



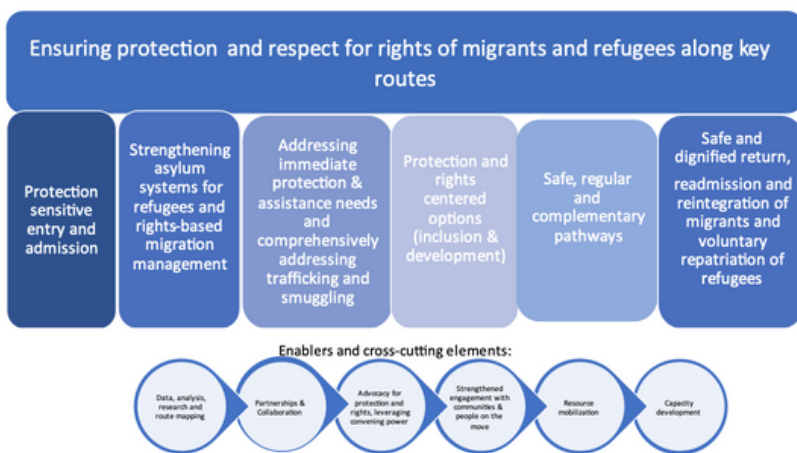
Global South Reflections and Recommendations on a *Routes-Based Approach to Onward and Mixed Movements (UNHCR)*

Overview

In June 2024, UNHCR proposed ‘A Route-Based Approach’(RBA) ‘to ensure international protection and solutions for refugees, while upholding rights and creating opportunities for migrants, along the key routes’[1]. UNHCR argues that RBA offers a more ‘rights-based alternatives to externalization proposals and expulsion practices, while helping States to manage the challenges around irregular movements, including return, in line with their international obligations.[2]’

The three main goals of the RBA are to:

1. Save lives and reduce harm along the routes;
2. Create alternatives to dangerous journeys all along the routes, and
3. Strengthen the tools, systems and cooperation – supporting States strengthen asylum capacity and effectively manage mixed movements.



Debates, Critiques and Challenges: Perspectives from the Global South

The approach is arguably a paradigm shift in humanitarian responses to migration because of how it restructures protection support from a siloed country-based to integrated routes-based programming. A stated goal is to better manage ‘mixed flows’ by helping to alleviate global North asylum systems while encouraging expansion of legal pathways for migrants. This shift reflects the increased mixed-movements worldwide and the vast suffering among these mixed-movement routes. The approach does not aim to facilitate the onward movements of refugees and migrants in an irregular manner, but rather seeks to find lawful ways to reconcile the sovereignty and legitimate interests of states in managing their borders with the rights of refugees and migrants under international and other relevant branches of law.

While its whole-of-route approach may be a helpful step forward in the coordination of multilateral and multistakeholder responses to increased mixed flows to the global North, it also presents challenges, especially from the perspective of actors in the global South, where these interventions would be focused.

[1] https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/explainer_unhcr_route_based_approach.pdf

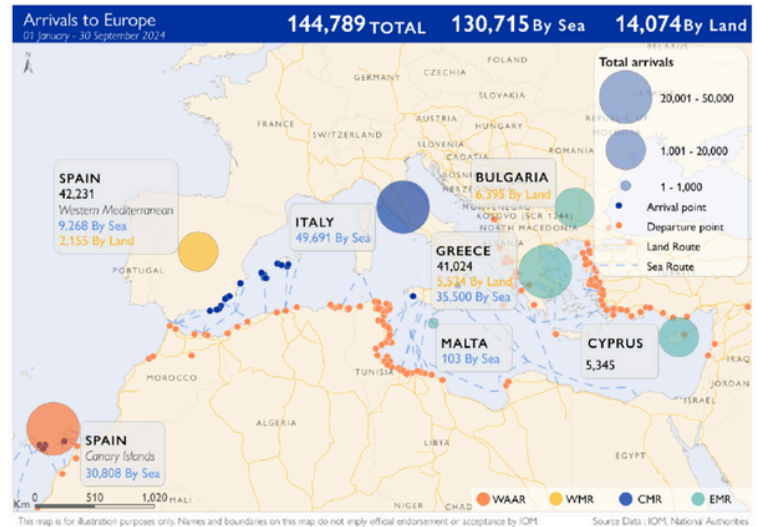
[2] Madeline Garlick, Chief, Protection Policy and Legal Advice Section, Division of International Protection, UNHCR Geneva, speaking at webinar, **Global South reflections on a routes-based approach to protection: Perspectives from Latin America and North Africa**, organized by IDRC Research Chairs Network on Forced Displacement, 11 December, 2024.

Challenges:

Mixed flows, definitions and eligibility for protection: Context specific implementation strategies

'Mixed flows' of people include refugees, migrants, asylum seekers and labour migrants, whose legal distinctions imply different rights and protections. Yet the way these categories are defined and, by extension, the rights and protection associated with them differ by region. Both Africa, via the 1969 OAU Convention, and Latin America, with the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, provide more expansive definitions of those in need of protection than the 1951 Convention and the 1967 protocol more widely recognized by countries in the Global North. Whose definitions will be used? What implications does this have as people move along the route depending on origin, transit, destination, and return countries. Furthermore, eligibility for protection may also change because of exposures to violence, conflict, extortion, or other experiences during the journey. Someone may begin as a labour migrant according to the destination country but qualify for protection based on conditions or harm encountered in transit. Finally, how might self-understanding at origin as well as shifts in these self-definitions along the route matter in implementing policies? Who counts as a refugee and/or a migrant and at which point in/on their journey is complicated and variable.

'Frame of reference' still remaining in the global North: While RBA is a step forward, in terms of ensuring international protection of and respect of human rights –the dominant 'frame of reference' still remains that used by the global North. For example: because implementing RBA in the Southern shores of the Mediterranean requires a move towards a responsibility-sharing-frame, it necessitates a shift from border-controls-frame (which has been a source of revenue for many of these countries).



Challenges for a "whole-of-route approach": which routes are prioritized?

As resources are limited, priorities are made based on geo-political dynamics, influences and biases. Research on people in transit in Latin America has shown that, in reality, migrants in their onward movement do not necessarily think about options in a linear 'route-based approach' perspective. Rather, they use a 'whole-of-region' calculus, which considers multiple potential routes within a region. For example, forcibly displaced Venezuelans may have initiated a route from Venezuela to Colombia and then decided to go to Peru but continued to Chile. After a period in Chile, they decided to go northward toward the United States. But while waiting for an asylum interview in Mexico, they weighed their options between staying in Mexico, returning to Venezuela, going back to Peru, or exploring how to go to Spain.

RBA as a 'response-based approach:'

RBA offers new linkages and synergies with Global Refugee Compact (GRC) and the Global Compact on Migration (GCM) to maximize a global effort to ensure that vulnerable people on the move do not fall between the gaps and have access to their rights of safety and protection. There is a need for new protocols to ensure a stronger bindings principles laid out by migration Compacts. It is crucial to work with countries that have not ratified the conventions related to the states of refugees and protocols.

Lack of binding principles and legal basis for implementation:

Although most of the countries along the migration routes have signed international conventions and treaties governing specific aspects of the refugee protection, many, such as those countries in the Mediterranean routes, have not yet developed asylum system and continue to consider irregular state as a criminal offense.

Integration and reintegration challenges:

Research in the regions find that many of the refugees-migrants in these mixed flows, do not live in camps as many go to the cities and urban areas to settle. This creates new opportunities and challenges of (re)integration with local population and economies. While urban environments may provide more livelihood options, they may also result in housing and labour market stress, affecting host populations.

Implementation partnerships: Exclusion of the local actors:

Evidence from the regions indicates the important roles local, municipal level actors and stakeholders play in mixed movements along the routes. 'Hidden' partners, like the diaspora from different communities on the move, provide financial and information assistance. For UNHCR, the challenge and need are to build on partnership and collaborations among states focused on interventions in all countries along the routes. It is about recognizing the states obligations to protect and respect the human rights of refugees and migrants at all points by creating conditions in which more people can find protection at all parts along the journey.

Obligations and Responsibilities: focus on transit countries

Although distinctions are made between country of origin, transit, and destination, these distinctions are too rigid as they overlap along the route. A single country can be all three, as it is the case for both Morocco and Peru. In 2024, Peru was an origin country (with nearly one million citizens having left and yet to return that year), a destination country (with an estimated 1.6 million Venezuelans living within its borders), and a bi-directional transit country (with Venezuelans still moving through to enter

Chile while experiencing an increase in extra-continental migration in the other direction from Brazil through Peru into Ecuador to go north to the United States). Furthermore, transit countries, often, are spoken in terms that imply that they do not have obligations and responsibilities to the binding principles of refugee and migrant protection rights – letting them, 'off the hook' from offering protection.

Urgent need for localized knowledge from the global South:

Shifting the concentration of knowledge production and research capacities from the global North and bringing evidence-based knowledge from the global South.

Implementation challenge of the RBA lies bringing in knowledge from different sites. Given the politics of research, knowledge and financial contributions – the question raised here would be how can we encourage a global conversation and discussion in a context-specific way that does not become consumed or overshadowed by the priorities of those very powerful actors (in the global North).

Recommendations for Policy Makers and Implementing Stakeholders

- *Challenge/re-examine definition-distinctions-categorization at the conceptual level:* there is a need to 'problematize' the current labelling politics at the conceptual level. For example, should we continue to distinguish between 'refugee versus migrants', pitting one against the other, or look at the 'continuums of vulnerabilities?'
- *Integration-reintegration: bridge between humanitarian and development perspectives.* In framing the routes-based approach, it is important to bridge the humanitarian perspective to the developmental perspective. Localized evidence needs to demonstrate the potential benefits of taking a more comprehensive approach and the capacity for absorption to a national development agenda – especially in middle-income countries where there may be more capacity for

socioeconomic integration and responsible sharing, as compared to low-income countries.

- *Develop protection sensitive ‘entry management’*: this recognizes that states are entitled to protect their borders, but that this should be done in a lawful way. Legal migration channels are to be made available for migrants along the routes.
- *Responsible partnership*: Cities and local governments are key stakeholders to the implementation of RBA in terms of creating capacity at the ground level, organizing reception, processing referrals, providing services, and ensuring inclusivity. Therefore, more focus and attention needs to be given on reinforcing governance systems at the local level. Developing a ‘responsibility sharing partnership model’ at the ground level will offer better service, protection, and minimize vulnerabilities.
- *Linkages and synergies between existing and new Tools and Instruments*: Questions should be asked whether the existing tools and instruments are sufficient or if new tools are required to provide better protection and safety for people on the move. Also, questions on appetite for new legal tools and instruments in this current political environment where power eclipses principles – is an important one. Finding linkages and synergies between existing tools like the Global Refugee Compact (GRC) and the Global Compact on Migration (GCM) is crucial in implementing RBA, because a balance in using what is proven to be effective and what additional value RBA brings need to be examined.
- *Analysing contextualized problems: inclusive dialogues*. Explaining the benefits of the approach by initiating inclusive dialogues with local governments, leaders, first-line responders, and people on the move can enable more effective implementation of tools. No ‘one size fits all’ implementation strategy for RBA is advisable but rather adopting RBA

as a comprehensive approach can help in avoiding/ending the short-term opportunistic approaches to these issues eventually.

- *Research for evidence-based knowledge: analysis for policy guidance and implementation*: The need for diverse perspectives generated from different sites of knowledge production is crucial. We need to question whose research and perspectives are used for particular policy paradigms. Valuing localized, data-driven, evidence-based knowledge for designing and implementing interventions is needed by UNHCR and all implementing partners. The IDRC Research Chairs’ work substantively demonstrate the significant importance of ensuring that conversations between researchers and policy spaces are foregrounded in data-driven, evidence-based knowledge, including the perspectives and lived realities of those closest to the phenomenon of displacement. Localizing knowledge and supporting contextualized research is not only a morally right thing to do but is the right thing to do.

This Policy Brief is a result of ***Global South reflections on a routes-based approach to protection: Perspectives from Latin America and North Africa***, webinar organized by IDRC Research Chairs Network on Forced Displacement, 11 December, 2024.

Listen to the full webinar here:

<https://carleton.ca/fd-chairs-net/cu-events/global-south-reflections-on-a-routes-based-approach-to-migration/>



Canada

The IDRC Research Chairs Network on Forced Displacement is a community of twelve scholars based at universities in countries experiencing mass displacement working to reframe the narrative of forced displacement and transforming the field of forced migration studies to mainstream Global South perspectives.

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