



Actionable recommendations on missing migrants and providing humanitarian assistance to migrants in distress

23 March 2023

Summary Report

Background

The International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) Progress Declaration requests the Secretary-General, with the support of the United Nations Network on Migration (Network) and other actors, to include actionable recommendations on strengthening cooperation on missing migrants and providing humanitarian assistance to migrants in distress, including by collaborating with humanitarian actors, in his next biennial report, with the aim of preventing loss of life in transit.¹

To meet this mandate, the Network created a thematic workstream as part of its 2022-2024 workplan. The workstream conducted its first global consultation – or GCM Talk – on 23 March 2023.

Since the adoption of the GCM in 2018, more than 22,000 migrants have died or gone missing. In the run-up to the next round of Regional Reviews and the upcoming Secretary-General's Report both due in 2024, the workstream will conduct a series of consultations at global, regional and national levels on a 'migratory route-based approach' to seek feedback on the development and prioritization of the recommendations.

Organization

The 90-minute introductory GCM Talk for this workstream was held online and in-person (IOM Headquarters in Geneva). Simultaneous interpretation was provided in English, French and Spanish.

This GCM Talk on missing migrants and provision of humanitarian assistance to migrants in distress was organized by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as co-chairs of the workstream with the support of the Network secretariat.

Objective

The objective of this introductory GCM Talk was threefold:

¹ Paragraph 76, [International Migration Review Forum Progress Declaration](#)

- 1) To brief stakeholders on the scope and workplan of the workstream.
- 2) To gather feedback on the format and modality of future consultations.
- 3) To delineate key thematic priorities as well as routes to be considered for the actionable recommendations.

The discussion was based on the following guiding questions:

- Which format and modality can ensure a comprehensive consultation process? Which stakeholders need to be consulted?
- Do the two different topics (missing migrants and humanitarian assistance) require separate consultation processes, given the different stakeholders involved? If yes, to which degree?
- Which migratory routes and/or countries should be the focus of subsequent consultations or GCM Talks?
- Which thematic priorities should the workstream focus on to develop actionable recommendations?
- Are there key challenges, opportunities, or issues which require attention when drafting the actionable recommendations?

Participants

- Registered participants: 599
- Participants: 368, including 24 Member States, and over 100 CSO
- Speakers and Panellists: Jonathan Prentice, Head of the secretariat of the UN Network on Migration, Mariela Guajardo, Operations and Emergencies Officer, IOM, Mr. Jorge Gonzalez-Mayagoitia, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Mexico in Geneva, Salomon Ezehi, a Nigerian migrant in transit in Niger) and Sanjula Weerasinghe, Coordinator, Migration and Displacement, IFRC. The moderator was Laurel Townhead, Representative of the Quaker United Nations Office.

Recommendations and key take-aways from the 23 March GCM Talk

Participants highlighted some of the dangers and risks faced by migrants throughout their journeys, including exploitation, the challenges of getting basic essential services such as food and water, and how fear of arrest and deportation could inhibit that access. Initially, there were more interventions related to missing migrants than humanitarian assistance.

The interventions highlighted that no country can manage this issue on its own and without cooperating among each other or including all possible sectors, especially humanitarian actors. This issue is a shared responsibility. While these consultations must be inclusive and broad, state leadership is necessary.

Below is a summary of the main challenges, practices and recommendations noted during the session.

On missing migrants

While there are growing initiatives that states and other actors are undertaking to strengthen or replicate existing practices, challenges remain.

Challenges:

- Lack of human resources, budget and lack of technical and scientific tools
- Lack of regional vision to strengthen cooperation between countries and lack of sharing of promising practices
- Weak institutional coordination on searching, investigation and identification of missing migrants
- The inclusion of all sectors, including civil society organizations and families while ensuring leadership from governments on this issue
- Limited and uneven knowledge and awareness of this issue across regions and along different migratory routes; while the focus is mainly on Africa or Asia, migrant disappearances also happen in Europe

Promising practices:

- The government of Mexico shared several examples of efforts undertaken in the country to address this issue:
 - Adoption of a law on forced disappearances
 - Establishment of a national system for search
 - Support to research and investigation
- “Research table” (Mesa de Búsqueda) for missing migrants established in 2019 gave hope to families of missing migrants
- Practices such as those presented by Mexico can be a good opportunity for the region, especially in the main transit countries towards the United States
- The Family links project in Brazil

Recommendations:

- Better quantify and understand this issue (data, research, and awareness raising)
- Missing migrants are victims of irregular migration. Clarify rules and raise awareness of existing legal pathways and visa policies
- Use Humanitarian Service Points to register search requests from families and co-travellers who cannot find their relatives
- Support families who lost their relatives (at emotional and financial levels)

On humanitarian assistance

Challenges:

- Lack of access to food, water and life-saving health services along migratory routes.
- Gender-based violence along migration routes.
- Limited regular pathways
- Fear of detention and deportation even when trying to access life-saving services.
- Difficulties in accessing services and limited protection of vulnerable people, especially boys and girls, during journeys
- Limited search and rescue operations in the desert in North Africa
- Need for support in both directions (North-South), including in relation to return movements
- Collective expulsions create acute additional risks for those expelled

Promising practices:

- Safe spaces for migrants where they can access essential services such as IFRC's Humanitarian Service Points (HSP) and IOM's transit centre in Niamey, Niger. HSPs offer life-saving information; first aid; healthcare referrals; food and non-food items, temporary shelter and family tracing services, This mechanism is both fixed and mobile.

Recommendations:

- Create safe spaces along migratory routes for migrants, regardless of their status, to access humanitarian assistance.
- Establish emergency response systems that are independent of immigration enforcement and border controls.
- Review the negative impacts of laws and policies that undermine cooperation on the provision of humanitarian assistance to migrants.
- Ensure search and rescue efforts also occur along land routes such as deserts and jungles.
- Develop a shared vision on the issue across borders on the search and standardize identification (DNA) processes.
- End criminalization of search and rescue at sea and ensure non-obstruction of humanitarian assistance.
- Strengthen regular pathways
- Address drivers of migration that can lead to migrants embarking on dangerous journeys.
- Recognize not just the journey towards the destination but also return journeys and the need for humanitarian assistance to people coming back to their countries
- Combat discrimination and racism against migrants, including along migratory routes.

- Raise awareness and improve understanding of the specific needs of different groups, especially women, children and other vulnerable and marginalized groups
- Work to improve access to telecommunications along migratory routes so that migrants can request assistance and contact loved ones.
- Improve collaboration between governments, humanitarian actors, migrants, diaspora, CSOs, private sector to improve provision of life-saving assistance. It is important to use stakeholders that are trusted by migrants, such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent and its HSPs along key migration routes.
- Ensure that data collected for humanitarian purposes is not used for immigration control measures.

This summary of the GCM Talk held on 23 March 2023 was prepared by the members of the [workstream on missing migrants and humanitarian assistance to migrants in distress](#) and the secretariat of the UN Network on Migration. It does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Network members. As a summary, it is not a verbatim transcript. Watch the full recording [here](#).