

Missing migrants and their families: a call for greater international cooperation

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A strengthened commitment to coordination and collaboration is essential if actors are to be more effective in locating missing migrants and assisting their families. New initiatives offer a path forward.

The search for missing migrants is a transnational, even transcontinental, undertaking requiring cooperation among a broad range of actors.¹ A global intergovernmental framework for such cooperation had been lacking, but this changed with the inclusion (at ICRC's instigation) of Objective 8 in the Global Compact on Migration. With this, more than 150 States committed to establishing coordinated efforts on missing migrants, including by standardising the collection and exchange of information and establishing transnational coordination for identification and communication with families.

Translating political commitments into action, however, requires information in order to quantify and analyse the problem. This is a notorious challenge as reliable numbers of missing migrants are hard to come by, due, among other things, to the often clandestine nature of migration. Moreover, perceptions of the issue are often distorted, reflecting a focus in both media reporting and public attention on the Mediterranean or Central American contexts, thus neglecting the vast extent of intra-African, Asian or Middle Eastern migration flows. Initiatives such as the Missing Migrants Project of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or the African Union's recently created African Observatory for

Migration and Development are therefore critical to create a baseline for policy and provide much needed analysis.

At the same time, concrete frameworks are needed to coordinate the efforts of relevant actors along migratory routes to prevent² and resolve cases of missing migrants including by collecting, compiling, sharing and comparing information from different sources. Examining existing practices and providing guidance on how to achieve this is an objective that the ICRC's Missing Persons Project (MPP) has pursued since its launch in 2018.³

Bringing stakeholders together

Building on its longstanding experience in this area, the ICRC established the MPP to assemble a global community of stakeholders to jointly develop guidance to improve the response.⁴ In discussions at an expert workshop in 2019,⁵ some 60 practitioners representing States, organisations and families of missing migrants confirmed some major obstacles: the absence of established practices and standards in the area of information collection, challenges to protect sensitive personal information, and poor forensic practices. Participants also stressed the specific challenges faced by families of missing persons, such as the difficulty of accessing information held



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ICRC staff takes a tracing request from a Somali woman. Leros Island, Greece.

in another country, lack of trust in state authorities, and bureaucratic, legal and linguistic barriers. In view of the resources and expertise brought by non-State actors and the importance of involving families in the search, there was broad agreement that a multi-stakeholder model for coordination was most likely to deliver results.

To transform these findings into action, participants proposed that the MPP develop three specific outputs. Firstly, we have worked on a draft dataset to harmonise information relevant to the search for missing migrants.⁶ Building on, rather than seeking to replace, existing practices ranging from Interpol forms to those used by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, this document contains standardised questions covering information such as personal details of the missing migrant, physical characteristics and circumstances of disappearance. A second output is the publication of *Principles on Stakeholder Interaction with Families of Missing Migrants*.⁷ This addresses the abovementioned challenges faced by families and provides guidance for actors on how to engage with them, emphasising the families' central role in any search process.

The third and arguably most complex document is a set of *Guidelines on Coordination and Information Exchange Mechanisms for*

the Search for Missing Migrants.⁸ These mechanisms – designed to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing migrants, both dead and alive – comprise a flexible network of different types of stakeholders who cooperate in exchanging and analysing information along a migratory route and whose respective roles and relative importance can vary depending on the context. Our document sets out key elements of such a mechanism: a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities; a coordinated approach to information management that may include inter-operable tools; clearly defined information-sharing pathways; and legal agreements that underpin all of these. The draft guidelines also describe preliminary steps that need to be taken at the national level such as the harmonisation and centralisation of data collected by different actors. Given the sensitivity of the migratory context, the document stresses the need to vigorously protect personal data.⁹

In line with the project's commitment to basing recommendations, wherever possible, on existing practices, the guidance document builds on a set of guidelines currently under adoption by the Regional Conference on Migration in the Americas. This is the first regional inter-governmental framework to set out concrete modalities for cooperation on the

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missing migrant issue. In the same vein, the *Guidelines* illustrate specific recommendations with reference to existing practices.

What else is needed?

The discussions we have held with experts and practitioners leave us in no doubt that efforts to implement Objective 8 need to be reinforced and coordinated. While some countries are reporting on measures taken at national level – such as strengthening national forensic systems – such efforts are bound to be insufficient without coordinated international action. More determined and coordinated action by governments is a pressing need.

In the absence of decisive action by governments, civil society and other non-State actors have stepped up to fill the void in many parts of the world. However, often their action is limited in scope, and lacks resources and support from relevant authorities. We are therefore convinced that a stronger role for international actors such as the ICRC is required in order to assist States to act upon their commitments in complementarity with the aforementioned efforts. Such a role may need to go beyond convenor and technical advice functions to the provision of concrete support – such as in relation to data and information management – to enable cooperation among States and others. As an example, the ICRC is currently developing a digital platform that will allow authorities and other actors to share and manage data and information on missing persons securely both nationally and transnationally.

Moreover, developing investigation and identification methodologies and processes that can use this information effectively and that can be tailored to a broad range of contexts and available resources remains a significant challenge.¹⁰ Long-

term efforts and investments to ensure cooperation and information exchange along migratory routes are essential, however, if we are to provide answers to families searching for missing loved ones.

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1. There is no international legal definition of 'missing migrants'. The ICRC understands missing persons as individuals whose whereabouts are unknown to their relatives and/or who, on the basis of reliable information, have been reported missing as a result of armed conflicts, other situations of violence, disasters or migration.
2. For ICRC policy recommendations on preventing migrants from going missing, see ICRC (2017) *Missing Migrants and their Families*, Recommendation 1 [bit.ly/ICRC-missing-migrants-recommendations-2017](https://www.icrc.org/missing-migrants-recommendations-2017)
3. www.icrc.org/en/publication/4375-missing-persons-project
4. Through a virtual platform, the MPP brings together experts, family representatives and other stakeholders to stimulate discussion, build consensus on best practices, promote existing technical standards and develop new ones where needed. To join this global community of practice, please contact one of the authors.
5. Organised jointly by ICRC, the IOM Missing Migrants Project and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team. See ICRC (2020) *Clarifying the fate and whereabouts of missing migrants: Exchanging information along migratory routes* [bit.ly/ICRC-clarifying-fate-2019](https://www.icrc.org/clarifying-fate-2019)
6. Draft dataset open for public consultation until 15 April 2021: www.icrc.org/en/document/draft-minimum-standard-dataset-search-missing-migrants
7. Draft document open for public consultation until 15 April 2021: www.icrc.org/en/draft-principles-stakeholder-interaction-families-missing-migrants
8. Draft document open for public consultation until 31 May 2021: www.icrc.org/en/document/guidelines-coordination-missing-migrants
9. See ICRC (2020) *Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action*, 2nd Edition [bit.ly/ICRC-Handbook-data-protection-2nd-edition](https://www.icrc.org/handbook-data-protection-2nd-edition)
10. For an example of how to undertake such work, see: ICRC (2020) *The Missing and Deceased Migrants and their Families Program in South Africa and Zimbabwe* [bit.ly/ICRC-Southern-Africa-2020](https://www.icrc.org/southern-africa-2020)