

A multistakeholder platform to explore solutions to irregular migration

Background brief

www.polisync.org/brief/irmig

Executive summary

Despite increasingly stringent border security policies employed around the world, irregular migration continues in high numbers. Driven by political, economic, security, social and environmental factors, combined with decreasing visa access for people in the Global South, irregular migration creates challenges for all involved - the migrants embarking on dangerous journeys and living in an irregular situation; receiving, transit and origin countries; and humanitarian actors.

While current policy approaches intended to respond to irregular migration are each important for migration management, including border security and combatting smuggling and trafficking; voluntary return and regularisation; humanitarian/human rights protection; addressing economic inequalities and conflict in origin countries; and creating new pathways for safe, regular migration through labour agreements; they are each limited in their ability to curb irregular migration in the long-term.

To support governments as they grapple with irregular migration, and to foster innovation in policies and practices aimed at sustainable, long-term solutions to address it, PoliSync has launched a multi-stakeholder platform for governments, city actors, international organisations, humanitarian and advocacy NGOs, researchers and other relevant actors.

The platform will focus on five initial activities intended to drive policy innovation:

- 1) Take stock of the academic and grey literature examining policy approaches to address irregular migration;
- 2) Map and categorising key actors working on different aspects of irregular migration, and their activities;
- 3) Build a multi-stakeholder platform and network for collaborative policy innovation efforts;
- 4) Launch a policy dialogue series examining different policy approaches to address irregular migration; and
- 5) Foster the sharing of best practices, resources through policy communications and community engagement.

Context: Irregular migration continues in high numbers despite the significant resources invested to control it

Irregular migration, defined by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as movement of persons outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination, continues in very high numbers,¹ despite increasingly stringent border security practices used by countries around the world.

Various political, economic, security, social and environmental factors,² combined with increasing visa restrictions for people in lower human development index countries and fragile states,³ are driving more people to embark on irregular journeys as their only travel option. In view of UNHCR declaring 46 emergencies in 32 countries since October 2022, and 114 million forcibly displaced and stateless people (a massive 54% increase over the past five years),⁴ the drivers of irregular migration are expected to intensify.

A lack of complete data in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Caribbean, and the Middle East make it difficult to

examine global estimates of irregular migrant arrivals. However, an overall trend of rising irregular flows can be seen in the European Union (EU) and the United States (US), and in specific corridors in other regions.

Between January and September 2023, 194,269 irregular arrivals were registered in the EU, nearly double the 2022 figure.⁵ In the United Kingdom (UK), 28,526 irregular arrivals were registered in 2021, a steep increase from the 1,843 registered in 2019.⁶ The US border patrol encountered 2.38 million migrant arrivals at the US-Mexico border in 2022, a 37 percent increase over 2021 numbers (many originate in Cuba, Venezuela, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Brazil, Ecuador and Haiti providing insight to irregular migration within the region).⁷ Within Africa, IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix registered 269,000+ irregular movements along the Eastern route in 2021, across the Gulf of Aden to Yemen and onto Saudi Arabia.⁸ In Asia, the UNODC estimates that more than 660,000 migrants travel irregularly from Cambodia, Myanmar and Lao PDR to Thailand each year.⁹

The number of migrants living in an irregular situation worldwide is estimated—an estimate because counting

1. IOM Website, "Key Migration Terms," (accessed 25 October 2023).

2. International Federation of Red Cross 2018 "World Disasters Report: Leaving No One Behind."

3. McAuliffe, M. & A. Triandafyllidou (eds.), 2021. World Migration Report 2022. IOM, Geneva, pp 194 "Migration and the lottery of birth."

4. Grandi, F. 2023 "High Commissioner's 2023 Kofi Annan Geneva peace address," 3 November 2023. (accessed 11 November 2023).

5. Council of the European Union, Website, "Infographic - Irregular arrivals to the EU (2008-2023)," updated 11 October 2023 (accessed 25 October 2023).

6. Government of the UK Home Office Website "Official Statistics: Irregular migration to the UK, year ending December 2021," published 24 February 2022.

7. Ruiz Soto, A. G. 2022 "Record-Breaking Migrant Encounters at the U.S.-Mexico Border Overlook the Bigger Story," Migration Policy Institute Oct 2022 (accessed 19 Nov 2023).

8. IOM Missing Migrants Project, Website, "Missing Migrants Project," last updated 24 Oct 2023 (accessed 28th Oct 2023).

9. UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2015 "Migrant Smuggling in Asia: Current Trends and Related Challenges," pp 58.

undocumented migrants is difficult—to be between 15 and 20 percent of approximately 280 million international migrants globally – 30-40 million people.¹⁰

But not all undocumented migrants crossed a border irregularly. Many entered countries regularly, but overstayed temporary visas, used forged papers or false identities, were denied asylum, or were born to undocumented parents.¹¹ In 2018, around only one-third of the estimated 10.6 million undocumented migrants in the US were registered as crossing an international border irregularly, with the remaining having become undocumented after arriving in the country regularly.¹²

Current policies and the enormous resources invested to control irregular migration are doing little to stem irregular flows, or to reduce the number of migrants living in an irregular situation around the world.

Key estimates*

194,269
irregular arrivals
to the EU in 2023¹³

660,000+
annual irregular
arrivals in Thailand¹⁵

2.38M
irregular US-Mexico
border crossings in
2022¹⁴

269,000+
irregular movements
along African Eastern
Route in 2021¹⁶

30-40M
people estimated to be living in an
irregular situation around the world¹⁷

*Estimates because of the difficult nature of counting irregular migration arrivals and residents living in an irregular situation.

Irregular migration creates challenges for migrants, countries of destination, transit and origin, and humanitarian actors

Irregular migration creates serious challenges for all involved, including migrants embarking on dangerous journeys; migrants living in an irregular situation in transit and destination countries; the countries receiving, processing and hosting irregular migrants, including governments, cities and their communities; transit and origin countries; and humanitarian actors. Irregular migration also threatens security at various levels, fuelling international networks of traffickers, smugglers and other crime rings.

Challenges for migrants during perilous journeys: death and human rights violations

The numbers of irregular migrant arrivals cited above exclude the thousands of migrants who set out on irregular journeys each year, but who go missing or die in transit due to the dangerous migration routes they take. IOM's Missing Migrants Project estimates that since 2014, at least 59,272 migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, have died during transit – an undercount due to the difficulty of collecting information, since the migrants deliberately try to avoid detection.¹⁸ The remains of more than 25,000 of these people have never been recovered.¹⁹

The main causes of death of migrants taking irregular journeys are drowning; vehicle accidents or death

linked to hazardous transport; harsh environmental conditions combined with lack of adequate shelter, food and water; violence; and sickness combined with lack of access to adequate healthcare. The Mediterranean stands as the mostly deadly irregular migration route, with 28,196 migrants confirmed dead or missing since 2014, followed by Africa, where 13,643 migrants have gone missing since 2014. Significant numbers of migrants have also gone missing in transit to an international destination in the Americas (8,445 since 2014), and Asia (5,761 since 2014). 2,157 migrants have also gone missing in Western Asia, and 1,070 have gone missing in Europe since 2014.²⁰

The dangerous nature of irregular travel and the sheer scale of death of migrants in transit is staggering.

In addition to the tragedy of those who don't make it, migrants embarking on irregular migration journeys are frequently exposed to traffickers and extortionists, and are often subjected to inhumane treatment, prolonged (at times indefinite) detention that can last for years without any access to legal recourse, and they frequently face serious violations of their human rights.

Thousands of migrants and asylum seekers travelling irregularly through Libya to reach Europe, for example, are often detained in migrant detention centres in Western Libya where they face inhumane treatment, denial of legal rights, forced stay in overcrowded spaces, deliberate medical neglect, physical and psychological

10. Ambrosini, Maurizio & Minke H. J. Hajer, 2023, Irregular Migration: IMISCOE Short Reader, Springer Nature Switzerland AG, pg 9.

11. Spencer, S., Triandafyllidou, A., 2022, "Irregular Migration," in Scholten, P. (eds) Introduction to Migration Studies. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham. pp 191-204.

12. Warren, R., 2020, "Reverse migration to Mexico led to US undocumented population decline: 2010 to 2018. Journal on Migration and Human Security, 8, 32-41.

13. Council of the European Union, Website, "Infographic - Irregular arrivals to the EU (2008-2023)," updated 11 October 2023 (accessed 25 October 2023).

14. Ruiz Soto, A. G. 2022 "Record-Breaking Migrant Encounters at the U.S.-Mexico Border Overlook the Bigger Story," Migration Policy Institute Oct 2022 (accessed 19 Nov 2023).

15. UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2015 "Migrant Smuggling in Asia: Current Trends and Related Challenges," pp 58.

16. IOM Missing Migrants Project, Website, "Missing Migrants Project," last updated 24 Oct 2023 (accessed 28th Oct 2023).

17. Ambrosini, Maurizio & Minke H. J. Hajer, 2023, Irregular Migration: IMISCOE Short Reader, Springer Nature Switzerland AG, pg 9.

18. IOM Missing Migrants Project, Website, "Missing Migrants Project," last updated 24 October 2023 (accessed 28th October 2023).

19. IOM Missing Migrants Project, Website, "Data: Deaths During Migration Recorded Since 2014, By Region of Incident," last updated 24 Oct 2023 (accessed 28th Oct 2023).

20. Ibid.

21. International Organization for Migration Missing Migrants Project, Website, "Missing Migrants Project," last updated 24 October 2023 (accessed 28th October 2023).

torture, starvation, extortion and sexual harassment. Scholars and NGOs have produced ample reports, data, and analyses relating to the inhumane conditions and death many migrants face in immigration detention centres around the world.²²

In response to fortified borders intended to prevent irregular migration, many migrants pay exorbitant fees to smugglers with no guarantee of arrival at their intended destination. While scholars have shown that smugglers are a symptom to the demand for irregular migration, and not the cause of irregular migration,²⁴ by turning to smugglers migrants place themselves at risk of abuse by organised crime syndicates and are vulnerable to human trafficking.²⁴ The Danish Refugee Council's Regional mixed Migration Secretariat found that 79 percent of migrants interviewed from the Horn of Africa between 2014 and 2017 had witnessed or experienced one or multiple abuses, including physical and sexual violence, kidnapping, torture and/or death.²⁵

Women, children, older people and people with disabilities face particular risks and vulnerabilities during irregular travel. Women face a higher risk of drowning during irregular sea crossings than men as they often travel in cabins, as well as sexual violence in land and sea crossings.²⁶ Children face higher risks of sickness, injury, violence as well as trafficking and exploitation. Between 2015 and 2016 more than 300,000 unaccompanied and separated children were reported to have moved across borders, a rise of almost 500 percent compared with 2010-2011.²⁷ Older people and persons with disabilities, in addition to women and children are more likely to be left behind during irregular journeys.²⁸

Challenges for migrants living in an irregular situation: Denial of basic rights

While migrants living in an irregular situation often participate in society and engage in labour, they often face discrimination; exclusion; abuse and exploitation; denial of access to healthcare, adequate accommodation and documentation such as a driving licence. Migrants in an irregular situation also frequently find themselves employed in informal labour markets, where they are frequently denied basic labour rights and social security benefits. Fear of detection also often leads them to forgo basic rights, such as medical help and education for their children.²⁹

In most countries, irregular migrants are excluded from the provision of social and welfare services, such

as food, shelter, clothes, sanitation and medical assistance. Ambrosini, Minke and Hajer explain, "National laws do not accord non-nationals equal rights. There is a hierarchy, with irregular migrants regularly accorded the fewest rights; especially economic and social rights such as the right to work, healthcare, and shelter... Children with irregular status are considered to be more deserving of inclusion in services than adults... Regardless of entitlements, services can only be accessed where there is a "firewall" preventing transfer of personal information on service users to immigration enforcers."³⁰

Irregular migration also fuels criminal networks of smugglers and traffickers, creating a demand for their services, and often leading migrants to be caught in a web of criminal activity, frequently giving up their passports and racking up debts that require them to perform illegal activities in order to free themselves from their debtors both in transit and destination countries. This, in turn, creates insecurity in countries of transit and destination.

Challenges for countries receiving and hosting irregular migrants

Transit and destination countries must manage unplanned, and at times large-scale arrivals of irregular migrants, including provision of shelter, food and medical care, as well as processing their asylum applications and arranging the deportation of migrants who do not qualify for asylum. Many countries invest enormous financial and human resources into elaborate immigration processing and detention centres, as well as deportation and return procedures.

In 2024, the US administration requested nearly \$25 billion from Congress for Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection, almost \$800 million more than for 2023. Likewise, the EU's spending on border enforcement in 2023 was at a record high, with border guard agency Frontex receiving more money than any other single EU agency. Between 2012 and 2022, Frontex's budget rose from E 85m to E 754m.³¹ Switzerland, a non-EU European country, also boosted its funding of Frontex following a public referendum whereby 71.5 percent of voters favoured increasing Switzerland's support Frontex with up to CHF 61 million (\$60.8 million) annually by 2027, nearly triple the CHF 24 million committed in 2021.³³

22. UN OCHA Relief Web 2023 "Libya: Death of detainee underscores lethal conditions in migrant detention centres," 30 Aug 2023, (accessed 7 Nov 2023).

23. The Global Detention Project uses data and analysis to promote the human rights of migrant detainees in countries around the world. See their "Country Profiles" for the conditions of migrant detention centres around the world. (accessed 7 Nov 2023).

24. De Haas, H. 2023 How Migration Really Works: A factual guide to the most divisive issue in Politics, Penguin Books.

25. Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat 2017 "Weighing the Risks: Protection risks and human rights violations faced by migrants in and from East Africa."

26. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2018 "World Disasters Report: Leaving No One Behind: The international humanitarian sector must do more to respond to the needs of the world's most vulnerable people," pp 147.

27. IOM 2018 and UNICEF 2017 in International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2018 "World Disasters Report: Leaving No One Behind: The international humanitarian sector must do more to respond to the needs of the world's most vulnerable people," pp 148.

28. Ibid.

29. United Nations, 2014, *The economic, social and cultural rights of migrants in an irregular situation*, United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

30. Ambrosini, Maurizio & Minke H. J. Hajer, 2023, *Irregular Migration: IMISCOE Short Reader*, Springer Nature Switzerland AG, pg 40.

31. Trilling, D. 2023 "How Migration Really Works by Hein de Haas review - home truths," The Guardian 3 Nov 2023 (accessed 7 November 2023).

33. Geiser, U 2022 "Swiss agree to boost funding of European border agency," Swissinfo.ch 15 May 2022, (accessed 7 November 2023).

Irregular migration also affects labour market dynamics in destination countries, offering low-cost, abundant workers to the construction, domestic work, agriculture and food sectors. Spencer and Triandafyllidou explain, “By creating conditions of regular stay and work that are impossible to meet, states indirectly support the interests of unscrupulous employers and create ethnic segmentation and hierarchies in the labour market that are functional to the national economy.”³⁵

Amid economic difficulties and social unrest, the negative aspects of migration tend to take hold of public discourse - in traditional media, social media, and among politicians, including as core elements of their election campaign platforms. For example, as the Swiss population geared up to vote in the October 2023 Federal election, 30 percent of respondents to an Ipsos - Le Temps poll indicated that migration would significantly impact their electoral decision.³⁶ This skewed focus on the “problems of migration” buries the enormous benefits that migration has brought to labour markets, economies and societies for centuries.³⁷

Challenges for the humanitarian community

Local and international humanitarian actors are increasingly required to draw on scarce financial and human resources to meet the humanitarian needs of migrants while they are undertaking dangerous irregular journeys, and to support governments as they grapple with managing the, at times large scale, arrival of irregular migrants. The ICRC explains that undocumented migrants traditionally fell outside the scope of work for humanitarian organisations. However, the increasing lack of state protection, denial of basic rights and assistance, violence, abuse and exploitation migrants often experience in transit and destination countries have required humanitarian organisations to step in. Many of the large international humanitarian organisations now offer support and protection to migrants in detention and victims of trafficking; conduct search and rescue of migrants during irregular journeys; search for and identify missing migrants; offer mental health support and education access; and advocate to authorities, among other activities.³⁸

In some countries governments have authorised humanitarian organisations to manage the reception of migrants arriving irregularly, including medical checks, housing and processing in migrant reception centres. Since June 2023, for example, Italian authorities granted the Red Cross Italy the role of receiving the

hundreds of thousands of irregular arrivals on Lampedusa each year.³⁹

Humanitarian and human rights organisations also play a role in bringing attention to human rights violations. In 2017, they garnered international attention towards a large-scale kidnapping of migrants and multiple ‘slave markets’ where migrants were traded openly and held for ransom and extortion, and were forced into labour and sexual enslavement.⁴¹

Several civil society organisations now provide aid to migrants in distress during dangerous irregular journeys. At times they deploy smaller vessels to distribute life vests and water to migrants in distress at sea as they await rescue from Coast Guards.⁴² Since Italy ended its Mare Nostrum rescue programme in the Central Mediterranean in 2014, they have deployed 40 rescue vessels and four reconnaissance aircraft, rescuing and saving the lives of migrants in distress at sea. However, their vessels frequently undergo inspections and seizures by port authorities, hampering their rescue activities. They also face multiple legal and criminal proceedings, with charges against them ranging from “technical irregularities related to maritime security” to “criminal association” and “facilitation of irregular migration.”⁴³

The civil society organisations argue that assisting people in distress at sea is a duty of all states and shipmasters under international law, including the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, and the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. They justify their rescue operations as being in line with the International Maritime Organisation Guidelines on the treatment of persons rescued at sea, the 2022 joint Statement on Place of Safety by UN entities, and the 2018 UN Global Compact for Migration, which all stress the principle of non-refoulement and that rescue operations terminate only when survivors are delivered to a “place of safety.”⁴⁴

Challenges for countries of origin and for returned migrants

Countries of origin are also required to manage the reception and reintegration of migrants living in an irregular situation abroad, including cooperating in the identification process of their citizens, accepting their return, and managing social and labour reintegration.

35. Spencer, S., Triandafyllidou, A., 2022, “Irregular Migration,” in Scholten, P. (eds) Introduction to Migration Studies. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham. pp 191-204.

36. Haeberli, D 2023 “Sondage élections fédérales: les Suisses poussent pour une solution européenne aux problèmes de migration,” Le Temps, 13 Oct 2023 (accessed 8 Nov 2023).

37. De Haas, H. 2023 How Migration Really Works: A factual guide to the most divisive issue in Politics, Penguin Books.

38. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2018 “World Disasters Report: Leaving No One Behind” pp 147.

39. Croce Rossa Italiana Website “Hotspot Lampedusa: Il Punto Sulle Attività Cri,” last updated 7 August 2023, (accessed 8 November 2023).

41. IOM 2017 “IOM learns of ‘Slave Market’ conditions endangering migrants in North Africa, in International Federation of Red Cross 2018 “World Disasters Report: Leaving No One Behind,” pp 147.

42. See SeaWatch [X post](#) on 30 November 2023 “Saturday night, our rescue ship [#Aurora](#) found a boat in distress with 57 people on board that had been at sea for 2 days already. We handed out life jackets & water until 3 hours later, a Guardia di Finanza ship arrived, took the people on board & brought them to [#Lampedusa](#),” (accessed 9 Nov 2023).

43. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2023 “June 2023 update - Search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean and fundamental rights,” pp 4, 9-23.

44. Ibid. pp 8.

Returned migrants are frequently stigmatised in countries of origin for having “failed” in their international migration endeavours, or for returning without adequate wealth. They are often wrongly labelled as deported criminals, and face changes to family and social networks, requiring them to start over. Migrant children and adolescents are at times returned to countries where they have never lived or don’t remember, at times needing to adapt to a new language and culture. The reintegration process is particularly challenging for migrants who have been subjected to violence or other vulnerabilities.⁴⁷

While many migrants in an irregular situation support family in countries of origin through remittances, their physical absence frequently places strain on family life and social networks. Not limited to, but including many of those living in an irregular situation abroad, children are often left in the care of grandparents, and “transnational mothers” who migrate for work to send money back to their families, often face social pressures for leaving their children. Children can also face emotional and psychological trauma growing up without their parents.⁴⁸

The utility and limits of current policy approaches to address irregular migration

An initial review of the literature and actors working to address irregular migration shows five non-mutually exclusive policy approaches - each important for migration management, but limited in their ability to curb irregular migration in the long-term.

Border security: border controls, anti-smuggling, anti-trafficking, detention and deportation

Though central to most countries’ migration management practices, and fundamental for preserving states’ sovereign right to decide who can enter and stay on their territory, there are clear limits to the extent to which border security policies have been able to control irregular migration. Increasing year-on-year government spending on the fortification of borders, tackling smuggling and trafficking, immigration detention and deportation, is not yielding its intended reduction of irregular flows. On the contrary, irregular migration is rising.

Research has shown that enforcement measures produce a range of political, administrative, legal and economic challenges, with undocumented migrants often integrated within communities, and at times using false identities. There is often a lack of cooperation between countries for returning migrants, with high costs for forced removals. Human rights obligations also restrict the use of punitive measures against migrants, frequently leading to lengthy court battles.⁴⁹ What is more, as fewer people in the world, particularly those in the Global South, have access to regular migration pathways, research has shown that tighter border controls actually fuel irregular migration, as well as smuggling and trafficking.

Regularisation and voluntary return programmes

Regularisation and voluntary return programmes have emerged in some countries as a way to reduce the number of people living in an irregular situation. Scholars have shown that regularisation, through periodic amnesties or pathways to regularisation for those who meet the requirements, have been implemented in countries where enforcement measures have produced limited effects.⁵⁰ Objective eight of the Global Compact for Migration calls for regularisation pathways, where possible: “Build on existing practices to facilitate access for migrants in an irregular status to an individual assessment that may lead to regular status, on a case-by-case basis and with clear and transparent criteria, especially in cases where children, youth and families are involved, as an option for reducing vulnerabilities, as well as for States to ascertain better knowledge of the resident population.”⁵¹

In 2021, the Government of Colombia launched, for example, a Temporary Condition of Protection for Venezuelan Migrants - a regularisation mechanism that allows Venezuelan migrants to work in Colombia under the same conditions as Colombian citizens, guaranteeing labour rights.⁵²

Similarly, voluntary return programmes, in some cases assisted by IOM through provision of reintegration support, can offer a temporary solution to reduce the number of migrants living in a country irregularly.⁵³ While some voluntary return programmes include reintegration support aimed to prevent repeat irregular migration, evidence suggests that many returned migrants re-enter the same or a different country irregularly multiple times, sometimes assuming a new identity to avoid detection.⁵⁴

47. IOM Regional Office for Central, North America and the Caribbean Website “[Coming Home Can be harder than leaving.](#)” (accessed 13 Nov 2023).

48. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020 “Migration Trends and Families” Future of the World Policy Brief No 133 pp 2-3.

49. Spencer, S., Triandafyllidou, A., 2022, “Irregular Migration,” in Scholten, P. (eds) Introduction to Migration Studies. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham. pp 191-204.

50. Ibid.

51. See “Objective 8: Address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration,” in United Nations General Assembly 2018 “Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2018 73/195 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration,” A/RE/73/195.

52. IOM, 2022. Global Compact for Migration implementation in practice: Successes, challenges and innovative approaches. International Dialogue on Migration No. 33. Pp 57.

53. See, for examples, the European Commission Migration and Home Affairs Website “[A human and effective return and readmission policy](#)” (accessed 13 November 2023); and IOM’s Website “[Return and reintegration.](#)” (accessed 13 November 2023).

54. Kanapathy, V. 2008 “Controlling Irregular Migration: The Malaysian Experience” International Labour Organisation Regional Programme on Governance of Labour Migration Working Paper No. 14. Pp 11.

Both regularisation and voluntary return programmes are reactive measures to irregular migration, implemented after it has already occurred. They offer temporary solutions to reduce the numbers of migrants residing in an irregular situation, but do little to stem future irregular arrivals or to stop people's situations from becoming irregular.

Humanitarian aid and human rights advocacy

The humanitarian and human rights ramifications resulting from irregular migration, as outlined in the previous section, require humanitarian actors and human rights advocates to invest substantial human and financial resources to support migrants in need. However, while crucial for the support and protection of migrants during perilous journeys, and for migrants residing in an irregular situation, these interventions are also a reactive response to migrants who are already on the move irregularly, or who are living in an irregular situation. They do nothing to reduce future irregular migration flows, or to ameliorate the challenges that lie ahead for migrants who are at risk of becoming undocumented.

Furthermore, the increasing hostility and tension between humanitarian/human rights actors and governments/border security actors, as outlined through the various court cases filed against NGOs and civil society organisations referred to in the previous section, inhibits the multi-stakeholder cooperation desperately needed to address the root causes of irregular migration. These tensions are additionally raising discord among the public, fuelled by social media posts by non-expert social media influencers that pit those in favour of stringent border controls against those in favour of humanitarian and human rights support to migrants in an irregular situation.⁵⁵

Sustainable development, conflict resolution and peace-building in countries of origin

Many governments focus on sustainable development, conflict resolution and peace-building as essential to curbing irregular migration. For example, through the 2018 Global Compact for Migration, governments set the objective to "Create conducive political, economic, social and environmental conditions for people to lead peaceful, productive and sustainable lives in their own country and to fulfil their personal aspirations, while ensuring that desperation and deteriorating environments do not compel them to seek a livelihood elsewhere through irregular migration."⁵⁶

Central to US efforts to manage migration from Central America is its "Root Causes Strategy," whereby the US focuses on addressing the hardships that cause people to leave Central America. Organised under five pillars, the strategy aims to address economic insecurity and inequality; combat corruption, strengthen democratic governance and advance the rule of law; promote respect for human rights, labour rights and a free press, counter and prevent violence, extortion and other crimes perpetrated by criminal gangs, trafficking networks, and organised criminal organisations; combat sexual, gender-based and domestic violence.⁵⁷

While noble goals that, if achieved, would certainly reduce many of the drivers of irregular migration, the current tensions in international diplomacy, the regression of many countries' human development levels since COVID-19, the escalation of inter- and intra-state conflicts, and more frequent and intense environmental disasters are making the attainment of these goals unlikely any time soon. Sustainable development, conflict resolution and peace building efforts must therefore be complemented with other migration-specific policies and initiatives aimed at reducing irregular migration flows in more immediate timeframes.

Creating more regular, safe pathways of migration

Governments, international organisations, non-governmental organisations and scholars are increasingly voicing the need for new, regular, safe migration pathways in order to reduce irregular migration flows. Both the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees stress the need to create additional safe, legal pathways of migration. The former stresses the need to do so through labour and skills agreements, as well as family reunification and education visas, while the latter focuses on creating complementary pathways to resettlement for forcibly displaced refugees.⁵⁸

In practice, however, most countries' immigration policies continue down a path of increasing selectivity whereby skilled, educated and wealthy people in higher human development countries have almost full access to regular travel, while people in lower human development countries and fragile states have almost no access to regular migration pathways.⁵⁹ This is combined with very low resettlement places available for refugees, amounting to less than 5 percent of the needed places.⁶⁰

55. See, for example, the heated unleashing of angry comments from both those in favour and those against an X re-post by Elon Musk on 29 September 2023 that said "Is the German public aware of this?" Original post states "There are currently 8 German NGO ships in the Mediterranean Sea collecting illegal immigrants to be unloaded in Italy. These NGOs are subsidized by the German government. Let's hope AfD wins the elections to stop this European suicide."

56. See "Objective 2: Minimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin" in United Nations General Assembly 2018 "Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2018 73/195 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration," A/RE/73/195.

57. U.S. Department of State Website "U.S. efforts to address the root causes of irregular migration in Central America," (accessed 8 November 2023).

58. See Objective 5 of the 2018 Global Compact for Migration "Enhance availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration," and section B, 3.3 of the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees "Complementary pathways for admission to third countries."

59. Ambrosini, Maurizio & Minke H. J. Hajer, 2023, Irregular Migration: IMISCOE Short Reader, Springer Nature Switzerland AG, pg 39.

60. UNHCR Website "Resettlement data" Last updated November 2022, (accessed 14 November 2023).

The gap: searching for innovative, sustainable solutions to irregular migration

While many actors work on different aspects of irregular migration, few of them assess the efficacy of existing policy approaches employed to curb it. Nor is policy innovation encouraged with a view towards sustainable, long-term solutions to reduce the need for irregular migration. Actors are either working to understand the nature and scale of irregular migration as one among many migration-related issues; to respond to it once it has already commenced or occurred: or they work on very narrow aspects of irregular migration, such as filling data gaps (Missing Migrants Project); immigration detention (Global Detention Project); social justice/human rights of undocumented migrants (PICUM); and protecting migrants in transit (SeaWatch, ICRC), among others.

Within the UN Network on Migration, certain work streams focus on protecting migrants during irregular journeys, including the provision of humanitarian aid and protection from smuggling and trafficking. One work stream examines alternatives to detention, another focuses on return and readmission; and others focus on regular pathways that are already accepted by governments, with a focus on bi-lateral skills agreements and existing pathways for people in vulnerable situations.⁶¹

Scholars, too, tend to focus on understanding irregular migration and the challenges it poses, but only briefly outline the policy approaches in place to address it, without a systematic assessment of them.⁶²

In practice, a handful of countries have launched encouraging pilot programmes that create new, regular migration pathways, beyond existing ones. Similarly, a few scholars have presented evidence-based proposals for new regular pathways (see box below for examples).

In view of the limits of existing policy approaches to address irregular migration, the need for policy innovations focused on sustainable, long-term solutions is paramount. There is a clear need for:

- An assessment of existing policies aimed to address irregular migration;
- Gathering and assessing the relevant literature;
- Gathering and assessing innovative policies, pilot programmes and proposals intended to create new, regular migration pathways, and showcase what works well, challenges and lessons learned;
- Multidisciplinary, multi-stakeholder collaboration and dialogue among diverse actors working to address irregular migration;
- Sharing lessons learned from different policy approaches, including best innovative practices;
- Policy communications and community engagement.

Innovative practices and proposals for new migration pathways

Government of Canada

The Canadian Government recently launched three new immigration programmes aimed at opening up regular migration pathways over and above existing federal immigration programmes. These include:

- [Atlantic Immigration Program](#) and [Rural and Northern Immigration Pilots](#) create pathways to permanent residence for migrants who want to settle in Canada's smaller cities and rural/remote areas.
- [Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot](#) allows skilled refugees and displaced people to apply to immigrate through existing economic programs, over and above Canada's humanitarian visa quotas. It opens up novel pathways to migration by combining refugee resettlement and economic immigration.

Government of Australia

The Australian and Tuvalu governments signed, in 2023, the [Falepili Union Treaty](#), whereby up to 280 Tuvaluans facing adverse effects of climate change can migrate permanently to Australia each year. The Australian government also signed the [Pacific Engagement Visa](#) starting in 2024, allowing up to 3,000 people to be selected through a ballot process across participating Pacific countries and Timor-Leste, enabling them to apply for permanent residence in Australia.

IOM, UNHCR & International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) Complementary pathways

IOM, UNHCR and ICMC are working with European countries on [complementary pathways](#) - additional humanitarian admission and corridors, private sponsorship, family reunification and student scholarships for refugees. UNHCR is striving to support 2 million refugees through complementary pathways by 2028.

Human development visa scheme

By introducing visa applicant eligibility based on citizenship of participating States rather than visa categories, a quota of migrants can be selected with accompanying family provisions and links to development assistance.

60. See UN Migration Network workstreams: [Actionable recommendations on missing migrants and providing humanitarian assistance to migrants in distress](#); [Ensuring migrant protection through strengthened responses to migrant smuggling and increased coordination on its linkages with trafficking in persons](#); [Alternatives to immigration detention](#); [Enhancing pathways for regular migration through bilateral labour migration agreements](#); [Promoting safe, dignified and rights-based return and readmission, and sustainable reintegration](#); [Enhancing regular pathways for migrants in vulnerable situations](#).

62. See the scholars referenced in the section on "Irregular migration creates challenges..." pages 2-5 of this brief.

A way forward: Multi-stakeholder platform to explore solutions to irregular migration

To support governments and other actors as they grapple with irregular migration, and to drive policy innovation that can address it in a sustainable, long-term manner, PoliSync has launched a multi-stakeholder platform to explore solutions to irregular migration. Initially, the platform is focused on five core activities:

1 Take stock of the academic and grey literature to weigh up existing analyses and policy proposals to address irregular migration;

2. Map the key actors working to address irregular migration, and their activities, including governments (from city actors to country-level and regional governance organisations), international organisations, non-governmental organisations, (including migrant organisations/networks, humanitarian and human rights NGOs and advocacy organisations), civil society actors (including migrants), think tanks, scholars, and others;

3. Build a digital and physical multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary platform to support a network of actors specifically focused on developing

sustainable, long-term solutions to address irregular migration, and to foster information/best practice sharing;

4. Launch a series of multi-stakeholder dialogues, each focused on a particular policy/programmatic approach to address irregular migration, supporting constructive, evidence-based and solutions-oriented dialogue on the topic;

5. Communicate the platforms findings to policy decision-makers, international organisations and other actors working to address irregular migration, as well as communities at large.

Interested in providing feedback, supporting or joining the platform? Get in touch to learn more.

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Dr. Cannon served as Academic Adviser to the United Nations for its 75th anniversary, authoring the three official UN75 reports. She has worked in a consultancy capacity for other international organisations since 2013, including IOM, UNDP, IATA and UNHCR. She participated in the 2018 Global Compact for Migration process and served as rapporteur for IOM's 2022 International Dialogue on Migration on implementation of the Compact. Dr. Cannon teaches at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies and has published working papers on immigration detention, as well as immigrant coalition communications. She co-authored a book chapter on migrant detainees' use of social media for human rights advocacy. She has created several multimedia projects to facilitate research uptake by policy actors, and worked with IOM's Policy Research Division to create the World Migration Report digital toolkit for policy officers. She obtained a PhD in International Relations/Political Science at Geneva Graduate Institute.

Further reading and useful resources

- Ambrosini, Maurizio & Minke H. J. Hajer, 2023, Irregular Migration: IMISCOE Short Reader, Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
- UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014, [The economic, social and cultural rights of migrants in an irregular situation](#)
- IOM [Missing Migrants Project](#)
- [IOM Migration Data Portal](#)