



SUPPORT NEEDED FOR FAMILIES OF MISSING MIGRANTS:

Evidence from IOM's

"Assessing the Needs of Families Searching for Relatives
Lost in the Central and Western Mediterranean" Project



The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout the report do not imply expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IOM concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning its frontiers or boundaries.

IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental organization, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration; advance understanding of migration issues; encourage social and economic development through migration; and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

Funding for this report has been provided by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the donor.

Publisher: International Organization for Migration
17 route des Morillons
1211 Geneva 19
P.O. Box 17
Switzerland
Tel.: +41.22.717 91 11
Fax: +41.22.798 61 50
Email: hq@iom.int
Internet: www.iom.int

Authors: Kate Dearden and Marta Sánchez Dionis
Editors: Frank Laczko, Gabriella Sanchez
Research coordination: Gabriella Sanchez
Project coordination: Kate Dearden and Marta Sánchez Dionis
Art direction and data visualization: Roberta Aita
Illustrations: Salam Shokor
Language editing: Laarni Alfaro
Layout: Mae Angeline Delgado

Cover photo: *Split*. "My sons were my hope. One died during an earlier migration [journey]. The second went to search for him and ... [h]e went missing as well. I am dying twice: [because] I lost them and [because] I lost hope." © IOM 2021/Salam SHOKOR

Required citation: Dearden, K. and M. Sánchez Dionis, 2021. *Support Needed for Families of Missing Migrants: Evidence from IOM's "Assessing the Needs of Families Searching for Relatives Lost in the Central and Western Mediterranean" Project*. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva.

ISBN 978-92-9268-163-0 (PDF)
ISBN 978-92-9268-164-7 (print)

© IOM 2021



Some rights reserved. This work is made available under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 IGO License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/igo/legalcode) (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 IGO).*

For further specifications please see the [Copyright and Terms of Use](#).

This publication should not be used, published or redistributed for purposes primarily intended for or directed towards commercial advantage or monetary compensation, with the exception of educational purposes, e.g. to be included in textbooks.

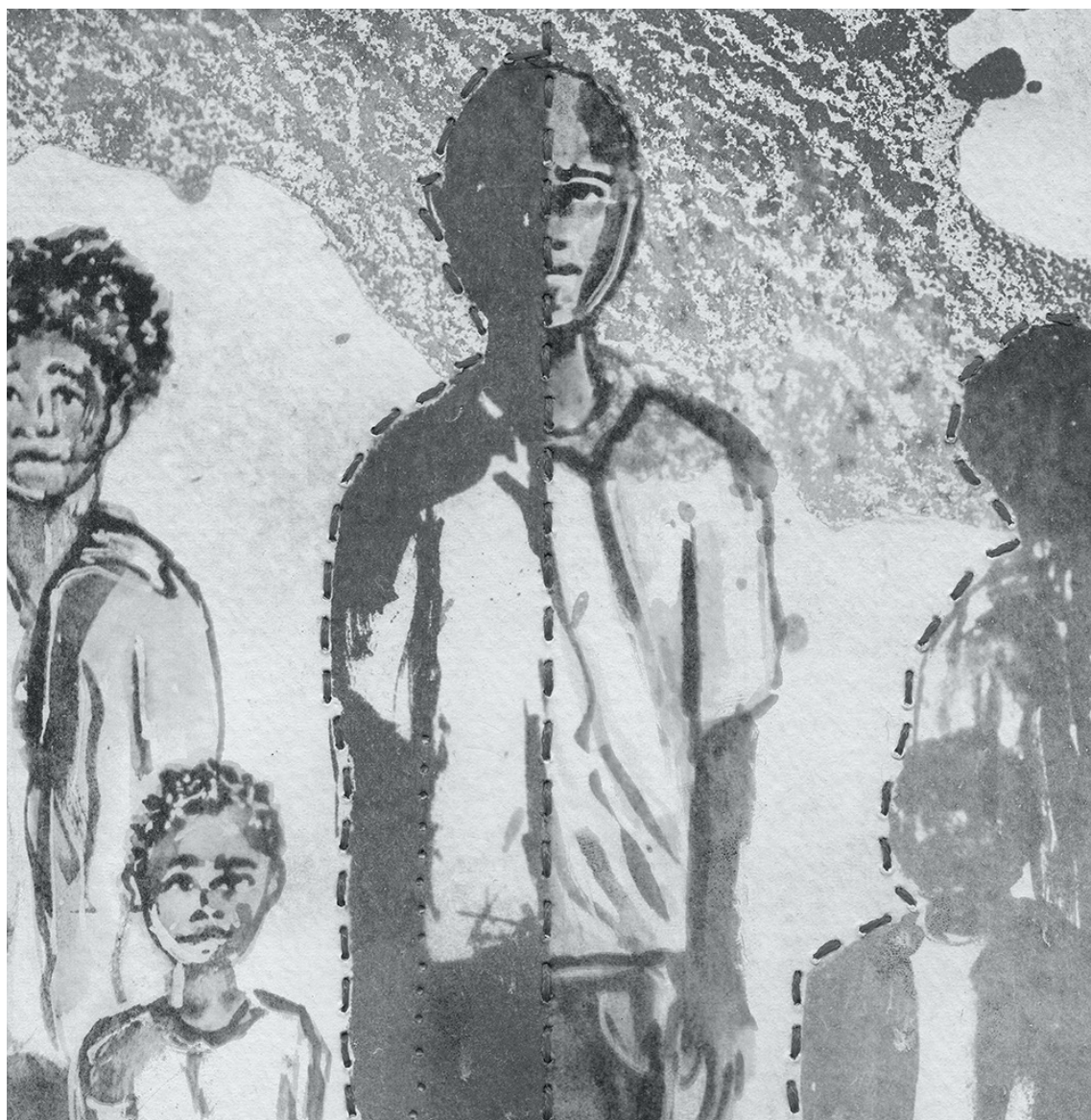
Permissions: Requests for commercial use or further rights and licensing should be submitted to publications@iom.int.

* <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/igo/legalcode>



SUPPORT NEEDED FOR FAMILIES OF MISSING MIGRANTS:

Evidence from IOM's "Assessing the Needs of Families Searching for Relatives Lost in the Central and Western Mediterranean" Project



SUMMARY

- (a) Tens of thousands of people worldwide live with the pain and uncertainty of not knowing the fate of their relatives and loved ones who have gone missing or died during migration journeys around the world.¹
- (b) In addition to the emotional toll, people's lives may be forever harmed by the psychosocial, legal and financial impacts related to the disappearance of their relatives. The community-wide and multigenerational trauma of unresolved disappearances – whether due to war and conflict, displacement, or migration – has also been documented.²
- (c) Families of missing migrants have little visibility. Their experiences are often ignored, and they lack access to adequate services and support. Besides the moral imperative to support them, States also have international obligations and commitments to the families of missing migrants. Notably:
 - (i) Under international human rights law (IHRL), States are bound by the obligation to uphold the right to life, which includes the right for all people to be treated with dignity after death and mandates all States to effectively investigate deaths when their cause is uncertain, to identify the deceased, and to provide information to their families (and to do this in a non-discriminatory manner, irrespective of the victim's race, ethnicity, national origin, gender or other status). This procedural obligation also exists when people go missing in life-threatening circumstances. Families have the right to participate in investigations, as part of States' procedural obligation to protect the right to life. More generally, they have the right to know the fate and whereabouts of their missing relatives, with corresponding rights under international humanitarian law (the "right to know") and under IHRL (the "right to truth").³
 - (ii) Objective 8 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration urges States: "[To assume] collective responsibility to preserve the lives of all migrants, in accordance with international law. [And to] ... commit to identify those who have died or gone missing, and to facilitate communication with affected families."

¹ Since 2014, IOM's *Missing Migrants Project* has documented the deaths of more than 42,000 people on migration journeys around the world. Historical data estimate that at least 85,000 people have died on migration journeys since 1996. This represents an undercount of the true number of missing migrants. Many more have disappeared without proof of what happened to them. Others have gone missing or died as internal migrants, in situations of immigration detention, reception centres, after deportation or after settlement in another country – these cases are not included in Missing Migrants Project data.

² See, for example, the Red Cross' *Humanitarian Consequences of Family Separation and People Going Missing*, available at <https://redcross.eu/uploads/files/Positions/Migration/Family%20Separation/rapport-2019-humanitarian-consequences-of-family-separation-and-people-going-missing.pdf>.

³ For a detailed analysis of the international obligations of States regarding missing migrants, please see the legal memo prepared under the Mediterranean Missing Project (2016), available at <http://iosifkovras.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Legal-Memo-on-Missing-Migrants.pdf>; the report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, with a focus on the unlawful deaths of refugees and migrants (A/72/335) (2017), available at <https://undocs.org/A/72/335>; the report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances on enforced disappearances in the context of migration (A/HRC/36/39/Add.2) (2017), available at <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/36/39/Add.2>; and the Last Rights Project's extended legal statement and commentary (2019), available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1P7RGtTQw95gFL-o6iBzxmVRsDngxpHHc/view>.

- (d) Sustainable Development Goal 10.7 calls on States to facilitate orderly, safe, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies. Part of this commitment is that States should report on deaths and disappearances during migration in their respective territories, as one indicator of (un)safe migration (SDG 10.7.3).

This policy briefing proposes 10 recommendations that States, regional organizations, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) can act on to better support families of missing migrants. These are informed by a research project carried out by a team coordinated by IOM's Missing Migrants Project, based at the Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC),⁴ and are in line with the actions recommended in the Global Compact for Migration.

⁴ For a detailed account of the methodology used to carry out this research, along with the findings on the challenges that families of missing migrants face in their searches and how the loss impacts their lives more generally, please see the country reports on Ethiopia, the United Kingdom, Spain and Zimbabwe, and the accompanying comparative report, *Families of Missing Migrants: Their Search for Answers and the Impacts of Loss – Lessons Across Four Countries*. These reports also provide recommendations for how families of missing migrants can be better supported in the contexts studied, which are the basis of the guidance included in this briefing. All reports are available at <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/publications>.

CONTENTS

Summary.....	iii
About the project.....	1
Policy issue	3
Guiding principles and recommendations for a comprehensive response to families of missing migrants.....	5
For all actors	5
1. All efforts to assist families of missing migrants should situate families at the centre of all searches and related initiatives, including recognizing and meaningfully considering their expertise and knowledge.....	5
2. Any intervention designed to address the needs of the families of missing migrants must account for the multiple ways that people's identities shape search processes and access to rights and support services.....	5
For States.....	6
3. States must meaningfully work to uphold international obligations and commitments towards missing migrants and their families under international human rights law, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Compact for Migration.....	6
4. States should adapt existing legal, policy and institutional frameworks to address issues specific to missing migrants.....	7
5. States should develop a road map to address cases of missing migrants.....	8
6. Specialized mechanisms should be established to allow families (and advocates acting on their behalf) to safely file a report concerning the disappearance of their loved ones.....	10
For States and regional actors.....	11
7. Establish mechanisms enabling transnational coordination on missing-migrant cases.....	11
8. Fund civil society actors that support families in their searches.....	12
For intergovernmental, non-governmental and civil society organizations.....	14
9. All intergovernmental, non-governmental and civil society organizations that interact with people on the move should have a road map with guidance on how to assist families of missing migrants and survivors of incidents in which other migrants have gone missing or died	14
10. Provide training for relevant government authorities, including law enforcement, about the needs and rights of families of missing migrants	15
Conclusion	16

ABOUT THE PROJECT

“Assessing the Needs of Families Searching for Relatives Lost in the Central and Western Mediterranean” is a qualitative research project carried out between April 2019 and March 2021 in Ethiopia, the United Kingdom, Spain and Zimbabwe. With support from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, it was coordinated by IOM’s Missing Migrants Project at GMDAC and conducted by a team of researchers who interviewed 76 families of missing migrants and over 30 key stakeholders. The project aimed to provide a better understanding of the challenges faced by families searching for loved ones who have gone missing on migration journeys. It also sought to amplify their voices and to identify how they could be better supported in their search for information and in coping with the impacts of loss. The Missing Migrants Project’s website (missingmigrants.iom.int) includes the project’s reports, as well as other resources for learning about the experiences of families of missing migrants. It also has information on relevant non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other actors that may be helpful to those searching for missing loved ones.

MEANINGFUL ACTION NEEDED TO ADDRESS THE GLOBAL COMPACT FOR MIGRATION’S OBJECTIVE 8

In December 2018, 164 States committed to the Global Compact for Migration, whose Objective 8 is as follows:

“ We commit to cooperate internationally to save lives and prevent migrant deaths and injuries through individual or joint search and rescue operations, standardized collection and exchange of relevant information, assuming collective responsibility to preserve the lives of all migrants, in accordance with international law. We further commit to identify those who have died or gone missing, and to facilitate communication with affected families.”

Six actions, in line with the recommendations in this briefing, are identified in the Global Compact for Migration to help realize this commitment.

The first round of voluntary reviews submitted by Member States, on the Global Compact for Migration’s implementation in 2020 and 2021, indicated that little progress has been made towards comprehensively addressing Objective 8 so far. In fact, only 15 of the 86 States who submitted reviews in this first round responded to Objective 8. Those that did, they largely focused on their efforts around their own border management, halting irregular migration and smuggling, and/or being involved in search and rescue efforts for people on maritime migration routes. The few countries that mentioned efforts to repatriate remains of migrants who died abroad and to help families with missing relatives (Ecuador and Guinea-Bissau) focused on their missing nationals abroad.

ASSESSMENT OF THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES SEARCHING FOR MISSING MIGRANT RELATIVES: PROJECT OVERVIEW



OBJECTIVE 8

of the Global Compact for Migration commits States to “identify those who have died or gone missing, and to facilitate communication with affected families”.



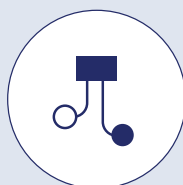
4 COUNTRIES

The research was carried out in the United Kingdom, Ethiopia, Spain and Zimbabwe.



76 FAMILIES

with missing relatives.



30+ STAKEHOLDERS

including NGOs, activists, government authorities, international organizations and academics.

MAIN FINDINGS



The search experiences of families are shaped by different intersecting factors, including gender, age, class, race and migration status.



Traditional law-enforcement approaches and legal and administrative procedures for searching for missing persons do not meet the needs of missing migrants' families.



The vast majority of families receive meaningful support in their search only from informal networks, including other migrants, activists, and grass-roots and community-based associations.

Note: The maps are for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on these maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.

POLICY ISSUE

IOM's recent research in Ethiopia, the United Kingdom, Spain and Zimbabwe identified significant gaps in addressing the needs of families of missing migrants. In all countries of research, there are no specialized institutional responses to missing-migrant cases, and existing official frameworks and mechanisms to search for missing persons in national contexts are not adapted to address the dynamics pertaining to irregular migratory journeys. Aside from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and its International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement,¹ other international organizations have not developed specific programmes to support families of missing migrants. The research found that data sufficiently capturing the needs of families of missing migrants are scarce and not taken into account in the planning of policies and services. As a result, families receive little or no institutional support in the search for their relatives, and they face a myriad of economic, legal, administrative and sociocultural barriers as they search for information and cope with the impacts of their loved ones' absence.

People's experiences of searching for their missing relatives and coping with the loss cannot be disentangled from the structural inequalities they experience based on their gender, age, class, race and migration status. These intersecting factors shape how people experience the search in the context of interactions with authorities, with community members and within families themselves. For instance, people with missing migrant relatives who are migrants themselves – especially if they do not have stable/regular migration status – will face distinct and overlapping barriers to accessing support, information, and services, including language barriers, socioeconomic precarity, fear of detention or deportation, and discrimination. Women encounter additional challenges to searching for disappeared relatives on account of their gender, along with their race, age, and socioeconomic and migration status. Because of societal inequalities when it comes to mobility and the lack of support, some people even resort to embarking on their own (irregular) migration journeys in search of their missing loved ones. In other words, the families of missing migrants disproportionately experience inequality, discrimination, and marginalization, and this is compounded by the lack of mechanisms and/or official protocols to guide or facilitate their search. This leaves them at greater risk of harm, whether from poverty, exploitation, fraud and further trauma.

The policy context also impacts how and if people can effectively search for information about their missing loved ones. In particular, political pressure to control irregular migration has impacted searches for missing migrants, as they are framed by authorities not as missing-person cases, but as investigations into migrant smuggling operations. When a family (or activists acting on their behalf) reports the disappearance of a migrant to authorities, they can be pushed for information concerning the smugglers who organized their loved one's journey, rather than about the disappearance itself. The focus on combating smuggling and irregular migration has contributed to the sidelining of the search process, a lack of trust between families and authorities, and in some cases, the criminalization of families' search efforts and of humanitarian support provided by CSOs.

¹ The Restoring Family Links Network of the ICRC and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement helps families who have lost contact with their loved ones as a result of conflicts, natural disasters and migration globally. More information is available at www.familylinks.icrc.org/en/_layouts/icrc.familylinks/FindSomeOne.aspx.

The challenges that families face during their search are compounded by the impacts of the loss. For example, the unresolved grief resulting from a lack of closure in a missing-person case (known as ambiguous loss)² severely impacts the health and well-being of those left behind. References to feelings of anger, sorrow, anxiety or helplessness were common in conversations with families, and most participants reported suffering ongoing psychological anguish as a result of not knowing what happened to their relatives. Families who do not know the fate of their loved ones suffer emotionally, psychologically, as well as legally and financially, and these impacts affect some people (particularly women, older relatives or children of the missing) more than others. Women who participated in IOM's research reported being disproportionately affected by stigma following the disappearance of a male relative and that they faced significant barriers to supporting themselves and their families.

The findings of IOM's research³ indicate that no single actor can address the topic of missing migrants alone. The recommendations in the next section aim to provide concrete ways in which States, regional organizations, IGOs and CSOs can take action to support families of missing migrants in their search for their loved ones and to help them cope with the impacts of loss. While the recommendations are applicable generally, specific examples of how they can be applied to the countries of research are also provided.



FAMILIES SPEAK

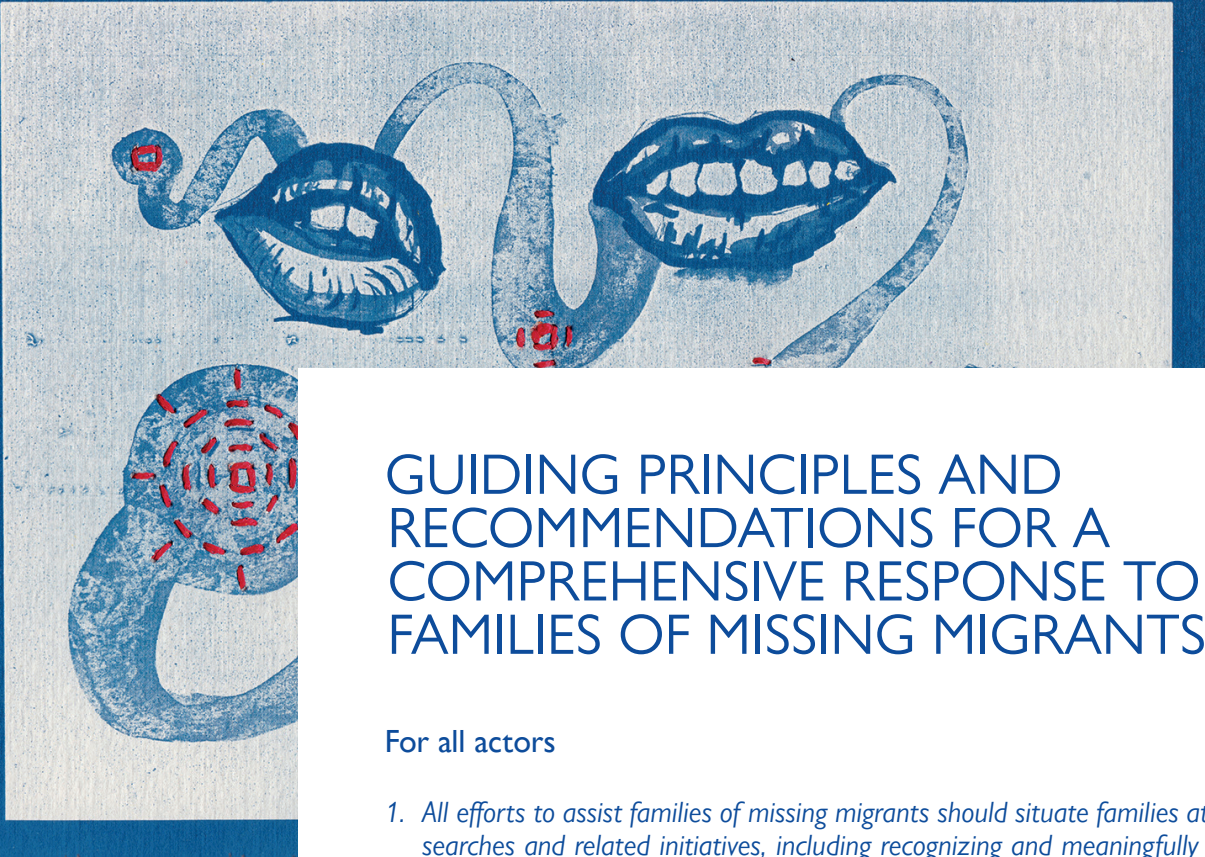
A father in Ethiopia told IOM's research team:

“As time goes on, our pain and suffering worsen. I can't work in my farm effectively because [I can see] the face of my boy again and again. As a result, I can't even fulfil the basic needs of my family. I don't sleep at night. His voice and image come to my mind every minute. His mother had a heart attack after she heard of his disappearance.”



² Coined by Pauline Boss in 1999, the term refers to unresolved grief emerging from loss without resolution or closure. Her article is available at https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc_99_905_4.pdf.

³ These findings are in line with those of previous projects on the topic, such as the Mediterranean Missing Project, which was carried out in 2015–2016 by researchers at the University of York; City, University of London; and IOM.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A COMPREHENSIVE RESPONSE TO FAMILIES OF MISSING MIGRANTS

For all actors

1. *All efforts to assist families of missing migrants should situate families at the centre of all searches and related initiatives, including recognizing and meaningfully considering their expertise and knowledge.*
 - This involves learning search methods and/or research tools developed by families and CSOs, then incorporating them into official and/or systematized search processes. Recognizing and legitimizing the efforts of families and other key search actors that support them (such as friends, diaspora members and activists), instead of dismissing them as amateur or non-professional, builds trust and cooperation.
 - This requires ensuring the active involvement of families of missing migrants in search and identification processes, as well as the grass-roots associations and CSOs that support them.
 - This may also demand finding ways to incorporate data generated from non-traditional sources (for example, information shared by smugglers), which are often dismissed by authorities but can be useful to other actors who help in the search.
2. *Any intervention designed to address the needs of the families of missing migrants must account for the multiple ways that people's identities shape search processes and access to rights and support services.*
 - Initiatives to support families of missing migrants should follow an intersectional approach that takes into account how gender, age, race, class, disability, migration status and other factors intersect to shape vulnerability and exclusion, with a focus on lowering barriers to accessing support and services for those facing multiple disadvantages.
 - Sidelining or ignoring the ways that such factors shape the encounters of families with authorities, large organizations, and other institutions or bodies supporting them may inadvertently leave those facing multiple, overlapping barriers behind, and add harm and further trauma to families.

For States

3. *States must meaningfully work to uphold international obligations and commitments towards missing migrants and their families under international human rights law, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Compact for Migration.*

- State authorities bear the primary responsibility to respond to the needs of the families of missing migrants. They have obligations and commitments to search for missing migrants, protect and fulfil the rights of their families, and address their needs in a collaborative way, at the national and transnational levels. These obligations apply even if the journeys on which the deaths or disappearances occurred are deemed irregular by States.
- In order to uphold these obligations and commitments, States must remove all legal, bureaucratic or administrative impediments that families of missing migrants face in exercising their rights or in accessing justice.¹
- Additionally, States have obligations to prevent further disappearances as people continue to migrate. This includes critically examining their migration policies to identify the conditions that structurally produce unsafe migration and lead to increased vulnerability and risk of death and disappearance. These situations are linked to the protracted conditions of irregularity that people face during their journeys or in places of destination as a result of unequal access to safe mobility paths. Providing more options for safe, regular and orderly migration, so that people do not have to compromise their well-being in their journeys to reach better opportunities, would help prevent further tragedy.



RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION FROM THE GLOBAL COMPACT FOR MIGRATION'S OBJECTIVE 8

Review the impacts of migration-related policies and laws to ensure that these do not raise or create the risk of migrants going missing, including by identifying dangerous transit routes used by migrants, working with other States as well as relevant stakeholders and international organizations to identify contextual risks, and establishing mechanisms for preventing and responding to such situations, with particular attention to migrant children, especially those unaccompanied or separated.

¹ For more information on this, please see the Mytilini Declaration for the Dignified Treatment of all Missing and Deceased Persons and their Families as a Consequence of Migrant Journeys, available at http://lastrights.net/LR_resources/html/LR_mytilini.html.

4. States should adapt existing legal, policy and institutional frameworks to address issues specific to missing migrants.

- States should ensure that, in their design and implementation, national migration policies include provisions to prevent and address cases of deaths and disappearances occurring during migration. This should include mainstreaming the specific needs and views of families of missing migrants into their programmes in order to meet international commitments under the SDGs and the Global Compact for Migration and legal obligations that protect the rights of missing migrants and their families.
- Migration policies should follow a human rights-based approach to the issue of missing migrants, prioritizing the efforts to clarify their fate and whereabouts and to provide answers to their families.
- States should also adapt the existing frameworks for handling missing-person cases to take into account the particular dynamics of deaths and disappearances on transnational migration journeys, including the situations faced by people searching for loved ones in the context of migration. States' legal and policy frameworks should include provisions to investigate cases of missing migrants, regardless of the legal context of the journeys on which the death or disappearance occurred, and they should ensure that all families of missing migrants have access to justice and information.



INSIGHTS FROM IOM'S RESEARCH IN ETHIOPIA

The research with families of missing migrants in Ethiopia found that some provisions exist for cases of migrants who go missing in countries of destination where they have travelled through regular migration channels. However, these provisions do not apply to people who went missing or died on irregular migration journeys or without having legal status in the countries of destination. An officer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated:

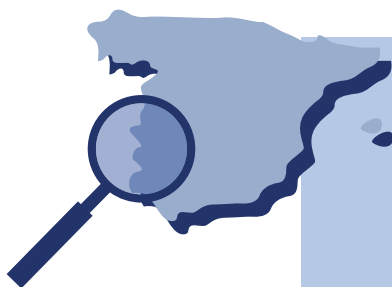
“ If migrants die in countries [with which] we have bilateral labour agreements, our consulate offices, labour recruitment agencies and the Ethiopian Airlines repatriate bodies from abroad. This is possible when migrants are legal and they have life insurance from their employer in the country of destination. But it is a big problem when migrants are illegal* and die in migration routes, in transit or destinations.”

Note: The term “illegal” is used in this briefing only when it is a direct quote from a research participant or the official name of a government unit. IOM prefers the term “irregular” to refer to a mode of moving outside regular/legal migration channels, as this word does not necessarily carry a criminal connotation, is not against migrants’ dignity and does not undermine respect for the human rights of migrants.

5. *States should develop a road map to address cases of missing migrants.*

- To improve the response to missing-migrant cases, States should develop a road map establishing clear guidance for government departments, State institutions, and regional and local authorities on their respective roles regarding search strategies, identification methods, information-sharing pathways, and data collection, centralization and sharing.
- The road map should deploy a multi-stakeholder approach that ensures the active involvement of families of missing migrants in search and identification processes, as well as of grass-roots associations and CSOs that support them, along with other key stakeholders.
- It should include clear and effective guidelines for how families can report cases of missing migrants, regardless of where they occurred; the institutions or bodies where they can go for assistance; and the support they can expect to receive to cope with the economic, social and legal impacts of the disappearance.
- One option to facilitate this could be that the road map designates an institution as a single point of contact for families searching for their missing loved ones, with the aim of enabling their active participation in the search for their relatives and facilitating the exchange of information.
- The road map should be flexible enough to adapt to the needs of multiple family members regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, migration status, abilities, etc.
- The road map should facilitate the systematization, centralization and preservation of data collected for the purposes of the search and identification of missing migrants, according to international data protection standards.
- It should also include goals to periodically evaluate the response to missing-migrant cases and to publish reports on good practices and lessons learned that can contribute to improving responses in the future.
- The road map should be aligned with international standards developed for the treatment of cases of missing or deceased migrants, and their families – including but not limited to: (a) the principles governing interactions with the relatives of missing migrants; (b) the guidelines on coordination and information-exchange mechanisms assisting the search for missing migrants; and (c) the core data set for the search of missing migrants developed by the ICRC.²

² These three documents are forthcoming. More details are available at www.icrc.org.



INSIGHTS FROM IOM'S RESEARCH IN SPAIN

A recommendation emerging from IOM's research conducted in Spain is a call for the State to develop a protocol that establishes a central strategy to search for and identify missing or deceased migrants, taking into account the respective mandates of the different actors involved in these processes. This protocol should be produced with the active involvement of families of missing migrants, as well as the grass-roots associations and CSOs that support them. It should include the following components:

- (a) Specific police and forensic protocols for missing migrants and unidentified remains on irregular migration routes to Spain that take into account the dynamics of disappearances and deaths in migratory contexts, as well as the needs of family members. These protocols should set a high priority for cases involving the disappearances or deaths of migrants, even when these cases are not linked to any criminal acts.
- (b) The amendment or development of protocols for the reception of migrant shipwreck survivors to include the requirement of collecting witness testimonies from them regarding the missing or deceased. By collecting survivor testimonies on a systematic basis, whether through anonymous interviews conducted by the authorities or by CSOs, data that may prove necessary for search and identification processes can be collected and stored.
- (c) The development of common structures or elements such as specific databases for cases of missing migrants and unidentified human remains, along with mechanisms to connect existing national and international databases, in order to facilitate the systematization and centralization of data collected and the exchange of data with other institutions or the authorities of other countries.
- (d) The inclusion of privacy and data protection provisions to ensure that data collected for the search and identification of missing or deceased migrants are kept separate from data collected for law-enforcement purposes.

6. *Specialized mechanisms should be established to allow families (and advocates acting on their behalf) to safely file a report concerning the disappearance of their loved ones.*

- Safe reporting mechanisms (such as firewalls) are needed to protect families and civil society advocates from criminalization when they report the disappearance of missing migrants to the authorities. These mechanisms should ensure that any information provided by families (or other search actors acting on their behalf) should be used strictly for the purposes of the search and not for immigration enforcement or other motives.
- Specialized mechanisms should be developed to facilitate transnational access of the relatives of missing migrants from abroad, whether they are in their countries of origin or in countries of transit or destination where they themselves are migrants. There are several options to ensure transnational access – for example, by creating or enabling a mechanism through consular channels that allows families to engage actively and efficiently in a search from their countries of residence, or by creating special visas for the families of missing migrants to conduct searches or participate in funerary and return arrangements.



FAMILIES SPEAK

The brother of a missing migrant told IOM's research team:

“ We are not criminals. We went to the police and to the Ministry [of Foreign Affairs] for help. They treated us as criminals. The guards did not even allow us to enter the building. ... [There is no path to file a report] or complaint. They must recognize missing migrants are also citizens. The State has to help us with our searches.”



For States and regional actors

7. *Establish mechanisms enabling transnational coordination on missing-migrant cases.*

- Such a mechanism should provide a structured framework to enable the flow of information between countries. It should clarify the roles and responsibilities of actors across different jurisdictions dealing with investigations that have a cross-border element, to foster a close working relationship between counterparts. It should establish procedures to enhance cross-border exchange of information and data and ensure mutual access to existing databases (or provide for the creation of regional databases to centralize data), in line with data protection principles.
- The collection, centralization and sharing of data among key stakeholders should be modelled after the Guidelines on Coordination and Information Exchange Mechanisms for the Search for Missing Migrants, under development by the ICRC.³ These standards guide the collection, processing and exchange of relevant information on missing-migrant cases, its centralization at the local and national levels, and sharing and exchange along migratory routes between countries of origin, transit and destination.



RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION FROM THE GLOBAL COMPACT FOR MIGRATION'S OBJECTIVE 8

Establish transnational coordination channels, including through consular cooperation, and designate contact points for families looking for missing migrants, through which families can be kept informed on the status of the search and obtain other relevant information, while respecting their right to privacy and protecting personal data.

Collect, centralize and systematize data regarding corpses and ensure traceability after burial, in accordance with internationally accepted forensic standards, and establish coordination channels at the transnational level to facilitate identification and the provision of information to families.

³ This publication is forthcoming. Details are available at www.icrc.org.



GOOD PRACTICE: THE CROSS-BORDER OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE FOR THE MISSING AND DECEASED MIGRANTS AND THEIR FAMILIES IN ZIMBABWE AND SOUTH AFRICA

With support from the ICRC, authorities in Zimbabwe and South Africa are working to establish a State-led, cross-border mechanism to focus on clarifying the fate of missing migrants and informing their families, known as the Oversight Committee for the Missing and Deceased Migrants and Their Families. The aim of the mechanism is to facilitate coordination and enable the two-way flow of information between key actors in both countries, allowing information provided by families in Zimbabwe to be sent to search authorities in South Africa, and news of developments in the search, or requests for additional information, to be channelled back to the families. Initial meetings with Zimbabwean and South African authorities geared towards the establishment of this mechanism were held in the second half of 2021, hosted by the ICRC with support from the IOM Regional Office for Southern Africa.

8. *Fund civil society actors that support families in their searches.*

- IOM's research project revealed that community-based and grass-roots organizations are the main source of support of families of missing migrants. These informal, grass-roots and community-based structures need to be recognized and supported, and their capacities should be enhanced financially and technically to enable them to reach as many families as possible.
- Support services for the families of missing migrants should be facilitated by people from within their same communities, who are aware of their sociocultural context. Most official or structured efforts bring outsiders, who may not share the same perspectives and beliefs of families, which can lead to the latter feeling ignored and discouraged.
- This is key to enabling families of missing migrants to develop trust in institutions, strengthening the capacity of migrant communities and organizations, and eliminating systemic and structural discrimination, which currently is a barrier to effective management of missing-migrant cases.



INSIGHTS FROM IOM'S RESEARCH IN ETHIOPIA

In Ethiopia, one recommendation was to enhance the capacity and role of existing community-based support structures, such as support funds known as *iddir*, community care coalitions (CCCs), and church- and mosque-based associations, which have proved effective in mobilizing psychosocial and economic support for families who have lost their loved ones on migration journeys. Members of the Ethiopian diaspora abroad also play a key role in supporting the search for people who have gone missing on their migration journeys, facilitating the repatriation of remains in the event of death, and providing socioeconomic support for families left behind. This role should be supported and replicated. Diaspora groups could be engaged through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the network of Ethiopian consulates abroad, as well as through the Ethiopian Diaspora Agency.



INSIGHTS FROM IOM'S RESEARCH IN ZIMBABWE

In Zimbabwe, a specific recommendation is for the State to fund and support the establishment of legal empowerment programmes with the aim of connecting families of missing migrants in rural communities with tools that will help them access justice and support. Such programmes would equip people from affected communities to act as “community-based facilitators”, with the aim of reaching families in rural communities, mitigating issues of trust, and supporting them in overcoming fears of interacting with authorities. Facilitators would raise awareness among families about their rights, provide support in individual cases, and help them navigate legal and administrative processes in their search and pursuit of remedies. They could then document and collect data on missing-migrant cases for case management and evidence-based advocacy. Facilitators could also engage village leaders to address sociocultural and gendered issues leading to stigmatization.

For intergovernmental, non-governmental and civil society organizations

9. All intergovernmental, non-governmental and civil society organizations that interact with people on the move should have a road map with guidance on how to assist families of missing migrants and survivors of incidents in which other migrants have gone missing or died.

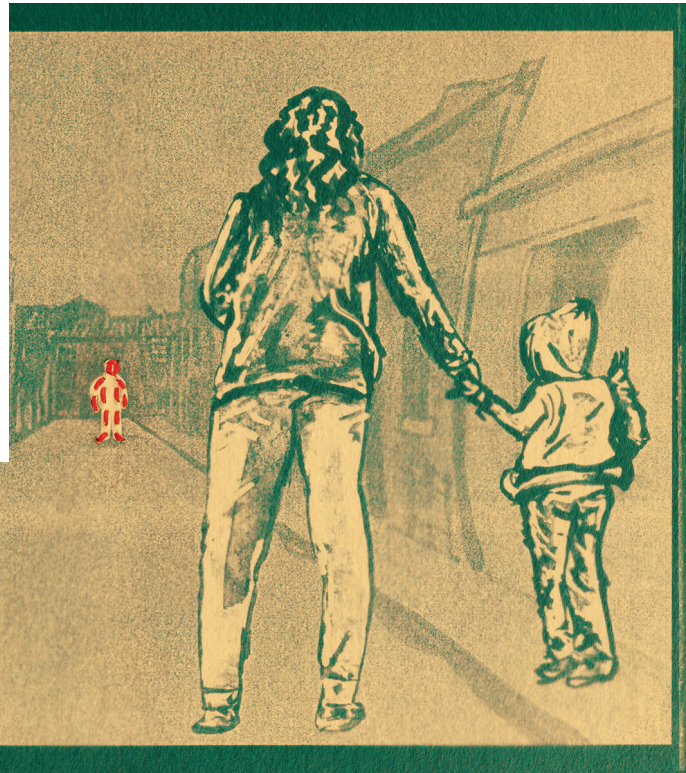
- Different humanitarian and development actors and organizations may already interact and assist people with missing migrant relatives and/or survivors of incidents in which other migrants have gone missing or died. A road map or a set of guidelines on how to address the specific needs of people in such situations should be created in order to facilitate the provision of more consistent assistance.
- Having such a road map does not imply that the organizations must engage in searches themselves, but it should help them refer cases to other actors who can provide better support.
- Awareness-building and training on the road map/guidelines are essential for them to be effective.
- These guidelines should be in line with those developed by the ICRC on the collection of data for missing-migrant cases, interacting with families of missing migrants, and the collection, centralization and sharing of data among key stakeholders.⁴



FAMILIES SPEAK

Anais, a Somali woman interviewed in the United Kingdom, has been searching for her two sons who went missing while trying to cross from Libya into Europe. She said:

“ Getting right information and knowing where to go for what purpose is very important. People don't [know] where to go or where they can find such information. If people can get information through the Home Office, IOM office or other big organizations ... that will be helpful for them.”



⁴ These guidelines are forthcoming. Details are available at www.icrc.org.

Up until now, IOM's efforts on the topic of missing migrants have been evident through its Missing Migrants Project, based at GMDAC. However, the topic of missing migrants extends beyond the definitional and practical scope of the project, and often overlaps with the humanitarian work of IOM staff in other areas of the Organization. To help support staff who might not have specialized knowledge to address these cases, in 2021, IOM's Missing Migrants Project started to develop an information, advice and guidance (IAG) document to support all staff with enquiries about any cases of missing migrants and migrant deaths. The document brings together tools and resources on topics such as referral mechanisms, psychosocial support, data collection and privacy protection, which come from within IOM and across a wide range of stakeholders. Some situations in which the IAG could be useful for IOM staff include:

- (a) When IOM colleagues provide direct response and/or assistance to migrants after a disaster (for example, after shipwrecks on irregular migration routes).
- (b) When IOM colleagues hear witness reports about the deaths of migrants on the move in the course of their other work.
- (c) When IOM colleagues receive first- or second-hand enquiries from families and/or friends searching for their missing migrant family members.

10. *Provide training for relevant government authorities, including law enforcement, about the needs and rights of families of missing migrants.*

- Trainings by IGOs and NGOs should be geared towards ensuring that authorities take responsibility for addressing missing-migrant cases and the rights and needs of their families – and with a view to enhancing technical knowledge and capacity to improve search and identification processes.
- IGOs convening these trainings should partner with community-based and grass-roots groups and advocates working with families of missing migrants and build and/or strengthen their best practices. Trainings should be designed and facilitated with and from the lens of the most impacted: the families.
- These trainings should sensitize authorities about following a trauma-informed, intersectional approach to interacting with affected communities, and passing on referrals to NGOs and community-based organizations. There should also be training on procedures for addressing missing-migrant cases and on international laws and standards around the proper management of these cases.

CONCLUSION

This policy briefing proposes 10 recommendations addressed to policymakers and other stakeholders who are in a position to support families of missing migrants in their search for their loved ones and to help them cope with the impacts of loss. The action points are based on the findings from IOM's recent research in Ethiopia, the United Kingdom, Spain and Zimbabwe. They draw from the testimonies of 76 families of missing migrants and over 30 stakeholders interviewed as part of the project.

The findings from this research show that to date, policymakers have failed to genuinely engage in the structural challenges that families of missing migrants face when searching for information about the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones, as well as the multiple impacts derived from their absence. By narrowly focusing on combating smuggling and irregular migration, State authorities – which bear the primary responsibility to protect and fulfil the rights of families – have largely sidelined those with missing migrant relatives, resulting in profound consequences on people's lives.

Worldwide, tens of thousands of people do not know what has happened to their parents, partners, siblings, children, and other relatives and families who left to migrate in search of safety and better opportunities. They remain invisible in data, and they are routinely excluded from policy debates about safe migration. These gaps and the lack of adequate efforts to listen to their voices and to address their needs lead to their persistent exclusion and marginalization.

IOM calls for urgent action to protect and fulfil the rights of families of missing migrants, to support them in their search efforts and in coping with the impacts of loss. Besides the moral imperative, Objective 8 of the [Global Compact for Migration](#) specifically calls on States to identify those who have died or gone missing, and to facilitate communication with affected families. The search for missing persons and determining their fate or whereabouts are human rights duties of States, regardless of the nature of the journeys on which the migrants lost their lives.

missingmigrants.iom.int

