

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROGRAMMES AND FINANCE**

**Thirty-fifth Session**

**IOM'S APPROACH TO THE PROTECTION OF  
MIGRANTS AND DISPLACED PERSONS**



## IOM'S APPROACH TO THE PROTECTION OF MIGRANTS AND DISPLACED PERSONS

### Introduction

1. The scale, scope and complexity of both internal displacement and international migration is growing. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported that 75.9 million individuals were living in internal displacement at the end of 2023, with nearly 47 million new internal displacements recorded that year. Conflicts and disasters are the primary drivers of exposure to protection risks, limiting access to essential services and triggering displacement, with the ongoing climate crisis exacerbating these challenges.<sup>1</sup> The year 2023 was the deadliest on record for migrants seeking to cross international borders, with at least 8,606 people dead or missing on migration routes worldwide according to the IOM Missing Migrants Project.<sup>2</sup>

2. Global frameworks such as the [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#) and the [United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement](#) provide guidance for addressing protection risks and ensuring the protection of persons on the move, while considering how to resolve displacement crises and realizing the full potential of migration. The [IOM Strategic Plan \(2024–2028\)](#), which is aligned with these frameworks, focuses on putting people first. Guided by the objectives of saving lives, protecting people on the move, driving solutions to displacement and facilitating pathways for regular migration, IOM interventions now span the full spectrum of migration governance, with protection at the forefront.

3. [IOM's Approach to Protection](#) is central to the Organization's efforts as a key player in protecting people globally and a leading agency in migration-related action. Through its work with governments and other partners, IOM aims to reduce disaster risks, support peacebuilding, ensure the protection of human rights and prevent displacement whenever possible.

4. This paper provides a brief overview of IOM's history and work in protection. It outlines the process of defining IOM's Approach to Protection as part of efforts to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of migrants and displaced persons, and explains how these efforts contribute to the Organization's commitments contained in the Strategic Plan.

### Protection and rights throughout the history of IOM

5. Established in 1951 as the Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for the Movement of Migrants from Europe (PICMME), the Organization initially focused on resettling migrants from Europe in the aftermath of World War II to help them to resume their lives in freedom and with dignity. Unlike United Nations agencies, the Organization did not have a protection mandate. However, its expanding scope of activities provided protection to hundreds of thousands of migrants, including displaced persons and refugees. Between the 1950s and 1980s, its mission became global, a transformation recognized with a new name in 1989: the International Organization for Migration (IOM).<sup>3</sup>

6. The role of IOM as a global protection actor has been shaped by operational realities and strategic decisions. In 2002, IOM outlined this role in the document [Migrants' Rights – IOM Policy and Activities](#). In 2006, the then United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for United Nations

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<sup>1</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), [2024 Global Report on Internal Displacement](#) (Geneva, IDMC, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> IOM Missing Migrants Project, [Dead and missing by year](#), data set (accessed 13 September 2024).

<sup>3</sup> IOM, [A World on the Move: A brief history of IOM 1951–2016 in words and pictures](#) (Geneva, IOM, 2016).

agencies to mainstream human rights into their work.<sup>4</sup> At that time, IOM had a limited role within the United Nations system. Yet the call, along with demands from external stakeholders for clearer communication of the Organization's protection role, led IOM to better define how a rights-based approach was incorporated into its work and how it understood the concept of protection.<sup>5</sup>

7. The IOM definition of protection is based on the 1999 definition by the International Committee of the Red Cross, which was also adopted in 1999 by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee.<sup>6</sup> These organizations define protection as all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law, namely international human rights law, international humanitarian law and international refugee law. The IOM definition is broader because for the protection of migrants other bodies of law are also relevant, including labour law, maritime law, consular law and transnational criminal law. The importance of protecting people was emphasized through the United Nations Human Rights Up Front initiative in 2013. The same year, [a statement by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Principals](#) called for humanitarian efforts to prioritize protection.

8. In 2015, IOM published staff guidance on the [rights-based approach to programming](#). This guidance highlights that, in the context of IOM's work, while most of the rights considered under a rights-based approach are derived from human rights law, it is also essential to consider other branches of international law relevant to migration, such as international labour law, refugee law, humanitarian law, transnational criminal law and nationality law.

9. In 2015, IOM explained how it protected people in its [Humanitarian Policy](#) and presented to its governing bodies a proposal for a [protection policy](#). IOM also contributed actively to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee policy on protection in humanitarian action.<sup>7</sup> The policy was adopted in 2016, the same year in which IOM became a related organization of the United Nations. IOM had been a standing invitee to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee since its establishment through General Assembly resolution 46/182 of 19 December 1991. In 2016, IOM's new status as a related organization of the United Nations conferred to it full membership of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

10. The protection of individual rights is also central to [IOM's 2021 Policy on the full spectrum of return, readmission and reintegration](#), which recognizes these concepts as interconnected and essential components of effective and rights-based migration management. States have the sovereign prerogative to determine their national migration policies and to govern migration within their jurisdiction, in line with their international legal commitments. Today, IOM works with States to establish, expand and enhance regular migration pathways to enable more individuals to benefit from opportunities for development and protection, while addressing the challenges of irregular migration.

### **IOM's institutional approach to protection: a collective effort**

11. IOM has evolved from an operational logistics agency in 1951 to an intergovernmental organization that works with its Member States on all aspects of human mobility governance. This

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations, *In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all – Report of the Secretary-General*, (New York, United Nations, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> IOM, Informal Consultations on IOM Strategy, [Protection of persons involved in migration: Note on IOM's role](#) (IC/2007/3 of 18 April 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Policy Paper: Protection of Internally Displaced Persons* (New York, Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 1999). An update is foreseen by 30 September 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Policy: Protection in humanitarian action* (Geneva, Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2016).

evolution demands a consistent, coherent and accountable role for IOM in protection across all contexts.

12. In 2021, IOM began consultations involving over 7,000 staff worldwide to define an institutional approach to protection. A key finding was that the top request from IOM staff was for a common, singular narrative on the Organization's approach to protection.

13. The two-year staff consultation process involved fostering dialogue on protection, addressing divergent views, building consensus and reinforcing the centrality of protection in all IOM interventions. The final set of 40 recommendations were costed and prioritized and the responsibility for implementation was allocated at three levels: Headquarters, regional offices and country offices. The process was instrumental in establishing a shared understanding of what protection entails in the context of IOM's work. IOM's Approach to Protection and the [IOM Protection Roadmap](#) were shared in January 2024 via the IOM [Migrant Protection Platform](#).

14. IOM's Approach to Protection represents the first detailed and complete explanation of the work, role and vision of IOM in relation to protection across different contexts. The related Roadmap sets out the short-, medium- and long-term actions required to achieve IOM's overarching protection goal, which is to place the rights and well-being of migrants, regardless of their status, at the centre of its operations. The Approach and the Roadmap were developed under the Defining an Institutional Approach to Protection (DIAP) initiative, supported by 18 IOM Member States through unearmarked funding and by the Cooperation on Migration and Partnerships to Achieve Sustainable Solutions (COMPASS) programme, which is funded by the Kingdom of Netherlands. The Roadmap focuses on mainstreaming protection across all sectors, making IOM efforts results-driven and ensuring that accountability mechanisms are in place for staff to fulfil their protection responsibilities. It also seeks to enhance the Organization's protection capacity, including through protection analysis, support for robust and consistent advocacy for the rights of migrants and displaced persons and strengthened support for and engagement in collective approaches to reduce protection risks.

15. Protection features prominently in the IOM Strategic Plan (2024–2028) as one of four cross-cutting priorities alongside integrity, transparency and accountability; equality, diversity and inclusion; and environmental sustainability. IOM's objectives are aligned with the IOM Constitution and Humanitarian Policy, the Charter of the United Nations and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee policy on protection in humanitarian action.

16. IOM recognizes that when people move, they may be exposed to protection risks. IOM collaborates closely with countries and communities, striving to uphold the rights and dignity of all migrants and displaced persons and making safety and protection a cornerstone of its programmes. This involves ensuring the protection of migrants across the full spectrum of crises, migration management and governance to deliver on the promises of safe, orderly and regular migration and of saving lives and protecting people, while supporting the world's most vulnerable.

### **Conclusion and next steps**

17. As IOM's scope of work has expanded, it has become a global protection actor and the leading intergovernmental organization in migration. These changes over time have necessitated greater coherence in efforts to reduce protection risks whilst protecting, respecting and fulfilling the rights of individuals in all aspects of human mobility.

18. Central to IOM's mission is its Approach to Protection, which focuses on safeguarding the rights and well-being of migrants and displaced people. This Approach was designed to reduce risks and ensure that protection is integrated into all aspects of IOM's work, regardless of the context.

19. In 2020, the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres launched a renewed Call to Action for Human Rights, followed by the introduction in 2024 of the United Nations Agenda for Protection, which reaffirms the critical role of United Nations agencies in protecting the populations they serve. This growing global recognition – within both the United Nations and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee – highlights the urgent need to strengthen protection efforts. The 2023 assessment of IOM by the Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network acknowledged that the Organization had strengthened its approach to protection, while emphasizing the need for an enhanced Protection Division and a protection strategy.<sup>8</sup> Since the assessment, IOM has raised the profile of its Protection Division, which now reports directly to the Deputy Director General for Operations, and has increased the number of expert advisers and senior protection staff.

20. IOM will continue to implement its Approach to Protection in line with its Protection Roadmap. This ongoing initiative includes investment in staff capacity through the development of guidelines, programming and training materials on protection, and enhancing collaboration across IOM departments to ensure that protection is fully integrated into all aspects of the Organization's work. IOM will also engage with its Member States in discussions on what protection means in different thematic and geographic contexts.

21. By placing protection at the centre of its actions and decision-making, in close collaboration with its partners, IOM contributes to a world where safety, dignity and rights are upheld for all.

#### ***Recommendations for Member States***

- Join the upcoming Friends of Protection platform to support the implementation of the Protection Roadmap and contribute to strategic guidance and advocacy efforts.
- Allocate unearmarked or softly earmarked funding to strengthen resources to address serious protection challenges in operations run by IOM Headquarters, regional offices and key missions.
- Provide experts, including Junior Professional Officers, associate officers and secondments, in key protection areas to strengthen institutional systems and tools. Focus areas include social protection, diversity and inclusion, mental health and psychosocial support, intercultural communication, accountability to affected populations, child protection, gender-based violence and human rights due diligence.
- Fund country-level projects aimed at enhancing the quality and quantity of protection activities on the ground.
- Advocate for stronger protection of migrants in global, regional and national forums.
- Advocate for enhanced financing for protection programming.

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<sup>8</sup> Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN), *MOPAN Assessment of International Organization for Migration (IOM)*, (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2023).