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Migration Routes in Focus

Route-based Approaches between Protection and Control

Nadine Knapp and Anne Koch

Route-based approaches promise a paradigm shift in international refugee and migration policy. Rather than treating individual country contexts in isolation, they shift attention to developments along key migration corridors. The analytical value is obvious, given the complex and transnational character of mobility dynamics. Yet the growing popularity of route-based approaches also follows a political rationale – they resonate across different political camps, offer operational synergies and may help allocate scarce resources more effectively. At the same time, the concept reflects a fundamental tension in international migration policy: route-based approaches can improve protection along migration corridors, but they can also legitimise the outsourcing of migration control to countries of origin and transit. Whether route-based approaches amount to substantive change or merely repackage a logic of control will depend on how they are implemented.

Migration management and protection needs often transcend national borders, while responsibilities, funding mechanisms and support structures tend to be organised within national frameworks. Route-based approaches seek to address this mismatch by treating migration corridors as connected spaces for political and humanitarian action. In recent years they have gained traction in international refugee and migration policy – both within the UN system and at European level. Since 2022/23, the EU has increasingly organised its external migration policy around migration routes under the label of the Whole-of-Route Approach.

Several factors have expedited the growing popularity of route-based approaches.

First, a perspective that looks at migration routes in their entirety reflects the complexity of mobility patterns. This is particularly true of mixed movements, where people seeking protection and other migrants use the same routes and face similar risks, even though their legal status may differ fundamentally. A route-oriented perspective can help to improve our understanding of such dynamics, highlight gaps in protection, and enhance the coherence of support services. A second factor is the severely constrained funding environment for humanitarian assistance and development cooperation. UN organisations in particular face growing pressure to create synergies, improve coordination and set clearer priorities. Route-based approaches



promise efficiency gains by overcoming sectoral and geographic fragmentation and bundling interventions along migration routes. Their appeal cannot be explained by analytical or operational considerations alone, however. In particular in the European context, the focus on routes also reflects a broader shift in migration policy towards deeper cooperation with countries of origin and transit and a related externalisation of migration management.

Origins and practical value of route-based approaches

A holistic perspective that takes the entire migration route into view is not new. It reflects a basic insight of migration research: that migration is a dynamic process, not a one-off event. People make their mobility decisions not only prior to departure, but continuously along the route — responding to factors such as changing security conditions, employment prospects, access to protection and the offers of smuggling networks.

A route-oriented perspective was first put into practice in the humanitarian field. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is regarded as a key pioneer of what came to be known as the Route-Based Approach (RBA). The approach was subsequently taken up within the UN system, by the EU, and by individual European states, each interpreting and operationalising it in line with their institutional mandates and political priorities. This has produced different — and at times competing — understandings of what a route-based approach entails, with distinct assumptions, objectives and instruments.

Protection orientation in the multilateral context

Apart from the IFRC, the two most important UN actors in the field of displacement and migration — the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration

(IOM) — have also adopted the RBA. Under this label, all three organisations pursue a needs-based approach that responds to the specific features of mixed movements. They focus less on legal status and more on risks and vulnerabilities that migrants and displaced persons face along the route, protection needs, and access to support, information and rights.

At the same time, IFRC, UNHCR and IOM set different priorities in implementing the approach, in line with their respective mandates. Through its Global Route-Based Migration Programme, the IFRC pursues a strictly humanitarian approach centred on providing immediate, accessible aid in the context of mixed movements, irrespective of the legal status of the recipients.

UNHCR understands the RBA as a tool for moving towards a more integrated protection architecture by connecting protection interventions at an early stage and expanding regular pathways. Durable solutions are promoted to ease pressure on host countries along major displacement routes, strengthen international responsibility-sharing, and create safer alternatives to dangerous journeys. The UNHCR emphasises the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between refugees and migrants, so even in mixed movements, people in need of international protection must have access to asylum procedures and other rights under the Geneva Refugee Convention.

IOM uses the route-based approach primarily as a programmatic framework for bringing together existing measures along key migration routes. Its aim is to establish a governance structure that links protection, data collection, capacity-building, regular mobility, and return and reintegration. IOM also implements specific route-based programmes, in some cases in co-operation with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Save the Children.

Notably, in addition to its analytical and programmatic functions, the RBA now increasingly serves UN organisations as an institutional and communicative tool. In recent years, UNHCR's senior leadership has

sought to integrate the approach as an internal organising principle. Within the context of the UN80 reform process, which aims to make the UN system more efficient and coherent, the RBA serves UNHCR and IOM as an important instrument for achieving closer alignment of their activities. They have agreed on six joint programmatic pillars of the RBA and are collaborating to map protection and support services along specific routes. Through joint briefings for the European Commission and EU member states, UNHCR and IOM also use the RBA to demonstrate to donors that they are working in close cooperation. The approach thus increasingly serves external communication and strategic resource mobilisation.

A governance logic at EU level

The external dimension of EU migration policy is also increasingly oriented towards migration routes. The European Commission's action plans for the Western Balkans, the Central Mediterranean, the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic, and the Eastern Mediterranean, developed in 2022 and 2023, all follow the same logic. They seek to advance border management, return cooperation, the fight against migrant smuggling and human trafficking, and – to a limited extent – regular migration along the main migration routes towards the EU. In the interim, the Whole-of-Route Approach has found its way into further EU strategy documents, including the EU Pact for the Mediterranean (2025) and the European Strategy for Asylum and Migration Management (early 2026).

For the Commission, the added value of this approach lies in structuring cooperation with countries of origin and transit and allocating resources along strategically relevant routes. In this perspective, migration routes function primarily as analytical and operational points of reference for curbing irregular movement towards the EU. This logic lies behind the Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) on the Central Mediterranean and Atlantic/Western Mediterranean routes. The TEIs are designed to pool

relevant EU instruments, member state contributions and development-related programmes along selected migration corridors. The EU's migration deals with Tunisia (2023) and Mauritania (2024) emerged against the backdrop of increased movement along the main routes to Europe. The Mauritanian case in particular illustrates how the growing political salience of a specific route – here the West African route to the Canary Islands – can raise a country's strategic importance in the EU's external migration policy and reshape both funding allocations and cooperation priorities. The sharp rise in crossings from late 2023 contributed directly to the launch of the €210 million EU – Mauritania Migration Partnership, with significant support directed towards migration management, patrols and border operations.

National variations between control and protection

At the level of individual states, too, it is clear that route-based approaches can be placed at the service of different political objectives. While the German government has not to date made use of the concept, the way other European countries apply it ranges from predominantly control-oriented to more protection-oriented interpretations.

The United Kingdom lies at the control end of the spectrum. London supports the EU's Whole-of-Route Approach and focuses on “upstream cooperation” with countries along relevant migration routes, primarily in order to tackle smuggling networks, prevent irregular onward movement and facilitate returns.

Sweden also uses route-based approaches for control-oriented migration management, but places greater weight on development cooperation instruments. Sweden's development cooperation strategy for migration, returns and voluntary return for 2024 – 2028 represents one such example, for which around €275 million has been made available.

Switzerland has adopted a more protection-oriented interpretation, for example funding the first phase of Save the Children's East African Migration Routes Project, which focuses on protecting migrant children along key mobility corridors in East Africa. Since 2021, Switzerland has also supported the IFRC's route-based activities.

Denmark occupies an intermediate position. Its Pathways to Protection (P2P) programme, funded by the government with around €53 million over five years, aims to strengthen support and protection along important migration routes towards Europe. At the same time, it is embedded in a political context in which protection along the route is expected to help reduce irregular onward movement.

One approach, two logics

The various ways in which route-based approaches are operationalised reflect an inherent conceptual ambiguity. There is, as yet, neither a generally accepted definition of the concept nor a shared understanding of the associated objectives, instruments and responsibilities. In fact, this openness is a major source of its political appeal, as it allows governments and international organisations to insert the concept flexibly into very different institutional and political contexts.

Route-based approaches are not by definition either protective or control-oriented. What matters is which objectives they serve, which actors set the priorities, and how securely protection standards, rights and responsibilities are anchored. While humanitarian organisations seek to improve protection and support along migration routes, the practical implementation of route-based approaches often prioritises European control interests. Many programmes therefore concentrate on politically relevant transit countries and the corresponding segments of routes towards Europe, while countries of origin and regional mobility spaces receive less attention.

Route-based approaches thus exemplify a broader development in international migration policy: protection and control are no longer negotiated separately, but brought together within a common programmatic framework. The risk here is that the fundamental tensions between protection and control become obscured – especially where governments strategically deploy protection-oriented narratives to make upstream border and migration control measures more politically acceptable.

The potential of a route-based perspective

Despite this ambiguity, route-based approaches possess genuine political and operational potential. If the route is employed as the central unit of analysis, the divide between refugee policy and migration policy becomes less rigid and the needs of affected people come more clearly into view. The RBA can, for example, serve as a connecting element between the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, bringing into focus issues that are not clearly situated in either compact, such as climate-related mobility, internal displacement and secondary movements of refugees.

Second, the approach changes how data on displacement and migration is collected and analysed. Whereas attention has often focused on point-in-time data collection at border crossings or in refugee camps, a route-based perspective shifts the focus to dynamic movement patterns and their change over time. The Mixed Migration Centre has been collecting such data since 2014. IOM and UNHCR are also expanding their own instruments. This includes changes to IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix, and the development of new interactive platforms such as UNHCR's Routes Monitor. These developments create new possibilities for identifying protection risks, gaps in assistance, mobility decisions and the effects of policy interventions along

entire routes. Such data could help plan programmes more precisely, allocate resources more effectively and respond early to changing movement patterns.

Third, a route-based approach can help actors to organise more reliable protection and support services along migration routes. Recipients of counselling, medical care and psychosocial support often lose access to these services when they move on to another country or enter a different jurisdiction. A route-based approach can address these deficits by systematically mapping services and identifying overlaps, gaps and potential synergies. The objective is to improve coordination among UN agencies, national and municipal authorities, INGOs and local civil society organisations, and help ensure that their services complement rather than duplicate one another. IOM, UNHCR and IFRC, for example, are seeking to better align the support offered through their respective physical service points — the IOM Migrant Resource Centres, UNHCR Multi-Purpose Hubs and IFRC Humanitarian Service Points. The practical added value of the RBA therefore lies in improving the coherence of existing services rather than creating entirely new instruments.

Fourth, a route-based approach creates opportunities to link humanitarian, development and migration measures more deliberately, and to focus on sustainable solutions. Factors such as security risks, lack of basic provision, lack of rights and the absence of viable prospects in countries of origin, transit and first reception can encourage onward movement along dangerous and irregular routes. A route-based approach can help connect short-term protection and support measures with longer-term development cooperation, thereby improving the prospects for people to remain. It may also provide impetus for integrating regional freedom of movement, labour mobility and complementary pathways into protection strategies and solutions.

Limitations and risks

In practice, however, it is evident that route-based approaches do not automatically overcome existing problems. There is a risk that they will fail to reflect actual mobility patterns, create new coordination burdens, obscure political trade-offs or weaken protection claims.

Route-based approaches fail to realise their potential if they are applied only to routes to Europe, or if routes are understood as stable or clearly delineated corridors. In practice, many mobility patterns are regional, circular, multi-stage or subject to rapid change. They shift in response to border controls, changes in security conditions and economic opportunities, the activities of smuggling networks and the availability of protection or support. Programmes therefore need to remain flexible enough to reflect the actual mobility dynamics within and between regions.

Genuine route-based work begins only when the change in perspective is translated into new ways of working. In practice, UN organisations and their partners still have a long way to go. They remain organised primarily at national level: through country offices, country-specific mandates and bilateral coordination with governments. The expectation that the RBA will improve coordination is also difficult to fulfil. While mapping existing protection and support services can help identify gaps, improve referral structures and reduce overlaps, new route-related formats do not automatically resolve mandate conflicts or divergences in funding systems and political priorities. Where multiple national, regional and sectoral coordination structures already exist, route-oriented formats can even increase the burdens associated with coordination. This applies particularly to local NGOs, migrant-led organisations and municipal actors, which have very limited resources for additional coordination processes.

Another risk is that route-based approaches may obscure political and

normative conflicts. The focus on services, data collection, mapping and coordination appears pragmatic and solution-oriented. Precisely for that reason, it can divert attention from the fact that many protection gaps along routes are caused primarily by political conditions such as restrictive visa regimes, the lack of regular pathways, the criminalisation of mobility, or fragile statehood, rather than by poor coordination. The route-based approach can thus be instrumentalised as a technocratic or communicative frame to depoliticise normative conflicts under the banner of “improving coordination”. This is particularly problematic where cooperation along the route involves governments or security actors that are themselves exacerbating protection risks.

In this context particular attention needs to be paid to possible effects on refugee protection. Route-based programmes often operate in settings where refugees, asylum-seekers, migrants, victims of human trafficking, stateless people and other groups in need of protection are present at the same time. Integrated support services can be useful in such situations, because individuals with different legal status often face similar risks and may, for example, need similar information or medical care. Problems arise, however, when governments repurpose support structures, linking them to pre-border screening or return procedures and disregarding legally relevant distinctions between refugees and migrants. The integrity and continued existence of the international refugee regime depend on upholding access to asylum procedures, the principle of non-refoulement and effective legal counselling — and ensuring that independent monitoring of these principles takes place. Route-based support services must not be presented or used as a substitute for the individual assessment of protection claims.

Conclusion and recommendations

Route-based approaches will shape international refugee and migration policy for the foreseeable future. Whether they actually lead to new forms of action depends on how they are designed politically and operationally. Their political appeal stems from the fact that they cater to different expectations: they promise better coordination, efficiency gains and tailored support along migration routes — while remaining compatible with efforts to shift migration control to countries outside the EU. In practice, there is a risk of the latter becoming predominant. If route-based approaches are narrowed to control-oriented agreements with countries along the main migration routes towards the EU, their true potential will remain unrealised. Such policies may signal a rapid response capacity, but they cannot sustainably reduce unregulated movements. Rather, they risk shifting movements to more dangerous routes and straining cooperation with countries of origin, transit and reception — which are in turn pressing for compensation, development and fair burden-sharing. A protection orientation is therefore not the opposite of effective migration policy; it is one of its preconditions.

Increase the coherence of German refugee and migration policy

The ongoing reorientation of German humanitarian assistance and development cooperation offers an opportunity to more systematically address a structural problem in the country’s refugee and migration policy. Germany is present along key migration routes with a broad repertoire of instruments for humanitarian assistance, disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation, development cooperation, migration diplomacy, border management and skilled labour migration. These instruments serve different and, at times, competing interests, but are rarely aligned as part of a coherent overall approach. This inevitably creates tensions between policy objectives.

Applying a route-based logic does not mean replacing country-based and sectoral programmes with route-based measures. Instead, route-based approaches can reveal where protection risks and mobility dynamics transcend national contexts. A systematic mapping of German engagement along selected migration corridors could provide a basis for addressing gaps, overlaps and contradictions in a targeted and coordinated manner.

The relevance of a route-based perspective extends well beyond dealing with movements towards the EU. A large proportion of global displacement and migration takes place in South-South contexts, for example in the Horn of Africa or the Sahel. Especially where conflict-induced displacement overlaps with climate-change-related mobility and labour migration, route-based approaches can help to identify shifts in mobility patterns, strengthen local reception capacities and promote regional solutions, instead of treating irregular migration primarily as a European governance problem.

Make EU migration cooperation more partnership-oriented

In shaping the EU's Whole-of-Route Approach, the German government should work to ensure that the interests and burdens of partner countries are adequately taken into account — especially those that host large numbers of refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons while also being strongly affected by climate change. Their often limited capacities are further strained by cooperation arrangements that focus one-sidedly on return and border management. Development cooperation can make an important contribution by supporting host communities and promoting durable solutions — for instance through investment in public services and livelihoods, and by supporting safe and regular educational and labour mobility.

At the same time, for all the potential of route-based cooperation to improve migration management one must not forget that

migration diplomacy requires clear boundaries. Just because a state lies on an important route does not mean that investing in a partnership makes sense. Where cooperation with repressive or autocratic states is precluded on human rights grounds, it must not be legitimised in the name of migration management.

Hold UN organisations to account

In the UN context, Germany should use its political and financial leverage vis-à-vis IOM and UNHCR — bilaterally and at EU level — to ensure that the RBA does not primarily serve to mobilise resources, but instead aligns protection and support services with changing needs along individual mobility trajectories. This requires a fundamental change in the established working methods of international organisations. In this spirit, the German government should use the UN80 process to call for more binding standards for route-based programmes: joint data collection and analysis, a transparent and coordinated division of labour, and verifiable protection indicators. This should be flanked by systematic monitoring and evaluation components to assess the RBA's actual added value in practice.

Consistently include internal displacement

If the RBA is to create synergies between refugee and migration policy, it must also include issues that are lacking an institutional home at UN level, above all climate-change-related mobility and internal displacement. Internal and cross-border displacement are closely linked: countries with high numbers of internally displaced persons regularly feature among the most important countries of origin of asylum-seekers in Germany. At the same time, many key migration routes run through countries that are themselves heavily affected by internal displacement while also hosting large numbers of refugees, such as Sudan or Ethiopia. The German government should use the debate on route-based

approaches to keep the chronically neglected issue of internal displacement on the political agenda.

Involve local actors substantively

Finally, when funding relevant programmes, Germany should ensure that local NGOs, municipalities and migrant-led organisations as well as migrants, displaced persons and host communities are not merely consulted, but actively involved in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This is a matter of effectiveness as well as participation. Local actors often have more detailed knowledge of mobility patterns, risks, informal support structures and actual needs on the ground. Without their involvement, there is a risk that programmes will fail to take local realities into account, while creating additional coordination burdens.



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SWP

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for
International and
Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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