

MISSING MIGRANTS, MISSING SOLUTIONS?

Reviewing Objective 8 of the
Global Compact for Migration
in West Africa



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8 SAVE LIVES

More than 2,100 migrants have died in West Africa and on overseas routes from the region to Europe since 2014, according to data from IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP). In 2018, Objective 8 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) called on States to “save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants”. However, in 2022 this objective remains scarcely implemented worldwide, as highlighted in a recent [statement](#) by the UN Migration Network and in the latest UN Secretary-General [report](#) on the GCM. It also remains poorly addressed in West Africa and in member states of the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS), as well as in West Africa-European Union (EU) processes. The [GCM review process](#) and our analysis reveal that only very few policy and programming efforts with regard to Objective 8 have been adopted. At the same time, the data and evidence on migrants going missing or dying during migration needed to inform these efforts remain scarce, and data available are incomplete both in terms of quantity and quality. Limited policy implementation and data gaps are mutually reinforcing. Slow policy and programming progress render it difficult to collect comprehensive data on missing migrants. In turn, a lack of comprehensive data and of adequate consideration of the available data contribute to hinder evidence-informed policies and programming that could reduce risks and save lives.

Ahead of the International Migration Review Forum, this brief calls on GCM Member States to strengthen policies and data on missing migrants, as well as to improve the dialogue between policymakers, evidence producers, and other relevant stakeholders. It concludes with the following main recommendations to West African and European policymakers:

- » Mainstream GCM Objective 8 in national and international policies and programmes, and respect international obligations on the rights to life, in line with the UN Migration Network's recommendations.
- » Avoid linking the implementation of Objective 8 with the prevention of irregular migration.
- » Improve data and evidence on migrant deaths and on risks of dying or going missing during migration, and strengthen their use for policymaking and programming.
- » Adopt transnational and participatory approaches and partnerships, including to overcome data gaps



GCM OBJECTIVE 8:

Save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants

8 SAVE LIVES

ACTIONS:



a) DEVELOP PROCEDURES AND AGREEMENTS

on search and rescue of migrants, and ensure that humanitarian assistance to migrants is not considered unlawful



b) REVIEW MIGRATION POLICIES AND LAWS

to ensure that these do not raise or create the risk of migrants going missing



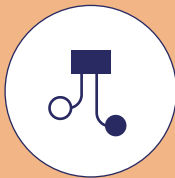
c) ENABLE MIGRANTS TO COMMUNICATE WITH THEIR FAMILIES

along routes and at their destination



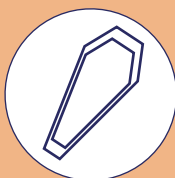
d) ESTABLISH TRANSNATIONAL COORDINATION CHANNELS

and designate contact points for families looking for missing migrants



e) COLLECT, CENTRALIZE AND SYSTEMATIZE DATA

regarding corpses and ensure traceability after burial



f) RECOVER, IDENTIFY AND REPATRIATE

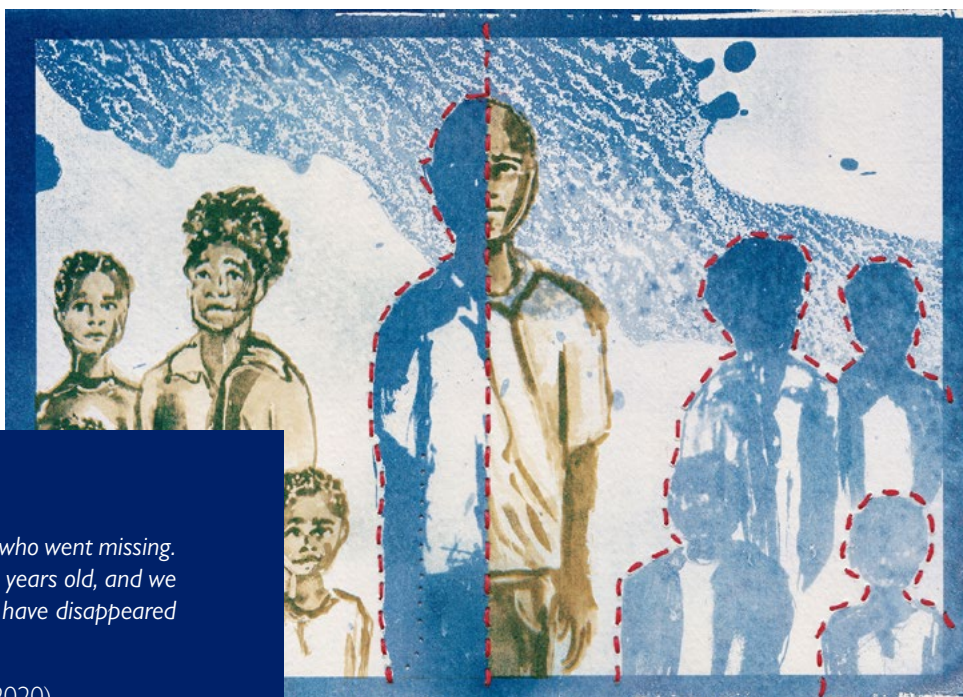
the remains of deceased migrants in a dignified, respectful and proper manner

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND PROGRAMMING: POOR AND UNEVEN PROGRESS

GCM Objective 8 is still very scarcely integrated into national and transnational policies. Policymakers have addressed the six actions it recommends to different degrees, with action 8.b. (on policy impacts) having been integrated in only one document. Moreover, indications on specific strategies and responsibilities remain limited. It is notable that most policies not including provisions on missing migrants were developed prior to the GCM adoption in 2018, but also that these policies have not been amended afterwards. Niger and Nigeria are the only ECOWAS member states that have adopted policy provisions on GCM Objective 8. In Niger, the National Migration Policy Action Plan (2020-2035) foresees the adoption of a relevant project, but doesn't provide details on its specific aims. In Nigeria, the Action Plan and Framework for the National Implementation of the GCM (2020) includes provisions on missing migrant data, in line with GCM action 8.e. Relevant ECOWAS policies such as the Common Approach on Migration (2008) don't include any provisions on saving lives and on missing migrants. The revised Migration Policy Framework for Africa (2018) of the African Union (AU) partially addresses action 8.a: it calls on states to establish search and rescue (SAR) systems, but only focuses on situations at sea. With a ground-breaking, more comprehensive approach, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (AHCPR) Resolution 486 on missing migrants and refugees in Africa and the impact on their families (2021) addresses all actions recommended in Objective 8 and provides further recommendations. It also urges state parties to respect commitments taken and calls for collaboration within and across countries and regions.

Practical implementation also remains limited in the region. No relevant initiative implemented by the ECOWAS and its member states exists at the regional level, and only Niger and Senegal are currently implementing measures relevant for Objective 8. Niger is establishing a National Inter-ministerial Committee for the Management of Human Remains, including those of migrants, in line with actions 8.e. (on data on human remains) and 8.f. (on identification). Senegal is assessing its capacities to conduct SAR at sea and to assist rescued and returning migrants, and developing standard operating procedures on post-disembarkation assistance, in line with action 8.a. (on enhancing reception and assistance capacities) and with the support of IOM. As international funding remains crucial for migration programming in the region, funding frameworks that do not adequately address Objective 8, or that couple it with the prevention of irregular migration contribute to poor progress.

In EU-(West) Africa processes, as well, Objective 8 is still very scarcely addressed. It is furthermore often linked to the deterrence of irregular migration. The EU-AU Abidjan Summit Declaration (2017) presented deterring



“

He is the second member in our family who went missing. My uncle left our village when I was 12 years old, and we never heard from him again. Four kids have disappeared from our village. It's a small village.”

(Migrant from Guinea Bissau. Spain, 2020).

irregular migration as instrumental to saving lives, and the EU-AU Brussels Summit Declaration (2022) didn't include any mentions of migrants' risks of dying or going missing. The Valletta Action Plan (2015) partially addresses action 8.a., as it calls to prevent "the loss of life at sea" including through greater transnational cooperation. However, it doesn't acknowledge the need to save lives on land, and it links SAR operations with the prevention of irregular migration. So far, no declarations of the Rabat Process have mentioned Objective 8. While the GCM was adopted only in 2018, most West African and European states are parties to pre-existing international treaties which include commitments that are also relevant for saving lives, preventing migrants from going missing, and providing answers to the families of the missing. The rights to life, to liberty and to security of the person are established by the International Convention on Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, among others. SAR responsibilities, particularly at sea, are also regulated by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea.

POLICY AND PROGRAMMING GAPS HINDER ADEQUATE DOCUMENTATION OF MIGRANT DEATHS

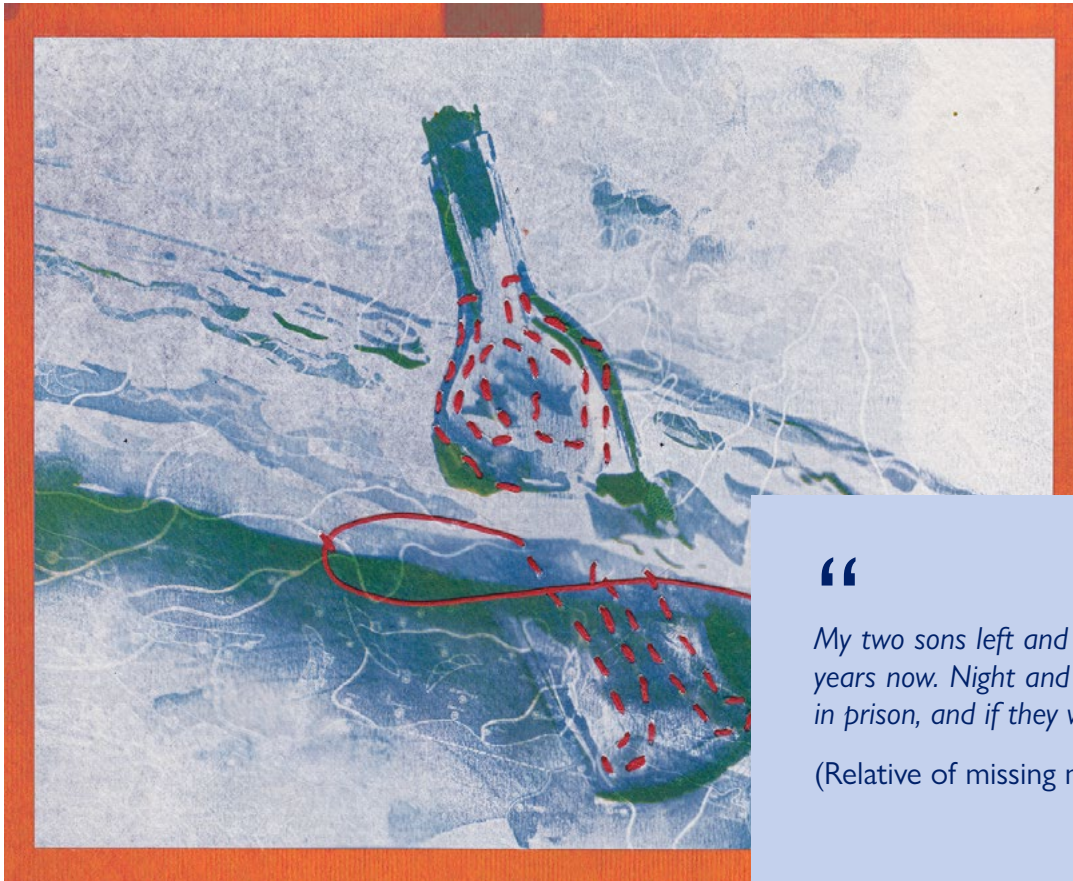
The scarce policy and programming attention given to Objective 8 hinders adequate documentation of migrant deaths and disappearances. There are no official sources that collate and publish data on migrant deaths or disappearances in West Africa. The main sources of information available are the testimonies of people who witnessed the deaths of others they were travelling with; however, these are not systematically collected. At the national level, resource allocation and training of actors who encounter cases of missing migrants and who may be collecting relevant administrative data – such as medical examiners, coroners, border and coast guards, and migration, law enforcement and civil protection officers – are still inadequate to ensure a comprehensive documentation of deaths and disappearances during migration. Additionally, limited transnational cooperation on aspects such as data sharing and harmonizing terminologies continues to hinder the resolution of missing migrant cases and the identification of the dead.

These factors render data on the risks of dying or going missing during migration and migrant deaths within and from West Africa still insufficient. Between 2014 and 2021, MMP recorded 2,100 deaths and disappearances on migration routes within and from West Africa, including around 430 women and almost

250 children. Half of these deaths occurred in attempts to cross the Sahara Desert towards Northern Africa and one in ten took place on the route from West Africa to the Canary Islands. Additionally, in the same period, at least 1,600 nationals of ECOWAS member states died or disappeared during migration, mostly on overseas routes towards Europe. However, it is likely that many deaths and disappearances have gone undocumented due to the dearth of official sources. In addition, the identities and demographic characteristics of the majority of people who have died or gone missing are unknown. The lack of data also extends to the impact of deaths and disappearances on families and communities left behind. Apart from one study focusing on families of missing migrants in Nigeria and Senegal (Maunganidze and ICRC, 2021) there is not much information on how families are affected and on the barriers they face while searching for their loved ones.

DATA GAPS HINDER EVIDENCE-BASED POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

Policy documents have framed saving lives and missing migrant cases differently. In particular, the AHCPR's 486 Resolution and civil society organisations have framed them in terms of human rights and protection. Meanwhile, EU-AU processes have dedicated more attention to irregular migration and smuggling. Specific aspects and geographic areas have furthermore been more visible than others. For example, fatalities and risks on maritime routes to Europe have received more attention than those occurring on land in countries of origin, transit and destination, including in the Sahara Desert. In addition, this



“

My two sons left and never came back. It has been 13 years now. Night and day, I wonder if they are dead or in prison, and if they will ever come back.”

(Relative of missing migrants. Senegal, 2019)

rather narrow policy focus has tended to exclude factors that are likely to increase the risk of dying or going missing, such as situations of irregularity, detention, and a lack of access to resources and essential services, including adequate shelter, food, water and healthcare. Deterrence-based narrative frames have been key to advocating for and justifying policy and programmatic approaches. However, they have been influenced by a limited availability of timely and comprehensive data, by the lack of appropriate cross-border data harmonisation and sharing mechanisms, and by the absence of formal strategies to use the existing data to inform policies.

The lack of an adequate evidence base has limited national and transnational efforts on missing migrants and saving lives. To begin, as detailed above, GCM Objective 8 is still scarcely implemented in policies and programming. It is significant that only two West African countries have reported on it in their national voluntary reviews. In addition, the narrow focus of existing efforts and the lower level of attention paid to other risks and situations have hindered the identification of measures to effectively address the risks faced by migrants and to save their lives. In recent years, evidence on the complexity of links between irregular migration and risks – with increasing securitisation of migration leading to increased vulnerability and risks of death and disappearance (Sanchez and Achilli, 2020) – has shown once again the importance of timely and quality data to inform comprehensive and attentive policy measures.

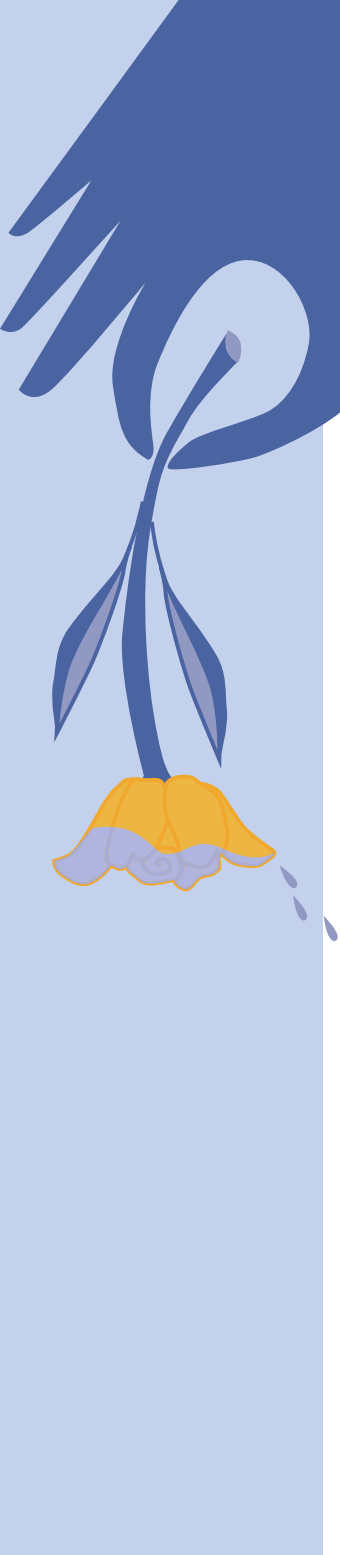


RECOMMENDATIONS TO WEST AFRICAN AND EUROPEAN POLICYMAKERS

Based on the analysis above, the following recommendations are made:

- 1. Mainstream GCM Objective 8 in relevant national and transnational policies, and respect international obligations on the rights to life.** More than three years after the GCM adoption, the implementation of this objective remains very poor. Policymakers should mainstream measures on saving lives and missing migrants in all relevant future policies and develop additional strategies and guidelines to complement existing ones, including all actions recommended in Objective 8. States should address the specific recommendations in the [UN Migration Network statement](#) on Objective 8, which center around preventing migrants from dying or going missing, searching and identifying those who have died or gone missing, and providing support and redress to affected families. In addition, states should respect international and human rights law on the rights to life, to liberty and to security of the person. Migrants and their families should be guaranteed access to justice and accountability in case of violations of these rights. In line with the AHCPR's 486 Resolution, measures should adopt a comprehensive focus and address factors that are likely to increase exposure to the risk of going missing. Interlinkages with other GCM objectives should also be considered.
- 2. Establish and strengthen initiatives implementing GCM Objective 8.** Concrete initiatives are needed to prevent deaths and disappearances and to address the needs of families of missing migrants. States should prioritize SAR at sea and on land and establish clear and predictable disembarkation mechanisms for rescued migrants to prevent people from going missing. Transnational and participatory coordination mechanisms need to be established, to support families searching for missing migrants and to identify and repatriate remains of those deceased. Structures coordinating efforts on Objective 8 are needed also at the national and local level. Finally, the capacities of state officers to deal with cases of missing and deceased migrants and to interact with their families need to be developed.
- 3. Avoid linking the implementation of Objective 8 with the prevention of irregular migration.** An increasing securitization of migration has augmented the vulnerability of migrants and negatively impacted the searches of missing migrants. In line with action 8.b., policymakers should review the impacts of policies and laws to ensure that they don't create or augment risks of migrants dying or going missing. This could be done through the establishment of consultation mechanisms or of dedicated task forces, and through the conduction of periodical reviews. Policymakers should furthermore make sure that measures on saving lives and missing migrants do not criminalize, obstruct or otherwise deter the efforts of humanitarian organizations who provide lifesaving assistance and of those who are searching for missing migrants. In addition, possibilities for safe and regular migration need to be strengthened, including for the most vulnerable.

- 4. Improve data and evidence on migrant deaths and on risks of dying or going missing during migration.** Despite inherent challenges of documenting deaths and disappearances during irregular migration, improving these data is essential to inform implementation of all actions of objective 8. Data disaggregated by age, sex, and nationality, and information on the causes of death and disappearance are needed to protect the most vulnerable. These data should be made publicly available, while respecting the right to privacy and data protection. The capacities of government actors dealing with cases of missing migrants (including medical examiners, coroners, border and coast guards, and migration, law enforcement and civil protection officers) to collect accurate and reliable data need to be strengthened, as an essential step towards the prevention of further deaths.
- 5. Strengthen the use of data and evidence for policymaking and programming.** While data gaps contribute to hinder comprehensive policymaking and programming efforts, available data are often not taken into adequate consideration. National and international policymakers should establish or improve existing communication and exchange platforms between the users and producers of data and evidence. They should also develop harmonised terminologies and data sharing agreements. Dedicated training initiatives can improve stakeholders' knowledge of relevant data sources. Formal strategies on how to ensure the use of existing data and evidence to inform relevant policies could be adopted.
- 6. Address GCM Objective 8 through transnational policy approaches.** Inter-state and regional coordination on saving lives and missing migrants is still low. In line with the transnational nature of migration, more intraregional and international approaches are needed, and could include the establishment of dedicated transnational coordination mechanisms and the identification of shared strategies and guidelines. These approaches should address all actions recommended in Objective 8 and adopt a comprehensive focus.
- 7. Adopt participatory approaches and partnerships, including to overcome data gaps.** Local civil society organizations and international organizations are currently filling the gap left by states in the management of missing migrants' cases. In addition, while data on migrant deaths and disappearances are limited, there is a wealth of knowledge and capacities on the issue that should be used for evidence-based policy making and implementation. Joint action by state and non-state actors, including the families of missing migrants, can improve policy and programming efforts. Mapping out non-state actors that work with families of missing migrants, establishing informal coordination platforms and organising regular meetings are examples of actions that can facilitate participatory approaches.
- 8. Mainstream GCM Objective 8 into international funding frameworks.** So far, this objective has been scarcely integrated into funding instruments, or it has been coupled with preventing irregular migration and promoting return. This has hindered implementation at the national and international level. Instead, dedicated funding needs to be reserved for the implementation of Objective 8 and its six actions and separated from funding for measures preventing irregular migration. Developing international guidelines to mainstream Objective 8 in funding mechanisms could help to ensure this.



THE MISSING MIGRANTS PROJECT

IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP) records incidents in which people died at state borders or in the process of migrating to an international destination. It hosts the only existing open-access database of records of deaths during migration on the global level. The Project is a concerted effort towards informing GCM Objective 8 and its data are used to inform the Sustainable Development Goals Indicator 10.7.3 on the "[n]umber of people who died or disappeared in the process of migration towards an international destination."

While there is a range in how missing migrants are defined, the Project focuses only on migrants who die or disappear and are presumed to have died (such as the victims of shipwrecks). This approach was adopted because it provides evidence on the risks that migrants face on specific migration routes. MMP gathers information from official sources, including from SAR and mortality records, when available. Given the dearth of official records, other sources of information are used: NGOs reports, surveys data, migrants' and families' testimonies and traditional and social media reports. Whenever possible, reports of migrant deaths are verified by local IOM staff.

Documenting migrant deaths is extremely challenging because data are generally lacking and when they exist, they are scattered, inaccessible, unharmonized and not disaggregated by migratory status. The challenges inherent to collecting these data are made even more complex when dealing with vast and unmonitored areas such as the Sahara Desert or the West African Atlantic Coast. To counterbalance the scarcity of data, MMP publishes written analyses, such as [“No one talks about what it's really like” – risks faced by migrants in the Sahara Desert](#). Given the difficulty to document migrant deaths, all MMP's figures are considered minimum estimates of the real number of lives lost during migration.

ICRC'S WORK ON MISSING MIGRANTS

Of the more than 48000 missing persons registered by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Africa, more than half originate from West Africa. While the majority of these cases is conflict-related, a growing proportion is linked to migration. Already, in several countries of West Africa where the ICRC has been operating for decades, migration related cases outstrip conflict related ones.

In collaboration with the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), the ICRC has published the report [Where are they? Searching for missing persons and meeting their families' needs](#) (2021) which analyses the issue of missing persons, including migrants, and their families in Africa with a focus on three humanitarian priorities: prevent people from going missing, facilitate their search and identification, and address the specific needs of their families.

In West Africa and beyond, the ICRC is strengthening its engagement with governments to help create national capacities to record and process cases of missing persons and unidentified remains. The ICRC is also working to support greater regional cooperation on missing migrants both bilaterally and multilaterally. In a promising example, the ICRC has been collaborating with Tunisian authorities since 2019 to reinforce the response to shipwrecks. This includes facilitating the exchange of information with countries of origin in Africa, the Middle East and Asia to enable identification of deceased migrants. This has resulted not only in consular contacts but also the transmission of more than 70 DNA samples of families of missing migrants from Côte d'Ivoire to Tunisia to help identification efforts. In addition, in cooperation with Tunisian authorities, the ICRC accompanies families during visual recognition procedures.

The ICRC advocates for a multi-stakeholder approach involving governments, civil society, international organizations including the Red Cross/ Red Crescent movement, and the affected families, all of whom can contribute to efforts to prevent and resolve missing migrant cases. In 2021, the ICRC published a set of [Guidelines on Coordination and Information-Exchange mechanisms](#) for the Search for Missing Migrants that draw on current initiatives in Africa and other regions.



“

I spent 15 days stranded in the desert. I saw more than 800 graves during that time. When I arrived at the transit center, I saw children recreating these gravesites with stones. I couldn't even find it sad anymore – it was something beyond that.”

(Migrant from Senegal. Niger, 2020)

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missingmigrants.iom.int

