Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Bijlage 12

Literature review on the effectiveness of protection programs for migrants and refugees

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Content

1. Methodological note

This literature review answers the questions:

- What can we say based on current scientific literature about the extent to which protection programs for migrants align with the priorities and needs of migrants from the eight partnership countries?[1]
- To what extent are such projects successful at protecting migrants along migration routes?

This quick literature scan was conducted at the request of IOB to inform ongoing evaluation work by providing a concise overview of scholarly debates and evidence on migrant protection. From the outset, the scan was designed to prioritize academic publications, reflecting a deliberate focus on sources capable of offering critical and in-depth perspectives on the structural and systemic challenges embedded in current migration management practices. While a limited selection of gray literature was included to enrich the analysis, academic sources remained central to the approach. The decision to prioritize academic literature in this scan was intentional. While academic sources offer analytical independence and emphasize theoretical and conceptual frameworks—enabling deeper reflection on underlying logics and assumptions—they also come with limitations. Their focus often results in discussions that remain theoretically anchored and less attuned to the immediate operational challenges faced by practitioners. In contrast, much of the literature on protection is produced by humanitarian organizations and tends to concentrate on the technical and programmatic aspects of implementation. These sources provide valuable insights into practical realities but are frequently shaped by institutional mandates, funding structures, and political imperatives, which can constrain their analytical scope.

Another limitation of academic publications is their delayed release, often reflecting on events that occurred several years prior. This temporal distance allows for more reflective analysis but limits the immediacy and real-time relevance found in situation reports or operational assessments from humanitarian actors. In light of these considerations, the quick literature scan prioritized academic sources for their analytical depth and conceptual rigor, while acknowledging the complementary value of gray literature in capturing recent developments and operational dynamics.
The literature reviewed for this analysis was selected using a combination of methods. First, key academic works were identified based on prior familiarity with well-established publications in the field. These texts were included in the review and assessed for their relevance to the objectives of this rapid literature scan.

To broaden the scope of the review, targeted searches were conducted on Google Scholar using combinations of relevant keywords. Examples of search terms include: *"protection of migrants Niger / Tunisia / Algeria / Nigeria / Iraq / Turkey / Morocco / Egypt," "protection needs of migrants," and "access to protection Niger / Tunisia / Algeria / Nigeria / Iraq / Turkey / Morocco / Egypt."*

Citation metrics were also used to identify influential and widely cited publications, ensuring the inclusion of impactful academic contributions. In addition, several key articles were identified through consultations with academic peers specializing in migration governance, humanitarian protection, and border externalization. These discussions helped ensure the inclusion of emerging and regionally grounded perspectives.

1 Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Turkey, Niger and Nigeria.

In order to respond to the research questions, the quick literature scan is organized as follows. The first section looks at the concept of protection and draws the key methodological observation on the absence of a clear definition of protection, which significantly affects both the conceptual understanding and practical implementation of protection programming. Neither the Netherlands nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a working definition of protection that could guide the design and scope of relevant projects and programs. Meanwhile, various organizations apply their own definitions, leading to varying interpretations of protection—particularly in the context of the externalization of European borders. The section "What is protection?" focuses on this aspect and reviews the most relevant definitions of protection for this quick scan.

The second section of this literature scan explores how protection programs are conceptualized and implemented, particularly in the context of European migration governance. It highlights how these programs often operate within a dual framework—combining humanitarian objectives with migration control imperatives. Rather than being guided solely by the needs and rights of migrants, protection programs are frequently shaped by donor agendas, especially those linked to the externalization of EU borders. This section examines how such programs are framed, the political and institutional logics that underpin them, and the implications of this duality for their legitimacy, effectiveness, and reception by migrants and local actors.

The third section of the quick literature scan addresses the question of migrant needs. One of the key findings is that academic literature rarely engages directly with the specific needs of migrants. This does not reflect a lack of relevance, but rather the distinct analytical approaches and research questions typically pursued in academic work, which tend to focus on structural, legal, or geopolitical dimensions of migration. In contrast, discussions of migrants' needs are more commonly found in gray literature and humanitarian reports, which concentrate on operational and programmatic concerns. Nevertheless, one fundamental need emerges clearly—albeit often implicitly—from the academic literature: migrants seek to reach their intended final destination. While this may seem like a simplistic or rhetorical observation, it is a critical point in the context of current policies and programming. Donors and humanitarian actors frequently frame alternative outcomes—such as route changes, return to countries of origin, or asylum in transit countries—as fulfilling migrants' needs. Yet this framing may not reflect migrants' own perceptions of their goals and priorities.

The fourth section of this literature scan examines the effectiveness of protection programs in safeguarding migrants along migration routes. Rather than evaluating success through predefined metrics, the review focuses on the outcomes and consequences of programs labeled as "protection." It highlights the inherent tension between the stated humanitarian objectives of these programs and their embedded role within broader migration control regimes. The literature reveals that many initiatives, while framed as protective, often produce contradictory or harmful effects—such as coercive returns, limited reintegration support, and increased vulnerability. The literature also highlights the erosion of trust toward humanitarian and international organizations providing assistance, which is central to understanding how migrants engage—or choose not to engage—with available support mechanisms. For this reason, the section explores the dynamics of trust and mistrust, which significantly influence whether and how migrants access protection and assistance.

2. How is migrant protection defined?

There is no universally accepted definition of protection in international law, nor is there a single, standardized definition within the humanitarian sector. Different organizations and actors adopt different interpretations and operational definitions of protection, shaped by their mandates, institutional priorities, and contextual needs.

This definitional ambiguity has significant implications. It contributes to the broad spectrum of programs and activities labeled as protection initiatives, ranging from legal assistance and rights advocacy to psychosocial support and physical security measures.

In the context of this quick scan, the absence of a clearly defined scope of protection affects both the selection of sources and the categorization of programs. Without a guiding definition, it becomes difficult to determine which interventions qualify as protection-related, which can lead to over-inclusion or omission of relevant initiatives.

To address this challenge, this section proposes to refer to several existing definitions of protection drawn from key humanitarian and legal frameworks. By seeking to delineate the conceptual boundaries of protection, these definitions promote a clearer understanding of the scope and limits of protection interventions in different contexts and clarify the research question. Furthermore, they can help frame the academic literature reviewed in light of existing definitions.

According to humanitarian organizations such as the ICRC, protection is often defined based on multifaceted and evolving needs of migrants throughout their journey.[2] Protection can be understood as a comprehensive approach that ensures the safety, dignity, and rights of migrants and refugees. It involves providing assistance, safeguarding their rights, addressing their vulnerabilities, and preventing human rights violations.

This humanitarian approach reflects the complexity of migration patterns and acknowledges that "mixed migration" involves people with varying protection profiles, reasons for migrating, and needs. The ICRC's approach underlines that all individuals have rights and must not fall into a legal or protection gap. For this, it is useful the concept of "mixed migration" that reflects the complex and overlapping reasons people move, regardless of legal status.[3] Since traditional classifications that divide migration into "forced" and "voluntary" categories often fail to reflect the complexity of migration drivers, adopting a mixed migration perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of protection needs—especially for individuals who do not meet the criteria of the 1951 Refugee Convention but are still compelled to move due to overlapping economic, political, social, or ethnic factors.[4]These individuals frequently face risks similar to those encountered by recognized refugees and often travel along the same routes. However, because international legal frameworks primarily distinguish between two categories—migrants and refugees—many of these people fall outside formal protection mechanisms. This highlights a critical gap: among people on the move, some qualify for international protection, while others, despite facing comparable vulnerabilities, do not.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), subject of numerous academic articles, also included in this scan, protection is defined as advocating, supporting or undertaking activities that aim to obtain full respect of, protect and fulfil the rights of all individuals on the move in accordance with the letter and spirit of relevant bodies of law (i.e. international human rights law, international humanitarian law and international refugee law).[5]

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2 The ICRC and other components of the Red Cross Movement describe migrants as persons who are outside of their country of origin or habitual residence. This broad description includes migrant workers, migrants deemed irregular by public authorities, refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless persons entitled to special protection under international law. The Movement's description is deliberately broad to include all people who leave or flee their home to seek safety or better prospects abroad, and who may be in distress and need protection or humanitarian assistance. See Le Bihan S. Addressing the protection and assistance needs of migrants: The ICRC approach to migration. International Review of the Red Cross. 2017;99(904):99-119. doi:10.1017/S1816383118000036

3 https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/mixed-migration

4 Ibid.

5 https://shorturl.at/uJqxb

The European Commission does not define migrant protection as such, but it defines humanitarian protection as the response to violence, coercion, deliberate deprivation and abuse of individuals, groups and communities in humanitarian crises. This is done in accordance with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence and in compliance with international law. This framework defines the obligations of states and belligerent parties to assist and protect civilians and to prevent and refrain from conduct that violates their rights.[6]

Taken together, these definitions illustrate the conceptual fluidity of protection and the tensions between legal obligations, humanitarian principles, and operational realities. While they offer useful frameworks for understanding protection in theory and practice, they also underscore the need for critical reflection on how protection is interpreted and implemented across different contexts. For the purposes of this quick literature scan, these definitions serve as reference points to assess how protection programs are framed in academic literature and to identify where gaps, inconsistencies, or contested meanings may influence both policy and practice.

3. What are protection programs?

Policy context

Over the past decades, European migration governance has increasingly relied on strategies that shift border control responsibilities beyond its own territory. In policy discourse, this trend is often framed as partnership-based cooperation, emphasizing mutual engagement and shared objectives with neighboring and transit countries. In academic literature, however, it is more commonly referred to as externalization, a concept that critically examines how the EU extends its migration control through development aid, diplomatic agreements, and delegated enforcement mechanisms. While both terms describe similar practices, they reflect different analytical perspectives and normative assumptions about the nature and purpose of these arrangements.[7] Rather than focusing solely on humanitarian needs, these arrangements frequently prioritize containment and deterrence, embedding migration control within broader security agendas. Academic critiques highlight how such policies blur the lines between protection and restriction, using humanitarian rhetoric to justify practices that limit access to asylum and mobility. These dynamics reflect a broader shift in global migration policy, where the language of care is often employed to legitimize mechanisms of control, raising fundamental questions about the ethics and effectiveness of current approaches.[8]

This quick literature scan suggests to examine protection programs through the lens of externalization, a framework that reveals how responses to migration increasingly combine both humanitarian and containment components. In response to the evolving global migration landscape, scholars

6 Very often there is an extended understanding of protection that also changes based on the location of the third country. For instance, protection programs differ based on the geographical location. This is closely linked to the ideas about 'origin', 'transit' and 'destination' countries strongly present in policy documents but which have been challenged in academic literature. For instance, see Frowd, P. M. (2019). Producing the 'transit' migration state: international security intervention in Niger. Third World Quarterly, 41(2), 340–358. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1660633.

7 The literature on externalization is extensive and continue to grow. See among others Sebastian Cobarrubias, Paolo Cuttitta, Maribel Casas-Cortés, Martin Lemberg-Pedersen, Nora El Qadim, Beste İşleyen, Shoshana Fine, Caterina Giusa, Charles Heller, Interventions on the concept of externalisation in migration and border studies, Political Geography, Volume 105, 2023, 102911; Marie Deridder, Lotte Pelckmans and Emilia Ward, "Reversing the gaze: West Africa performing the EU migration-development-security nexus", Anthropologie & développement, 51, 2020, DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/anthropodev.938; Weisner, Z., Vidal, P., Kraler, A., & Czaika, M. (2024). Trust in Transit: External Migration Control and Migrants' Perceptions of Humanitarian Borderwork in the Sahel. International Migration Review, p. 6.

8 See Bialasiewicz L (2012) Off-shoring and Out-sourcing the Borders of EUrope: Libya and EU Border Work in the Mediterranean. Geopolitics 17(4): 843-866; Zaiotti R (ed.) (2016) Externalizing Migration Management: Europe, North America and the spread of « remote control » practices. London: Routledge; Moreno-Lax V (2018) The EU Humanitarian Border and the Securitization of Human Rights: The 'Rescue-Through-Interdiction/ Rescue-Without-Protection' Paradigm. Journal of Common Market Studies 56 (1): 119–40;

have developed conceptual tools such as 'protection-through-interdiction'[9] and 'rescue-through-interdiction/rescue-without-protection',[10] which critically assess the European Union's approach to maritime border control in the Mediterranean. These frameworks argue that while the EU frames its actions as humanitarian interventions, they paradoxically undermine the very human rights they claim to uphold. By invoking the language of saving lives, the EU justifies interdiction and border control measures that ultimately restrict access to asylum and protection. This approach redefines human rights in ways that support securitization and control, rather than genuine humanitarian protection. As a result, migrants are simultaneously securitized as threats and humanitarianized as victims, yet denied meaningful opportunities to exercise their rights. While protection programs in the Mediterranean are not the focus of this review, its case is instructive: it exemplifies how protection is embedded within the externalization of borders approach and serves as a conceptual backdrop for analyzing similar dynamics in the selected focus countries.

Overview of protection programs

This section critically examines protection programs implemented within the framework of EU border externalization, emphasizing their often ambiguous and problematic nature. While officially framed as humanitarian interventions, these programs frequently serve dual purposes—providing assistance while also contributing to migration deterrence. In the context of externalization of the EU borders, the academic literature pays attention to the increasing role of protection programs that are often defined through the concept of 'anti-policies', i.e. policies that outwardly promote humanitarianism and development while concealing a hidden, dual agenda of migration deterrence.[11] This perspective aligns with the notion that these interventions, funded by the EU, are not merely acts of aid but mechanisms of international control over 'undesirable' populations.[12]
The article by Mariia Shaidrova provides ethnographic analysis of how EU-funded return and reintegration programs are locally interpreted and enacted in Nigeria.[13] Focusing on Benin City, her study—*Local Engagement of Nigerians with Neocolonial EU Humanitarian Return Policies*—examines how initiatives such as the EU-IOM Joint Initiative, which targets returnees from Libya, are received by returnees, community members, and local authorities. While officially framed as humanitarian protection and development aid, these programs are widely perceived by local actors as mechanisms of migration deterrence. This interpretation aligns with Walters 'concept of 'anti-policies'—introduced above.

Shaidrova's fieldwork reveals that returnees and community members are not merely passive recipients of these interventions. Rather, they actively engage with and adapt them, sometimes proposing forms of civic policing—such as monitoring or disrupting smuggling routes—as a means to align with EU expectations and secure economic or political capital. These practices reflect a pragmatic and, at times, opportunistic response to the neocolonial dynamics embedded in the EU migration governance. The article thus challenges simplistic notions of top-down policy imposition by illustrating how local actors participate in shaping and enforcing externalized border control, often in ways that reproduce the very asymmetries these policies purport to mitigate.

9 Longo F, Panebianco S, Cannata G. Mind the gap! Organized hypocrisy in EU cooperation with Southern neighbor countries on international protection. Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica. 2023;53(3):367-383. doi:10.1017/ipo.2023.9

10 Moreno-Lax, V. (2017). The EU Humanitarian Border and the Securitization of Human Rights: The "Rescue-Through-Interdiction/Rescue-Without-Protection" Paradigm. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 56(1), 119–140. doi:10.1111/jcms.12651

11 Walters, W. 2008. Anti-policy and the politics of external borders. European Journal of Social Theory 11 (2):209–32.

12 Mariia Shaidrova (2025): Local Engagement of Nigerians with Neocolonial EU Humanitarian Return Policies: Civic Policing and Awareness-Raising Activities, Geopolitics, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2025.2480314; Brachet, J. 2016. Policing the desert: The IOM in Libya beyond war and peace. Antipode 48 (2):272–92. doi: 10.1111/anti.12176; Kleist, N. 2017. Disrupted migration projects: The moral economy of involuntary return to Ghana from Libya. Africa 87 (2):322–42. doi: 10.1017/S0001972016000980X; Maâ, A. 2021. Manufacturing collaboration in the deportation field: Intermediation and the institutionalisation of the international organisation for migration's 'voluntary return' program in Morocco. Journal of North African Studies 26 (5):932–53. doi: 10.1080/13629387.2020.1800210.

13 Mariia Shaidrova (2025): Local Engagement of Nigerians with Neocolonial EU Humanitarian Return Policies: Civic Policing and Awareness-Raising Activities, Geopolitics, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2025.2480314

Building on this perspective, Laura Lambert's analysis of IOM programs in Niger further illustrates the disconnect between humanitarian framing and operational realities.[14] These programs, framed as humanitarian interventions, aim to address migration challenges and control migration flows. However, promises of assistance, voluntary return, reintegration support, livelihood, and resettlement often fail, exposing hidden standards and operational practices. Migrants criticize the focus on return logistics over well-being, coercion in the return process,[15] and procedural challenges for minors. Reintegration assistance is seen as arbitrary or demanding, with waiting periods exacerbating survival needs. The assumption of a simple return to a 'home' requiring minimal assistance is contradicted by migrants' histories of displacement and vulnerability. These issues reveal the complex and contested nature of IOM's protection, leaving many migrants without adequate support.

These case studies illustrate what the literature often refers to as the "rippling effects" of externalization—unintended consequences of outsourcing migration control to third countries. These effects reshape local governance, create new industries and services, and alter protection practices, frequently reinforcing power imbalances and undermining migrants' rights.[16] These rippling effects give rise to a complex nexus between human rights, protection, and containment—reflecting the persistent tension between safeguarding state borders, protecting migrant lives, and upholding their rights.[17]

Information campaigns as protection

In the context of EU border externalization, protection has evolved to encompass new forms, with activities such as information campaigns—previously not considered part of protection programs – now emerging as distinct humanitarian sectors. It is common among the humanitarian organizations and non-academic sources to emphasize that access to trustworthy information is imperative so that migrants can make well-informed decisions about their journeys.[18] There is a significant thread of literature discussing information campaigns, migrants as messengers[19] and access to information as a form of protection.[20] As Schenetti and al. highlight, migration information campaigns are often justified by European policymakers as moral, educational, and harmless tools to deter irregular migration. However, their actual effectiveness is questionable. Campaigns are based on the assumption that better information will change behavior, but initiators themselves admit that people often migrate despite being informed. The campaigns serve more as symbolic actions to show care and responsibility, rather than proven solutions to reduce migration.[21]

14 Laura Lambert (2023) Contested promises. Migrants' material politics vis-à-vis the humanitarian border in Niger, Science as Culture, 32:3, 363-386, DOI: 10.1080/09505431.2023.2221289

15 See a more detailed discussion in the section on the migrants' needs and voluntary return programs in Section 3.

16 Jegen, Leonie Felicitas (2025) "Protecting" Rights of Smuggled Migrants in the Context of State-Enforced Immobility: Legal Borderwork in Senegal. International Political Sociology , https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olaf011; Weisner, Z., Vidal, P., Kraler, A., & Czaika, M. (2024). Trust in Transit: External Migration Control and Migrants' Perceptions of Humanitarian Borderwork in the Sahel. International Migration Review, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183241261365

17 Perkowski shows how Frontex blends humanitarian, human rights, and security discourses in its operations and public image. Drawing on staff interviews and agency documents, she argues that Frontex presents itself as a savior of lives, a defender of rights, and a protector of Europe—using these overlapping narratives to justify its actions and shape migrant vulnerability. Perkowski, Nina. 2018. "Frontex and the Convergence of Humanitarianism, Human Rights and Security." Security Dialogue 49 (6): 457–75.

18 This trend is common for a global approach to migration that links access to information on the dangers of migration to protection of migrants and as a consequence lack of exposures to risks. https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/337_Information-Access-Central-Sahel_EN.pdf

19 Vammen, I. M. S. (2021). 'When Migrants Become Messengers': Affective Borderwork and Aspiration Management in Senegal. Geopolitics, 27(5), 1410–1429. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1913408

20 Among others Schenetti, C., Mazzucato, V., Wyatt, S. & Schans, D. (2025) Navigating contradictions: justifications and imaginaries of the initiators of European migration information campaigns. International Migration, 63, e13366. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13366

21 Ibid.

4. What are the needs of migrants?

Migrants face a range of needs stemming from their unique vulnerabilities and conditions. These include protection from violence and exploitation, access to medical care, legal assistance, and support to maintain family ties. Vulnerable groups—such as women, children, and unaccompanied minors—require access to essential services like food, water, shelter, and psychosocial support. Respect for human rights is also critical, including protection from discrimination, arbitrary detention, and other violations.[22] Their human rights must be respected, protecting them from discrimination, arbitrary detention, and other violations. They also need protection from dangers such as violence, crime, and hazardous conditions, including threats from bandits, armed actors and other criminal elements. While these needs are widely recognized, their interpretation and response within migration governance frameworks—particularly in the EU—often reflect a securitized logic. For example, protection from smugglers and traffickers is increasingly framed as a rationale for containment, limiting mobility under the guise of safety. Some authors define it as the 'global counter-migrant smuggling project'.[23] Migrants' difficulties and vulnerabilities depend on their sex, gender,[24] age, health status, nationality, to lack of documentation, language barriers, and exposure to dangerous conditions while traveling. Empirical research from the Mixed Migration Centre in the Sahel illustrates a gap between needs and assistance received. While 88% of respondents reported needing support—most commonly cash (83%)—the aid received focused on basic necessities like food (72%), water (66%), and shelter (50%), with only 23% receiving cash assistance.[25]

Talleraas looks at the needs of migrants in West Africa through the lens of the challenges and impacts of externally driven border control initiatives.[26] Migrant needs are framed in terms of the practical requirements for crossing borders, such as suitable documentation and the ability to navigate border control systems that often rely on advanced technologies. The article highlights the mismatch between the equipment provided by external donors and the actual needs of migrants, who frequently travel with no or invalid documentation. Talleraas calls for a more localized and responsive approach to migration governance, arguing that externally imposed systems often fail to address the practical, social, and legal realities migrants face, and may exacerbate broader sociopolitical tensions.

Laura Lambert's article examines how migrants in Niger respond to the unfulfilled promises of humanitarian border infrastructures established by international organizations.[27] It highlights a wide range of unmet needs—including food, shelter, medical care, legal protection, voluntary return, reintegration, education, and resettlement—despite commitments from actors like IOM and UNHCR. Assistance is often conditional, reintegration support delayed or denied, and resettlement processes opaque and perceived as unjust. Lambert's findings underscore the systemic shortcomings of international humanitarian infrastructures, revealing how conditionality, delays, and opaque procedures erode trust and lead migrants to disengage from available support.

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22 Sarkin, J. (2017). Respecting and protecting the lives of migrants and refugees: the need for a human rights approach to save lives and find missing persons. The International Journal of Human Rights, 22(2), 207–236. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2017.1354572

23 Sanchez, Gabriella E., and Antonopoulos Georgios A. 2023. "Irregular Migration in the Time of Counter-Smuggling."Trends in Organized Crime 26 (1): 1–12.

24 There is a thread of literature that looks at the needs of queer migrants and asylum seekers. For instance, Lambert (2025) calls for a nuanced understanding of the protection needs of queer asylum seekers, emphasizing the complex and multifaceted challenges they face. It involves recognizing the unique legal and social context in Niger, where same-sex sexual activity is not criminalized, but societal norms are heavily influenced by conservative gender and sexuality norms. This creates a paradoxical environment where formal legality exists alongside rampant anti-queer discrimination. The protection of queer asylum seekers in Niger is not a straightforward process but involves negotiation and institutional emergence. This means that protection is actively negotiated between diverse actors, rather than being precluded from the outset. Laura Lambert (05 Mar 2025): Between morality and the law: negotiating protection for queer asylum seekers in Niger's asylum administration, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2025.246134

25 https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/323_Protection-risks-Central-Sahel.pdf

26 Cathrine Talleraas, Externally Driven Border Control in West Africa: Local Impact and Broader Ramifications, International Migration Review, 2024.

27 Laura Lambert (2023) Contested promises. Migrants' material politics vis-à-vis the humanitarian border in Niger, Science as Culture, 32:3, 363-386, DOI: 10.1080/09505431.2023.2221289

International protection as a humanitarian need

Migrants require access to international protection not only upon reaching Europe but also along migration routes, particularly in countries often labeled by the EU as "transit" states.[28] The literature consistently highlights that access to such protection is severely limited in North Africa and Turkey, despite these countries' formal engagement with international refugee frameworks.

In Morocco, despite cooperation with the UNHCR and the EU, asylum legislation remains misaligned with international standards and is hampered by institutional weaknesses.[29] Tunisia lacks a formal asylum law altogether, leaving asylum seekers in legal limbo and vulnerable to detention and informal labor, while EU cooperation prioritizes border control over protection.[30] Egypt, though a signatory to refugee conventions, has made reservations that limit rights and maintains restrictive practices, including detention and limited access to legal work, often influenced by nationality and bilateral agreements.[31] Algeria adopts a security-centric approach, criminalizing irregular migration and conducting mass expulsions—particularly to Niger—without due process, raising serious human rights concerns.[32]

Similar dynamics are observed in Turkey, where protection frameworks are shaped by distinct political and cultural logics. In Turkey, refugee protection is shaped by the concept of "guesthood," which allows for selective treatment based on ethnic and political considerations. The EU-Turkey Statement has further restricted asylum access and reinforced containment strategies, limiting the rights and mobility of asylum seekers.[33]

These limitations are not solely the result of domestic governance challenges; they are often reinforced by EU externalization policies that prioritize containment and border control over rights-based protection.[34] Through funding agreements, technical cooperation, and political partnerships, the EU incentivizes third countries to act as gatekeepers, limiting onward movement and managing migration flows on its behalf.[35] This approach shifts the responsibility for protection away from Europe and onto countries with weaker asylum systems, thereby institutionalizing practices that undermine migrants' access to safety, legal status, and basic rights. As a result, international protection becomes fragmented and conditional, shaped more by geopolitical interests than humanitarian principles.[36]

28 Academic literature brings to the light how protection changes based on the location of the third country, i.e. protection programs differ based on the geographical location. Using the example of Niger, Philippe Frowd shows how Niger has been politically constructed as a "transit" state for migration, rather than this being a neutral or purely geographic designation. This framing enables and justifies security interventions that blur migration with transnational threats like trafficking and terrorism, leading to increased border controls, mobile policing, and domestic policy changes—often at the expense of migrant protection, as migration becomes securitized rather than treated as a humanitarian or development issue. See Frowd, P. M. (2019). Producing the 'transit' migration state: international security intervention in Niger. Third World Quarterly, 41(2), 340–358. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1660633.

29 Natter, K. (2022). Ad-hocratic immigration governance: How states secure their power over immigration through intentional ambiguity. Territory, Politics, Governance, 11(4), 677–694. https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2021.1877189.

30 Sha'Ath, H., & Raach, F. (2024). Cooperation within reason: Tunisia's approach to asylum and readmission. European Journal of Migration and Law, 26(2), 179–196. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718166-12340176; Veron, P. (2020). Tunisia: Possibilities for reform and implementation of migrant reception and protection (Country report Tunisia). ECMPD.

31 Abdel Fattah, D., Rietig, V., & Fakhry, A. (2021). Egypt, the EU, and migration: An uncomfortable yet unavoidable partnership (DGAP Report, 18). Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-75831-1

32 ECMPD. (n.d.). Protecting migrants and refugees in North Africa: Challenges and opportunities for reform (Discussion Paper No. 281); Federica Zardo & Chiara Loschi (2020): EU-Algeria (non)cooperation on migration: A tale of two fortresses, Mediterranean Politics, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2020.1758453

33 Lamis Abdelaaty, Refugees and Guesthood in Turkey, Journal of Refugee Studies, Volume 34, Issue 3, September 2021, Pages 2827–2848, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez097

34 Natter, K. (2022). Ad-hocratic immigration governance: How states secure their power over immigration through intentional ambiguity. Territory, Politics, Governance, 11(4), 677–694; Moreno-Lax, V. (2017). The EU Humanitarian Border and the Securitization of Human Rights: The "Rescue-Through-Interdiction/Rescue-Without-Protection" Paradigm. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 56(1), 119–140.

35 Longo et al. (2023). Organized hypocrisy in EU cooperation with Southern neighbor countries on international protection. Italian Political Science Review, 53(3), 367–383.

36 Jegen, L.F. (2025). "Protecting" Rights of Smuggled Migrants in the Context of State-Enforced Immobility.

Migrants' needs in context of 'voluntary returns'

Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programs, promoted by IOM, are framed as humanitarian tools intended to support migrant protection and reflect migrants' needs. In the literature, these programs are widely criticized for being only nominally voluntary, as migrants often face limited choices that make returns feel forced.[37] An emerging body of literature indicates that protection programs—particularly the AVRR initiative— tend to align more closely with donor objectives aimed at deterring migration than with the actual needs and return aspirations of migrants themselves. For example, scholars such as Farrah (2020) and Pécoud (2017) argue that assistance is often contingent upon migrants agreeing to return to their country of origin, raising concerns about the voluntariness of such programs.[38] This conditionality blurs the line between humanitarian support and migration control, as aid becomes a tool to incentivize compliance with return policies. Pécoud highlights how the language of "voluntary" return can obscure underlying power dynamics, effectively masking forced repatriation as humanitarian intervention.

This section first presents evidence from critical analyses of assisted voluntary returns (AVR) and then highlights academic literature that discusses 'voluntary returns' in relation to migrants' needs.

Laura Lambert's ethnographic study in Niger explores how migrants interpret and respond to IOM-administered return programs, with a particular focus on the contested notion of voluntariness.[39] Although IOM presents its AVRR scheme as a humanitarian option—inviting individuals to go back to their countries if they choose—many migrants interpret this offer as subtly coercive. One participant described the process as being "forced intelligently," suggesting that the lack of viable alternatives undermines the authenticity of the choice. The research highlights how individuals with complex histories of displacement and hardship often feel pressured to accept return due to deteriorating living conditions or exclusion from aid. Some migrants opted to leave IOM facilities altogether, asserting control over their own mobility. Lambert frames these actions—whether through verbal critique or withdrawal from services—as forms of political engagement that challenge the gap between institutional narratives and migrants' lived experiences. Ultimately, the study argues that the idea of voluntariness is compromised by structural limitations, opaque procedures, and the broader context of displacement and border enforcement.

The ethnographic study by Maâ is an example of critical approach to so-called voluntary returns from Morocco to West Africa.[40] Maâ shows that while AVRR programs may offer some material support, they are also embedded in broader systems of border control and exclusion. Migrants' engagement with these programs is shaped by a complex mix of coercion, pragmatism, and symbolic negotiation. Rather than being a clear-cut protective measure, return becomes a site of negotiation where migrants navigate between institutional expectations, social pressures, and personal aspirations. So, while protection is part of the official discourse around returns, the article argues that in practice, returns from Morocco are often experienced as constrained, strategic, and ambivalent rather than genuinely protective.

Another example of critical interpretation of returns - particularly those facilitated by the IOM - from Libya to Mali.[41] While these returns are also officially framed as humanitarian interventions—especially in the wake of the Libyan civil war and the exposure of slave markets—the article argues that this framing masks the coercive, racialized, and exclusionary realities experienced by many

International Political Sociology.

37 Boulaye Keita et Soumana A. Maïga, « La mise en œuvre du plan d'actions de la Valette au Mali : Initiatives de dissuasion migratoire et de « réinsertion » des migrants de retour pour quel résultat ? », L'Espace Politique [En ligne], 46 | 2022-1. DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/espacepolitique.10900

38 Farrah, R. (2020). Algeria's Migration Dilemma: Migration and human smuggling in southern Algeria. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime available: https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/algerias-migration-dilemma/; Pécoud, A. (2017). What do we know about the International Organization for Migration? Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44(10), 1621–1638. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2017.1354028.

39 Lambert, L. (2023). Contested promises: Migrants' material politics vis-à-vis the humanitarian border in Niger. Science as Culture, 32(3), 363–386. https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2023.2221289

40 Maâ, 2023, Autonomy of migration in the light of deportation. Ethnographic and theoretical accounts of entangled appropriations of voluntary returns from Morocco, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space.

41 Marie Deridder and Almamy Sylla, "Racialized Impacts of Migration Governance in Mali", Revue européenne des migrations internationales [Online], vol. 40 - n°1 | 2024. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/remi.25425

returnees. The authors highlight that the IOM's humanitarian narrative is seen as a veneer that obscures the underlying political and security-driven motives of migration governance.
In a similar vein, Alpes & Sylla[42] discuss transit return programs from Libya and Niger highlighting how these initiatives obscure the rights of West African migrants and deflect accountability from European actors. Migrants are frequently expelled from Algeria or intercepted at sea and returned to ECOWAS countries, where they hold the legal right to move freely. However, once there, they are often pressured or compelled to return to their countries of origin, despite the protections guaranteed by ECOWAS free movement protocols. Mass expulsions from Algeria to Niger—often involving migrants being left in remote desert areas—are followed by humanitarian interventions. IOM plays the most prominent role in retrieving expelled individuals regardless of their intention to return. Access to further assistance in transit centers is generally conditional on agreeing to participate in "voluntary" return programs.[43]

The examples discussed above do not support the conclusion that returns are an effective form of protection; the section now turns to a different argument, showing that voluntary return programs also fail to meet migrants' complex and context-specific needs.[44] Migrants frequently face constrained choices, deteriorating conditions, and coercive pressures that render return a necessity rather than a genuine option. In contexts like Nigeria, Morocco, and Libya, AVRR is embedded in broader migration control regimes, where reintegration support is limited, racialized, and shaped by opaque eligibility criteria.[45]

Maâ's work emphasizes the key needs of migrants in the context of voluntary returns from Morocco.[46] Migrants require financial support, temporary accommodation, and logistical help to return to their country of origin, as they often face harsh living conditions and threats from state authorities. They seek recognition of their vulnerability and legitimacy to access return assistance, often performing their vulnerability to meet the criteria set by organizations like IOM.

Drawing on the work of Boulaye Keita and Soumana A. Maïga, who examine the implementation of the Valletta Action Plan in Mali, migrants returning through voluntary programs face strong social expectations from their relatives and communities to demonstrate success. Many migrants register for voluntary return programs as a contingency plan, using them strategically while continuing to explore other migration options. This reflects their need for continued mobility and adaptability in navigating uncertain futures. Reintegration support often falls short of expectations, leaving returnees to rely on personal resilience and informal networks to rebuild their lives. Overall, migrants' needs are multifaceted, extending beyond physical assistance to include social recognition, flexibility, and the ability to maintain dignity and agency within their communities.[47]

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42 Maybritt Jill Alpes et Almamy Sylla, « Quand les programmes de réintégration interrogent la citoyenneté : La figure du « retourné » au Nigéria et au Mali », Cahiers d'études africaines [En ligne], 254, 2024. DOI: 10.4000/11v3b

43 Puig, O., Stephens, L., Eiksund, M.(2024) "Expulsions from Algeria to Niger: a postcolonial approach to IOM-assisted "voluntary" returns" EuroMedMig Working Paper Series, no. 11 (September): http://hdl.handle.net/10230/60963

44 Among others see Maâ, A. (2021). Manufacturing collaboration in the deportation field: Intermediation and the institutionalisation of the International Organization for Migration's 'voluntary return' program in Morocco. Journal of North African Studies, 26(5), 932-953. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2020.1800210; Shaidrova, M. (2025). Local engagement of Nigerians with neocolonial EU humanitarian return policies: Civic policing and awareness-raising activities. Geopolitics. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2025.2480314; Lambert, L. (2023). Contested promises: Migrants' material politics vis-à-vis the humanitarian border in Niger. Science as Culture, 32(3), 363–386. https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2023.2221289

45 Alpes, J. (2020). Emergency returns by IOM from Libya and Niger: A protection response or a source of protection concerns? Frankfurt am Main: Brot für die Welt, Evangelisches Werk für Diakonie und Entwicklung e.V.; Deridder, M., & Sylla, A. (2024). Racialized impacts of migration governance in Mali. Revue européenne des migrations internationales, 40(1). https://doi.org/10.4000/remi.25425 ; Sylla, A., & Cold-Ravnkilde, S. M. (2022). En route to Europe? The anti-politics of deportation from North Africa to Mali. Geopolitics, 27(5), 1390–1409. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1995358.

46 Maâ, 2023, Autonomy of migration in the light of deportation. Ethnographic and theoretical accounts of entangled appropriations of voluntary returns from Morocco, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space.

47 Boulaye Keita et Soumana A. Maïga, «La mise en œuvre du plan d'actions de la Valette au Mali : Initiatives de dissuasion migratoire et de « réinsertion » des migrants de retour pour quel résultat ? », L'Espace Politique [En ligne], 46 | 2022-1. DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/espacepolitique.10900

Beyond North and West Africa, similar challenges are reported among Iraqi returnees from Belarus, highlighting the global relevance of these concerns.[48] Returnees to Iraq face several key challenges. Employment is the top need, as many return with depleted savings and debt. Access to credit is also vital for rebuilding livelihoods. Mental health support is crucial, especially for those who experienced trauma. Some also need legal aid, information on their rights, and better access to services like shelter and childcare. Addressing these needs is essential for sustainable reintegration.

Taken together, these cases underscore the need to critically re-evaluate 'voluntary return' programs—not only in terms of their humanitarian framing, but also in their capacity to address the full spectrum of migrants' needs. These include logistical and financial support, recognition of social vulnerability, access to reintegration resources, and the preservation of agency and dignity. Current approaches often fall short, highlighting the importance of designing return policies that are context-sensitive, rights-based, and aligned with migrants' long-term aspirations.

5. Are protection programs successful at protecting migrants along routes?

Building on the previous section's focus on migrants' needs and how these are reflected in protection programming, this section examines a critical barrier to the effectiveness of such programs: the growing mistrust of humanitarian actors among migrants. Drawing on examples from IOM and UNHCR, it explores how perceptions of complicity in migration control and conditional assistance undermine the legitimacy and accessibility of protection services.

Migrants' mistrust in humanitarian actors

One of the consequences of the externalization of the borders and consequent securitization of migration is migrants' mistrust towards humanitarian actors.[49] Weisner et al. argue this mistrust is primarily driven by the perception that humanitarian organizations are complicit in migration control efforts, including deportations and returns. These feelings are explained by migrants' experiences and the general environment of migration control, which includes awareness campaigns that discourage migration. This mistrust is exacerbated by the visibility of humanitarian organizations and their perceived collaboration with police and local authorities. Migrants tend to avoid these organizations to protect themselves from potential risks, preferring to rely on informal networks and solidarity among fellow migrants. The authors emphasize that mistrust varies depending on the type of organization and its mandate. Organizations involved in return programming, such as the IOM,[50] are particularly mistrusted.[51] Many perceive its primary role as facilitating repatriation rather than offering support, leading to concerns that engaging with such services may result in being sent back to their country of origin. This perception contributes to a broader mistrust of humanitarian actors seen as aligned with migration control efforts. In contrast, according to some examples in the literature, organizations providing medical aid or basic humanitarian services are viewed more favorably.[52]

48 IOM, MIGRATION FROM IRAQ TO EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES A SURVEY OF RETURNEES FROM THE BELARUSIAN MIGRATION CRISIS, April 2022

49 from Weisner, Z., Vidal, P., Kraler, A., & Czaika, M. (2024). Trust in Transit: External Migration Control and Migrants' Perceptions of Humanitarian Borderwork in the Sahel. International Migration Review, p. 12-13.

50 Unlike IOM, the UNHCR did not evoke as much suspicion among migrants in transit, primarily because either they had limited knowledge of the organisation or believed that 'UNHCR is there, but it's for refugees'.

51 See Weisner et al.

52 For instance, a Senegalese male migrant in Agadez expressed that migrants prefer the services of MDM and Red Cross because they take into account the most urgent needs, namely health, food, and cash more than those of IOM which only intervenes to repatriate migrants. See Frowd, P. M. 2018. "Developmental Borderwork and the International Organization for Migration." Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 44 (10): 1656–72. doi:10.1080/1369183X.2017.1354046; Gilbert, G. 2023. "The International Organization for Migration in Humanitarian Scenarios." In IOM Unbound?: Obligations and Accountability of the International Organization for Migration in an Era of Expansion, edited by Megan Bradley, Cathryn Costello, and Angela Sherwood, 297–325. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; De Blasis, F., and S. Pitzalis. 2023. "Externalising Migration Control in Niger: The Humanitarian–Security Nexus and the International Organization for Migration (IOM)." The Journal of Modern

This perception leads to significant protection gaps for migrants, as they often wait until they are in desperate situations before seeking aid, which can compromise their safety and well-being. At the same time, this perception emphasizes the dual role of humanitarian organizations in providing care and control, and the resulting implications for migrant trust and protection.[53]

The literature demonstrates that migrants often choose to withdraw from protection relationships or refuse offered protection as a harm-reduction strategy. This occurs when they believe that organizations may contribute to their deportation or manipulate them into returning to their country of origin. This strategic avoidance of aid is a way to safeguard their investments in their journey.[54]

IOM as a provider of protection services

IOM is widely criticized in the academic literature for its ambiguous role in migrant protection. Although it presents itself as a humanitarian actor committed to upholding migrants' rights,[55] its activities often reflect a dual mandate that blends assistance with migration control. This contradiction is especially visible in return and reintegration programs, which are promoted as protective but frequently serve containment and deterrence goals aligned with donor interests—particularly those of the EU.[56] Scholars such as Dini, Fine, and Pécoud argue that IOM tends to prioritize the agendas of powerful receiving states, framing migration as a crisis and emphasizing control over rights.[57] These narratives are reinforced through technological practices like biometric data collection via MIDAS, which critics view as tools of surveillance rather than protection.[58] Stefan Rother shows that IOM's influence within the UN Network on Migration promotes a vision of "orderly" and "safe" migration that aligns with Global North interests, sidelining migrant agency and justice. As a result, migrants often perceive IOM's interventions as coercive or conditional, eroding trust in its protective role.[59] The literature ultimately calls for a redefinition of protection—one that centers migrant rights, socio-economic justice, and challenges the neocolonial and securitized frameworks underpinning global migration governance.[60]

African Studies 61 (3): 367–87. doi:10.1017/S0022278X23000149.

53 The distinction between care and control activities within these organisations is often blurred. See Cuttitta, P. 2018. "Delocalization, Humanitarianism, and Human Rights: The Mediterranean Border Between Exclusion and Inclusion: Delocalization, Humanitarianism, and Human Rights." Antipode 50 (3): 783–803. doi:10.1111/anti.12337

54 among others Savio Vammen, I. M., S. Plambech, A. Chemlali, and N. Nyberg Sørensen. 2021. Does Information Save Migrants' Lives? Knowledge and Needs of West African Migrants en Route to Europe. Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies. https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/4209801/Does_information_save_migrants_lives_DIIS_Report_2021_01.pdf; Lambert, L. 2023. "Contested Promises. Migrants' Material Politics Vis-à-Vis the Humanitarian Border in Niger." Science as Culture 32 (3): 363–86. doi:10.1080/09505431.2023.2221289.

55 https://www.iom.int/humanitarian-assistance

56 Rother, S. 2025. International organisations are people, too: IOM's role as coordinator of the UN migration network and the socialisation of international organisations. Geopolitics 1–28. doi: 10.1080/14650045.2025.2465665.

57 Sabine Dini, Shoshana Fine & Antoine Pécoud (2025): Rethinking the International Organization for Migration, Geopolitics, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2025.2480316.

58 Philippe M. Frowd (2024): The 'Datafication' of Borders in Global Context: The Role of the International Organization for Migration, Geopolitics, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2024.2318580

59 Frowd, P. M. 2018. "Developmental Borderwork and the International Organization for Migration." Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 44 (10): 1656–72. doi:10.1080/1369183X.2017.1354046; Weisner, Z., Vidal, P., Kraler, A., & Czaika, M. (2024). Trust in Transit: External Migration Control and Migrants' Perceptions of Humanitarian Borderwork in the Sahel. International Migration Review, 0(0).

60 Moreno-Lax, V. (2017). The EU humanitarian border and the securitization of human rights: The "rescue-through-interdiction/rescue-without-protection" paradigm. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 56(1), 119–140. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12651; Jegen, L. F. (2025). "Protecting" rights of smuggled migrants in the context of state-enforced immobility: Legal borderwork in Senegal. International Political Sociology. https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olaf011

UNHCR as a provider of protection services

In the literature UNHCR is also criticized - although less extensively than IOM - for its role in the externalization of the EU borders, in particular in Niger. Van Dessel argues that the UNHCR's involvement in Regional Development and Protection Programmes (RDPPs) may inadvertently support the EU's goal of offloading its asylum responsibilities to third countries.[61] This could lead to these countries being labeled as "safe," allowing the EU to reject asylum applications from individuals who have transited through them, thus undermining the protection needs of refugees. Additionally, the UNHCR's activities in Niger, such as encouraging asylum applications within the country and facilitating voluntary returns, are seen as aligning with the EU's broader strategy to control migration movements and reduce arrivals in Europe. This raises concerns that the UNHCR's humanitarian efforts are being co-opted to serve political objectives, potentially compromising its mandate to protect refugees and asylum seekers.

Lambert highlights how UNHCR's promises—of assistance, livelihood support, and resettlement—are often undermined by exclusion, lack of transparency, and perceived injustice.[62] Asylum seekers frequently criticize opaque admission criteria and unequal treatment, which they see as arbitrary. Livelihood support is seen as inadequate, lacking basic guarantees like food and healthcare, making self-reliance difficult. Resettlement, too, is contested due to unclear selection processes and perceived favoritism, leaving many feeling unfairly excluded.

Conclusions

This quick literature scan set out to answer two research questions:

1. To what extent do protection programs align with the priorities and needs of migrants from the eight partnership countries?
2. To what extent are such programs successful at protecting migrants along migration routes?

The scan demonstrates that protection and assistance programs for migrants, though often presented in humanitarian terms, are deeply shaped by security concerns and European migration control agendas. While migrants face a range of needs—from legal support and healthcare to safe return options—these are frequently unmet due to vague procedures, limited access, and a lack of trust in aid organizations.

International actors like IOM and UNHCR, central to these efforts, often align more closely with donor priorities than with the lived realities of migrants. This is particularly evident in return and reintegration programs, where the label of 'voluntary' return often conceals coercive pressures, such as deteriorating living conditions and rising discrimination. Migrants are routinely criminalized and detained on ambiguous grounds, making them both detainable and deportable. As a result, protection becomes a tool of containment, reinforcing rather than challenging the structures that drive displacement.

To what extent do protection programs align with the priorities and needs of migrants from the eight partnership countries?

The literature reviewed demonstrates that protection programs often fall short of addressing the multifaceted needs of migrants from the eight partnership countries. Migrants require not only basic assistance—such as food, shelter, and medical care—but also legal protection, access to documentation, safe mobility, reintegration support, and social recognition. However, many programs fail to respond to these needs in a comprehensive or sustained manner. Return and reintegration initiatives, particularly those led by IOM, are frequently criticized for being only nominally voluntary. Migrants often face constrained choices and coercive pressures, making return a necessity rather than a genuine option. These programs tend to reflect donor priorities—especially migration deterrence—more than migrants' aspirations or reintegration needs.

61 van Dessel, J. (2019). International Delegation and Agency in the Externalization Process of EU Migration and Asylum Policy: the Role of the IOM and the UNHCR in Niger. European Journal of Migration and Law, 21(4), 435-458. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718166-12340060

62 Laura Lambert (2023) Contested promises. Migrants' material politics vis-à-vis the humanitarian border in Niger, Science as Culture, 32:3, 363-386, DOI: 10.1080/09505431.2023.2221289

One of the more significant challenges facing the humanitarian system is the growing erosion of trust between migrants and aid organizations. This mistrust is largely a consequence of the system's increasing alignment with donor-driven political imperatives, particularly in the context of return programming and migration control. As humanitarian assistance becomes more closely linked to these agendas, protection often takes on a conditional character—especially in contexts like Libya, Morocco, and Niger, where access to aid may depend on agreeing to return. This dynamic undermines rights-based approaches and limits migrant agency, prompting many to strategically avoid engagement with humanitarian actors, even in situations of acute vulnerability.
Finally, protection programs are often designed with generalized assumptions that overlook the specific sociopolitical realities of each country, further reducing their relevance and effectiveness. These findings underscore the need for protection programs that are context-sensitive, rights-based, and genuinely responsive to the lived experiences and priorities of migrants.

To what extent are such programs successful at protecting migrants along migration routes?
The literature reviewed suggests that the success of protection programs along migration routes is highly constrained by the broader political and institutional frameworks in which they operate. Rather than functioning as standalone humanitarian interventions, many protection programs are embedded within migration control regimes, particularly those shaped by EU externalization policies. This structural entanglement often redefines protection as a tool of containment, where the language of care is used to legitimize practices that restrict mobility and access to rights.
One of the central challenges to effectiveness is the conceptual ambiguity surrounding protection itself. Without a universally accepted definition, a wide array of initiatives are labeled as "protection," despite differing significantly in purpose and practice. This allows implementing actors to frame migration control measures—such as interdiction, detention, and return—as protective, even when they result in increased vulnerability and rights violations. The literature highlights how this ambiguity facilitates the normalization of coercive practices under the guise of humanitarianism. Moreover, the governance of protection is increasingly outsourced to third countries and (private) actors, often through opaque agreements and delegated enforcement mechanisms. This externalization process not only dilutes accountability but also reshapes local governance in ways that reinforce power asymmetries and undermine migrants' rights.

Symbolic interventions, such as information campaigns, further illustrate the limits of protection programming. While these initiatives are presented as empowering migrants to make informed decisions, their effectiveness is questionable. They often serve donor visibility more than migrant agency, and their messaging may reinforce deterrence narratives rather than offer meaningful support.

A crucial, though often implicit, indicator of successful protection in the context of migration is the ability of migrants to reach their intended final destination safely and with dignity. While this observation is not always explicitly articulated in the literature, it is inherent to the logic of most migration journeys. However, many of the protection programs reviewed appear to be designed primarily to contain movement rather than facilitate it. This misalignment between program objectives and migrant aspirations reflects a deeper tension: protection is frequently conditional, instrumentalized, and shaped by political imperatives, rather than grounded in the rights and priorities of migrants themselves.

In sum, protection programs along migration routes are often compromised by their alignment with security agendas, their operational ambiguity, and their reliance on externalized governance structures. Their success cannot be measured solely by the provision of services but must be evaluated in terms of their ability to uphold rights, reduce harm, and support migrants in achieving their goals. Without a shift toward rights-based, transparent, and accountable frameworks, protection risks remaining a rhetorical device rather than a substantive safeguard.