



# A New Pact for a Europe that Truly Protects

Recommendations for the New EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

International Rescue Committee | May 2020

Front cover: Iranian mother, Wahida with her two sons, Puria, 15, and Neema, 10, on the Greek island of Lesbos. Lucie Horton/IRC.

This page: Refugees in the port of Mytilini, Lesbos, Greece. Milos Bicanski/IRC.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is a global humanitarian organisation founded in the 1930s by Albert Einstein. Employing around 13,000 staff and 15,000 volunteers in 40 countries, the IRC responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises and helps people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover and gain control of their future.

The team in the IRC Brussels office strives to ensure this humanitarian and development programming expertise is shared with decision makers in EU institutions and member states to help shape EU policies in ways that improve the lives and livelihoods of the people we serve across the world.



# Introduction: A fresh start for Europe's response to forced migration

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across continents, it brought into sharp focus both our global interconnectedness, and the critical role the EU can play in bringing countries together in a common endeavour. But while the response has showcased many societal strengths across Europe, it has also painfully exposed certain policy gaps which have exacerbated existing inequalities. From the dire unsanitary conditions on the Greek islands and the turning away of asylum-seekers at the EU's external borders, to the suspension of resettlement programmes and the drastic reduction in asylum service provision, refugees and asylum-seekers have been hit hard by the crisis.

**Despite the novel nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, crisis is not new to refugees and asylum-seekers in the EU: most issues highlighted by the current emergency are the acute result of longstanding and unresolved challenges.**

They include a lack of agreement on key elements linked to internal solidarity and responsibility-sharing, an unpredictable and unsustainable reliance on third countries to manage migration in an effort to prevent people from reaching Europe, and a need for greater accountability in EU action on migration, with transparency and legal obligations too-often deprioritised in the interest of measures to curb migration. These challenges can be overcome, but only by a European approach to forced migration that puts people, rather than borders, at the heart of its policies.<sup>1</sup>

**The forthcoming presentation of a 'New EU Pact on Migration and Asylum' presents a major opportunity to overcome the deadlock between member states on long-awaited reforms and put in place a more fair, sensible and humane policy framework that works for both new arrivals and host communities.**

With the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework on the verge of agreement, the Pact should also play a key role in ensuring that refugees and asylum-seekers are fully integrated into funding frameworks for the next seven years. The Pact should also be seen as a key tool to help the EU and member states progressively realise their commitments towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration within Europe, and to support their implementation around the world.

This renewed effort will require political courage, but, done correctly, it could finally move the Union beyond the ad-hoc, crisis-centred approach that has left people seeking protection in Europe in unnecessarily precarious situations and held them back from contributing fully to their new communities.



Above: A woman cleans her hands at the Alexandria refugee camp in northern Greece. Tara Todras-Whitehill/IRC.

# IRC recommendations for the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

As a humanitarian organisation working with migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in more than 40 countries, both within and beyond the EU's borders, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) witnesses daily the impact of the EU's migration and asylum policies on the lives of the people we serve. The IRC has seen various instances where EU policies have had positive outcomes, including an increase in EU resettlement numbers, promising efforts to implement a common strategy on integration and a clearer focus on addressing the specific needs of women and girls. However, IRC teams are also responding to some of the urgent humanitarian and protection needs created by shortcomings in the EU's current approach.

In this briefing, the IRC outlines its recommendations for the new Pact to truly represent a “fresh start”,<sup>2</sup> which upholds the rights of people on the move. These recommendations reflect our current programming and expertise in Europe and beyond and strive to reflect the needs of those whose health and hopes will be most affected by the EU's approach in this new Pact – men, women and children, seeking safety, solidarity and a better life.

The new Pact offers EU institutions and its member states an opportunity to:

- 1. Address the protection crisis in the EU, and especially in Greece, by implementing a long-term response** which upholds fundamental rights, commits to a fair and sustainable system to share responsibility across member states, and addresses specific vulnerabilities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic for people seeking protection;
- 2. Provide principled leadership and adequate funding for the integration and social inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers**, in particular refugee women, by evaluating and renewing the 2016 EU Action Plan on Integration and ensuring an inclusive post-pandemic recovery that values the contributions of new arrivals;
- 3. Adopt a Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework** that supports a **scaling up of EU resettlement** to reach 250,000 places by 2025 and encourages better monitoring of EU resettlement arrivals;
- 4. Protect people on the move along irregular migration routes** by establishing a well-functioning search and rescue operation to save lives at sea, developing alternatives to detention and promoting the adoption of national legal frameworks on migration in third-countries, in line with international human rights standards; and
- 5. Strengthen coherence between EU migration and development policies** by supporting regular migration pathways, investing in countries of origin, transit and destination, and including displaced populations in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Below: Mural on a container in Eleonas camp, Athens, Greece.  
Daphne Tolis/IRC.



# 1. Addressing the protection crisis within the EU

The situation in Greece exposes the serious fault lines in the EU's current response to forced migration. Over the last year the reality facing asylum-seekers and refugees on the Aegean islands has steadily worsened, reaching a new breaking point at the start of 2020. With the humanitarian situation deteriorating month by month, risks facing the most vulnerable were further exacerbated by the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Illustrating the extent of political stalemate and the protection crisis within the EU's borders, tens of thousands of people remain trapped in overcrowded camps, without access to sufficient water, sanitation, shelter, safety, or vital services such as health, education or legal assistance.

## Safeguarding the right to asylum

Recent decisions by Greece to suspend the right to asylum for one month in response to Turkey's decision to open its borders,<sup>3</sup> or restrictions introduced by other European governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>4</sup> have proven that the current EU asylum system is ill-equipped to stand strong during emergencies or to safeguard rights against shifting political influence. The upcoming Pact will need to include a clear and non-negotiable commitment to protect and uphold the right to seek asylum and the principle of non-refoulement throughout the EU, two fundamental obligations under international and EU law.<sup>5</sup>

The Pact should, as a minimum, also include a substantial investment in ensuring that all member states' asylum systems meet existing EU legal requirements. This will require a guarantee of fair and efficient asylum procedures that refrain from applying any 'accelerated procedures' that cannot provide such a guarantee;<sup>6</sup> meaningful access to legal aid and effective remedies; as well as safeguards against returns to a country where a person's life or dignity may be at risk. Political agreements, such as the EU-Turkey Statement, which restrict the right to seek asylum in the EU and shift these responsibilities to third countries, must also be reassessed in this light.<sup>7</sup>

## Improving reception conditions

The Pact needs to ensure that the rights of asylum-seekers and refugees to access critical services are protected and provided for, as laid out in the 2013 Reception Conditions Directive.<sup>8</sup> In Greece, the IRC has repeatedly drawn attention to the significant numbers of people forced to survive in crowded and wholly unsuitable camp structures on the islands, and to a serious lack of protection and care.<sup>9</sup> While

the humanitarian situation is particularly dire for these people, their experience is representative of a concerning trend, where the level of access to services afforded to asylum-seekers and refugees has been reduced rather than improved in several member states.<sup>10</sup> To ensure this does not become more widespread, the Pact should prioritise a dialogue with all member states with a view to promoting the respect of minimum legal obligations and dignified reception conditions as agreed in the Directive.

## The need for EU solidarity

If the EU is to live up to its founding value of solidarity, the Pact must also revive negotiations to agree a fair, humane and sustainable system to share responsibility for all people seeking international protection in Europe in full respect of fundamental rights. In practice, this will entail reforming the system for designating responsibility under the Dublin Regulation, which places an impossible burden on some member states; prioritising family unity; and implementing a mechanism for assigning responsibilities to member states in a fair and predictable way.<sup>11</sup> Any proposals must also offer a viable and humane alternative to the 'geographical restriction' imposed by the EU-Turkey Statement, which adds an extra obstacle to the relocation of asylum-seekers and contributes to the overcrowding on the Greek islands.

Relocating people to other member states must be a priority, starting with unaccompanied children<sup>12</sup> but also including other vulnerable groups such as older people, those with chronic illnesses or disabilities, pregnant women, and families. This is all the more urgent in the light of the threats to health and life posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Monitoring compliance with the asylum acquis

As the guardian of the Treaties, the European Commission has a vital role to play, both in supporting member states to uphold their legal obligations and in sanctioning any violations of EU law that affect the rights of displaced people in the EU. The Pact should make it a priority to monitor compliance with existing legislation on asylum and reception, issuing guidance to support proper implementation and, where relevant, pursuing enforcement and infringement procedures when these obligations are violated.

## 2. Providing principled leadership on integration

When provided with appropriate support, refugees and asylum-seekers contribute socially, culturally and economically to a welcoming society. In fact, according to recent IRC research, closing pay gaps and removing barriers to the labour market for refugees in some of the largest refugee-hosting countries could boost overall GDP by around €49 billion, and €13 billion in Germany alone.<sup>13</sup> These contributions also extend past the purely financial: refugee women who the IRC's teams work with in Germany perceive their economic empowerment and labour market inclusion as beneficial not only to themselves and their families, but also to society.<sup>14</sup> European integration policy and practice should aim to maximise this potential, removing impediments to this effect.

### The need for long-term measures beyond COVID-19

While certain EU member states have become more receptive to allowing refugees and asylum-seekers to fill crucial labour shortages in times of COVID-19, these measures should be accompanied by longer term strategies to compensate for funding shortfalls and limited employment support beyond this emergency. In particular, the skills of refugees currently working in healthcare, agricultural or other roles must be officially recognised and their labour rights fully respected with a view to their long-term inclusion in European labour markets.

### A renewed EU Action Plan on Integration

As part of this process, the IRC has long advocated for an evaluation and renewal of the 2016 Action Plan on the Integration of Third Country Nationals, including in our reports *Forging a Common Path* (2018)<sup>15</sup> and *Getting Back on Track* (2019).<sup>16</sup> We therefore welcome the planned publication of a new Action Plan in the final quarter of this year. Both the Pact and a renewed Action Plan, building on emerging consensus among citizens,<sup>17</sup> should seek to ensure that the EU plays a key role in integration. A vital first step towards this is ensuring a truly inclusive consultation process. The Commission should use the time leading up to the renewal to consult widely and inclusively on the impact and shortcomings of the 2016 Action Plan, as well as on the priorities for the new strategy. As this consultation is now likely to take place largely online, additional steps should be taken to ensure that it is truly inclusive and accessible to refugees and asylum-seekers, taking into account lower levels of digital literacy or internet access among some communities.

In general, the Pact should promote integration in the EU as an explicit objective of any common European approach to asylum and migration, re-committing the EU institutions to progress in this area wherever legally possible, in partnership with civil society and in new and creative ways. In particular, the Commission should use this opportunity to encourage and incentivise member states which currently have higher standards than the EU legislative minimum to maintain these. Furthermore, the EU Action Plan on Integration should prioritise the strengths and integration needs of refugee and asylum-seeking women in the EU through targeted policies at both the individual and structural level.<sup>18</sup> It is critical to ensure that all these priorities are fully costed and integrated within related policy and funding frameworks, notably the European Semester.

Despite the local nature of integration, these commitments also have an external dimension: ultimately, the EU cannot continue to ask other refugee hosting countries to receive and protect refugees without making any commitments of its own.



Above: Moussa is a refugee from the Ivory Coast living in Athens. He aims to open the first Ivorian restaurant in Greece, "Our Home", after receiving support from the IRC/Citi Back My Business programme. Elena Heatherwick/IRC.

### 3. Reinforcing and scaling up EU resettlement

EU resettlement numbers have consistently, if moderately and unevenly, increased in the past decade.<sup>19</sup> The new Pact should build on the momentum achieved in the past Commission mandate and maintain resettlement as a priority, highlighting its role as an important demonstration of international solidarity with major refugee hosting countries and as an essential safe route for people in need of protection. At a time of growing resettlement needs and decreasing global resettlement opportunities, this is crucial to ensure any COVID-19 related barriers to resettlement are minimised in time and scope, and that the EU's pledge to resettle 30,000 refugees in 2020 is met despite current travel restrictions.

#### Resettlement as a protection tool

To truly represent a “fresh start”, the new Pact should re-focus on the nature of resettlement as an essential protection tool and a durable solution for the most vulnerable rather than as a ‘legal migration’ pathway. With reference to the 1951 Geneva Convention, it should also explicitly state that providing resettlement places is not an alternative to member states’ legal obligation to uphold the right to claim asylum, no matter how a claimant reaches the EU. The new Pact should also clearly make the link between resettlement and integration, a link that was missing in discussions to date which focused on resettlement as a modality of arrival only.

#### Resuming reporting on EU resettlement

With the media frequently dominated by anti-migrant narratives, it is important to communicate success stories. The Commission should resume regular, at least quarterly, reporting on progress and should work with UNHCR and member states to further improve disaggregated data collection and reporting ahead of the adoption of the Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework. In order to track progress on EU resettlement specifically, and to properly assess the impact of EU funding intended to incentivise such efforts,<sup>20</sup> data provided by member states and reported by the Commission should include at least the nature of admission (resettlement, humanitarian admission, family reunification, other), the status granted, the country of origin and the country of asylum of the person resettled.

#### Scaling up EU resettlement

At the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019, EU member states committed to resettling more than 30,000 refugees in 2020. Beyond this commitment, the EU should collectively work towards resettling 250,000 refugees by 2025. A clear commitment to a continuous and significant increase in EU resettlement, as part of efforts to implement the Global Compact on Refugees and the associated three-year strategy, should be included in the Pact.<sup>21</sup> As part of this endeavour, the Pact must also ensure adequate support is provided to the Emergency Transit Mechanisms (ETMs) in Niger and Rwanda, including by speeding up procedures, increasing the number of places available and ensuring more member states join with pledges.

#### Adopting the Union Resettlement Framework

Restarting the stalled negotiations and adopting the Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework by the end of 2020 would be an important step towards harmonising criteria and procedures within a multi-year planning process, smoothing the path for such an increase and ensuring it is sustainable in the long-term. The Pact should therefore not include any wording that may preclude an agreement on the pending Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework between the European Parliament and Council (for example, language framing resettlement as a migration management tool or identifying lack of ‘integration capacity’ as an exclusion ground). In this way, the essential protection role of resettlement can be safeguarded.



Above: Amani, a Syrian refugee in Jordan, illustrating her dream of becoming a pilot to discover new places. Meredith Hutchinson/IRC.

## 4. Protecting people on the move at Europe's borders and beyond, including along irregular migration routes

The IRC works with vulnerable migrants in Niger, Libya and Italy, along what has become known as the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR). EU policy interventions could make a significant positive impact on the situation on the ground, and there are many examples of good practice. However, the EU's current focus on migration management risks undermining many of its critical longer-term development objectives in the region and increasing the vulnerability of migrants and refugees along migratory routes. If the EU is to maintain its role as a credible and principled humanitarian and development actor, the Pact must set out concrete actions to protect people on the move at Europe's borders and beyond, including those who travel along irregular migration routes.

### Saving lives at sea

The Central Mediterranean continues to be the deadliest sea crossing in the world, where more than 3,600 people have lost their lives since 2016.<sup>22</sup> The continued absence of dedicated EU search and rescue capacity is one of the issues that must be urgently addressed through an effective European solidarity mechanism. It is vital that the Pact establishes a new, well-functioning search and rescue (SAR) operation to save lives at sea. This must be underpinned by a fair and binding disembarkation system by which all EU member states share responsibility for those rescued. Such a system should prevent further ad-hoc solutions, or intergovernmental and extra EU Treaty arrangements such as the Malta Declaration, which have not only proven unsustainable but which also erode the protection of migrants' and refugees' rights.

### Promoting human rights and alternatives to detention

The new Pact offers the EU a chance to foster improved cooperation with countries of origin, transit and destination that addresses the real needs of people on the move. It can also re-invigorate the EU's commitment<sup>23</sup> to strengthen the protection of migrants and refugees in third countries.

This can be achieved through the adoption of national legal frameworks on migration in line with international human rights standards. To this end, the EU and its member states must review their existing cooperation with countries such as Niger and Libya, where laws criminalising migration continue to push people on the move into the hands of smugglers and expose them to multiple threats - from a lack of access to essential services to the risk of arbitrary detention.<sup>24</sup>

In Libya, as the brutal conflict continues to escalate, there are currently more than 1,500 migrants and refugees trapped in official detention centres, living in appalling conditions and exposed to violence, including gender-based violence.<sup>25</sup> The new Pact should include an EU commitment to promote alternatives to detention, in particular through regional platforms, such as the AU-EU-UN Taskforce to Address the Migrant and Refugee Situation in Libya. Here, the EU can push for the establishment of alternatives to detention for migrants and refugees currently held in detention centres, with a clear timeframe for implementation.

In Niger, the EU must ensure that the new migration law currently being drafted with its support aligns with ECOWAS' Mixed Migration Strategy to help reduce the vulnerabilities of people on the move. Respect for human rights and the principle of non-refoulement should be at the core of the new national law and of any bilateral action, including on forced returns. The advancement of similar initiatives by the EU would be an important step in its relations with all ECOWAS member states.

Below: People who have fled violence and food shortages in Mali at Abala Camp, Niger. Kevin McNulty/IRC.



## 5. Strengthening coherence between EU migration and development policies

The new Pact offers the EU a crucial opportunity to display global leadership through principled and effective development cooperation with partner countries. To this end, the Pact must strengthen rather than undermine policy coherence with development goals, in line with the EU's legal obligation, enshrined in the Treaty of Lisbon, to take development cooperation objectives into account in all internal and external policies.

By harnessing the positive social and economic potential of migration, the Pact can explicitly support development objectives and the attainment of the SDGs. Conversely, the Pact must also ensure that the goal of poverty reduction, through the deployment of EU development aid, is not superseded or negated by short-term objectives such as curbing migration to Europe. The latter risks a misallocation of official development assistance (ODA)<sup>26</sup> that could hinder essential progress in partner countries and increase suffering.

### Equal partnerships with third countries

The Pact, along with the new EU-Africa Strategy,<sup>27</sup> will play a crucial role in reshaping future cooperation on migration between the EU and African countries. An improved approach to migration policies, based on the principle of equal partnership, will necessarily require a reshaping of how funding is allocated to partner countries. Already, promising tools such as the EU Trust Fund for Africa have been disproportionately used to curb migration flows rather than to support legal migration schemes.<sup>28</sup> Improving opportunities for migrants to move safely within the North and West Africa regions and to reach Europe will help reduce the numbers of people forced to take unnecessarily dangerous journeys and irregular routes across the desert and sea in search of a better future.

### Addressing the real needs along the route

To this end, the Pact must provide the strategic direction for European donors to scale up investments that address the real needs of communities, with a 'whole-of-route' approach. Since 2015, the increasing focus on curbing migration flows through development interventions has progressively failed to address the structural causes that motivate people to move, return, or continue moving. Sometimes this focus has had the opposite impact, even increasing migration drivers.<sup>29</sup> EU policies can better address this if they are shaped by an improved understanding of the social norms that shape migrant's experiences in their home country and

along the routes they travel. This could also facilitate better alignment across humanitarian-development-peace interventions. Furthermore, the new Pact must pay special attention to 'vulnerable migrants'<sup>30</sup> including provisions that ensure their access to basic services along the route. Doing so will require the allocation of EU funding on the basis of vulnerability criteria rather than a person's legal status as a migrant, asylum-seeker or refugee, so that vulnerable people no longer fall through the cracks of the system.

### Achieving the SDGs for displaced populations

As part of the EU's commitment to sustainable development the Pact should also commit to including migrants, refugees and internally displaced people, both within and outside the EU, in measurements of progress towards SDG achievements. In practice, this would require the inclusion of these populations in EU member states' and EU partners' development plans and Voluntary National Reviews. To effectively measure outcomes for crisis affected populations the European Commission would also need to align its outcome indicators for programmes targeting migrants and refugees with the SDG indicators. These actions would help ensure that displaced populations are not left behind in the global efforts to achieve Agenda 2030, in line with its promise of a life of dignity for all.<sup>31</sup>



Above: Malian children in an IRC-supported school in Tabareybarey camp, Niger. Peter Biro/IRC.

## References

- 1 The use of the term 'forced migration' is not intended to exclude the needs of vulnerable people on the move more generally, including migrants moving for economic, climate-induced or other reasons.
- 2 As announced by President von der Leyen, for example in Commissioner Johansson's [mission letter](#) (10 September 2019).
- 3 For more information, please see a letter from the IRC and 255 organisations '[Protect our laws and humanity!](#)' (6 March 2020).
- 4 ECRE, '[COVID-19 measures related to asylum and migration across Europe](#)', 23 April 2020.
- 5 In particular, as per the 1951 Geneva Convention and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.
- 6 For more information, please see: ECRE, '[Border Procedures: Not a Panacea. ECRE's Assessment of Proposals for Increasing or Mandatory use of Border Procedures](#)', 2019.
- 7 For more information please see: IRC, NRC, Oxfam, '[The reality of the EU-Turkey statement: How Greece has become a testing ground for policies that erode protection for refugees](#)', 2017.
- 8 [Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection.](#)
- 9 For example, please see: '[In the wake of proposals to create closed refugee camps in Greece, the IRC calls on UN Commissioner for Refugees to help alleviate the devastation on the Greek islands](#)' (27 November 2019); '[Open letter to EU leaders ahead of the Global Refugee Forum](#)' (16 December 2019); '[Joint NGO open letter to Greek Prime Minister](#)' (25 February 2020).
- 10 Please visit [ECRE's AIDA database](#) for up-to date information.
- 11 For more information, please see the joint NGO statement '[The new Pact on Asylum and Migration: An Opportunity Seized or Squandered?](#)' (14 February 2019).
- 12 For more information, please see joint statements by the IRC and other NGOs: '[Greece/EU: Urgently Relocate Lone Children](#)' (4 March 2020); '[Immediately honour commitments to relocate unaccompanied children from the Greek islands](#)' (3 April 2020).
- 13 IRC and GIWPS, '[Unlocking Refugee Women's Potential](#)', 2019.
- 14 IRC, '[Scaling Economic Opportunities for Refugee Women](#)', forthcoming.
- 15 IRC, '[Forging a Common Path: A European Approach to the Integration of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers](#)', 2018.
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- 17 European Commission, '[Results of special Eurobarometer 469 on integration of immigrants in the European Union](#)', 2018.
- 18 For more details, please see p. 15-17 in IRC, '[Getting Back on Track: A New EU Action Plan on Integration](#)', 2019.
- 19 According to [UNHCR](#), EU resettlement numbers have risen consistently over the last ten years from around 7,147 in 2009 to 25,652 in 2019.
- 20 For more information, please see recent study by Rachel Westerby on behalf of ECRE and UNHCR: [Follow the Money III](#).
- 21 For more information, please see the IRC's briefing '[A new chance for EU leadership on resettlement](#)' (July 2019) and the [joint NGO statement](#) issued ahead of the Forum (October 2019).
- 22 [IOM Missing Migrants Project](#) (last updated 24 April 2020).
- 23 Most recently as part of the '[Progress Report on the Implementation of the European Agenda on Migration](#)' (16 October 2019)
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- 25 [UNHCR Update Libya](#) (17 April 2020).
- 26 Please see [OECD guidance on ODA](#) for more information.
- 27 European Commission, '[Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa](#)', 9 March 2020.
- 28 Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, '[Money against Migration: The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa](#)', 2019.
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- 30 Migrants who fall outside the specific legal category of refugee may find themselves in vulnerable situations because of various reasons linked to their situation. For more information please see: OHCHR, '[Principles and Guidelines, supported by practical guidance, on the human rights protection of migrants in vulnerable situations](#)', 2018.
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