2015 VALLETTA SUMMIT ON MIGRATION

Implementing Cádiz Action-Plan Objective 5b

Insights from the JVAP Database on Preventing and Resolving Cases of Missing Migrants (2015-2024)[1]

Overview

The Rabat Process partner countries and key stakeholders meet in Banjul, The Gambia, against a sobering backdrop: in 2024 alone at least **9,002** people have died or gone missing along mixed-migration routes, the highest annual total since records began in 2014. Objective 5b of the Cádiz Action Plan – reinforced by Action 17 – commits partners to prevent such tragedies, locate and identify the missing and support their families. A review of the Joint Valletta Action Plan (JVAP) database shows that **32 of the 3,446 recorded actions between 2015 and 2024** address at least one phase of this response chain and mobilise some **€257.4 million**. They have delivered measurable gains: desert and maritime search-and-rescue (SAR) corridors, new forensic laboratories, digitised civil registries and family-assistance centres. Yet four structural gaps persist – fragmented data standards, under-funded family services, uneven route coverage and short-term financing – all of which require attention in Banjul to consolidate progress into a coherent, route-based architecture.

Context and Purpose

The Rabat Process was founded on principles of solidarity and shared responsibility. Nearly two decades on, partners confront a humanitarian toll that underscores the urgency of those principles: every **58 minutes**, on average, a person disappears while attempting to cross the Sahara, the Atlantic or the Mediterranean. The Banjul meeting is the first in-person gathering of formally appointed **National Focal Points (NFPs)** for Missing Migrants. Therefore, there is need for a concise, evidence-based picture of what has been undertaken to date under the JVAP framework, i.e. where resources are presently concentrated and which corrective measures can maximise impact in the next programme cycle. This analytical note distils 10 years of monitoring data into policy-relevant findings intended to inform both plenary debate and technical break-out sessions.

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Data Source and Methodology

The JVAP Database currently lists **3,446 initiatives** (2,740 projects and 706 policies) approved between 2015 and 2024.

- **1,574 initiatives** (1,353 projects + 221 policies) target the **Rabat Process (RP) region only**.

- **961 initiatives** (916 projects + 45 policies) target the **Khartoum Process (KP) region only**.

- **911 initiatives** (471 projects + 440 policies) are flagged as **joint RP-KP**.

For this study, we excluded the 961 "Khartoum Process only" records and focused on the **2,485 initiatives relevant to the Rabat Process** (Rabat Process only + joint initiatives). Within that pool we manually screened titles and narrative descriptions for evidence of work on missing migrants. A controlled vocabulary ("missing", "tracing", "SAR", "forensic", "civil registration", etc.) served as a first pass; each hit was then checked line-by-line to remove false positives (e.g., "job-search training") and rescue overlooked items.

This produced a working corpus of **165 initiatives** for detailed review. Because the database primarily tracks internationally financed projects, purely domestic efforts are likely under-represented, a caveat to bear in mind when interpreting totals.

Classification of JVAP Initiatives by Relevance to Missing Migrants

Each of the 165 initiatives was classified as (a) **Directly related** (dedicated to search-and-rescue, identification of remains, family tracing, etc.); (b) **Indirectly relevant** (addressing related drivers or enablers such as anti-smuggling, trafficking in human beings, civil-registry reform, border fatalities documentation, or migrant protection); or (c) **Unrelated**.

Category	Count	Share
Directly related	4	2 %
Indirectly relevant	28	17 %
Unrelated	133	81 %

Definition of Categories

Direct initiatives (Category a) include efforts such as dedicated search-and-rescue (SAR) operations, forensic identification of deceased migrants, and programmes for tracing and reunifying missing persons with their families.

Indirect initiatives (Category b) cover measures that can *affect* migrant disappearance rates or help address the consequences of disappearances, even if not explicitly labelled as such (for example, cracking down on smuggling networks, strengthening border controls or civil registries, and supporting victims of trafficking in human beings).

Initiatives with no evident link to missing migrants (Category c) include general humanitarian aid, education, or unrelated migration governance projects.

Only four (4) direct initiatives were reported, including a Tunisian Coast Guard Sea search-and-rescue project, an assessment of Libyan Coast Guard SAR capacity, an ICRC family-tracing programme in Chad, and the ICMP Missing Migrants Initiative focused on data collection and /identification).

28 indirect initiatives include national anti-trafficking or anti-smuggling campaigns, civil registry modernisation programmes, border security agreements, and other migration-management projects in Africa.

The remaining **133 initiatives** mostly include general humanitarian appeals (e.g. contributions to ICRC country programmes), asylum or integration laws, vocational training for migrants, and unrelated security or development programmes. For example, many "Contribution to ICRC appeal" entries in Libya or Burkina Faso aid conflict-affected populations but do not address missing migrants specifically, so they were marked unrelated.

Direct Initiatives in Focus

The **four directly relevant initiatives** demonstrate how JVAP partners are beginning to tackle missing migrants head-on. Two initiatives explicitly target search-and-rescue (SAR) at sea: one supports the Tunisian Coast Guard to conduct SAR operations in the Mediterranean, and another is an EU-funded project to enhance Libya's SAR capacity and legal framework. Such programmes are aimed at directly saving lives and reducing disappearances by providing boats, training, or coordination for maritime rescue. These efforts align with recommendations from Rabat Process partner countries, which emphasise prioritising migrants' protection and search operations. The 2023 Rabat Process Thematic Meeting in Geneva focused on the search for missing migrants and family reunification, showcasing practical tools to improve migrant searches and tracing efforts. By investing in Coast Guard training and SAR infrastructure, these initiatives aim to prevent tragedies like the 2023 Pylos shipwreck, where coordinated Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) efforts were needed to recover victims.

Another direct initiative is an **ICRC-led family-tracing programme in Chad**. This **Restoring Family Links** (RFL) project uses Red Cross networks to reunite families separated by migration. It exemplifies the category of *identification and reunification efforts* that organisations promote for missing persons. By collecting ante-mortem data and running "Trace the Face" tools, the Red Cross/ICRC find missing relatives. On average, these tools resolve one case per week. The Chad programme therefore directly contributes to resolving missing-person cases and mitigating families' "ambiguous loss" of loved ones.

The fourth direct entry is the **ICMP "Missing Migrants Initiative"**. The International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) project collects and shares data on missing migrants, and it coordinates forensic identification efforts globally. Such an initiative addresses missing migrants by improving data collection and international cooperation on post-mortem identification – actions explicitly called for by humanitarian organisations.

In sum, the reported direct initiatives fall within three core areas of action: *preventing disappearance (through SAR), identifying those who disappeared through forensics and family tracing, and reuniting survivors or remains with their families*. These efforts align with the Rabat Process's focus on missing migrants in Area 3 of the Cadiz Action Plan (Protection and asylum), which emphasises "search and identification of missing migrants" and "support and information to families".

Indirect Initiatives and their Contributions

A broader set of **28 initiatives** reported are considered indirectly relevant to missing migrants. While these projects do not explicitly address missing persons, they influence factors related to migrant disappearance. Many fall under the following thematic areas:

- **Anti-smuggling and anti-trafficking** programmes (e.g. Libya's campaign against smuggling of migrants, Nigeria's anti-trafficking action plan, Mauritania's child trafficking protection, a Ghana-Malta pact on illegal immigration, among others). By disrupting criminal networks that often force migrants into dangerous routes, these initiatives may indirectly reduce the number of migrants going missing. While such security measures are not sufficient alone, they complement humanitarian efforts by addressing root causes of risk.

- **Civil registration and documentation** projects (e.g. Côte d'Ivoire's national ID system reform, multiple "Civil Registry Act" and security initiatives). Modernising birth and death registries and ID systems does not specifically target migrants, but it can support the identification of a missing person when they are found. Incomplete civil registries are a known obstacle to migrant identification. By strengthening civil registration systems, these initiatives indirectly support efforts such as forensic identification, providing population databases against which DNA or fingerprint data can be matched. This aligns with expert recommendations calling for improved baseline data to facilitate post-mortem identification.

- **Border management and mobility governance** (e.g. agreements to strengthen Cameroonian borders, training for Libyan and Tunisian border agencies, the EU's new Border and Coast Guard Regulation, ECOWAS policies, Reinforcement of Integrated Migration Management in West Africa, among others.). These projects typically aim to manage migration flows or enhance security. By making migration routes safer or better-monitored, they have indirect impact: for example, trained border guards might conduct more effective search-and-rescue or promptly report bodies found at the border. Likewise, regional migration data harmonisation (ECOWAS data management guidelines) improves sharing information across countries, a prerequisite for cross-border family tracing.

- **Victim protection frameworks** (e.g. national victim support plans, IOM/UNHCR frameworks for victim identification). Projects supporting victims of human trafficking or migrants in vulnerable situations (including children) may include components such as tracing or case management. While primarily focused on protection, these initiatives indirectly support missing migrant cases by ensuring that authorities look for lost migrants as potential victims. For example, one EU-funded programme explicitly connects effort to combating trafficking in human beings with reducing irregular migration, which may help decrease disappearance rates.

- **Migration policy and asylum measures** (e.g. national migration policies or asylum laws in Burkina, Mali, Mauritania). Most of these high-level policy documents do not mention missing migrants at all and were largely classified unrelated. A few policies dealing with *integration of migrants abroad or legal migration* (like "Maghrib Belgium Impulse" or ECOWAS child migration policy) do not address migrant disappearance. In this analysis, most legislative or policy reforms (e.g. amending asylum law) are considered as unrelated unless they explicitly addressed missing persons in the context of migration or involved cross-border coordination.

In summary, **indirect initiatives** operate mainly on prevention (anti-crime) and infrastructure (data, border systems). They can mitigate tragedies by improving overall migration governance. For example, EU communications on child migration or asylum, while not about missing migrants per se, underline the need to protect the most vulnerable (a concern linked to disappearances). Notably, none of the indirect initiatives explicitly addressed "border fatalities" (recording or memorialising deaths), a gap in the dataset. However, the presence of many anti-trafficking and border projects shows that states recognise irregular migration as a related challenge.

Geographic and Thematic Patterns

The relevant initiatives reveal clear geographic and thematic clusters. Libya and Tunisia feature in many entries. Libya has SAR training (border management), anti-smuggling projects, and migration flow management. Tunisia similarly appears in SAR, anti-smuggling, and civil registry contexts. This reflects the centrality of the Central Mediterranean route to the missing migrant crisis. **West Africa** is also represented: ICRC family tracing in Chad, trafficking plans in Nigeria and Mauritania, and migration governance in Côte d'Ivoire and ECOWAS-wide plans. In **Europe/EU**, the few related items include a Memorandum on illegal immigration (Ghana-Malta) and EU regulations on borders; however, EU legislative measures focused on irregular migration often omit the missing aspect.
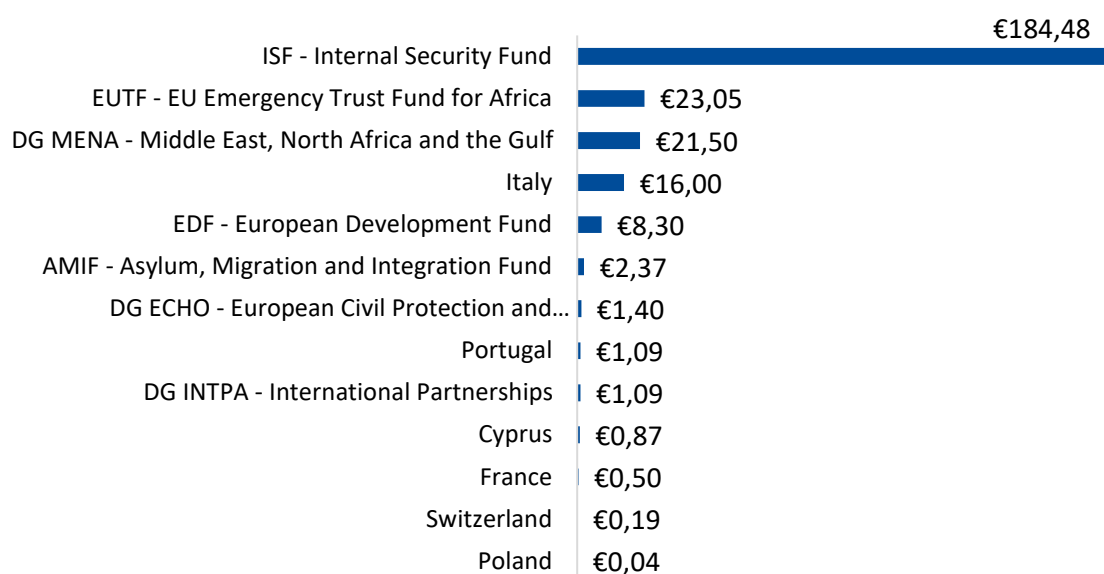
Thematically, security-oriented initiatives prevail. **Smuggling/trafficking** reforms (over a dozen projects) are the most common indirect category. Civil registry reform appears only a few times (Côte d'Ivoire, some North African decrees), and **formal family tracing** appears only once (Chad), despite Rabat Process emphasis on it. This suggests thematic gaps: for instance, there are no recorded JVAP initiatives dedicated to recording border/maritime deaths or funding DVI teams (though individual donors may support such via organizations). The few projects on vulnerable migrants focus on child protection, not explicitly missing persons, leaving a gap in family-tracing mechanisms. In sum, JVAP reporting currently skews toward **migration control and crime prevention**, with relatively little dedicated to the humanitarian search or forensic identification aspects of missing migrants.

Funding and Implementation

The **32 initiatives** in the focus of this paper consist of **18 projects** and **14 policies**.

Concerning the projects, these 18 initiatives represent a total funding of EUR 257.4 million, allocated between 2016 and 2023. Most funding was allocated in 2017, with implementation spread across the following years. Out of the EUR 257.4 million recorded in the JVAP database, 72% (EUR 184.5 million) was allocated through the EU's Internal Security Fund (ISF), 9% (EUR 23.1 million) through the EU Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa, and about 8% (EUR 21.5 million) through DG MENA.

Funding Source (in EUR millions)

Funding Source	Amount
ISF - Internal Security Fund	€184,48
EUTF - EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa	€23,05
DG MENA - Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf	€21,50
Italy	€16,00
EDF - European Development Fund	€8,30
AMIF - Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund	€2,37
DG ECHO - European Civil Protection and…	€1,40
Portugal	€1,09
DG INTPA - International Partnerships	€1,09
Cyprus	€0,87
France	€0,50
Switzerland	€0,19
Poland	€0,04

Projects recorded were primarily implemented by governmental authorities, namely ministries of the interior and coast guards, with support from national implementing agencies. This contrasts sharply with the broader trend in the JVAP database, where civil society plays a larger role in implementation. Among the 18 initiatives, the main international organisations involved were ICMPD, IOM, and ICRC.

Regarding the 14 policies covered in this document, the majority were EU or European policies applying throughout the EU Member States. Most were focused on Domain 4 of the JVAP, and adopted between 2015 and 2022, with four policies adopted in 2016 and three policies adopted in 2018.

How Initiatives Address Missing Migrants (Direct and Indirect)

Direct initiatives contribute in concrete ways: by rescuing migrants at sea, they literally prevent migrant disappearances. By strengthening forensic capacity (as ICRC and ICMP do), they make it possible to identify those who did perish. By tracing families, they resolve missing migrants cases. Each direct initiative maps to a function highlighted by experts as vital for missing migrants. For example, the ICRC's Trace the Face project has already resolved many cases by matching photos and data, exemplifying how a relatively small programme can yield weekly successes. In practical terms, the JVAP direct projects often involve capacity-building: equipping Coast Guard vessels or training police in DVI (Libyan case) adds tools to do rescue and identification.

Indirect initiatives contribute more diffusely. Anti-smuggling efforts, for instance, reduce the number of migrants taking deadly routes. Humanitarian reports note that many missing migrants drown when their unseaworthy boats capsize. Thus, any action that chokes off those boats helps indirectly. Similarly, protecting victims of trafficking in human beings ensures that people in vulnerable situations (at risk of disappearing) are identified and cared for, thereby reducing the risk that they vanish unseen. Civil registry projects improve baseline data: after a shipwreck, DNA from recovered bodies can only be matched if birth records exist; better registries thus indirectly support identification. Border-management projects also serve indirectly: trained guards might, for example, use better procedures

to document bodies found at land crossings or to log distress calls from migrants. In these ways, initiatives under this category form a support network for missing migrant efforts, albeit invisibly. They can be thought of as enabling conditions (stronger institutions, better data) that missing migrants programmes need.

Patterns and Gaps
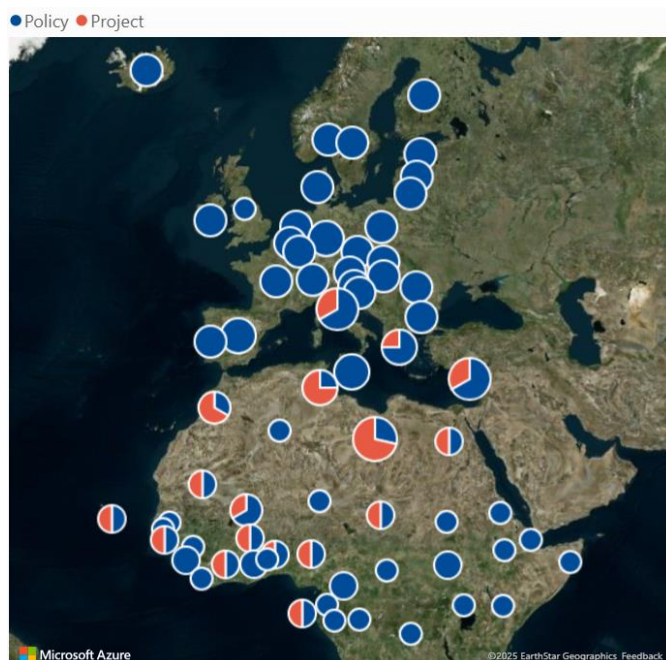
The analysis shows **several observable patterns**. First, there is a **North Africa bias**: most projects on the record (direct or indirect) involve North African states or transit countries (Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco). Fewer come from sub-Saharan origin countries (though Chad and Nigeria are present). This is logical given JVAP's Europe-Africa focus and the prominence of Mediterranean routes, but it highlights a regional gap: Sahelian and West African origin countries might benefit from more tracing and repatriation support, as many migrants disappear in the Sahara.

Second, the **thematic coverage is uneven**. Trafficking/smuggling dominates the landscape, whereas direct humanitarian efforts are limited. Only one initiative specifically addresses cross-border **family links**, despite the Rabat Process's emphasis on tracing networks. Similarly, forensic capabilities are mentioned only briefly (the missing migrants initiative and ICRC's broader activities).

Third, many unrelated initiatives may nonetheless **impact migrants** in other ways. For example, large ICRC humanitarian appeals (Libya, Mali, etc.) improve conditions for migrant populations, but do not explicitly aim to reduce missing cases. Such projects were categorized as unrelated because their objectives lie elsewhere. However, improved food, shelter, or healthcare for migrants in transit *may indirectly* reduce the impulse to risk dangerous journeys. This suggests a subtle grey area: broad development projects weren't counted as "indirect," but some could have long-term effects on migration patterns.

Finally, the **policy context** has shifted recently. The Rabat Process formally added missing migrants to its agenda under the Cadiz Action Plan for2023-2027. Following a first thematic meeting on the issue, 32 recommendations were developed focusing on prevention, tracing, and reunification. So far, this shift is only minimally reflected in JVAP projects, though this is likely to change with the 2025 data collection cycle scheduled for November 2025. The **Rabat Process recommendations** and the establishment of a Network of National Focal Points for Missing Migrants in July 2024[2] are likely to encourage more direct actions under JVAP in the coming years.

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[2] This initiative was launched by the ICRC, The Gambia and Switzerland, with the support of the Rabat Process Secretariat.

Policy-Relevant Insights

The data suggests several insights for policymakers:

- **Direct vs. indirect Balance:** There is a clear imbalance: far more resources are going to *preventing* missing migrants (via border control, anti-crime) than to *addressing* the consequences (search/identification/reunification). Given that thousands of migrants disappear every year, this is a policy gap. The Rabat Process recommendations from the 2023 thematic meeting, including the establishment of DNA databases and cross-border DVI protocols, are well aligned to help address this imbalance.

- **Cross-Cutting cooperation:** Missing migrants is an inherently cross-border issue. Yet most JVAP initiatives are bilateral or national. The success stories often involve cross-border networks (e.g. ICRC coordinating with families abroad, or Libya cooperating with Italy on coastguard data). **Promoting regional cooperation frameworks on missing persons** (e.g. a joint Sahara DVI centre, or an African missing-migrant alert system) could be a potential route to address this gap. The November 2024 meeting of the Network of National Focal Points for Missing Migrants highlighted the need for "official points of contact" and shared DNA databases – ideas that JVAP partners could integrate into future projects.

- **Data and accountability:** Only a handful of JVAP initiatives relate to data (civil registries, migration data systems). Yet reliable data underpins effective action. The IOM's Missing Migrants Project and ICRC's appeals show that official numbers (over 72,000 deaths/disappearances tracked since 2014) can drive policy. JVAP framework could support migration observatories or death registries. For example, partner countries might record all migrant fatalities at borders and share them with IOM or ICRC. This would align with broader humanitarian law: victims deserve documentation and a dignified accounting of their fate.

- **Integrate missing persons into migrant protection:** The *"humanitarian consequences"* of migration flows were explicitly mentioned at JVAP's inception, but missing migrants have often been sidelined. For example, border management projects could be required to include search protocols, and anti-trafficking plans could mandate assistance to families of disappeared victims. This integration would fulfil JVAP's spirit of shared responsibility across Europe and Africa.

- **Resource gaps for forensics and tracing:** The direct initiatives suggest a need for more funding in specialised areas. For example, only 13% of bodies lost at sea were identified between 2014-2019; improving that rate requires forensic labs, trained personnel, and region-wide database access. Policymakers could consider allocating for such technical support. Likewise, expanding Red Cross family link offices or national tracing offices in origin countries (as Italy and Greece are pushing for origin-country DVI capacity) would have high impact.

In conclusion, the JVAP database reveals that initiatives specifically tackling missing migrants are very rare. Most efforts target the "push-pull" dynamics of migration (smuggling of migrants, employment, borders) rather than the tragic human outcomes (migrant disappearances). Strengthening the *direct* response – search, identification, support to families – would be recommended. At the same time, maintaining robust *indirect* measures (anti-smuggling, data systems) will continue to prevent migrant disappearances. The Rabat Process's attention to missing migrants provides an opening: **JVAP partners can use this momentum to expand and better coordinate direct and indirect initiatives**.

Since the missing migrants dimension was formally integrated into Area 3 of the Cadiz Action Plan in December 2022, with implementation beginning in 2023, future JVAP data collection cycles may begin to reflect a broader range of initiatives in this area. This institutional recognition marks an important shift: as Rabat Process partner countries operationalize this commitment, we may see increased reporting on direct responses to migrant disappearances, including forensic capacity, tracing mechanisms, and support to families. Such developments would signal growing policy attention to the humanitarian consequences of migration and help rebalance the current emphasis on border control and deterrence.

References

The analysis above draws on Rabat Process and humanitarian sources discussing missing migrants. For context, the JVAP was launched to address the humanitarian consequences of irregular migration. Recent Rabat meetings emphasised prevention, search, identification, and family tracing as key to missing-migrant cases. Data from IOM and ICRC highlight the scale of the issue and the challenge of identifying remains. These sources underscore the need for both direct (SAR, tracing, forensic) and indirect (anti-crime, data, protection) actions.

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