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# Humanitarian Leader

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**Migrants' trust in humanitarian action: Local lessons,  
global insights**

MAGDALENA ARIAS CUBAS, NICOLE HOAGLAND AND SANUSHKA MUDALIAR

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# THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER:

## Migrants' trust in humanitarian action: Local lessons, global insights

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Cover image: Venezuelan migrants try to get a lift along the highway in Lambayeque, Peru. © Hanz Penge

# Abstract

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Humanitarian action is built on trust. Without it, humanitarian organisations cannot reach or respond to the needs of the most vulnerable, including many migrants. Yet, little is known about who migrants trust and why, as well as how this affects migrants' ability and willingness to seek and access humanitarian assistance and protection. This paper explores the findings of a large multi-sited research project conducted by the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab across 15 countries to gather insights into migrants' perceptions of, and trust in, humanitarian action. The rationale for the project has been that humanitarian organisations can better build (and, where necessary, repair) trust with migrants by listening and responding to their thoughts, fears, doubts, and concerns about their situations and the assistance and protection they receive. In this paper, we draw attention to three key lessons: first, the importance of increasing knowledge and awareness of humanitarian organisations and the services they provide; second, the importance of upholding the humanitarian principle of independence in migration programming; and third, the critical role that frontline staff and volunteers play in building and maintaining migrants' trust.

## How does this paper inform humanitarian leadership practice?

Trust is a crucial factor in the ability of humanitarian organisations to reach and respond to the needs of the most vulnerable. Trust in the context of migration is important for humanitarian leadership not only because of the increasing scope and scale of humanitarian need related to migration, but also because there is a need to recognise, respond and adapt to the specific and exacerbated vulnerabilities of migrants impacted by humanitarian crises. Further, the securitisation of migration requires the humanitarian sector to grapple with concepts and perceptions of neutrality, impartiality, and independence in the context of humanitarian need vis-a-vis the increasingly restrictive immigration laws, policies and practices implemented by some public authorities. The findings presented here can inform strategies to strengthen the integrity and effectiveness of humanitarian operations related to migration and/or involving migrants.

## Introduction

Trust is “the foundation of humanitarian action” (33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, 2019). Humanitarian organisations working to promote the safety, dignity, and wellbeing of migrants across the world, and to protect migrants caught up in humanitarian crises, depend on the trust of migrants, the public and local and national authorities. Trust enables humanitarian actors to access migrants in need and facilitates respect for humanitarian operations. In particular, migrants’ trust in humanitarian actors is essential: without migrants’ trust, the ability of humanitarian organisations to provide much needed humanitarian assistance and protection is greatly diminished, while for people facing increasing risks, harm, discrimination, and vulnerabilities as part of migration journeys, foregoing assistance and protection can have life-threatening consequences.

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Despite growing evidence of and concern for a breakdown in trust between migrants in vulnerable situations and humanitarian organisations (IMREF, 2021; Vammen et al., 2021), little is known about who migrants trust and why, and how this impacts their ability and willingness to seek and access humanitarian assistance and protection at different stages of their journeys. As such, there is need for more migration-specific and global research to inform and guide the work of humanitarian organisations engaged in supporting migrants.

This paper reflects on the findings of a large research project conducted by the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab (the Global Migration Lab) in collaboration with 15 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the Americas, Africa, the Asia Pacific and Europe,<sup>1</sup> the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent

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<sup>1</sup> Participating National Societies include Argentinian Red Cross, Australian Red Cross, Finnish Red Cross, French Red Cross, the Gambia Red Cross Society, Honduran Red Cross, Maldivian Red Crescent, Mali Red Cross, Niger Red Cross, South Africa Red Cross Society, Sri Lanka Red Cross, Sudanese Red Crescent, Swedish Red Cross, Turkish Red Crescent, and Zambia Red Cross Society.

Societies (IFRC), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The project explored migrants’ lived experience and perspectives on trust in the context of various forms of humanitarian assistance and protection.

Our findings indicate that trust cannot be assumed—it needs to be built, maintained, and evaluated. While we have elsewhere discussed in detail the broader findings of the project (Arias Cubas et al., 2022), in this paper we focus on three key lessons for the humanitarian sector, including Red Cross and Red Crescent actors.<sup>2</sup> First, and despite their global presence in the humanitarian field, our findings demonstrate that more efforts are needed to promote the work and role of Red Cross and Red Crescent actors in providing humanitarian assistance and protection among migrants. Second, our findings indicate that many migrants do not know whether humanitarian organisations—including (but not only) Red Cross and Red Crescent actors—operate independently of public authorities. In the context of the securitisation of migration, this blurred line has the potential to negatively impact trust and access to assistance and protection. Finally, and in the context of the above points, our findings highlight the crucial role of staff and volunteers of humanitarian organisations in building trust with migrants and supporting access to humanitarian assistance and protection. As discussed in detail below, these findings can inform strategies to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions by Red Cross and Red Crescent actors and other humanitarian organisations, while also contributing to broader discussions about a principled humanitarian approach to migration (Faure Atger, 2019).

## Background

Vulnerable migrants across the world are faced with shrinking international protection, increasingly restrictive migration policies and a lack of legal or safe migration channels (Faure Atger, 2019; Litzkow, 2021; MMC, 2019). In this context, trust between migrants and humanitarian organisations is perhaps more important than ever before, as humanitarian organisations are often the first—and last—port of call for migrants in need. As such, the potential breakdown of trust between migrants and humanitarian organisations is of grave concern: if humanitarian organisations are not being trusted, we need to identify the factors that are hindering their relationship with migrants and work towards developing alternatives that will allow them to build and maintain trust.

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<sup>2</sup> The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) is comprised of the world’s 192 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Despite increasing interest on the topic of trust in the humanitarian sector (Jayasinghe, 2011; Slim, 2019), there is no single widely agreed definition of the concept. In simple terms, trust can be defined as a “firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something”, or as “confidence or faith in a person or thing” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022). More complex definitions also describe trust in terms of a positive expectation or belief about the behaviour of another person or institution (Gambetta, 1988; OECD, 2017). In addition, and across definitions and measures of trust, common attributes such as competence and values or ethical behaviours are recognised as strong predictors of trust.<sup>3</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this debate in further detail, it is important to clarify that our rationale for undertaking the project has been that by listening and responding to the thoughts, fears, doubts, and concerns of migrants about their situations and the assistance and protection received, humanitarian organisations, including Red Cross and Red Crescent actors, can better understand how to build (and, where needed, repair) trust.

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While limited, existing research on the specific intersection of trust, migration, and humanitarian organisations provides important insights into migrants’ perspectives of, and trust in, humanitarian action. First, humanitarian organisations are not universally trusted by migrants. Previous research with refugees and migrants on the Myanmar–Thai border, in Bangladesh, in Kenya, and in the Sahel region in Africa found significant levels of mistrust of humanitarian organisations. This was driven by a range of factors including the poor behaviour of humanitarian personnel (ACAPS, 2021; Grayson, 2016; Hynes, 2003), migrants’ perceptions of the limited reach and fairness of humanitarian assistance and protection (ACAPS, 2021), and the perceived risks associated with seeking and accessing assistance and protection (particularly the risk of deportation) (IMREF, 2021; Vammen et al., 2021).

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<sup>3</sup> Competence is defined in terms of responsiveness and reliability, or as ‘being good at what you do’, while values or ethical behaviours are defined through dimensions of integrity, openness, and fairness, or through dimensions of purpose, vision, honesty, and fairness (Edelman, 2020; OECD, 2017).

Second, the conflation of humanitarian and securitisation agendas has the potential to hinder trust. Securitisation involves the “the repositioning of areas of regular politics into the realm of security by increasingly using narratives of threat and danger aimed at justifying the adoption of extraordinary measures”—such as detention and deportation (MMC, 2019). Earlier research in the Sahel and with West African migrants en route to Europe found that some migrants associate humanitarian organisations with detention, deportation, and discouragement of onward journeys because authorities target them at sites where humanitarian assistance and protection is provided, and because of the intersection of return agendas and humanitarian interventions in the region (IMREF, 2021; Vammen et al., 2021). Similarly, research in Greek detention centres revealed that migrants may doubt the intentions of humanitarian personnel due to their perceived association with authorities (Kotsioni, 2016).

Third, there is room for improvement with regards to the competence and values or ethical behaviours displayed by humanitarian organisations in the provision of assistance and protection to migrants. For instance, the above-mentioned research with refugees in Bangladesh found that trust in humanitarian organisations was being undermined by factors such as migrants’ lack of inclusion in decision-making processes, the absence of accountability and responsiveness on the part of humanitarian organisations, and by the provision of inadequate assistance (ACAPS, 2021; Field et al., 2021). Likewise, research with refugees in Kenya found that a lack of transparency around decision-making processes and funding allocation undermines migrants’ trust in humanitarian action (Grayson, 2016).

Fourth, migrants’ perspectives on humanitarian action are influenced both by first-hand experience and third-party information. The research mentioned above in the Sahel and Bangladesh pointed to the impact of past interactions with field staff on migrants’ trust in the work of humanitarian organisations (ACAPS, 2021; IMREF, 2021), while research in West Africa highlighted the role of information from families, other migrants, and smugglers in influencing migrants’ perceptions of humanitarian organisations (Vammen et al., 2021). Conversely, and as illustrated by studies in the Sahel and Greece, efforts by humanitarian organisations to communicate key details of their mandate and activities can build trust with migrants, for instance by reducing high or unrealistic expectations about their services, or by lessening fears about the organisations’ perceived and actual collaboration with authorities (IMREF, 2021; Kotsioni, 2016).

Finally, a focus on competence and values can improve the relationship between migrants and humanitarian organisations. Existing research in Bangladesh, in the

Sahel and with West African migrants en route to Europe identified practical strategies—such as strengthening engagement, accountability and feedback loops, improving staff behaviour, and separating humanitarian interventions from migration control and deportation measures—that can foster trust with migrants (ACAPS, 2021; IMREF, 2021; Vammen et al., 2021). Likewise, and as noted above, research in the Sahel and Greece demonstrated that transparency can strengthen the relationship of humanitarians with migrants, even under conditions of extreme vulnerability (IMREF, 2021; Kotsioni, 2016).

To gain further insight into migrants' lived experience and perceptions of, as well as trust in, humanitarian action, the Global Migration Lab conducted research involving face-to-face and online data collection with migrants in 15 countries across the Americas, Africa, the Asia Pacific, and Europe. This included 225 interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), 2,086 face-to-face surveys and 14,532 online surveys with migrants in Argentina, Australia, Finland, France, the Gambia, Honduras, Maldives, Mali, Niger, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Sweden, Turkey, and Zambia (and a small number of supplementary countries for the online component, primarily Syria).<sup>4</sup>

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In line with the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's strictly humanitarian approach to migration—an approach that focuses on migrants' needs and vulnerabilities, irrespective of legal status, type, or category—the research covered a broad spectrum of migrants, including people seeking asylum and refugees, irregular or undocumented migrants, migrants in transit as well as returned or deported migrants. While the data is not representative and has limitations,<sup>5</sup> the findings provide much needed insight into the lived experience and knowledge of migrants from across the world. As argued throughout, these unique insights and expertise provide invaluable lessons for humanitarian

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<sup>4</sup> Prior to data collection, the project was reviewed and received approval by the ICRC Centre for Operational Research and Experience's Ethics Review Board.

<sup>5</sup> A detailed methodology, including a discussion on key limitations of the data, is available in Arias Cubas et al. (2022).

organisations concerning the provision of assistance and protection that meets migrants' needs in a way that is responsive to their priorities and strengths.

## **Red Cross and Red Crescent: Recognised, yet misunderstood**

Our findings suggest that Red Cross and Red Crescent actors are widely recognised by migrants, but the various forms of assistance and protection provided by these actors is only vaguely understood. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is the world's largest humanitarian network and is actively engaged in supporting migrants in vulnerable situations across all regions of the world. More than a quarter (28%) of the migrants involved in the research had received support and assistance from Red Cross and Red Crescent actors (among other providers). Yet, levels of knowledge and understanding of the Red Cross and Red Crescent emblems and the migration-related activities of Red Cross and Red Crescent actors varied significantly among migrants, indicating the need to increase awareness of the humanitarian assistance and protection available.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent emblems may be used for two purposes (1) to signal legal protection in times of armed conflict and (2) for indicative purposes in times of peace and armed conflict as a means to identify components of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, helping people to identify “humanitarian organisations, helping people in natural disasters, times of armed conflict, war or other emergencies—purely based on need” (ICRC, 2017). While the emblems were associated with “safety and hope” by almost three quarters of migrants surveyed (73%), in Mali, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Zambia at least 1 in 10 of all migrants surveyed had no familiarity with the emblems. Likewise, across all countries, data disaggregated based on self-reported legal status indicates that at least 1 in 10 returned migrants, migrants with an irregular status and deportees were not familiar with the emblems. As such, it is important to increase awareness of the emblems as key symbols to convey to migrants that help is at hand, based on needs and vulnerabilities and irrespective of legal status.

Furthermore, and as reported by migrants in interviews and FGDs, while most migrants recognised the emblems and associated them with help during war, disasters, and crises, they either did not consider Red Cross and Red Crescent actors as a potential source of assistance and protection beyond these circumstances or were unaware of how and where to seek and access assistance. For instance, migrants in South Africa had little familiarity with Red Cross and Red Crescent actors and the services provided to migrants prior to recent visits by the

National Society (which provided relief and assistance to migrants during COVID-19). Meanwhile, migrants in Argentina and Honduras reported that their vulnerability while in transit was compounded by a lack of information about the locations of humanitarian service points run by Red Cross and Red Crescent actors and/or other humanitarian organisations. Similarly, some migrants in Finland said that they did not know how and where to locate local Red Cross and Red Crescent actors during their journeys, while others said they did not know which services are provided and available to them. In Sri Lanka too, and despite some migrants having received assistance and protection from Red Cross and Red Crescent actors while overseas, returned migrants relied primarily on authorities because of a lack of knowledge of the services provided by humanitarian organisations.

The project findings strongly indicate that although Red Cross and Red Crescent actors are widely recognised by their emblems and their global humanitarian work, local humanitarian efforts to support migrants are less understood across countries of origin, transit, and destination. This suggests a need for strategies to better communicate the work of Red Cross and Red Crescent actors in providing humanitarian assistance and protection to migrants in vulnerable situations, irrespective of legal status. Depending on local contexts, these strategies could include outreach initiatives, such as information campaigns or the recruitment of volunteers and staff with a lived experience of migration, to increase awareness and access for those in need. In situations where these strategies are already in use, an evaluation of the effectiveness of the initiatives could increase their impact.

### Humanitarian actors and authorities: Independence is increasingly important

Our findings demonstrate that migrants' perceptions regarding the relationship between public authorities and Red Cross and Red Crescent actors, as well as between authorities and humanitarian organisations in general, have the potential to negatively affect migrants' willingness to seek assistance and protection. While migrants in many cases recognised and valued the principle of independence, there were instances where migrants were uncertain of the relationship between Red Cross and Red Crescent actors and public authorities. Migrants in particularly vulnerable situations indicated that they may not seek help from humanitarian organisations due to fears that this placed them at risk of detention or deportation.

Perceptions of independence matter for humanitarian organisations just as much as independence itself. Around a quarter of migrants surveyed agreed with the statement “the Red Cross and/or Red Crescent is independent from immigration authorities” in both their

country of birth (CoB) and their current location (21% and 26% respectively). About 1 in 10 migrants agreed that “the Red Cross and/or Red Crescent is controlled by immigration authorities” in both their CoB and their current locations. More than half of migrants overall answered “don't know” when asked to describe the working relationship of the Red Cross and Red Crescent actors with immigration authorities in either location (62% and 57% respectively).

While it is not reasonable to expect all migrants—or the public in general—to have a clear understanding of the auxiliary role of National Societies to public authorities in the humanitarian field,<sup>6</sup> or the mandates of the ICRC or the IFRC, the independence of humanitarian actors—real and perceived—is critical to ensuring access to life-saving support throughout migrants' journeys. Any perceived or actual shortcomings in the way humanitarian principles are respected must be urgently addressed by humanitarian actors, particularly considering evidence that the conflation of humanitarian and securitisation agendas is hindering trust in humanitarian organisations more broadly.

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**Findings highlight a worrying perception among migrants that accessing humanitarian assistance and protection (from any humanitarian organisation) may increase risks of detention or deportation.**

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Indeed, findings highlight a worrying perception among migrants that accessing humanitarian assistance and protection (from any humanitarian organisation) may increase risks of detention or deportation. For instance, among all migrants surveyed, one quarter (25%) agreed with the statement “migrants may be exposed to risk of detention or deportation if they seek humanitarian support or assistance”. This fear was present to some extent across all countries, but it was most salient amongst migrants surveyed in Honduras (53%), Mali (62%) and Niger (72%) where the majority of migrants self-identified as having an irregular status or as returnees. Notably, across all countries, it was migrants in particularly vulnerable situations who held this fear:

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Statutes of the Movement (International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, n.d.), National Societies are considered to be “auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field”. This auxiliary role can be described as “a specific and distinctive partnership, entailing mutual responsibilities and benefits, based on international and national laws, in which the national public authorities and the National Society agree on the areas in which the National Society supplements or substitutes public humanitarian services”.

48% of migrants who self-identified as deportees, 40% of migrants whose asylum applications had been refused, and 37% of migrants with an irregular status associated seeking support from humanitarian organisations with a risk of detention or deportation. These findings underscore the importance of humanitarian organisations maintaining their independence (real and perceived). To do this requires a multi-layered approach to assistance and protection, from ensuring the protection of migrants' data, to avoiding involvement in the implementation of a state's migration-related policies, to carefully considering engagement in processes such as returns.

### Frontline staff and volunteers: The foundation of trust

Findings highlight the critical role that Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers play in building and maintaining migrants' trust and addressing barriers such as a general lack of understanding over their activities, and a concern about their relationship with authorities. As explained by migrants during surveys, interviews and FGDs, positive relationships and interactions between Red Cross and Red Crescent actors and migrants were characterised by the competence and integrity displayed by staff and volunteers on the ground—for instance, by providing the assistance and protection that was needed (when it was needed), by reliably responding to and following up on migrants' needs, and by being responsive to migrants' circumstances in ways that recognise their humanity.

Survey data shows most migrants had positive perceptions of Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers. Across countries, 72% of migrants surveyed agreed with the statement that “staff and volunteers from the Red Cross and/or Red Crescent are equipped to understand and respond to migrants' needs”. Similarly, 85% agreed with the statement that “the Red Cross and/or Red Crescent treats migrants with respect and dignity”. In both cases, perceptions differed across countries, and while results are positive overall, it is important to note that some contexts suggested a need to review and improve practices.

For instance, data based on migrants' self-reported legal status suggests further efforts are needed to strengthen practices related to the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection to migrants whose applications for asylum have been refused, as well as those who defined their legal status as “other”. Noting that this finding may be associated with a general level of frustration related to the outcomes of immigration processes, these groups were least likely to agree that Red Cross and Red Crescent actors had the ability to understand and respond to their needs. Only 67% of those whose application for asylum had been refused,

and 54% of those who defined their status as “other” agreed with the statement that “staff and volunteers from the Red Cross and/or Red Crescent are equipped to understand and respond to migrants' needs”. A number of strategies can be implemented to improve on this indicator, such as investing in training to strengthen the competence of staff and volunteers as well as engaging people with a lived experience of migration as staff and volunteers.

Indeed, an important finding to emerge from interviews and FGDs is the value migrants themselves place on volunteering with or working for Red Cross and Red Crescent actors—which can be interpreted as a sign of trust and inclusion. Crucially, the inclusion of migrants through employment or volunteer service is extremely valuable not only to migrants themselves, but also to Red Cross and Red Crescent actors and humanitarian organisations in general. Migrants with lived experience have unique insights and expertise to guide the work of humanitarian organisations and to ensure that activities respond to the priorities, needs, and strengths of migrant communities. Those with lived experience are uniquely positioned to understand and respond to migrants' needs and thus have significant knowledge to share that can inform the operations of humanitarian organisations.

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### Conclusion

The findings discussed in this paper confirm and expand on existing evidence on the intersection of trust, migration, and humanitarian organisations. Foremost, findings indicate varying levels of trust in humanitarian organisations—including Red Cross Red Crescent actors—and demonstrate that trust cannot be assumed but needs to be built and maintained. To build and maintain trust with migrants, humanitarian organisations need to listen to, respond to, and be accountable to the thoughts, fears, doubts, and concerns of migrants about their situations and the humanitarian assistance and protection they receive.

In this paper we have focused on three key lessons. First, increasing knowledge and awareness of humanitarian organisations and their work on migration plays a crucial role in building trust with migrants and facilitating their access to humanitarian assistance and protection.



Knowledge and awareness are critical given the vulnerabilities and risks many migrants face throughout their journeys—including an absence of community support networks, language barriers, and fears and exclusions associated with their legal status. There is a need to increase knowledge and awareness among migrants not only of the longstanding commitment of Red Cross and Red Crescent actors to work with and for migrants in vulnerable situations, but also of the specific programs and services (including, but not limited to the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection) and how and where to access them (based on need, and irrespective of legal status).

Second, the perceived or actual cooperation of humanitarian organisations with public authorities linked to immigration enforcement has the potential to hinder migrants' trust in humanitarian organisations and may dissuade migrants from seeking humanitarian support and protection when needed. In this context, urgent and joint steps must be taken to ensure that humanitarian organisations uphold the principle of independence and clearly communicate when, where and in what context they are cooperating with public authorities. This will lessen real and/or perceived fears of migrants in vulnerable situations. As the securitisation of migration continues, humanitarian organisations must also continue to uphold their independence and advocate for the safety, dignity and wellbeing of migrants, irrespective of legal status. This can be done in a way that communicates that the humanitarian impetus for protecting and assisting migrants is not tantamount to encouraging or discouraging migration.

Third, face-to-face interactions between migrants and frontline staff and volunteers—and the competence and integrity displayed by staff and volunteers—can build or break trust with migrants and can either facilitate or hinder migrant's access to humanitarian assistance and protection. This can have life-saving or life-threatening consequences for migrants in vulnerable situations. To build and maintain trust, humanitarian staff and volunteers must be equipped to understand and respond to migrants' needs and treat migrants with respect and dignity. The provision of information, training, and

technical support to enable staff and volunteers to work for and with migrants is essential, but so too are efforts to engage migrants—as staff or volunteers—and to trust their unique insights and expertise to guide the work of humanitarian organisations.

These three lessons have important implications for all humanitarian organisations working on migration, including Red Cross and Red Crescent actors. With a presence in over 190 countries, and a network of millions of local staff and volunteers, Red Cross and Red Crescent actors are uniquely positioned to address the humanitarian needs of migrants at various points of their journeys. The challenge lies in harnessing to the fullest the potential to provide humanitarian assistance and protection in the context of migration. To do this, humanitarian organisations, including Red Cross and Red Crescent actors, must actively listen to, respond to, and hold themselves accountable to migrants and host communities. By learning from the migrants who provided their time and expertise to this project, practical lessons have been identified to guide humanitarian assistance and protection activities. Beyond this, there is further need and urgency for Red Cross and Red Crescent actors to continue playing an active role in advocating for the safety, dignity, and wellbeing of migrants, irrespective of legal status, in national, regional and global dialogues. Engaging in evidence-based humanitarian diplomacy, which draws from the lived experience and expertise of migrants to highlight their assistance and protection needs and possible solutions to prevent and respond to these, is just as essential to ensuring that all migrants can live in safety and dignity.

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***Humanitarian organisations, including Red Cross and Red Crescent actors, must actively listen to, respond to, and hold themselves accountable to migrants and host communities***

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