

Guide: Alternative Metrics for Asylum and Border Policies for Better Policy Outcomes

International Rescue Committee | November 2024

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The International Rescue Committee
122 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10168 | [Rescue.org](https://www.rescue.org)



About this guide

Why are better metrics for asylum and border policies needed?

Global narratives around migration paint a one-dimensional picture of historically high numbers of people on the move. In particular, political and media narratives are focused on arrival numbers at wealthy countries' borders. This single-minded focus on daily, monthly, or yearly arrival figures obscures the complex factors that cause people to leave their homes and seek entry into a new country. Numbers give us no information about the reason people are arriving at borders, what happens to them during or after arrival, the impacts of such arrivals on host communities, and other causes and effects of these movements.

In reality, arrival numbers are only weakly tied to domestic policy. History has shown repeatedly that destination countries' immigration policies have only marginal impacts on arrivals. Events often beyond the control of destination countries—including war, climate change, economic factors, and “migrant diplomacy” (also referred to as “instrumentalization”)—can all have more significant impacts on arrivals than domestic policy. Arrival numbers may be a convenient proxy by which to judge asylum and border policies because they are relatively easy to ascertain and generally reported regularly, but they should not be the primary measure.

Policies with the express goal of reducing arrivals are usually meant to achieve some underlying goal, such as creating more order or predictability at borders; protecting economic, cultural, or national interests; or promoting a fairer immigration system. Yet, despite increasing availability of public and private data regarding migration, policymakers generally offer no more than vague goals such as “security,” “order,” or “fewer arrivals” and then track their progress using arbitrary metrics. Asylum and border policies are often implemented without clear theories of change and rarely explain the metrics they will use to measure progress toward their desired impacts.

This guide suggests alternative metrics by which to measure asylum systems and border policies. To satisfy the diverse motivations of policymakers, indicators are organized by thematic area: compliance with national and international law; the protection and safety of migrants and refugees; the economic impact for sending and receiving communities; the integrity of national security and orderly procedures; and progress toward more equitable global responsibility sharing. This is a non-exhaustive list of outcome areas and should be used to spark more nuanced conversations for people involved in designing border and asylum policies.

Who is this guide for

This guide is for advocates, policy experts, communications professionals, and lawmakers in the asylum and border policy space that are interested in overcoming one-dimensional political narratives to design and implement more rigorous, effective, and humane policies.

Where can I read more?

Reach out to Dan Berlin, Policy Director (daniel.berlin@rescue.org) for an extended version of this guide and more information on the cause and impact of inadequate border and asylum policy measurements.

Key terms

This guide treats asylum and border policies as a subset of migration policy. **Asylum policies** will refer to those which govern the processes by which people seek asylum and other forms of protection at or within

a country's border. **Border policies** will refer to the broader set of rules and regulations that govern the way individuals are received and processed at international borders.

A **Theory of Change (ToC)** is a model that helps explain how a project, program, strategy, or a policy will cause a series of outputs and outcomes that contribute to an intended impact. For asylum and border policies, a ToC model can be useful during policy formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation phases, bringing more structure, analysis and framing for policy dialogue, and ensuring that policies are data driven.

Policy Outputs are pieces of legislation, regulation, or written policies.

Policy Outcomes capture what happens in practice as a result of their implementation.

Policy Impact covers longer-term and broader changes, usually beyond one sector and achieved as a result of a multiplied effect of various policy *Outputs* and *Outcomes*.

Indicators are qualitative or quantitative measures of progress towards *Outputs*, *Outcomes*, or *Impact*, and can track how laws and policies (*Outputs*) are interpreted and delivered.

Alternative metrics for better policy outcomes

The following section suggests several frameworks by which asylum and border policies might be measured—including lenses that are primarily prioritized by governments and non-humanitarian actors—and some ideas for more accurate indicators to measure them. Focusing too narrowly on one lens will likely lead to unintended consequences in others, since policy tools typically have broad impacts.

(1) Compliance

<p>Compliance measurements allow policymakers to assess whether a policy or piece of legislation is in line with national and international legal obligations and norms. Having compliant policies is important both from a rule of law perspective and to ensure the longevity and success of the policy: when non-compliant policies face legal challenges, countries face disorder and reputational and financial damages. While alignment with binding national laws and international instruments should be the minimum expectation, policymakers should ideally align policies with “soft law,” such as international standards and recommendations and guidance from authoritative institutions.</p>	
<p>Sample Theory of Change</p> <p>IF robust and neutral compliance checks are conducted before policies are enacted AND impacted populations know their rights AND effective systems are set up to monitor compliance during implementation THEN asylum and border policies will be more likely to comply with national and international legal obligations.</p>	
<p>Output indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of a formal compliance evaluation by non-partisan technical experts • Inclusion of compliance monitoring mechanisms in policy • Assessment of the policy against the Migration Governance Index to gauge 	<p>Outcome indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of complaints filed and % increase or decrease in complaints found to be meritorious • # of procedural and human rights violations documented as a result of the policy or the

<p>compliance against the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration</p>	<p>failure to implement it (e.g. see IRC's protection monitoring reports from Italy)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of cases brought to the national, regional, or international judicial or human rights treaty bodies • # of representatives of implementing agencies and law enforcement who received information, technical advice, and training to implement the policy lawfully • # of NGO and civil society actors involved in monitoring and reporting activities
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(2) Protection and safety

<p>Upholding human rights, including the international legal requirements to prevent refoulement, should be a central concern for policymakers, not only to meet obligations but as a moral imperative. The journeys of refugees and migrants can be extremely dangerous: over 2,000 people were kidnapped by cartels and smugglers in Mexico in 2022 and there were over 3,000 dead or missing people along the Mediterranean route in 2023. Asylum and border policies that ignore protection needs endanger lives. Policies meant to deter irregular crossings (pushbacks, violence, externalization) often do not have their intended effect and rather result in people attempting multiple, dangerous crossings, result in prolonged and expensive detention, and have harmful impacts to refugees' and migrants' safety, health, and wellbeing.</p> <p>Even politicians who are unpersuaded by the human consequences of restrictive asylum policies should consider the costs of ignoring protection concerns. Because domestic and international law requires states uphold minimum protection standards, policies that violate these standards will often result in significant financial and logistical challenges to their implementation.</p>	
<p>Sample Theory of Change</p> <p>IF compliant policies are designed with accessible mechanisms to effectively raise and catalog protection concerns AND that data is regularly published THEN countries will be less likely to enact policies that harm asylum seekers and migrants.</p>	
<p>Output indicators</p>	<p>Outcome indicators</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence and resourcing of oversight and monitoring mechanisms that are institutionally and financially independent from the authorities that may be responsible for violations (see IRC's mapping of potential elements of an independent border monitoring mechanism in Greece as a blueprint for meaningful oversight) • Existence of sanctions mechanisms to prevent potential abuses of power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % increase or decrease in reports to authorities of protection related crimes, as tracked via coordination with humanitarian organizations, through coordination with local law enforcement authorities, or through self-reported harms by individuals interacting with border authorities • # or % of people able to successfully use a safer route relative to the number of people in need

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of protection screening mechanisms that have gender sensitive and equitable processes for identifying risks • Inclusion of anti-trafficking measures that are survivor-centered and trauma informed • Inclusion of mandate that detention is used only as a measure of last resort, when no other alternatives are available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # or % increase or decrease of deaths of irregular crossers (see IOM's Missing Migrants Project)
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(3) Economic impact

<p>While humanitarian policies like asylum should not be measured primarily on economic impact, “How much will this cost?” is nonetheless a politically salient and sometimes legally required question. There is abundant literature on the economic impact of asylum seekers and refugees on host communities. Generally, when large numbers of newcomers enter a country, this corresponds with an overall increase in GDP and household incomes, with some negative impacts on the most vulnerable groups in that community due to resource shortages, overcrowding, and increased competition. Measurements to ensure that newcomers can participate in the formal economy will help provide more accurate data to measure these impacts (and will facilitate self-reliance). Policy implementation (e.g. of a reception system for asylum seekers) requires investment of resources as well, and measures of economic impacts should consider both the financial costs and benefits of policies.</p>	
<p>Sample Theory of Change</p> <p>IF economic data is systematically collected and published regarding asylum and border policies AND policymakers take steps to facilitate formal economic participation of newcomers THEN reliable assessments of policy costs and benefits can be conducted.</p>	
<p>Output indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requirement of mechanisms to collect and share economic data related to the policy • Existence of measures to facilitate self-reliance, which will increase the economic benefits and reduce the public costs of welcoming asylum seekers (e.g. workforce training, credential transfer provisions) • Analysis of less costly alternatives to the policy (e.g. case management or Supported Independent Living as an alternative to expensive detention regimes) 	<p>Outcome indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$ value of incremental public costs of the policy compared to the status quo or alternative policies, including consideration of externalities like the cost of litigation or prolonged detention • Estimated \$ value of tax contributions through increased labor, new businesses and innovation, and other contributions • Time in days/months to receive a work permit following policy implementation • \$ value of remittances to countries of origin and analysis of how this might contribute to or detract from national economic benefits

(4) National security and order

<p>Governments often frame asylum and border policies in terms of national security and “orderliness.” States are deeply invested in maintaining control over who enters their borders. Successful “migration management” is intertwined with notions of state sovereignty, national membership, and the ability to</p>

protect one's citizens from foreign threats. Increased mobility and irregular migration are often framed as threats to states. Across the political spectrum, rhetoric and policy language often center around these themes. But governments rarely develop concrete measurements of whether a policy increases national security and presume that fewer arrivals is a proxy for greater order or security. Rather than focus on arrival numbers, policymakers can better monitor order at borders by measuring the predictability of arrivals and the degree to which processing capacity can manage them.

Sample Theory of Change

IF governments incentivize predictable arrivals through regular pathways **AND** invest in processing and reception **THEN** measurable results in order and security can be achieved.

Output indicators	Outcome indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of coordination mechanisms in place to manage dynamic flows of arrivals • Allocation of resources sufficient for timely, humane processing of estimated arrivals • Existence of an inclusive, accessible, equitable scheduling mechanism for asylum seekers to register their arrival at borders to help increase predictability for authorities, without punishing asylum seekers for their manner of entry • Existence of multi-year funding allowing for sustainable, continuous operations for service providers promoting orderly reception • Measures to disseminate accurate and timely information about the policy change to impacted populations via trustworthy channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # or % of people released after processing without support to streets (“street releases”) • \$ value or % increase of funding for shelters or other reception systems in place to meet the basic needs of new arrivals • % of regular versus irregular arrivals • Estimated # of people entering undetected and % increase or decrease • % change in the average price charged for smuggling, indicating an increase or decrease in demand • % change in the length of time people spend in reception or detention facilities • % or # change in the number of deaths of irregular crossers (see IOM’s Missing Migrants Project)

(5) Responsibility sharing

The urgent need to advance global responsibility sharing is one of the objectives driving migration policymaking. [The Global Compact on Refugees](#) sought to operationalize the principle of responsibility sharing to ensure better refugee protection and support to host communities. Yet, six years on, little progress has been achieved. In 2023, over [110 million](#) people were forcibly displaced worldwide, with 75% from just the twenty countries featured on [the IRC’s latest Emergency Watchlist](#). Additionally, [3 out of 4 refugees](#) are hosted in low-and middle-income countries near their countries of origin, and [70% of displaced people](#) are hosted in countries facing food crisis.

Sample Theory of Change

IF systems are created to facilitate solidarity **AND** data on responsibility sharing is consistently collected and published to monitor progress toward international pledges **THEN** countries will be more likely to work toward increased solidarity.

Output indicators	Outcome indicators

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of tracking and reporting mechanisms on responsibility sharing • Existence of binding mechanisms on solidarity that preference resettlement/relocation over externalization • Existence of formal and transparent mechanisms for creating and fulfilling resettlement pledges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$ amount of official development assistance (ODA) for the benefit of refugees and host communities in refugee hosting countries • # of partners in refugee response plans supporting the refugee hosting country • # of countries receiving UNHCR resettlement submissions • # of asylum-seekers and refugees per capita and per GDP • % GDP allocated to support asylum-seekers and refugees already in the country (e.g. for reception, provision of basic services and social support, etc.) • % GDP allocated to address the root causes of displacement in refugees' places of origin • # of resettlement pledges and % of pledges fulfilled • # of people arriving via durable complementary pathways every year
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Conclusion

Policymakers should move beyond their focus on arrival numbers and apply more nuanced methodologies to evaluate asylum and border policies. There are myriad other frameworks that can be used to design effective policies that integrate measurable indicators and describe a realistic theory of change based on the existing evidence. By articulating in advance the goals of a policy and how progress will be measured, policymakers can ensure that data is consistently collected, new theories are tested, and proposals are based on the best available evidence. Centering conversations on the true impacts of asylum and border policies will not only result in better policy design but may also increase opportunities to promote protection and compliance and reduce unintended harms to those seeking protection.

Please don't hesitate to reach out to the International Rescue Committee's Policy & Solutions team with questions: Dan Berlin, Policy Director daniel.berlin@rescue.org