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(editors)

Human mobility and social protection in Europe

Comparative studies and professional practices



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**HUMAN MOBILITY
AND SOCIAL PROTECTION IN EUROPE**

**Comparative studies and
professional practices**




This publication has been produced within the framework of the European Project “Global social work and human mobility: comparative studies on local government and good social work practices in the Euro-Mediterranean region (2022-2025)” (Project ID: 872209) Work Package 6: Research dissemination of good practices in Social Work and Human Mobility.

Required citation: Morata García de la Puerta, M. B., Bulli, G., & Huesca González, A. M. (eds.) (2025). *Human mobility and social protection in Europe: Comparative studies and professional practices*. Editorial de la Universidad de Granada.

Partners of the Global-ANSWER Project: University of Granada (Granada, Spain), Comillas Pontifical University of Madrid (Madrid, Spain), Red Acoge (Madrid, Spain), Bayt Al-Thaqafa (Barcelona, Spain), Diversidades (Vigo, Spain), Rioja Acolle (La Rioja, Spain), City Council of Granada (Granada, Spain), University of Palermo (Palermo, Italy), City Council of Palermo (Palermo, Italy), University of Florence (Florence, Italy), Oxfam Italia (Florence, Italy), FNAS- Fondazione Nazionale Assistenti Sociali (Rome, Italy), University of Lund (Lund, Sweden), University of Linnaeus (Kalmar and Växjö, Sweden), Agape@S:t Thomas (Lund, Sweden).

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	This publication has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 872209. The Agency and the Commission are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.
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professional practices

GRANADA, 2025

COLECCIÓN
TRABAJO SOCIAL Y BIENESTAR SOCIAL

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ISBN: 978-84-338-7668-3

Edita: Editorial Universidad de Granada

Campus Universitario de Cartuja. Granada

Telfs.: 958 24 39 30 - 958 24 62 20 • editorial.ugr.es

Maquetación: CMD. Granada

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of international mobility is prompting Europe to rethink its strategies and policies, as a growing number of migrants and refugees arrive at its borders in conditions of extreme precariousness. The vulnerability that characterizes these people requires effective responses to increasingly complex challenges, both for those arriving and for the receiving communities.

The drivers of these migratory movements are diverse. Economic crises, lack of opportunities, hunger, and structural poverty force millions of people to leave their places of origin in search of a dignified life. Likewise, disasters, armed conflicts, systemic violence, and climate emergencies displace millions of others who seek refuge in regions of the world not subject to such adversity. This forced mobility poses multiple challenges to host countries: on the one hand, a humanitarian imperative, but also political and social challenges that generate uncertainty in host societies.

For the displaced, the challenge begins with ensuring their survival, preserving their physical and mental health, and guaranteeing minimum security conditions. Host countries, for their part, must address issues related to the sustainability of their resources, social integration and community cohesion. In this context, the need to coordinate responses that are not only operationally effective but also consistent with human rights and human dignity becomes clear.

Since the 2015 migration crisis, tensions surrounding the management of international mobility have risen significantly. Europe's protection and asylum systems have come under increasing pressure, calling into question the collective capacity of the European Union to address these challenges in a coordinated, fair and humane manner. The sustainability of migration policies and the ability to ensure dignified and effective

reception require renewed commitment and greater cooperation both locally and internationally.

This chapter reflects on these global challenges of international mobility and their local repercussions. The analysis focuses on the different actors involved, emphasizing the human experiences of vulnerability and resilience. On the one hand, the vulnerability of those embarking on a journey into the unknown, facing risks and adversity; on the other, the perceived vulnerability of host societies, which often experience fears and uncertainties regarding the arrival of migrants and refugees.

Inclusion must be the primary goal of policies and practices related to international mobility. This chapter seeks to contribute to that goal by identifying key challenges, reflecting on current dynamics, and fostering a cooperative approach that advances toward more inclusive and supportive societies. Only through joint and sustained efforts will it be possible to transform vulnerability into opportunities for human and social development.

1. CHALLENGES IN THE FACE OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS, HUMAN MOBILITY, AND DISASTERS

Global migration, involving about 184 million people, including 37 million refugees, is now a structural phenomenon marked by economic inequalities, armed conflicts, widespread violence, and the growing impact of climate change (World Bank, 2023). By the end of 2024, over 123 million people were forcibly displaced, and by April 2025, the figure was approximately 122.1 million (UNHCR, 2025), marking the first decline in over a decade. The remarkable point is that climate change has become a decisive catalyst, exposing around 40% of the world's population to risks from rising sea levels, floods, droughts, and cyclones, forcing millions of people to leave their homes (Pérez-Segura *et al.*, 2025). In this context, refugee crises and disasters—whether natural or human-made—constitute a global and multidimensional challenge requiring comprehensive responses based on international cooperation, the protection of human rights, and the pursuit of sustainable solutions. From this reality, several challenges arise that must be addressed to ensure the effective protection and dignified integration of displaced persons.

1.1. Ensuring a Comprehensive Humanitarian Response to Mass Displacement

Refugee crises triggered by armed conflicts, natural disasters, and humanitarian emergencies often exceed the capacity of host countries, exposing the limitations of international protection systems. Since the 2015 crisis, mass arrivals have placed pressure on local resources and revealed gaps in coordination and immediate assistance mechanisms—from rescue and health care to the provision of shelter and food (Ferrero-Turrión, 2016; UNHCR, 2015).

The challenge is to strengthen international cooperation frameworks and the capacities of UNHCR and European asylum and civil protection agencies. The experience of the war in Ukraine demonstrates the importance of agile systems that ensure equitable access to housing, health, education, and employment (Brookings Institution, 2023; European Commission, 2024). Effective solidarity among Member States and stable funding are essential to transform emergency responses into lasting protection.

1.2. Ensuring Safe Pathways and Reducing Mortality on Migration Routes

The Mediterranean remains one of the deadliest migration routes in the world. During the 2015 crisis, more than 300,000 people crossed it, and in 2016, over 4,000 deaths were recorded—an average of eleven per day (El País, 2022; UNHCR, 2016). In 2023, more than 3,100 migrants lost their lives or disappeared, confirming the persistence of this tragedy (ECRE, 2024; ReliefWeb, 2024).

The scarcity of legal migration and asylum pathways, combined with obstacles to rescue operations and the criminalization of NGOs, aggravates the risk (SOS Méditerranée, n.d.; IOM, n.d.). Addressing this challenge requires establishing humanitarian corridors, reinforcing search and rescue mechanisms, and promoting cooperative agreements that guarantee shared responsibility among coastal States. In the long term, humanitarian action must be integrated with development and peace strategies to reduce the structural causes—conflicts, poverty, and environmental degradation—that drive people to embark on lethal routes.

1.3. Strengthening European Governance and Solidarity in Asylum Matters

The 2015 crisis revealed deep shortcomings in the European Union's migration governance, stemming from a lack of consensus and solidarity among Member States. Many governments prioritized border control and securitization, implementing surveillance measures and accelerated deportations, while humanitarian protection remained secondary (Ferrero-Turrión, 2016; UNHCR, 2015).

The challenge is to reinforce the European asylum framework through binding burden-sharing mechanisms and a better-resourced, more competent asylum agency (European Commission, 2024). Only more cohesive and solidarity-based governance will enable an effective and humane response to present and future migration crises.

1.4. Eliminating the Double Standard in Refugee Protection and Integration

Differences in treatment based on refugees' origin undermine the consistency of European asylum policies. The rapid and generous response to the arrival of millions of Ukrainians—with immediate access to basic services—contrasts with the difficulties faced by those fleeing Syria, Afghanistan or sub-Saharan Africa (Brookings Institution, 2023; Hoover Institution, 2024).

The challenge is to unify asylum procedures, guarantee equal rights and eliminate discriminatory practices in granting protection and in social and labor integration (Straehle, 2018; Real Instituto Elcano, 2015). Awareness campaigns promoting empathy and intercultural respect strengthen fair and universal reception.

1.5. Harnessing the Economic and Demographic Potential of Migration

Well-managed migration can help offset demographic aging and stimulate European economies. However, the lack of recognition of qualifications and the mismatch between migrants' skills and labor market demands generate unemployment and overqualification (World Bank, 2023; Brookings Institution, 2023).

Turning the arrival of refugees and migrants into an opportunity for growth requires investing in training, recognition of degrees and active employment policies that facilitate their inclusion in sectors with labor shortages (European Commission, 2024; Pérez, 2020).

1.6. Strengthening Long-Term Reception and Integration

After the initial emergency phase, many refugees remain exposed to precariousness. Lack of resources, administrative delays and fragmented responsibilities hinder their stable integration (Iglesias & Estrada, 2018; Brookings Institution, 2023).

The challenge is to build stronger reception systems with sustainable funding and active participation of local authorities, civil society and the private sector. Programs for affordable housing, language learning and employment mentoring transform emergency assistance into genuine long-term inclusion policies (Migration Policy Institute, 2021; Real Instituto Elcano, 2015).

1.7. Preparing Protection Systems for Future Disasters and Crises

The growing frequency of natural disasters and conflicts shows that mass displacements can occur rapidly, exceeding the capacity of ordinary asylum and civil protection mechanisms (Brookings Institution, 2023; European Commission, 2024).

Integrating crisis and climate change perspectives into migration policies—with contingency plans, early warning systems and emergency financial mechanisms—is essential to ensure a swift and rights-respecting response (World Bank, 2023).

1.8. Promoting Social Innovation and Community Participation

The future of refugee and migrant integration requires new forms of cooperation among institutions, civil society and local communities. Initiatives such as housing cooperatives, mentoring networks and migrant entrepreneurship projects have proven effective in improving access to employment, housing and basic services (Migration Policy Institute, 2021; Estrada *et al.*, 2024).

European societies face the challenge of encouraging citizen participation and financially supporting local initiatives. This strengthens social cohesion, fosters social innovation and turns inclusion into a sustainable long-term policy.

2. CHALLENGES OF SOCIOECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

The integration of immigrants and refugees is an economic and social challenge for host countries. The arrival of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers creates the need to guarantee their socioeconomic inclusion, which involves overcoming barriers such as recognition of qualifications, language training and discrimination in the labor market (UNHCR, 2021). Although some countries have developed specific training and employment programs to facilitate integration, refugees continue to face difficulties in accessing skilled jobs (EASO, 2021). In Spain, integration conditions are even more precarious, with high unemployment rates among refugees and strong dependence on informal labor sectors (EASO, 2021).

The following are some of the challenges host countries must address in this area through comprehensive policies that promote equal opportunities, social cohesion and effective integration of migrants and refugees (Estrada *et al.*, 2024).

2.1. *Investment in Education and Training for Employability*

Education and vocational training are the foundation of labor market integration that makes it possible to harness the capacities of migrants and refugees. Spain faces a particular challenge due to its production model, dominated by low-productivity sectors such as tourism and construction, which limits opportunities for skilled employment (European Commission, 2020; European Commission, 2022; Pérez, 2020). Refugees often face long periods of unemployment after arrival due to language barriers, cultural differences and lack of support networks (Iglesias & Estrada, 2018; Verdasco *et al.*, 2024).

Overcoming these obstacles requires investment in language learning programs, technical training and skills accreditation. These measures not only facilitate access to quality jobs but also contribute to social cohesion and economic competitiveness (Estrada *et al.*, 2024).

2.2. *Recognition of Qualifications and Streamlining of Administrative Procedures*

Recognition of degrees and professional competencies acquired abroad remains a slow and complex process in Spain, causing overqualification and underutilization of the human capital of many migrants and refugees (Iglesias & Estrada, 2018; Estrada, 2023). This situation not only generates frustration but forces them to accept jobs below their level of preparation.

To avoid this, it is necessary to simplify administrative procedures, expand skills validation programs and provide specialized counseling. This will foster labor market integration aligned with the education and experience of newcomers (European Commission, 2022; Pérez, 2020).

2.3. *Combating Discrimination and Promoting Equal Treatment*

Prejudices and stereotypes related to ethnic origin, religion or gender continue to limit access to employment, housing and basic services for migrants and refugees (Allport, 1954; Fernández *et al.*, 2017). In Spain, high unemployment and a precarious labor market increase these difficulties (Pérez, 2020).

Combating discrimination requires strengthening legal frameworks, promoting public awareness campaigns and implementing inclusion programs that foster equal treatment. A gender perspective is essential, as refugee women face specific obstacles, such as lack of childcare services to reconcile work and family life (UNHCR, 2021; Estrada *et al.*, 2024).

2.4. *Strengthening Social Welfare Systems*

A strong welfare system is fundamental for migrants and refugees to integrate sustainably. Temporary employment, low wages and labor precariousness leave many in vulnerable situations even when they find work (Iglesias & Estrada, 2018; Pérez, 2020). Support from the Reception and Integration System (SAI) is often limited and temporary, increasing insecurity (Estrada, 2023).

Strengthening social protection mechanisms, ensuring decent housing and guaranteeing universal access to health care and education are essential steps. Cooperation with local administrations and social organizations can enhance the effectiveness of these policies (Estrada & Rodríguez, 2021; European Commission, 2022).

2.5. *Active Participation in Social and Political Life*

Full integration requires the involvement of migrants in social and political life, fostering their sense of belonging and strengthening local democracy (Fernández *et al.*, 2017). However, barriers persist, such as lack of knowledge of participation mechanisms, lack of time due to precarious jobs and language difficulties (Iglesias & Estrada, 2018).

Addressing this requires promoting civic education, supporting intercultural community initiatives and creating spaces for dialogue between government, civil society and migrants, so that they can exercise their citizenship effectively (European Commission, 2020; Estrada *et al.*, 2024).

2.6. *Inter-Institutional Collaboration and Multisectoral Partnerships*

The integration of migrants and refugees depends on effective coordination among different levels of government, civil society, businesses and local communities. Fragmentation of competences and scarcity of resources can create duplication and gaps in service provision (Iglesias & Estrada, 2018).

Clear cooperation frameworks, sufficient funding and the exchange of best practices are necessary. Involvement of the private sector in training, hiring and corporate social responsibility projects strengthens the effectiveness of these strategies (European Commission, 2020; Rietig & Müller, 2018; Estrada *et al.*, 2024).

2.7. *Economic Sustainability and Adaptation to Crises*

Economic downturns and reliance on low-productivity sectors increase the vulnerability of migrants and refugees (European Commission, 2022; Pérez, 2020). The crises of 2008 and COVID-19 demonstrated how cyclical unemployment affects those without legal stability and support networks particularly harshly (Iglesias & Estrada, 2018).

Public policies must promote training in digital and green skills, encourage the transformation of traditional sectors and ensure the financing of integration programs, so that progress in rights and social cohesion is preserved even during recessions (European Council, 2023).

2.8. Demographic Challenges and Social Cohesion

Migration is a key factor in sustaining the active population and ensuring generational renewal in aging societies (Fernández *et al.*, 2017; European Union, 2021). However, its positive effect is not automatic: it depends on reception policies that promote coexistence and counteract prejudice (Pérez, 2020).

Intercultural awareness, strengthening community networks and active participation of migrants and refugees in local life are essential strategies to reinforce social cohesion and prevent tensions (UNHCR, 2021; Estrada *et al.*, 2024).

2.9. Preventing Exclusion and Promoting Social Innovation

Persistent precarious employment, limited access to housing and unequal distribution of services increase the risk of exclusion, especially during economic or health crises (Iglesias & Estrada, 2018; Pérez, 2020).

Social innovation—migrant entrepreneurship, solidarity economy, housing cooperatives—emerges as a key tool to promote the autonomy of refugees and strengthen community resilience. Its development requires public support, collaboration with social organizations and the use of digital technologies to facilitate training and labor market insertion (Estrada, 2023; Estrada *et al.*, 2024).

3. CHALLENGES RELATED TO HUMAN SECURITY

The link between human rights, development and security is captured by the concept of human security. Both socioeconomic challenges and those posed by planetary crises and disasters can be addressed through the lens of human security.

The systematic development of the notion of human security is found in the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994). There, security is introduced as an essential dimension of human development itself, defined as the ability to exercise vital choices freely and safely, without fear of losing them from one day to the next. In this way, human security is intrinsically linked to the expansion of freedoms and human rights, understood as the basis of development (Sen, 1999).

The 1994 report also highlights that human security must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, transcending the military sphere to include factors related to health, food, the environment, social cohesion and economic stability. In this sense, the concept offered a normative shift by questioning the centrality of the State as the sole referent of security, placing people at the core of the analysis (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007).

Later, the Commission on Human Security presented the report *Human Security Now* (2003), which consolidated a dual strategy: protecting people from threats and strengthening their capabilities. Within this framework, human security is conceived as inseparable from the effective realization of human rights. However, despite its normative ambition, this conceptualization triggered intense academic debates. One of the most frequent criticisms has been its excessively broad conceptual scope, which complicates its operationalization within public policy frameworks (Paris, 2001). It has also been questioned for the risk that the notion might become diluted in an overly extensive catalogue of threats, losing analytical power (Krause, 2004).

During the decade following the 2003 report, the United Nations made efforts to apply human security both normatively and programmatically. Nevertheless, from 2014 this process entered a ten-year period of institutional silence. This pause ended in 2024 with the publication of the Secretary-General's report *Human Security: report of the Secretary-General (A/78/665)*, which underlines the need for new tools and alliances to address interconnected crises and accelerate the 2030 Agenda. That same year, an informal debate was held at the General Assembly on the human security roadmap, emphasizing its relevance for identifying gaps in multilateral responses and reinforcing the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2024).

Today, the following challenges can be identified from the perspective of human security in relation to human mobility.

3.1. Using the Concept of Human Security

The first challenge concerning the phenomenon of human mobility lies precisely in accepting and using the approaches of human security to address the challenges raised. Its seven key dimensions (UNDP, 1994) are: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political.

3.2. Avoiding Misuse by Traditional Power Structures

Critical theory and security studies have pointed out that human security can be instrumentally used by States and international organizations to legitimize interventions in vulnerable contexts, under a discourse seemingly centered on people but in practice linked to geopolitical agendas (Chandler, 2008). The second challenge is therefore to avoid the risk of cooptation by traditional power structures that could limit its emancipatory potential.

3.3. Practical Applicability of the Concept

The third challenge lies in achieving practical application given the difficulties it poses. Only in recent years has the United Nations sought to advance in this regard (United Nations General Assembly, 2016), publishing manuals and other guiding documents. Processes aimed at ensuring human security must include a first phase of analysis, identification and planning, a second phase of implementation and a third of rapid evaluation.

3.4. Incorporating Participatory Processes

Security priorities must aim to substantially improve people's security by addressing their vital needs (UNDP, 2022, p. 3). This leads to the next challenge: to ensure meaningful participation of people in processes to achieve national solutions compatible with local realities. The participation of civil society and the associative fabric of the territories is fundamental.

3.5. Inter-Institutional Cooperation, Third Sector Organizations and Civil Society

The planet is now in the Anthropocene era, marked by large-scale threats and disturbances (Khoo, 2023). The challenge is to address these threats collaboratively, involving governments, international and regional organizations and civil society. International cooperation is more necessary than ever (United Nations General Assembly, 2012, p. 3 g).

3.6. *Special Attention to Vulnerable Populations*

The Anthropocene has highlighted the urgency of global intervention for many of the phenomena taking place, including massive movements of people around the world. In this sense, a key challenge is to attend to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, respecting their dignity, livelihoods, needs and experiences. It is these populations that mainly bear the consequences of environmental degradation.

3.7. *Facing Anthropocene Challenges with Global Solidarity*

Achieving global solidarity to confront the Anthropocene is the final challenge identified by the United Nations. Although human security traditionally sought to protect people and their communities, in the current era institutions and policies should systematically consider the interdependence between all people and between humanity and the planet (UNDP, 2022, p. 6). In a recently approved resolution on this issue, the UN General Assembly recognizes ‘the need to strengthen the multilateral system and its institutions’ (United Nations General Assembly, 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has shown that contemporary international mobility intertwines with multiple factors of vulnerability—structural inequalities, violence and conflicts, environmental degradation and extreme events—which place pressure on both displaced people and host institutions. In the face of this situation, Europe needs coherent responses that combine immediate protection, sustainable integration and governance reforms. The following conclusions summarize the key contributions of the chapter:

1. Transitioning from emergency response to sustained protection. Refugee crises and disasters (natural or human-made) overwhelm local capacities without robust cooperation frameworks. Moving from emergency response to lasting protection requires intergovernmental coordination, stable funding, operational strengthening of asylum and civil protection systems, and effective guarantees of access to housing, health, education and employment. Without safe pathways, mortality on routes such as the Mediterranean remains unacceptably

high; enabling humanitarian corridors and strengthening search and rescue is an ethical and operational minimum.

2. European governance and effective solidarity. Experience since 2015 highlights the fragmentation of EU asylum governance and the predominance of security-oriented approaches over protection. An adequate response requires binding burden-sharing mechanisms, common procedural standards and enhanced administrative capacity. Internal consistency (avoiding double standards based on origin) is essential for the legitimacy of the European asylum system.
3. Migration as a demographic and economic opportunity—if well managed. The potential contribution of migrants and refugees to aging economies depends on policies that align supply and demand for skills: investment in language and training, rapid recognition of degrees, employment counseling and intermediation, and active labor policies that facilitate integration into sectors with labor shortages. Without these mechanisms, overqualification, precariousness and under-integration become entrenched.
4. Integration with rights: welfare, housing and anti-discrimination. Socioeconomic integration is inseparable from accessible welfare systems and a rights-based approach. Ensuring decent housing, health and education, and combating discrimination (including intersectional discrimination affecting refugee women) are pillars to avoid exclusion trajectories. Civic and community participation is not an add-on but an accelerator of social cohesion and sense of belonging.
5. Multilevel cooperation and public-social alliances. The complexity of the phenomenon requires collaborative governance: coordination among levels of government, an active role for cities and regions, and alliances with civil society, academia and the private sector. These alliances should translate into concrete mechanisms—comprehensive reception and integration pathways, mentoring programs, entrepreneurship and social economy initiatives—with continuous evaluation and learning.
6. Resilience to crises and climate change. Integrating risk and Anthropocene perspectives into migration policies requires contingency plans, early warning systems and rapid response funds, as well as local adaptation strategies. Reducing climate vulnerabilities at origin and destination is part of a stability and peace agenda that must combine humanitarian and development objectives.

7. Human security as a normative and operational framework. The human security approach provides a compass for aligning protection, freedoms and capabilities in seven interdependent dimensions (economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political). Its value lies in orienting people-centered priorities with participatory processes and safeguards against instrumental uses of the concept. The current agenda demands moving from rhetoric to implementability: analysis, planning, execution and evaluation methodologies applicable to real contexts.
8. Social innovation and community participation. The scale and persistence of challenges call for complementing state policies with social innovation: housing cooperatives, mentoring networks, solidarity economy initiatives and digital solutions for training and labor market integration. Supporting, funding and scaling these experiences increases the resilience of local communities and of migrants and refugees themselves.
9. Coherence, evidence and evaluation. The strength of policies depends on their internal coherence (without double standards), alignment with international obligations and evidence-based evaluation. Comparable indicators on access to rights, labor market integration, language learning, housing and discrimination should guide decision-making and budget allocation.

In sum, Europe faces a dual imperative: to protect those who move in conditions of vulnerability and to strengthen its own governance and integration capacities. The path to achieving this combines human security, binding solidarity and rights- and evidence-based public policies, supported by multilevel cooperation and social innovation. Only in this way will it be possible to transform precariousness and vulnerability into pathways of dignity, inclusion and reciprocal contribution.

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