



GUIDANCE NOTE 8

DATA AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT REGARDING MISSING PERSONS



The national mechanism¹⁵ should create a data and information¹⁶ management system to ensure all data and information collected are trusted, accessible, secure and optimized for use, to increase the impact and effectiveness of a national mechanism for missing persons according to its mandate.

This guidance note provides an overview of common objectives that underpin the creation of a data and information management system within the mechanism and sets out key aspects of data and information processing in accordance with the principle of “do no harm”¹⁷ and applicable data protection laws and standards.

1. INTRODUCTION

The search for persons who go missing and the support to their families involve, among other actions, the collection, storage, processing and preservation of information and data. The extent of the data and information to be gathered will depend on the mandate and objective(s) of the national mechanism. Data may have different uses at various stages over the life of the mechanism, which may therefore be required to adapt how it manages data over time.

Collecting, managing and preserving good-quality and accurate data are essential to transforming them into useful information that guides the mechanism’s search for missing persons and the support it provides to families. These actions also contribute to measuring the mechanism’s achievements. If managed and preserved properly, data can be used in the search process well into the future and the mechanism becomes a custodian of the history of the missing and their families.

While tools and technical infrastructure (e.g. databases, servers) are important, these alone do not ensure data and information are used effectively in the search process. A mechanism needs to set up an information management system (IMS), which develops the policies, processes and competencies required to efficiently manage the mechanism’s data and information over time. Equally important, where the search for and/or identification processes are not part of the activities of the mechanism itself, the mechanism’s IMS still needs to take into account such information held within other national IMSs and ensure that processes exist for sharing information and communicating results between the different systems.

¹⁵ For the purpose of these notes, the term “mechanism” refers to all national institutions, commissions and other bodies and processes established by relevant authorities that aim to provide individualized answers on the fate and whereabouts of missing persons, and provide support to families of missing persons. Beyond this humanitarian objective, mechanisms may pursue other objectives, including those linked to accountability or transitional justice. However, these objectives will not be further explored in this set of guidance notes, other than insofar as they relate to the search for the missing.

¹⁶ Data are the facts or figures from which information is derived. Individual pieces of data are rarely useful alone. For data to become useful information, they need to be processed, organized, structured or presented in a given context.

¹⁷ “Do no harm” refers to the imperative to ensure that humanitarian action does not have adverse impacts on, or create new risks for, individuals or populations. “Do no harm” is noted in the first protection principle of the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, which emphasizes a need to “avoid exposing people to further harm as a result of your actions”. See the Sphere Project, Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, Protection Principle 1, available at: <https://handbook.spherestandards.org/en/sphere/#chapters>

Challenges to creating an IMS include the availability and reliability of information and data, and sufficient capacity of the mechanism to manage and use them efficiently. For these reasons, an IMS should be developed at the early stages of mechanism design to avoid delays in data collection and processing, system failures, or the data becoming unusable or untrustworthy over time. Moreover, the process of data protection must be incorporated in the early stages of the planning and development of the IMS.¹⁸

The management of all personal data should take into account applicable data protection laws, regulations and standards, including but not limited to the requirement that there be a “legal basis” for the processing of data, and the secure and confidential management of data and information over time, to ensure the mechanism permanently upholds the respect of each missing person and their family members until their fate and whereabouts can be clarified.

2. DATA AND INFORMATION GOVERNANCE OF A NATIONAL MECHANISM

An IMS drives the mechanism’s decision-making and ensures the coordination, control and analysis of all relevant and available information and data. It should consider an analysis of the context, the data stakeholders involved, i.e. who has the data, the sources and types of information available, the objectives to be achieved and the availability of human and technical resources to manage such a system. An effective IMS requires that a combination of people, processes and technologies be made available to ensure the efficient and secure management of the information and data received by the mechanism in any given format (electronically and physically). Data protection laws may also require that an institution keep records of personal data-processing activities and share such records with regulatory authorities upon request.

The definition and construction of an IMS must be linked to, and influenced by, the mechanism’s mandate as defined in the legal basis that created it. For example, a mechanism charged with the consolidation and centralization of a national missing persons caseload will need to create processes that facilitate the acquisition, processing and consolidation of a large amount of information and data on missing persons from different sources. However, should a mechanism be required to manage an official compensation system in addition to conducting the search, the IMS will need to adapt its processes to manage information related to compensation activities, as well as provide certification of such a service to families. The mandate¹⁹ of a national mechanism therefore becomes the key guiding policy of the IMS.

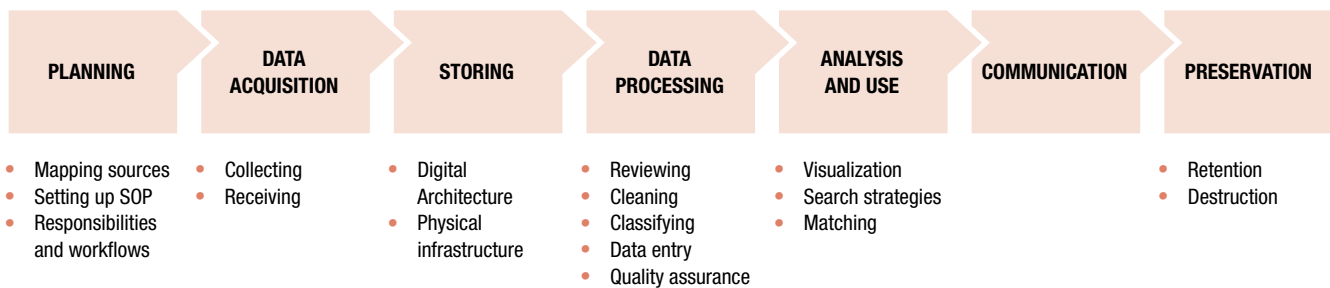
¹⁸ For guidance on interpreting data protection principles in the context of humanitarian action, see: C. Kuner and M. Marelli (eds), *Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action*, 2nd edition, Brussels Privacy Hub/ICRC, Geneva, 2020: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/4305_002_DataProtection2020_web.pdf

¹⁹ The legal basis creating a national mechanism establishes the functioning of a mechanism and should include its mandate, the objectives to be pursued, its structure, governance and functioning, its powers and status and its resourcing. Furthermore, the legal basis should include, as appropriate, provisions on the representation and participation of different constituencies, including families of missing persons. See Guidance Note 1 Missing Persons National Mechanisms: Contextualized Approach and Mandate.

The mandate will also set out the IMS's structure and reporting lines. This may be relevant when designing information and data workflows and establishing roles and responsibilities among the different teams within the mechanism. Ideally, a data and information management unit (DIMU) should be created within the mechanism's structure, and workflows developed within and between the DIMU and all those responsible for handling data within the mechanism.

Developing an IMS entails taking several interconnected steps, each requiring structure and planning. This sequence is called the information and data life cycle and usually contains the following elements:

There are different practices with regard to positioning a DIMU within a national mechanism. Given the cross-cutting role of a DIMU, it should ideally be placed high up within the mechanism's operations, to have an overview of all its information and data needs and ensure cross-disciplinary decision-making. Should this not be the case, a strong coordination mechanism needs to be put in place to ensure information and data flows are structured and efficient.



During the initial planning phase, understanding the context in which the data and information will be acquired is essential to creating an IMS. Three main elements need to be addressed:

a. Mapping of sources

It is often the case that data relating to missing persons are scattered among several sources. It is therefore essential, first, to attain an overview of the data and information available and assess the usefulness, reliability and relevance of their sources. A map of available sources becomes particularly relevant when consolidating a list of missing persons. While families of the missing are initially the primary source of data and information, it is necessary to consider other sources, such as attempts by any previous mechanisms/ commissions/bodies to consolidate lists of missing persons, or information collected by other actors in the past related to witness accounts, or investigative data that have been collated over time, etc. This mapping exercise sets the baseline for the IMS and may include information on the following:

- details of the source: these include name and contact details, type of source (e.g. pre-existing list of missing persons, perpetrators, witnesses, etc.)
- type of data, their availability and the format in which they are stored (electronically, physically)
- volume of the data
- accessibility, confidentiality and security
- reliability.



Sources of information can be the following (not exhaustive):

- Families
- National Authorities (including public forces)
- Civil society (e.g. family associations, local NGOs, etc.)
- Armed groups
- Witnesses
- Pre-existing mechanisms/commissions/bodies
- Open sources of information (e.g. social media, press, etc.).

Once relevant sources have been mapped, the mechanism needs to identify how best to obtain and process the data in order to build the mechanism's caseload. Legal instruments (e.g. a data-sharing agreement) with which data are obtained from an external entity may also need to be considered. An analysis of each data source should be carried out during the mapping exercise. This may provide a key document for further decision-making.

b. Standard operating procedures

An IMS needs to have a strong set of SOPs to establish the processes and regulate all aspects of managing data and information on missing persons at all stages of the search. Given the sensitivity of the type of data and information being collected, the SOPs must include specific instructions on how to handle confidential information and establish the level of sensitivity for each type of information (e.g. public, confidential and strictly confidential). A comprehensive data protection policy must also be drawn up that aligns with the requirements laid out in national and regional laws and regulations, as well as data protection standards. Access rights to information, including personal data, need to be established on a strictly "need-to-know basis" and, particularly, in line with the needs of the different teams within the DIMU and beyond. SOPs need to regulate each part of the information and data life cycle by:

- providing details on how data are collected (e.g. designing standard forms)²⁰
- defining specific criteria when collecting and incorporating a variety of data, including from different sources, taking into account the context in which individuals went missing (e.g. in certain contexts, data relating to ethnicity might be essential, while in others, they might not be as relevant)
- establishing formats in which data and information may be acquired and processed
- creating procedures to ensure standard processing of the data and the development of a coherent filing system
- developing instructions and guidance to ensure the quality of the data to be processed
- producing guidelines regarding the management of confidential data in electronic or physical format and a data protection policy
- developing policy relating to the preservation/archiving of data (digitally and physically) and establishing an appropriate schedule for retaining the information and data, i.e. determining how long the data will be stored for.

c. Workflows, roles and responsibilities

An IMS needs to be able to rely on a dedicated team of trained staff with different profiles – ideally, the following:

- **Head of data and information management:** usually in charge of data governance and incorporated into the operational decision-making body of the mechanism.
- **Data analyst:** has specific technical skills to analyse data and provide support to the teams in charge of the search.
- **Data operators:** different profiles working on data processing, accessing and entering information and data in a centralized system. These roles may be filled by specialized staff or by other existing profiles within the mechanism (investigators, lab scientists, field archaeologists, etc.). However, dedicated staff to ensure data control/data quality, data training/coaching and data entry are also required. Data operators may also oversee the filing of information in any of the approved formats.
- **Researcher/archivist:** a mechanism might need other specialists in the team with specific skills in archival research (e.g. historians or professional archivists).
- **Data protection officer:** has expert knowledge of data protection law and practices. Working in an independent capacity, this person informs staff of and advises them on their obligations pursuant to applicable data protection laws.

²⁰ See separate Guidance Note [Core Dataset for the Search of Missing Migrants](#) as a basis for designing relevant forms. One of the most significant obstacles encountered in the search for missing migrants is the lack of compatibility among the data gathered by different actors. This dataset has been formulated as a means to harmonize data collection efforts by establishing a number of shared data fields that can be completed to aid the search for a missing migrant, whether living or dead. It is a basis upon which different organizations/authorities may adapt their data collection according to their context, needs, resources and mandate.

There is a general misconception that information and data management professionals working within the mechanism need to have very technical profiles (e.g. information and communication technology (ICT) profiles). However, the key to the success of an IMS is including a variety of professionals with complementary skills, ranging from those specialized in technology, to data analysts, to more generalist profiles who understand processes and methodologies relating to the management of data and information (e.g. information managers, archivists, etc.).

Workflows are also an important element of an IMS, since they define and structure each step of the information and data flow and assign responsibility of staff to each step. Workflows are a practical way to organize the activities of IMS staff and ensure the flow of information and data is centralized and their quality and security assured.

3. CONSOLIDATING A LIST OF MISSING PERSONS AND COLLECTING DATA AND INFORMATION

It is necessary to collect detailed information on the missing person for the purpose of creating a missing persons case. Creating a missing persons case is key to structuring data collection and data processing and should include all necessary and relevant data and information collected from mapped sources related to the missing person and the circumstances of their disappearance. The missing persons case is then used as part of a search intended to clarify the fate and whereabouts of the missing person.

Consolidating a list of missing persons

The first, and perhaps most important, step is to consolidate a list of missing persons, which then becomes the basis for the mechanism's case management. This is also one of the greatest challenges of any mechanism, but it is important that, at the start of any search, the scale or magnitude of the issue, i.e. the number of individuals involved, is established. Consolidating the list of missing persons may be a time-consuming exercise; however, it is not necessary to have the entire list consolidated for the mechanism to begin its work.

Some mechanisms might be charged with consolidating the list of missing persons, clarifying each missing person's fate and whereabouts, and providing support to families, while relying on the medico-legal system of the country to take lead responsibility for the forensic identification of recovered human remains. Other mechanisms, however, might integrate forensic identification as part of their mandate. These details must be considered, as they directly affect the IMS to be created. The more data held by different institutions, the more difficult it can be to consolidate information. Robust coordination and data-sharing agreements may be required between all the data stakeholders involved.

A **unified consolidated list** of names of those reported missing should be created by centralizing and consolidating data from different sources. These could be from direct reports of disappearances by the families to the mechanism, but names could also be incorporated from the lists of previous mechanisms/commissions/bodies. In the latter case, the challenge will be to process lists that may have been compiled according to different criteria and objectives, and to make them compatible. Managing duplicates becomes critical at this point also, making it necessary to establish well-defined steps to identify duplicates before data are entered into the system (e.g. a mandatory checking step should be included in the data workflow).

The methodology to consolidate the list of missing persons entails assigning a **Unique File Number (UFN)** to each missing individual. Each missing persons case, even those relating to people who went missing in a common event, must be assigned a UFN. The list of missing persons is based on the personal data of the missing person, not that of the family member reporting the case, although these data are also essential and must be collected and stored safely.

The UFN also allows for the tracking/traceability of all associated data and information collected related to a missing person case, managing duplicates and facilitating communication exchange between families and other agencies involved. In the course of collecting personal data related to the missing person, other physical evidence (e.g. personal belongings, identification cards, etc.) may be collected and needs to be managed and preserved. A UFN reduces the risk of this information being lost and ensures coherency among all those working on the same case.

Types of data to be collected

The types of data that may be collected²¹ according to the mandate of and legal basis for creating the mechanism, whether that be to account for persons who went missing because of armed conflict, other situations of violence, disasters or in the context of migration, are as follows:

Data on missing persons refer to the personal background that makes the person identifiable and includes data relevant to the search. When collecting information about a missing person, it is important to recognize that it may not be known at the time of collection which features, characteristics or secondary information will ultimately be useful for the identification process. Hence, the quality and quantity of information collected are crucial.

Collecting these data requires interviewing one or several family members but also other potential witnesses. Interviews should be conducted by trained staff to ensure the confidentiality, security and legal rights of families and witnesses are protected, in accordance with data protection legislation. The use of standard contextualized forms is advisable, in line with the guidelines established during the planning phase and data protection laws and standards must be followed.

Collecting data on missing persons may need to be done at different stages, depending on the circumstances and the analysis of the context, and in accordance with the evolution of the search. Frequent contact with the families may be necessary to ensure the mechanism has the most up-to-date information while providing families with news on the search. The frequency of this contact should be decided together with the families.

The information and data on a missing person case may exist in different formats – electronically, physically or a combination of both. Consequently, the mechanism must foresee the need to process and structure such data in the IMS (often a database but not exclusively – see section 4 below), while maintaining the integrity of the original format (e.g. case filing). A missing person case usually contains:

- a **UFN**
- **personal identifiable data** (missing person's name, family names, nationality, date of birth, any documentation that verifies the individual's identity, etc.)
- **biological background and social history/lifestyle**
- **details about the circumstances of the disappearance**, with special attention paid to last-known place and date of disappearance, which are key elements with which to begin a search and, possibly, link missing persons cases when other disappearances might be connected
- **details of alleged sites of human remains** – if relevant and available, information on possible gravesite locations connected to the case might also be collected. Specific standard forms may be designed to ensure the proper collection of these data
- **personal data of the families** – it is essential to record and securely store complete contact details of families to ensure case follow-up
- information related to the legal basis to collect and process the data.

²¹ The data protection principle of minimization must be adhered to when processing personal data, i.e. the data handled by the institution must be adequate, relevant and not excessive for the purpose(s) for which they were collected.

A dedicated form to collect and structure the data on the missing person may be designed and standardized. Standard forms and SOPs might be adjusted according to the different data collection stages. The collection of biological reference samples (e.g. blood, saliva) from relatives for forensic genetic analysis purposes also requires a distinct strategy and SOPs.²²

Data on unidentified persons may also be collected by mechanisms that are mandated to conduct forensic identifications. Identification is a process to compare information relating to a person being sought to the person/remains whose identity is to be confirmed. Accordingly, as part of the identification process, it is necessary to gather detailed information on the unidentified person with the purpose of creating a unidentified person case file, which integrates biological data resulting from a forensic examination with investigative and recovery information. The unidentified person case must also be assigned a UFN for the same reasons stated above. Collecting data on unidentified persons must be done by forensics experts. The specific steps of the process of scientific and legal identifications are likely to vary depending on the domestic legal framework.

If the **person is alive**, the basic unidentified person case file may contain:

- a review of the circumstances that led to their status as an unidentified person
- a personal interview with the unidentified person
- forensic examinations and documentation.

If the **person is not alive**, the basic unidentified person case file contains:

- a review of the circumstances that led to their status as an unidentified person
- information on the recovery of all human remains in situ, including detailed information on location
- forensic examinations and documentation
- information on the cause, manner and circumstances of death.

Data on human remains sites (HRS) may be available and not linked to a specific missing person or unidentified person case. It is important that, in the course of its work, the mechanism collects and structures these data, which might prove to be essential information related to the search. When interviewing a witness, a specific form must be used for collecting data related to the HRS and a UFN must also be assigned to the HRS. This will allow for links to be made between the site and possible identities in the consolidated list of missing persons (e.g. to formulate a hypothesis on the identities of those buried) and for storage of all information possibly connected to the site. The form may include information about the following:

- **the interviewee:** personal details of the interviewee and relation to the presumed identity/identities
- **the human remains site:** geographical location, reference points, features of the terrain, accessibility, risks associated with the site (whether it is contaminated by weapons, for example)
- **the presumed identities:** number of sets of remains, possible identities, features of the remains
- **informed consent** of the interviewee for collecting and processing the data.

Data on events related to disappearances may be collected in the course of the action and can be linked to one or more missing persons. Collecting data on events will make cross-checking data relating to e.g. a place, date and circumstances of a disappearance, easier. It is necessary to structure the collection of these data to further analyse them and this can be done through another standard form. Events should also be assigned a UFN to make it easier to determine possible links with identities already in the consolidated list of missing persons.

²² See M. Salado Puerto et al., “The search process: Integrating the investigation and identification of missing and unidentified persons for more information about an effective search process which includes the investigation and identification phases of the missing using a multidisciplinary and multiagency approach”, *Forensic Science International: Synergy*, Vol. 3, 100154, Elsevier, 2021: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fsisyn.2021.100154>

The form may contain the following information, if relevant:

- date and place (geographical references)
- description of the event
- alleged perpetrator
- details on the victims (number, type of victim)
- data-sharing restrictions.

Other information of interest may be acquired by the mechanism over the course of its mandate that may be useful for clarifying the fate and whereabouts of the missing person. Any piece of information can be the key to resolving a case, including:

- **list(s) of missing persons** contained in unconsolidated documents
- **records/logbooks** from various entities, such as registries, tribal entities, communal services, hospitals, morgues, funeral companies, cemeteries, etc.
- **reports from parties to a conflict** that might contain lists of missing persons, detainees, exchanges of detainees, deceased persons, those killed in action, etc.²³
- **official/unofficial reports/photographs/video footage** describing the clearing of a battlefield, burial sites, etc.
- any **judicial proceedings materials** describing disappearances, detention, executions, etc.
- **user-generated content online**, such as video footage and photos of popular events, demonstrations, attacks, arrests, etc.
- **records from various international organizations, NGOs or civil society bodies** containing reports, statements, photographs, information on disappearances, arrests, places of detention, satellite imagery, etc.
- information related to **capture, arrest, abductions and detention**, including registers from places of detention, logbooks, accounts of witnesses, etc.

4. INFORMATION AND DATA STORING AND PROCESSING

Information and data on missing persons acquired by a national mechanism must be stored and processed in a manner that ensures their security and confidentiality. The level of security needs to be commensurate with the sensitivity of the data to protect them against unauthorized or unlawful access and use, or against accidental loss, destruction or damage.

a. Information and data storing

Information and data may be contained in various formats and will require different forms of secure storage. There are two main types of infrastructure required:

- **Digital infrastructure:** a robust ICT ecosystem is required to securely store electronic data in various formats (audiovisual material, electronic documents, digital hosting space for the data, etc.). Technical ICT resources (both human and infrastructure) need to be allocated to ensure the system is compliant with security requirements. Decisions will need to be made regarding the use of “on premises” versus “cloud” server solutions. While an on-premise server solution is generally more secure for storing and managing strictly confidential data, it is also more expensive and difficult to maintain.
- **Physical infrastructure:** the mechanism needs to build physical and secure infrastructure to handle physical formats, such as paper files, tapes, analogue pictures, etc. It is important that the mechanism allocate the space for those items as they are gathered at different stages of the search process. A chain of custody must be created to ensure compliance with archival standards for preservation:²⁴
 - Filing of records (in any format) refers to those items that need to be categorized, processed and preserved. These records should also be converted to an electronic format as soon as they are received within an electronic document and record management system.

²³ As this information is likely to be highly sensitive, it will need to be classified as “strictly confidential”, which also implies ensuring highly restricted access.

²⁴ See <https://www.ica.org/en/preserving-archives>; https://gfbio.biowikifarm.net/wiki/ISO_Standards_for_Digital_Archives

- As the archives provide a historical record of the mechanism’s work and may be further consulted, the final archival of records (in any format) entails securely preserving and archiving certain items and information. This may include information or data related to the mechanism’s operations from its creation, according to pre-established retention policies and relevant laws on data protection, historical preservation and/or laws regulating public records.²⁵

b. Information and data processing

One of the most challenging and key elements in terms of the efficacy of an IMS is the necessary tool(s) to acquire, process, structure and analyse information and data. The objectives of these tools are manifold:

- consolidate the list of missing persons (and manage any duplicates)
- centralize and structure all data collected in relation to missing person/unidentified person cases
- assign and manage the UFN of the missing person/unidentified person case serving as the link with any other related items collected in any format
- ensure follow-up of the cases during the search and provision of support to the families
- organize and prioritize work
- analyse data in order to build search strategies
- analyse data in order to make identification matches
- report on progress to families, including new information
- manage various sources and electronic content.

Usually, there is a need for more than one tool to cover all the different needs listed above. There are at least two types of tools that may facilitate the work of a mechanism in fulfilling the above objectives: a case management system and an electronic document and records management system. In the event that the mechanism includes the clarification of the fate of missing persons through the forensic identification of human remains, additional processes and tools will be used. If the data will need to be shared with third parties, a secure means to transfer those data will need to be procured or developed.

Case management system: centralizes, structures and processes all data collected in relation to missing persons cases. Typically, these data comprise the following:

- data on missing persons and their families
- data on unidentified persons
- data on HRSs
- data on events.

Ideally, a database will already be available and capable of processing, structuring and analysing the different types of data (see section 3 above). Relational databases are usually appropriate for this type of work, as they provide a structure for linking different pieces of data hosted in different tables (e.g. linking data on events with personal data or data on human remains sites). The mechanism may use an existing database that can be easily customized to suit the mechanism’s needs. It is recommended to avoid, where possible, building a database from scratch, as this can be technically and financially prohibitive.²⁶ However, a tool alone will not ensure the success of the IMS; strong IMS policies and workflows must accompany whatever tool is used.

²⁵ Retention policies refer to a basic policy that lists for how long each type of record is kept and what the final disposition of the record will be (archive or destroy) when it is no longer needed for business purposes.

²⁶ The ICRC has developed the “Resolve Platform” – a web-based solution – which it offers free of charge to relevant stakeholders, including governments, experts, agencies, organizations, etc. to help them record, process, store, archive and share information on missing persons and human remains. For more information, see: *The Resolve Platform: A Comprehensive Web-based Solution for Managing Information on Missing Persons and Human Remains*.



The **Dirección General de Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas del Perú** built its work process based on Excel spreadsheets to consolidate the list of missing persons and to structure the basic data that allowed them to carry out the mechanism's work. The mechanism was able to use this tool to create an inventory of missing persons cases and make links with the different sources from which data were collected (e.g. audiovisual material, physical file containing forms, etc.) to enable case analysis. The capacity of this type of tool to process and analyse data is, however, limited. Whenever there is existing technical capacity, resources and knowledge, it is advisable to use a case management system, which automates the many steps explained in this guidance note.

Elements to consider when using a case management system include:

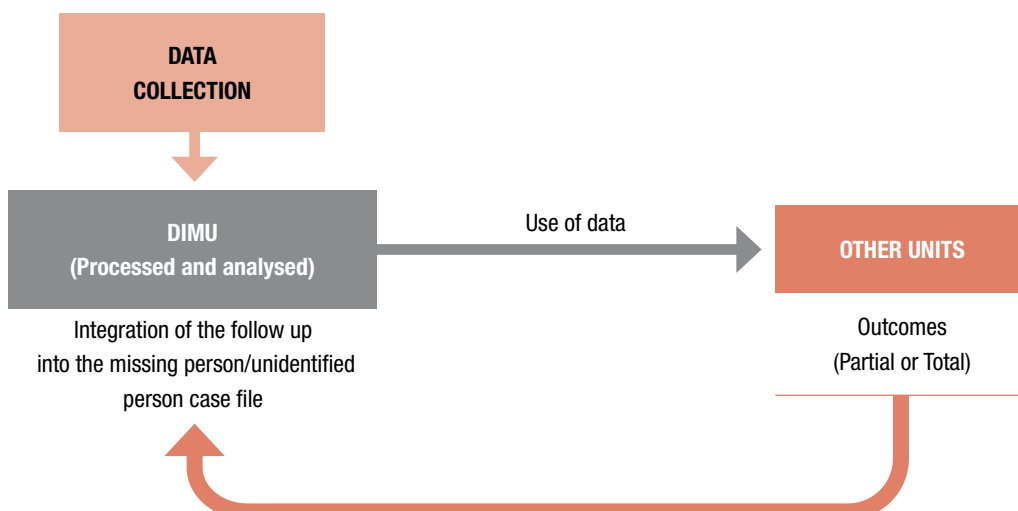
Security and confidentiality

- **Robust access-rights management:** the system needs to be able either to restrict access or provide it on a strictly needs basis and according to the different roles of staff. Ensuring security (whether physical or digital), data protection and confidentiality may be more challenging when using less advanced tools. In the case of ad hoc tools (e.g. Excel), a daily backup of the data should be incorporated into data workflows and processes. An offsite backup should also be made (e.g. in case of fire).
- **Collaboration:** the system will need to be used by several staff and therefore needs to facilitate the sharing, analysis and comparison of data.
- **Language and alphabet:** the system may need to handle different alphabets or languages.
- **Configuration:** the system needs to be adaptable to changes in the context and the evolution of the mechanism.

Electronic document and records management system (EDRMS): manages documents and records electronically and physically. The EDRMS complements the case management system, as it offers additional functionalities to store, organize and describe digital and physical content.

Regardless of the tool used, the main feature of an IMS is the centralization of information and data, which includes the acquisition of externally collected data. Information and data must always be centralized internally within a mechanism, regardless of whether the information is collected internally or externally.

Internally, clear workflows need to be created to centralize all information and data acquired and produced by the different units of the mechanism. There needs to be excellent coordination to ensure that the DIMU receives and processes all available information and data. This is relevant not only during the process of data acquisition but also during the search, as different outcomes resulting from the search may need to be recorded for follow-up.



Externally, data and information on missing persons are generally scattered among different sources and organizations and are therefore not centralized. It is rare for only one entity to collect and process all the data and information on missing persons. Following the completion of an exercise to map the different sources available, the mechanism may decide to coordinate with different entities by using data-sharing agreements. From the technical perspective, and in an ideal scenario, different entities collecting data would use tools that are interoperable, enabling the automatic sharing of data between the external organization and the mechanism. However, this is extremely rare and also challenging, unless the systems were originally designed with that purpose in mind. Manual interaction (e.g. data cleaning) will be needed in most cases. One element that may help the process of sharing data and information between different external entities is an agreement on the type and number of data and formats to be collected. Moreover, data-sharing agreements will, ideally, set out the specific purpose of data sharing and processing.²⁷ If forensic identifications are part of the mandate of the mechanism, additional agreements should be reached with the relevant authorities in charge of civil registration (e.g. for the production of death certificates). The more details that are agreed on prior to the mechanism beginning its work, the easier further exchange of these data will be. Prior to creating a new IMS, it is important to check if other systems already exist that could be adapted or built upon for the purposes of the mechanism.

5. ANALYSIS OF INFORMATION AND DATA

In addition to properly collecting and processing information and data, the importance of information and data analysis must be underscored. Collecting information is not synonymous with analysing it; both aspects are essential to the process.

Information and data, including personal data, on missing persons may be used to build search strategies, to support the identification of missing/unidentified persons and to provide answers to the families. Analysis of contextual information and data needs to occur throughout the search process. Data-analysis tools can be used to generate lines of investigation to help establish hypotheses of identity. The analysis of networks (e.g. relationships between missing persons; movement of individuals between detention centres, refugee camps and burial sites; transport of human remains once recovered during or after events, etc.) with hot-spot maps (e.g. key points on migration routes, places of executions, human remains sites, etc.) can be undertaken if the mechanism is in possession of the right data to do so.

In many contexts, incomplete information, compounded by a lack of transmissibility and coordination between governmental and non-governmental agencies or even between different units within the mechanism itself, can hinder the process of information comparison and analysis. Likewise, information that is adequately collected and registered in centralized repositories but not comprehensively analysed renders all efforts pointless and ultimately increases the number of missing persons. The analysis of data is further developed in the forthcoming Guidance Note 9.




²⁷ This should include information related to restrictions (if any) on the onward transfer of the data or other data protection obligations between different external entities sharing data and information with the mechanism, including the safeguarding of data-subject rights and the secure means of data transfer to be used.

International Committee of the Red Cross

The ICRC helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. The organization also seeks to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.

Central Tracing Agency

For the past 150 years, the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency has been helping people separated from their loved ones. We are entrusted by the Geneva Conventions as a neutral intermediary to assist parties and remedy family separation and disappearance in armed conflicts. In addition to helping people separated from their loved ones in times of conflict, the Central Tracing Agency coordinates global efforts by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to protect and restore family links, search for and identify missing people, protect the dignity of the dead, and address the needs of families of missing people.

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