

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROGRAMMES AND FINANCE**

**Thirty-third Session**

**ADAPTING SKILLS-BASED LABOUR MIGRATION PROGRAMMES FOR PEOPLE  
WITH INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION NEEDS: CREATING MORE FLEXIBLE,  
INCLUSIVE AND APPROPRIATE LABOUR MIGRATION PATHWAYS FOR ALL**



## **ADAPTING SKILLS-BASED LABOUR MIGRATION PROGRAMMES FOR PEOPLE WITH INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION NEEDS: CREATING MORE FLEXIBLE, INCLUSIVE AND APPROPRIATE LABOUR MIGRATION PATHWAYS FOR ALL**

1. Attracting skilled foreign workers is a growing priority for economies with ageing populations in high- and middle-income countries worldwide. According to the joint report *Migration Matters* by IOM and Boston Consulting Group, global labour shortages were at an all-time high in 2022, when there were an estimated 30 million open jobs across the 30 largest economies, with the United States of America, China, Germany and Canada experiencing the greatest shortages. The same report states that these structural labour shortages across all skill types are costing countries more than USD 1.3 trillion a year.

2. A key priority for the IOM leadership in the years to come is to step up the Organization's support for regular migration pathways, whether by adjusting existing pathways related to labour, family reunification, education or protection, or by devising new ones. Regular pathways are a way to leverage the skills and talents of migrants in a responsible way, while harnessing the potential of migration to unlock opportunities and prosperity for all – host countries, countries of origin, migrants and their families. This paper will focus specifically on labour migration pathways for people in need of international protection, defined in this context as people who are outside their own country, which is unable or unwilling to protect them, and who are unable to return to that country due to the risks they face there. The term is not limited to those with refugee status.<sup>1</sup>

3. Making skills-based labour migration pathways more accessible to, and inclusive of, people in need of international protection is a relatively new approach. By adapting skills-based pathways and labour migration programmes, it is possible to facilitate the movement of people who cannot make use of their skills in countries of first asylum to high- and middle-income destination countries where their skills are in demand. This approach holds the dual promise of addressing economic needs in destination countries and offering potentially long-term solutions for those in need of international protection. It could notably help alleviate the structural labour shortages that are so costly to the global economy, while addressing the plight of the 37 million people estimated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to be outside their home country in refugee-like situations or in need of international protection.<sup>2</sup>

4. The aim of this paper is to stimulate discussion on the potential role of these types of skills-based labour programmes and pathways. Although the paper focuses on populations requiring international protection, IOM recognizes that such programmes may also be relevant to contexts in which migrants are in situations of heightened vulnerability, but where they may not satisfy the criteria for refugee status.<sup>3</sup>

### **Skills-based labour migration programmes and international protection: rationale and opportunities**

5. A skills-based approach to migration that uses merit-based selection criteria while ensuring protection against refoulement is, by definition, complex. At the national level, it sits across both the humanitarian and labour/economic migration policy ecosystems. At the global level, it spans

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that there is no general consensus on this definition. However, it will be used as a working definition for the purposes of this paper, as it guides the eligibility criteria of some of the pilots discussed; see for example the [eligibility criteria used by Talent Beyond Boundaries](#).

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, "Mid-year Trends" (2022).

<sup>3</sup> See Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), [The Principle of Non-Refoulement under International Human Rights Law](#) (Geneva, 2018); and World Bank, "Distressed Migrants: Preserving Dignity" and "Recommendations: Making Migration Work Better" in *World Development Report 2023* (Washington D.C., 2023).

international instruments related to refugees and migrants. The [Global Compact on Refugees](#), for example, recognizes that complementary pathways for admission to third countries, which include this approach, can facilitate access to international protection and/or solutions. It also emphasizes that these pathways should be made available on a more systematic basis. At the same time, many of the principles underlying the approach rely on Member States making progress towards key objectives of the [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#), namely to enhance the availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration, to facilitate fair and ethical recruitment and safeguard conditions that ensure decent work, and to address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration.

6. The approach also responds to broader global concerns across the humanitarian–development nexus. From an international protection perspective, adapted labour migration programmes can offer pathways to potentially durable third-country solutions that are complementary to traditional resettlement processes for people in need of international protection. From a global development perspective, such programmes can contribute to greater productivity and overall prosperity in countries of destination by helping ensure that skills and human capital are used and valued where they are most in demand, rather than leaving them untapped or restricted, and by alleviating pressure on local labour markets and public resources in countries of first asylum. Indeed, according to the report *Migration Matters*, the annual economic contribution of migration could reasonably reach USD 20 trillion by 2050. Last but not least, from the perspective of the people seeking safety, the approach offers them an opportunity to realize their full potential while finding lasting solutions to their international protection needs and those of their families. Fair and equitable access to labour migration opportunities is key to ensuring that all these positive outcomes can be achieved.

#### **Lessons learned from translating the approach into reality**

7. A number of destination countries recognize the potential value of the approach combining skills-based migration with international protection, and have begun to pilot this type of programme on the ground. This has made it possible to identify both the barriers to access faced by people with international protection needs, and potential solutions.

8. In Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, pilots are under way to evaluate how accessible skills-based programmes are to refugee candidates. These pilots build on existing frameworks and mechanisms within skills-based programmes, as this is likely to be more cost-efficient and sustainable than creating new programmes. IOM and its partner, Talent Beyond Boundaries, are replicating the approach with the [Displaced Talent for Europe](#) pilot funded by the European Union, which connects employers and industries in Belgium, Ireland, Portugal and the United Kingdom with displaced individuals from Jordan and Lebanon who possess the required skills. Another project under way is [EU-Passworld](#), led by UNHCR and other partners and also funded by the European Union, which seeks to create additional education pathways for refugees. Although these pilots are recent and there is not yet any conclusive evidence of their impact, the initial findings provide some indication of the areas requiring attention – and of the solutions that might be necessary. In particular, it has been observed that people in need of international protection may face the following barriers:

- (a) **Barriers to admission and stay.** These could include a lack of documentation (such as identity or travel documents, proof of education and work experience, proof of required language proficiency or proof of funds) or the fear of forcible return to situations of persecution or torture (refoulement) if they lose their job.
- (b) **Information barriers.** These might take the form of limited awareness of regular migration or other programmes available (in addition to traditional humanitarian programmes such as resettlement).

- (c) **Barriers to job matching and skills recognition.** Employers often overlook the skills of potential migrants in need of international protection, perceiving them to be in greater need of support and less job-ready due to their vulnerability. There is also a lack of systematic data on their employment and skills, and limited access to skills recognition and validation procedures.
- (d) **Poor early integration services.** Language training provision is particularly limited, despite its importance for people with international protection needs and their families. In addition, employers are often reluctant to fund integration support on top of recruitment-related costs.

### **Scalable solutions and policy coherence**

9. Making skills-based programmes more accessible to, and inclusive of, people in need of international protection has great potential benefits for the populations, countries and stakeholders involved. These potential benefits are more likely to be realized where there is policy coherence with existing programmes and where policies and lessons learned are institutionalized within broader labour migration systems.

10. To achieve positive outcomes, it is also necessary to effectively manage the risks and unintentional consequences of such an approach. Skills-based programmes adapted for people in need of international protection should not negatively affect existing pathways offered by humanitarian and non-humanitarian programmes, and should bolster, rather than replace, needs- and vulnerability-based resettlement programmes. Furthermore, it is vital to avoid undermining the integrity of such programmes by creating pull factors that allow non-humanitarian candidates to take advantage of facilitated access measures aimed at those with international protection needs in skills-based labour migration programmes. Care should also be taken to ensure that adapted skills-based programmes do not adversely impact local efforts in host countries to integrate populations with international protection needs, or unintentionally create conflict over competition for scarce international migration opportunities.

11. Policy coherence will therefore be key to the acceptance and potential scalability of the approach. Further dialogue and the sharing of lessons learned across the humanitarian and migration ecosystems are needed to identify and implement scalable solutions that make skills-based labour migration work for every category of population on the move – including the most vulnerable.

### **Recommendations**

12. The Organization has already begun working with partners to find ways to scale up this approach combining skills-based migration with international protection. As a member of the [Global Task Force on Refugee Labour Mobility](#), IOM works closely with UNHCR and Member States to promote refugee labour mobility as a third-country solution that is complementary to resettlement. IOM and UNHCR are also facilitating labour mobility solutions as part of a broader route-based approach to respond to the transnational challenge of mixed movements. These initiatives are part of IOM's wider aim of expanding human mobility by creating safe, orderly and regular pathways for all that are flexible, inclusive and appropriate.

13. Promoting more widespread use and acceptance of the approach discussed above will mean broadening engagement beyond the traditional humanitarian/resettlement sector, while the buy-in and support of stakeholders and institutions in the fields of regular/labour migration will be essential for scale-up. IOM will support efforts in this area by:

- (a) Assessing existing and planned efforts to make labour mobility pathways more accessible to people in need of international protection, with special attention paid to barriers to growth and how IOM, in collaboration with UNHCR and other partners in the Global Task Force on

Refugee Labour Mobility, can help remove them – this will allow the Organization to determine the scale and scope of ongoing efforts and the viability of pilots in different regions.;

- (b) Convening a series of learning events for Member States and other stakeholders to share lessons from existing pilots and collaboratively identify needs for capacity development, through policy forums facilitated by IOM, such as the Global Policy Network on Recruitment and regional consultative processes, among others;
  - (c) Developing its offering to support Member States, based on its strong operational footprint in movement support to migrants and refugees and its involvement in capacity development for regular migration pathways;
  - (d) Contributing to knowledge management and the sharing of lessons learned with a view to supporting the piloting of innovative models and improving those already created;
  - (e) Mapping intergovernmental, private sector, employer and non-governmental networks in the non-humanitarian space to which IOM has access, and identifying entry points for advocacy and engagement.
14. It is recommended that Member States:
- (a) Promote dialogue among interested government, civil society and private sector partners about this new approach, including the associated risks and opportunities, for example, through existing platforms such as the Global Task Force on Refugee Labour Mobility.
  - (b) Raise awareness of the approach among other governments, especially those considering adjusting their existing skills-based programmes and those of countries of origin and first asylum, and private sector actors, and advocate for the creation of further innovative pilots.