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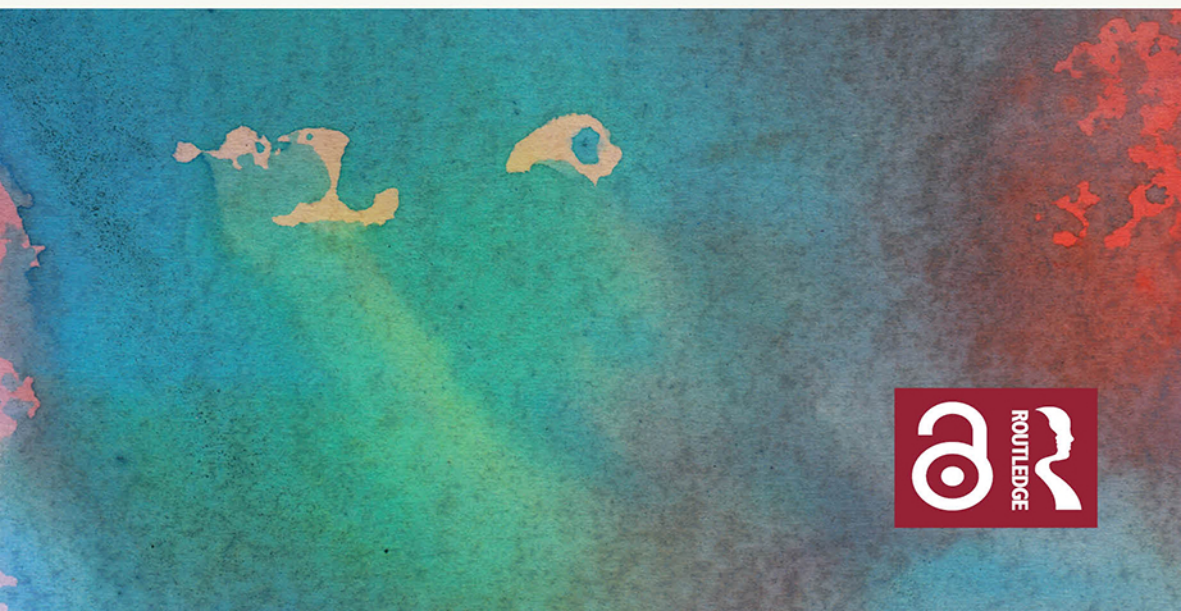
FAIR SKILLED MOBILITY

A MANIFESTO

Edited by
Izabela Grabowska and Mary Boatemaa Setrana



Fair Skilled Mobility

This book sets out a new approach to the global flow of skilled migration, one based on ethical, fair, balanced and sustainable frameworks. Instead of focusing on human capital loss and 'brain drain', the book argues that we should look towards mutually beneficial outcomes.

In a world where demographic shifts, rapid technological advancements connected to automation and AI enhancement, and evolving economic landscapes are reshaping labour markets, this book serves as a guide for 'doing' skilled migration, highlighting shared development, social inclusion and economic resilience opportunities. Seeking to provoke and inspire policymakers, researchers and practitioners, the book sets out a manifesto for transparent, fair and sustainable migration skill infrastructure, based on 13 theses. Based on extensive original data from across the Link4Skills consortium and its sister projects GS4S and SKILLS4JUSTICE across at least 15 countries of origin and 15 countries of destinations, the book addresses critical issues such as the depletion of labour markets in origin countries and the challenges of skill recognition and labour market integration and retention in destination countries.

This important new book will be a breath of fresh air for researchers, practitioners and policymakers looking for possible solutions to global migration skill flow challenges.

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Introduction

Izabela Grabowska and Mary Boatemaa Setrana

I.1 Introduction

The *Fair Skilled Migration Manifesto* is more than an academic investigation; it is a wake-up call. Structured as an academic-policy manifesto, it sets out 13 theses that challenge reactive approaches to migration. Instead, it proposes a reimagining of global skill mobility as a co-designed, ethical and strategically governed infrastructure. Grounded in research evidence and collaborative insight, the manifesto calls for transparent, rights-based and development-oriented infrastructure. It aims to shape both academic discourse and policy practice, laying out a forward-looking agenda for achieving fair skilled migration between origin and destination countries.

Building on this foundation, the manifesto presents a collaborative reflection and public statement developed through the active participation of the Horizon Europe-funded Link4Skills project and its sister initiatives, GS4S and SKILLS4JUSTICE, both in the content of this book as well as in seminars discussing arguments presented in this manuscript. Drawing on diverse expertise, regional insight and empirical fieldwork across more than 25 countries (11 destination countries and 14 origin countries of all three sister projects), it brings together researchers and experts from both ends of migration skill corridors (MSCs). This includes past empirical and conceptual work led by scholars and institutions, among others, in origin countries such as Ghana (Teye, 2022), India (Rajan, 2020), Bangladesh (Siddiqui, 2020), the Philippines (Asis, 2006; Asis & Piper, 2008) and Morocco (Lahlou, 2015), who bring grounded insights into the challenges and innovations in fair recruitment, return migration and diaspora engagement. This collective, cross-continent effort not only synthesises research findings but also brings forward a dialogue between origin and destination countries, advancing mutual understanding of skilled migration.

The manifesto is not a traditional academic monograph. It is a strategic, action-oriented intervention designed to speak to a wide audience such as academics, policymakers, employers, educators and migration practitioners alike. By translating research into accessible, evidence-based proposals, it fosters inclusive policymaking and supports doing fairer MSCs together. It emphasises reciprocal skill exchange, ethical recruitment and sustainable

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workforce planning, reframing migration as a multi-directional process that can support development and labour market transformation in both origin and destination contexts.

I.1.1 Key forces shaping the future of skilled migration: Linking perspectives from origin and destination countries

The need for infrastructure for skilled migration is driven by four major structural trends, each affecting both destination and origin countries in different ways. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing skilled migration policy directions that foster fair skills mobility exchanges.

First, shifting population compositions and demographic changes are reshaping labour markets and their demographic metabolism in both origin and destination countries, though in contrasting ways. In destination countries, particularly in the European Union (EU) and North America, shrinking working-age populations, increasing dependency ratios and mismatches between demand and supply create skill shortages, particularly in essential sectors such as healthcare and eldercare, construction and STEM. Immigration can help fill these gaps, but it is not a standalone solution. Integration, upskilling and retention strategies are needed to maintain a productive workforce (Lutz et al., 2021; Potančoková et al., 2021). By contrast, many non-EU origin countries face a surplus of young workers with limited employment opportunities at home – reflecting a demographic dividend (for example: India, Bangladesh (South Asia); Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana (Sub-Saharan Africa); Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria (North Africa)), unlike the ageing populations of the EU.

Second, automation and AI are transforming work and skill requirements, creating both challenges and opportunities. In destination countries, automation and AI-assisted work are reshaping employer expectations and shifting labour demand towards higher-skilled tasks, leading to a growing need for workers with digital and technical expertise (Kremer et al., 2021; Sowa et al., 2021). This can make it harder for lower-skilled migrants to integrate into labour markets without targeted up/re-skilling training programmes. In origin countries, automation can reduce the number of low-skilled jobs available, increasing existing unemployment, underemployment and underutilisation among young workers, many of whom seek better opportunities abroad.

Third, skills mismatches between education systems and labour market needs persist in both destinations and origins. In destination countries, businesses struggle to find workers with the right qualifications, despite an influx of migrants. Many highly educated migrants end up in jobs below their qualification level due to barriers in qualification recognition, licensing and language requirements (McGuinness et al., 2018). In origin countries, despite investments in education, many workers remain underqualified or out-qualified for available jobs, as local economies may not generate enough demand for their skills. Strengthening links between education systems, vocational training and

employer needs in both regions can create better-aligned migration pathways that benefit all stakeholders involved in the migration skills corridors.

Fourth, the transition to sustainability is reshaping labour demand by creating new opportunities in sectors such as renewable energy, sustainable construction and climate adaptation. In destination countries, green industries require specialised skills, yet migration policies have not fully adapted to facilitate the movement of workers with the necessary expertise. In origin countries, climate change is a push factor for migration, as environmental degradation reduces economic opportunities in agriculture and other vulnerable sectors. However, with targeted training programmes and skills partnerships, migrants from origin countries could be equipped to meet the rising demand for green skills in receiving countries (Hooper, 2021).

To conclude, in destination countries well-managed migration can help fill skill shortages, support economic growth and foster innovation. However, if migration policies are short-term and transactional, they risk creating exploitative conditions and limiting long-term workforce sustainability. In countries of origin, migration can bring economic gains through remittances, knowledge transfer and engagement with the diaspora. However, without stronger infrastructure for skills development and reintegration, these countries risk permanently losing their most qualified workers. Ethical governance frameworks require a focus on sustainable workforce planning, ensuring that both origin and destination countries benefit from skills mobility rather than facing economic disruptions and social tensions.

By adopting balanced migration policies that respond to the four key structural trends, countries can move beyond the narrow origin-destination divide and build mutually beneficial skill corridors that support long-term development. The manifesto presents what can be called a *realist utopia*: an ethically grounded yet politically feasible vision of global skilled migration based on fairness, reciprocity and sustainability. Drawing on Rawls' (Rawls, 1997) notion of realism infused with ambition, it links normative goals to institutional and political constraints, demonstrating that meaningful reform is both desirable and achievable within today's policy context (cf. Motomura, 2024).

I.1.2 Why MSCs matter

This book introduces the theoretical concept of *Migration Skill Corridors (MSC)* to describe and analyse pathways for the movement of skilled and high-skilled workers between countries. These corridors are not just migration routes, but institutional infrastructures that connect countries of origin and destination through coordinated and ad hoc policies on recruitment, training, skills recognition and labour market entry. The aim is to better understand how imbalances between skill supply and demand are addressed, and how different actors, such as governments, employers, recruitment agencies, education providers and migrants, contribute to shaping these systems of migration.

The concept of MSC (see Engbersen and Reinold, in this volume) finds its intellectual roots in Carling's (2010) conceptualisation of migration corridors, an approach that treats migration flows as structured, multi-directional pathways rather than one-way movements (see also Carling & Jolivet, 2016). MSCs emphasise the integration of migration into broader labour market systems, in which different stakeholders operate, including governments, educational institutions, employers and civil society.

MSCs differ from conventional approaches that mainly focus on attracting high-skilled workers to high-income countries. Instead, they may involve more planned and reciprocal forms of skilled labour mobility, including also medium-skilled. These can include measures to recognise qualifications across borders, provide targeted training and align migration with actual labour shortages in key sectors.

Chapter 1 outlines five types of MSCs that reflect different historical, economic and policy contexts: post-colonial corridors, which build on former colonial relationships and diaspora networks; post-guest worker corridors, often based on temporary or circular migration; highly skilled corridors, focused on professionals in areas like technology and research; medium-skilled and sector-based corridors, developed to fill gaps in sectors such as healthcare or construction; and humanitarian corridors, which increasingly include employment and skills development components. These corridor types can coexist and evolve over time.

MSCs are governed along three key dimensions: *emerging vs established, public-led vs private-led and ad hoc vs structured. Emerging corridors* are newly developing migration pathways with limited but growing migration flows; they often arise through private recruitment, new bilateral cooperation or responses to skill shortages. In contrast, *established corridors* have a longer migration history, often shaped by colonial ties or guest worker programmes, and benefit from existing networks and infrastructures. *Public-led corridors* involve government agreements and policies (mostly government-to-government), while *private-led corridors* are mainly driven by employers or recruitment agencies. *Ad hoc corridors* respond to immediate labour market needs without long-term planning, whereas *structured corridors* are part of sustained, institutional partnerships. Recognising these dimensions allows policymakers to better design labour migration policies that are both ethical and responsive to future labour market needs.

Understanding MSC offers a way to examine how medium-skilled and high-skilled migration is organised and governed. It also provides a basis for comparing how different regions manage mobility in relation to labour market needs and migration policy goals.

This dual lens of typology and dimensions is central to the manifesto's framework. It enables a shift from merely categorising migration corridors to assessing their quality, legitimacy and developmental impact.

The book does not propose a single solution to the challenges of skilled migration. MSCs are positioned here as potential components of long-term

workforce strategies rather than short-term or reactive fixes. By combining empirical research, conceptual insights and policy perspectives, the manifesto encourages reflection on how global skill mobility can be managed in a more balanced, transparent and responsive way, addressing the needs of multiple stakeholders in both origin and destination countries.

I.1.3 Whole-of-governance and whole-of society approach in MSCs

To make MSCs effective, fair and sustainable, it is essential to adopt both a whole-of-governance and a whole-of-society approach (cf. Appleby, 2020). A whole-of-governance approach means building collaborative frameworks that involve a wide range of actors. Governments alone cannot manage the complexity of skilled migration. Instead, institutions at different levels such as national ministries, regional authorities, local governments and international bodies need to coordinate their efforts. Ministries of labour, education, foreign affairs, internal affairs and migration must work together across borders to align their policies and address skill needs, qualifications recognition, ethical recruitment and integration measures. Coordination should also include mechanisms like transnational task forces or joint observatories that oversee migration corridors in real-time and ensure accountability and responsiveness. Yet, as public administration research reminds us, such whole-of-governance initiatives are not easy to realise. They are time- and resource-intensive, prone to unintended consequences and often slowed by bureaucratic specialisation and siloed responsibilities (Christensen & Lægreid, 2007; Perry et al., 2002). This means that while a whole-of-governance approach is a necessary guiding principle for MSCs, it must be pursued pragmatically: through incremental trust-building, realistic agendas and flexible mechanisms that can adapt to diverse institutional capacities and shifting labour market needs.

At the same time, a whole-of-society approach requires active participation from outside government. Employers, civil society organisations, trade unions, employer associations, migrant-led organisations, diaspora networks and educational institutions all bring essential perspectives and capacities. For example, employers and vocational training institutions can help design relevant up-skilling programmes based on actual labour market needs, while migrant associations can help ensure that policies reflect lived experiences and challenges. Involving these actors can improve both the fairness and the effectiveness of migration corridors. Local communities in receiving countries also play a vital role in welcoming and integrating migrants. When they are included in the dialogue, it helps reduce social tensions and fosters a more inclusive environment. Such inclusive engagement is not only instrumental for designing effective policies but also fundamental for ensuring their democratic legitimacy and fostering trust.

Embedding these approaches into MSCs would mean establishing clear roles, responsibilities and communication channels among all actors. A shared framework could define commitments, transparency rules and procedures for monitoring and dispute resolution. This would help avoid the top-down, state-centric design of many existing programmes and instead foster shared ownership and trust. A whole-of-governance approach ensures coordination across ministries, levels of government and international bodies, preventing fragmented or contradictory policies. A whole-of-society approach guarantees that employers, unions, migrant-led groups, educational institutions and local communities are directly involved in shaping and monitoring corridors. Taken together, a whole-of-society and a whole-of-governance approach make MSCs not just pathways for people to move, but institutional infrastructures for skills to circulate fairly, rights to be protected and development to be shared.

I.1.4 The manifesto for fair skilled migration and literature review

At the core of this book is a research-driven approach to understanding migrant skill flows as more than a one-way transfer of human capital. Instead of viewing migration primarily as a loss for origin countries and a gain for destinations, the concept highlights the interdependencies between these regions and the potential for mutual benefit. This perspective aligns with Clemens's (2009) work on skilled-worker mobility, which argues that the movement of skilled workers should be recognised as a development opportunity that can contribute to both origin and destination countries. Further engaging with the notion of skill ecosystems, the book builds on Czaika (2018), who advocates for a balanced approach to migration governance that integrates policy frameworks, labour market needs and education systems. The analysis emphasises migration as part of a broader ecosystem rather than a standalone phenomenon, reinforcing the role of migration corridors and transnational partnerships in shaping equitable and sustainable skill flows. Scholars such as Asis (2006) and Battistella et al. (2011) underscore the importance of building migration infrastructure in origin states, including ethical recruitment regimes and labour protections that originate in origin-country institutions.

Traditional approaches to high-skilled migration have often been characterised by restrictive policies aimed at regulating talent mobility to protect domestic labour markets. As Czaika (2018) argues, these restrictive policies often fail to capture the complexity of migration decisions, which extend beyond economic incentives to include professional development, career growth and access to specialised knowledge networks. Migration decisions are not purely instrumental; individuals move based on a combination of structural and personal factors that do not always align with rigid migration policies. However, migration policies frequently adopt a uniform approach that overlooks the varied motivations behind migration (Skeldon, 2018). Policies that focus exclusively on economic factors only risk overlooking the role of autonomy, job satisfaction and career trajectories in shaping migration decisions. One unintended

consequence of such policies is brain waste, where skilled migrants are underemployed or work in jobs that do not align with their qualifications. Our manifesto book engages with these critiques by proposing an alternative framework that focuses on skilled migration governance, rather than simple talent attraction or retention strategies.

The discussion also draws from Castles and Delgado Wise (2008), which argues for an expanded understanding of migration as part of broader development dynamics. The authors stress the importance of migration governance that prioritises skill formation, capacity building and the strengthening of transnational networks. These considerations are particularly relevant for countries in the Global South, where migration plays a key role in shaping both economic development and labour market transitions. Our book incorporates these insights by examining the role of skill and Talent Partnerships in development-oriented migration strategies, ensuring that the benefits of migration are distributed across both origins and destinations.

Our volume further engages with the barriers faced by skilled migrants, as explored in Sabadie et al. (2010). These barriers include the lack of recognition of foreign qualifications, difficulties in accessing legal migration pathways and skill underutilisation in destination labour markets. Policies that facilitate skills recognition and mobility partnerships can mitigate these challenges, supporting the integration of skilled migrants while also benefiting destination labour markets. Circular migration strategies that allow for skill transfer and knowledge exchange between origin and destination countries align closely with the book's approach to fostering sustainable skill flows.

By integrating these insights, the book positions itself within broader debates on skilled migration governance, skill recognition and workforce planning. It does not present a singular solution to global skill shortages but instead offers an analytical framework for understanding how migration skill flows interact with policy structures, labour market dynamics and transnational cooperation. Through its engagement with contemporary migration research and policy discussions, it provides a structured approach to rethinking migration skill flows as part of evolving economic and technological transformations.

I.2 Methodological approach

This book adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative exploratory research to provide some insights to MSC. Case studies form a central part of this methodology, offering insights into how migration policies and skill mobility frameworks operate in practice. These case studies are based on interviews with experts and policymakers, capturing diverse perspectives on migration governance, ethical recruitment and skill recognition, in some cases also from both ends of MSC.

The study also draws on secondary datasets, literature reviews and desk reviews of policy documents, labour market reports and migration statistics to

ensure an empirical foundation. An AI-assisted meta-analysis of existing studies on migration, employment and AI/automation further contextualises the findings within broader migration trends. Ethical considerations are at the core of this research, with informed consent, data confidentiality and participant well-being prioritised throughout.

I.3 Book structure

The book is structured into three cohesive parts that guide the reader from conceptual grounding to practical application. It begins with an introduction that lays out the urgent context for rethinking global skilled migration.

The first part of the book explores the structural and institutional foundations for managing fair skilled migration. It introduces the concept of MSC, as developed by Godfried Engbersen and Julia Reinold (Chapter 1), and examines how Skill Mobility Partnerships and Talent Partnerships, analysed by Caitlin Katsiaficas and Sabeth Kessler, can be used to address skill shortages while supporting broader development goals (Chapter 2). Ethical recruitment practices are highlighted as essential to ensuring fairness and transparency, particularly in transnational hiring processes, as discussed in Chapter 3 by Colleen Boland, Tesseltje de Lange, Ksenija Ivanović and Erica Schimmel (from Sister Project GS4S). This part underscores the need for legal frameworks, shared responsibility and cooperative governance between origins and destinations.

The second part shifts to real-world examples, offering a series of empirical case studies from various countries, regions and geopolitical contexts across continents. These case studies reveal how different infrastructures manage skill mobility in practice, exposing both their potential and limitations. In Chapter 4, Mary Boatemaa Setrana, Justice Richard Kwabena Owusu Kyei, John Narh and Joseph Kofi Teye explore reciprocal skill exchange mechanisms in Ghana. Chapter 5, authored by Helen Schwenken and Johanna Ullmann, analyses the challenge of enhancing global labour market responsiveness in Germany. Turning to Southeast Asia, Geoffrey Ducanes, Maruja M.B. Asis and Maria Andrea Soco-Roda examine bilateral labour agreements and migrant worker protection in the Philippine context (Chapter 6). In Chapter 7, Homayoun Shirazi and Emma Bouillard delve into stakeholder engagement within Canada's skill corridors. The impact of crisis-driven migration is highlighted in Chapter 8, where Ivanna Kyliushyk, Iryna Lapshyna, Emil Chról and Valentyna Zasadko investigate the Ukrainian-Polish and Ukrainian-German MSCs during wartime. Mehdi Lahlou addresses Morocco's efforts to mobilise its skilled diaspora in Chapter 9, while S Irudaya Rajan and Varsha Joshi examine India's navigation of skill flows in Chapter 10. Together, these examples show how skilled migration plays out in complex, often politically sensitive environments, and how it can be aligned with national and local priorities.

The third part of the book turns towards innovation and future-facing strategies. It addresses the technological frontier of skill mobility from credentialing systems to the use of AI in matching and governance. In Chapter 11,

Izabela Grabowska and Agnieszka Bezat examine the optimum allocation of migrant skills in the context of increasing automation, arguing for integrated planning mechanisms that can better align migrant qualifications with labour market needs. Chapter 12, by Vidmantas Tūtlys, Jonathan Winterton and Violeta Cvetkoska (from Sister Project SKILLS4JUSTICE), explores how skill formation and mobility strategies can be aligned with sustainability and social justice goals, drawing insights from the SKILLS4JUSTICE project. Chapter 13, authored by Pavel Savov, Kinga Skorupska, Witold Sosnowski and Adam Wierzbicki, introduces AI-driven decision support systems and their potential to enhance fairness, responsiveness and data-informed governance in migration policy. Collectively, this part argues that future-ready migration corridors must integrate reliable data, digital recognition and human oversight to ensure just and efficient mobility. It pushes the discussion towards scalable and adaptive solutions for fair skilled migration governance in a world shaped by rapid technological and ecological transitions.

The conclusions of this manifesto emphasise the need for ethical, transparent and development-oriented infrastructures. It calls for coordinated action between countries of origin and destination to ensure that global skill flows contribute to shared prosperity, demographic sustainability and individual empowerment. The 13 theses offer a conceptual and practical framework for designing infrastructures that work for people, societies and economies alike.

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Part I

Migration skill corridors, skill mobility and talent partnerships and ethical recruitment

1 Migration Skill Corridors*

Godfried Engbersen and Julia Reinold

1.1 Introduction

Labour migration is undergoing significant transformations worldwide. Demographic shifts, technological advancements and geopolitical tensions are reshaping the global supply and demand for skills. In this context, the concept of *Migration Skill Corridors (MSCs)* has emerged as both an analytical lens and a policy instrument. In this chapter, we define skills as formally recognised qualifications, such as diplomas, which enable migrants to access and perform occupations requiring at least an intermediate (post-secondary non-tertiary) or higher level of education. MSCs refer to structured pathways for skilled mobility between countries of origin and destination. These corridors function not only as channels for the movement of people but also as institutional frameworks for the exchange of skills, talent and knowledge (Snel et al., 2024; Triandafyllidou et al., 2024). In the European Union (EU), securing skilled workers from outside the EU has become increasingly urgent as a consequence of ageing populations, shrinking labour forces and skill mismatches. These challenges have created and will continue to create shortages in key sectors like healthcare, ICT, construction and energy (European Labour Authority, 2025; Eurostat, 2023; United Nations, 2024). In the Netherlands, the Committee on Demographic Developments 2050 warns that a shrinking labour force could threaten the sustainability of public services. Meanwhile, labour migration from Eastern and Central Europe, a long-standing source of workforce support, is decreasing, as these countries themselves face ageing populations and increasing economic convergence (Pinkus & Ruer, 2025). While labour supply within the EU is contracting, countries such as India, Pakistan, Indonesia, the Philippines and many Sub-Saharan African nations are experiencing demographic expansion, marked by a large and growing young working-age population (WRR, 2025) faced with high youth unemployment and underutilised human capital (World Bank, 2023). These asymmetries point to

* *Thesis 1. Migration Skill Corridors can serve as strategic instruments to align global skill supply with labour market demand, provided they are embedded within fair, transparent and structured governance arrangements.*

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the potential of fair and sustainable labour migration frameworks that may support long-term cooperation between states and stakeholders. They can foster transnational skill ecosystems that enable the development and use of skills across borders.

This chapter is guided by the central thesis that MSCs represent an instrument for aligning global skill supply with labour market demand through fair, structured and mutually beneficial governance arrangements. Drawing on empirical insights from the Link4Skills project, especially the country profiles (Engbersen & Reinold, 2024; Huss, 2024; Kyliushyk et al., 2024; Monteiro & Triandafyllidou, 2024; Ullmann & Schwenken, 2024) and interviews with Dutch stakeholders, we define and critically examine the concept of MSCs, outline five key types as well as three cross-cutting dimensions and assess their potential relevance for skilled labour migration policy.

1.2 From migration corridors to Migration Skill Corridors

The concept of migration corridors is gaining relevance in the study of international migration. Migration corridors are 'dyads of origin and destination in which changing patterns (or the absence of migration) can be observed' (Bakewell et al., 2016, p. 10). Migration corridors refer to institutionalised migration routes that can span within a single country (Bredeloup & Pliez, 2011), across multiple countries (Kasparek, 2016) or take irregular forms in response to restrictive migration regimes (İçduygu, 2011).

The concept of migration corridors is also related to the literature on transnationalism. From a transnational perspective, migration is not a straightforward, linear movement from one country to another. Instead, it often results in enduring practices that connect migrants with individuals and organisations in their countries of origin or within their broader diaspora (Bilgili & Bivand Erdal, 2025). These practices encompass a wide range of cross-border economic, political and sociocultural activities. Transnational connections are shaped by political and economic actors, contexts and technological developments, aligning closely with the concept of migration corridors, particularly in the context of labour migration.

A structured approach to migration corridors is provided by Carling and Jolivet (2016), whose framework informs the Link4Skills project. Here, corridors are not empirical realities but analytical constructs. This approach has four advantages. First, it allows for the analysis of both high and low levels of migration activity. Second, it is not restricted to one-way flows and can include settlement, return and circular migration. Third, it often focuses on bi-national corridors due to the availability of nationally collected data and the centrality of national migration policies. Fourth, migration corridors provide a robust framework for analysing skilled migration. They integrate macro-level policies and economic trends with meso-level institutional arrangements and micro-level individual decision-making. This multi-level perspective enables a more

comprehensive understanding of how migration flows emerge and evolve (Snel et al., 2024).

Migration corridors are often the result of historical, economic and political ties, such as colonial relationships or labour recruitment systems. Growing skill shortages have furthermore resulted in the creation of new connections between countries. Germany, for instance, has recently developed a structured approach through its 'Triple Win' programme, recruiting nurses from countries like the Philippines, Indonesia and Tunisia, with which it does not have historical economic or colonial ties (Ullmann & Schwenken, 2024).[1] In contrast, the Netherlands has historical connections with Indonesia but lacks formal partnership programmes with this country. Skilled labour migration from Indonesia to the Netherlands is primarily facilitated through international recruitment agencies (Engbersen & Reinold, 2024).

1.3 Towards a typology of Migration Skill Corridors

A defining feature of a MSC is its multidimensional character. It operates across several layers:

- Macro-level: National migration policies, bilateral agreements, international legal frameworks and trade relationships.
- Meso-level: Agreements between subnational actors,[2] recruitment agencies, employers, vocational institutions and civil society actors.
- Micro-level: Migrants' individual aspirations, abilities, skills, networks and mobility decisions.

MSCs differ significantly in their structure and origins. To better understand their opportunities and limitations, it is useful to classify them according to their historical development, economic function and policy design. Such a typology provides a practical framework for analysing established MSCs and the development of emerging MSCs that respond to current labour market needs. In the following, we identify five types of MSCs: (1) post-colonial corridors, (2) post-'guest worker' corridors, (3) highly skilled corridors, (4) medium-skilled and sector-based corridors and (5) humanitarian corridors. We acknowledge that the boundaries between them are not always clear-cut and that different types can coexist.

It is important to view these MSCs from *a dynamic perspective*. The essence of a MSC approach is, on the one hand, to build on existing migration MSC, such as post-colonial or post-'guest worker' corridors, for skilled migration purposes, thereby transforming them into forms of highly skilled or skill-based corridors. On the other hand, it involves recognising and supporting the development of emerging corridors between countries that often have no historical ties with one another. This latter aspect primarily concerns highly skilled and skill-based MSCs.

1.3.1 Post-colonial corridors

These MSCs are embedded in the historical legacies of colonial rule and the enduring ties between former imperial powers and their colonies, with shared languages, legal and administrative systems (including preferential migration schemes), educational frameworks and established diasporic networks (Castles et al., 2014). Prominent examples include migration from Algeria to France, Suriname to the Netherlands and India to the UK. Migration within these corridors was in most cases spontaneously and initially driven by economic factors and later followed by family migration. Over time, they also became pathways for highly skilled migration. Indian skilled migrants, for instance, are highly visible in the UK's technology, healthcare and education sector. However, the legacy of post-colonial corridors is complex. While they have enabled mobility, they are also entangled in asymmetric power relations, which remain a concern including in partnerships for migration management (Chapter 5; Papademetriou & Hooper, 2022).

1.3.2 Post-'guest worker' corridors

In the post-war period, many European countries established guest worker programmes to support economic reconstruction and address labour shortages in construction, mining and industry (Castles et al., 2014). Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, for example, recruited temporary low-skilled workers from Southern European countries, Turkey, Morocco, Yugoslavia and Tunisia. While these corridors were initially framed as short-term and circular in nature, they gradually evolved into more permanent migration systems, giving rise to substantial second-generation migrant communities. Depending on the sector, men usually migrated first and were later joined by their spouses and families. It should be noted, however, that as time passed also women were recruited as single guest workers, especially in the textile and manufacturing sector (Castles et al., 2014).

Guest worker corridors laid important foundations for contemporary mobility. Institutional ties, bilateral labour agreements and migrant networks continue to shape migration dynamics today, including pathways for skilled migration. For instance, the Netherlands is now witnessing a modest but growing influx of skilled migrants from Turkey, often building on long-standing transnational connections (Odé et al., 2024).

1.3.3 Highly skilled corridors

These MSCs are designed to attract workers with advanced qualifications, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), IT and finance. They are facilitated through fast-track immigration schemes, such as the Netherlands' Highly Skilled Migrant Scheme (*Kennismigrantenregeling*) or the EU Blue Card. The India-Netherlands and India-Germany corridors exemplify these pathways, driven by demand in ICT and engineering sectors

(OECD, 2024). In addition, the Netherlands actively attracted Indian companies, which then brought Indian workers to the country in a second step, either as highly skilled migrants or as intra-corporate transferees. Companies in general play a crucial role in implementing highly skilled migration schemes that follow a demand-driven approach (Reinold, 2023).

Highly skilled migration is often seen as politically acceptable and economically beneficial. At the same time, it is criticised for framing migrants' educational level as a 'more acceptable face of discrimination' (Skeldon, 2018, p. 52) and for being insensitive to gendered aspects of work and migration (Boucher, 2018). Women have a reduced chance of entering a country as highly skilled migrants because they are less likely to meet income requirements due to labour market discrimination and reduced earnings linked to childbearing and caregiving (Boucher, 2018). Migrant women accompanying their highly skilled migrant partner often do not work in the destination despite oftentimes being highly educated themselves, translating into a substantial untapped potential (Kirk, 2018). Highly skilled migration schemes are furthermore vulnerable to abuse. In the Dutch case, where only a salary threshold applies, inspections have revealed migrants working in low-skilled jobs after arrival. Common abuses include paper sponsors,[3] forced salary kickbacks, short-term contracts and abrupt dismissals leading to loss of residence status and undocumented stay.

Attracting and retaining international students also feeds highly skilled migration corridors. Similarly, migration for education is often cited as one of the main reasons for leaving the origin country in the first place, as the example of Morocco (Chapter 9) shows. International students are often perceived as ideal individuals to retain, since they already became familiar with the culture, language and working environment of the destination country while studying. Those who secure employment in the Netherlands often transition to the knowledge migrant visa, provided they meet the requirements. To retain international students, the Netherlands (and various other European countries) have introduced an orientation year visa, which allows international graduates from Dutch higher education institutions or prestigious universities worldwide to look for employment in the Netherlands (IOM, 2025).

1.3.4 Medium-skilled and sector-based corridors

Medium-skilled and sector-based MSCs are designed to address labour shortages in specific economic sectors through targeted recruitment, training and mobility schemes. They often focus on occupations such as nurses, electricians, care workers, welders and ICT technicians with important gendered differences depending on the sector. In 2023, Germany, for example, adopted the *Act to Further Develop the Immigration of Skilled Workers* (*Gesetz zur Weiterentwicklung der Fachkräfteeinwanderung*) to simplify the recruitment and immigration of skilled workers from outside the EU.[4] This national law and the EU's external migration policy, particularly the development of Talent Partnerships, are closely aligned in their strategic goals, namely to promote

legal pathways for labour migration, strengthen cooperation with partner countries and address skill shortages in Europe in a mutually beneficial way.[5]

Germany's 'Triple Win' programme is an example of this model in practice (Ullmann & Schwenken, 2024). Since 2022, Austria has also been developing its own triple win-like approach through formal Memoranda of Understanding, sector-specific integration, revised immigration regulations and integration support. This involves cooperation with countries such as India, the Philippines and Indonesia to attract skilled workers in the fields of healthcare, technology and ICT (Huss, 2024).

Despite their potential, the implementation of medium-skilled and sector-based corridors remains limited in scale. Structural challenges persist, including coordination across actors and countries, recognition of foreign qualifications, the risk of skill flow from partner countries and remaining power asymmetries between origins and destinations (Chapter 5; Cörvers et al., 2021).[6]

1.3.5 Humanitarian corridors

These MSCs emerge primarily in response to humanitarian crises rather than through deliberate labour market planning. They bring in individuals with diverse skillsets, including highly skilled professionals. Over the past decades, Western Europe has received large numbers of asylum seekers from countries such as the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Syria and, more recently, Ukraine. These forced migration flows have established new linkages and transformed existing linkages between origin and destination countries.

The Ukraine-EU corridor, which developed following the Russian invasion in 2022, exemplifies this dynamic (Chapter 8). Initially framed under the Temporary Protection Directive (Council Directive 2001/55/EC), such flows often evolve into more enduring migration systems, particularly when host countries support labour market access (Kyliushyk et al., 2024), as in the case of fast-track procedures for the recognition of qualifications of Ukrainian (health) workers (EMN & OECD, 2024). A central debate in policy and practice concerns whether a work-first or settle and train-first approach better supports the long-term labour market integration of forced migrants (Chapter 8). Dutch and Polish experiences with the work-first approach suggest that Ukrainian forced migrants often find jobs quickly. These jobs, however, rarely match their qualifications due to language and other structural barriers (Chapter 8; Dagevos & Rusinovic, 2024).

To conclude, we identified five different types of MSCs, which can coexist and overlap. Each type offers policy opportunities and difficulties. Post-colonial and post-'guest worker' corridors benefit from deep-rooted ties but require reimagination to remain relevant. High-skilled and medium-skilled corridors show economic potential but must guard against brain drain. Humanitarian corridors highlight the need for flexibility in migration governance, particularly to enable refugees to access the labour market quickly and make full use

of their skills. Unlike other MSCs, the focus here is on activating the labour potential of refugees who are already present. The future of skilled labour mobility will depend on policymakers' ability to learn from each type of corridor and adapt their features to address emerging skill shortages.

1.4 Dimensions of Migration Skill Corridors

Each type of MSC introduced above can also be characterised alongside three different dimensions, namely, degree of establishment (emerging–established), governance (mainly governed by private–public actors) and degree of formality (ad hoc–structured) (see Figure 1.1).[7] These dimensions should serve as tools to categorise MSCs in more detail. The identified spectra refer to neutral observations and do not suggest any judgement on the quality of the corridor and its effectiveness in matching skill supply and demand. The three dimensions can also overlap and interrelate with one another.

1.4.1 Emerging vs established corridors

MSCs can be emerging or established. Emerging corridors are rather new and characterised by limited, though growing, numbers of migrants between two countries. A new corridor may emerge for different reasons, for example, through private actors exploring new markets and localities, states intensifying cooperation in certain areas, forced migration, migrant networks or – most likely – a combination of these and other factors. Over time, as migration within one corridor increases, becoming more significant and consistent, the corridor can be categorised as more established. Established corridors today are usually those with a longer history of migration between countries, for instance due to colonial

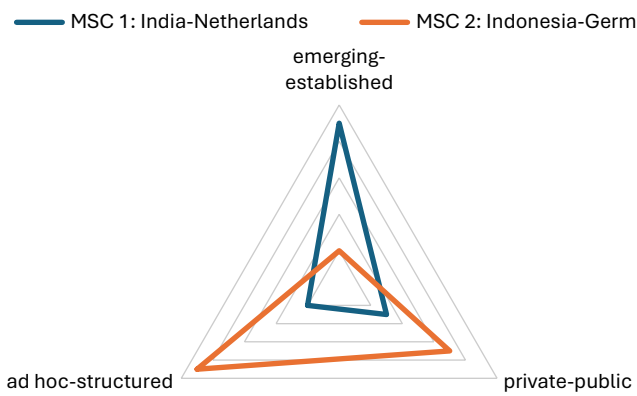

Figure 1.1 The three dimensions of Migration Skill Corridors.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

ties (e.g. India-UK) or former guest worker schemes (e.g. Morocco-Netherlands). This does not mean, however, that flows between countries are sustained indefinitely. They can also phase out again for various reasons. Restrictive immigration policies, fewer employment opportunities and unfavourable treatment of migrants have, for example, contributed to declining migration from Morocco to the Netherlands (Engbersen et al., 2016). This underlines the importance of comprehensive and ethical approaches to labour migration and integration, acknowledging that migrants are above all human beings with considerable agency and not mere instruments to address skills shortages in destinations.

1.4.2 Corridors led by private vs public actors

The second dimension relates to private and public actors facilitating migration within a corridor. On the one hand, MSCs can be produced by companies and private recruitment agencies that attract workers from abroad.[8] On the other hand, state-led initiatives, for example in the form of talent partnerships or bilateral agreements (Chapter 6), may encourage skilled migrants to move within a company. Balanced involvement of different actors seems most desirable as labour migration cannot work in the absence of state policies or firms' willingness and ability to recruit internationally (Reinold, 2023). Stakeholder engagement or consultation as in the case of Canada (Chapter 7) can furthermore ensure that immigration systems remain adaptive and in line with social and economic changes, thereby contributing to increased public support for immigration.

1.4.3 Ad hoc vs structured corridors

Third, migration within corridors can be the result of more spontaneous ad hoc initiatives or more structured approaches. Ad hoc initiatives are occasional attempts to encourage migration in response to current labour market needs. The activities of international recruitment agencies are a good example of this. Structured approaches refer to more long-term initiatives that facilitate the migration of consecutive cohorts of skilled workers, thereby addressing more structural skill shortages. They have the potential of providing more stability and sustainability. While limited in scope, the German 'Triple Win' project is an example for a more structured corridor (see Chapter 5).

1.4.4 Examples

Figure 1.1 visualises the three dimensions of MSCs, which can move from emerging (inside of the radar) to established (outside of the radar), from private (inside) to public-led initiatives (outside) and from ad hoc initiatives (inside) to structured (outside) programmes. To illustrate these ideas, we first apply it to the Indian-Dutch MSC (MSC1 with solid line) and the Indonesian-German

MSC (MSC2 with dashed line). The Indian-Dutch MSC can be characterised as rather established, ad hoc and private-led. Indians make up the largest group of non-European labour migrants and the second largest group of non-European students in the Netherlands, mostly in STEM sectors. Indian migration to the Netherlands mostly happens spontaneously through the Highly Skilled Migrant Scheme and intra-corporate transfers and is thus mostly led by the private sector. Nevertheless, public actors such as Dutch municipalities also have a role to play. This is illustrated by the MoU between The Hague and Karnataka, and initiatives by other municipalities to welcome and integrate highly skilled Indian migrants (Engbersen & Reinold, 2024).

The second example is taken from the Indonesian-German MSC. This corridor can be described as emerging as numbers of skilled Indonesian migrants in Germany are rather low, though increasing. The migration of Indonesian healthcare workers is facilitated by the 'Triple Win' project, governed and implemented mostly by public actors (e.g., public employment agencies, GIZ, Goethe-Institut). Increasingly, Indonesian healthcare workers are also recruited independently by German hospitals, indicating also growing involvement of the private sector. While Indonesia was only incorporated into 'Triple Win' recently, the project is already counting 12 years of experience in other countries, suggesting a more structured and sustainable approach to MSCs (GIZ, n.d.; Ullmann & Schwenken, 2024).

1.5 Policy relevance of Migration Skill Corridors for skilled labour mobility

The policy relevance of MSCs lies in their ability to offer a proactive and structured approach to attracting, integrating and retaining skilled migrants. This presumes that countries make deliberate choices about the extent to which they can utilise and activate existing corridors, or whether new corridors need to be developed. Existing corridors can facilitate the reception of skilled migrants, as they can build on established migrant networks and an existing ethnic infrastructure. This is not the case for emerging corridors. However, it should be noted that there can be a mismatch between existing migrant networks and infrastructures in destination countries and the characteristics of new skilled migrants. Yet, for both established and emerging corridors, their relevance is underscored by five key rationales: strategic workforce planning, fair and development-oriented migration, international cooperation, skills recognition and political legitimacy.

1.5.1 Strategic workforce planning

In response to Europe's declining working-age population, MSCs allow for long-term partnerships between countries. By identifying specific countries or regions of origin and linking migration more closely to labour market

forecasts, these corridors can help reduce mismatches between supply and demand. Germany's partnership with the Philippines to recruit nurses, or Austria's cooperation with Indonesia, are examples of how countries are trying to respond in a more coordinated way to chronic shortages. These agreements make it possible to invest in language courses, professional licensing and more targeted support for new arrivals, elements that are often missing in more ad hoc approaches. For example, while a broad network of expat and international centres in the Netherlands provides support for companies and highly skilled migrants in general, MSCs would allow for the provision of more specific information and support services, including in the migrants' native language as seen in the case of recent inflows from Ukraine. Besides, MSCs may stimulate the formation of migrant networks and infrastructures, such as associations and cultural facilities, which, alongside initiatives by employers and national and local governments, ease the incorporation process of newcomers in destination countries (Bilgili & Bivand Erdal, 2025).

MSC-based policies also offer space to support medium-skilled workers. These are professions that are often overlooked in high-skilled migration schemes and labour migration schemes more generally, but they are essential to the functioning of society, think of nursing assistants, technicians in heating and ventilation, or installers of solar panels. By investing in these roles, MSCs can contribute to both demographic resilience and the broader transitions Europe is facing in healthcare, housing and energy.

1.5.2 Ethical recruitment and rights-based frameworks

MSCs also serve as instruments for advancing fair labour migration. In contrast to exploitative or informal recruitment practices, structured corridors, as in the case of the German 'Triple Win' programme, can embed legal protections, fair wages and social support for migrant workers. They offer a governance framework where accountability can be distributed among governments, employers and recruiters.

Structured corridors can also be used to implement key international commitments, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, ILO Conventions to protect migrant rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8.8 on protecting labour rights and promoting safe working environments (De Lange et al., 2022, Chapter 3). Importantly, structured corridors also involve considerations for reintegration and return. In circular migration models, returnees should have access to recognition of acquired skills, support in job placement and career pathways in their home countries. Without these features, circular migration risks becoming extractive rather than developmental, which is especially problematic in the case of humanitarian corridors where the recovery of the origin country depends on the return of skilled individuals (see Chapter 8).

1.5.3 Bilateral agreements and multilateral coordination

MSCs offer a concrete platform for bilateral labour agreements grounded in International and European Law to protect the rights of migrant workers. These agreements, when rooted in mutual interests, can formalise the responsibilities of both origin and destination countries in areas such as visa issuance, social security portability, diploma recognition and dispute resolution. As the case of the Philippines shows, such agreements should be dynamic and open for periodic reviews, renegotiations and revisions to ensure the protection of migrant workers (see Chapter 6).

Countries like Austria, Germany and Canada have developed bilateral mobility frameworks that include components of training, recruitment quotas and skill certification (Huss, 2024; Monteiro & Triandafyllidou, 2024; Ullmann & Schwenken, 2024). The European Commission's Talent Partnerships are another multilateral attempt to scale such corridors across the EU, though implementation remains uneven. Furthermore, MSCs can be embedded in international cooperation for development. By linking migration to vocational training, diaspora engagement and capacity building, corridors can support sustainable development in origin countries. This aligns with the EU's commitment to coherence between migration and development policies.

Papademetriou and Hooper (2022), however, warn that

> There remains a real gap between rhetoric and practice in the partnership approach. Partnerships remain transactional and deeply asymmetrical – designed, steered and funded by destination countries, and (unsurprisingly) focusing on destination-country priorities, such as cooperation on controlling onward irregular migration and returns with little attention paid to origin or transit-country priorities such as expanding legal migration opportunities and deeper investments on issues that matter to them.
>
> (p. 131)

It is of crucial importance to overcome these asymmetries for MSCs to become truly fair, sustainable and mutually beneficial for all parties involved. This will be a challenge given current political developments in many destination countries, where even traditionally more accepted forms of migration like highly skilled migration and international student mobility are becoming more and more contested.

1.5.4 Bridging the skills gap through recognition and mobility

A key bottleneck in skilled labour migration is the non-recognition of foreign qualifications. MSCs can address this by facilitating mutual accreditation mechanisms, competency-based assessments and modular training programmes.

For example, Austria's recruitment of healthcare workers involves pre-departure training that aligns with national nursing curricula. Similarly, Germany's chambers of commerce have worked with partner countries to harmonise vocational education standards.

Digital tools, such as the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees and blockchain-based certification, offer new possibilities for scaling recognition across borders. These should be integrated into corridor agreements to ensure that migrants are not stuck in underemployment due to paperwork or bureaucratic barriers. Corridors can also support 'mobility chains', where migrants who gain work experience in one EU country may later move to another within the Schengen area. An advantage of this is that highly mobile talent remains within the EU and can seize better opportunities in other EU Member States. This requires harmonised standards and coordination across responsible ministries, a task that corridors can facilitate through regional frameworks. At the same time, such mobility chains can also be problematic as the phenomenon of posted workers illustrates. Posted workers are sent by their employers to work in another EU Member State. Untransparent practices and lack of enforcement can lead to the abuse and exploitation of posted workers, who are highly dependent on their employers, including for their residence permit in case of third-country nationals (Advisory Council on Migration, 2024). For companies who employ highly skilled migrants in the traditional sense, chain migration may mean that investments made to attract and train workers are lost if they leave the company again after a short time. Retention of highly skilled migrant workers has been identified as a key challenge for Dutch small and medium-sized enterprises (Reinold, 2023).

1.5.5 Enhancing political and public legitimacy

Migration from third countries remains a politically sensitive issue in many EU countries. Well-managed MSCs that engage various stakeholders can enhance public trust by making migration more transparent, predictable and development oriented. By showing that migration serves mutual interests, economic growth, skills development and global cooperation, MSCs can reduce fears of uncontrolled inflows or social dumping.

In the Netherlands, for example, political resistance has so far limited the development of migration pathways for medium-skilled workers, despite growing demand from sectors such as healthcare and construction. In response, the Dutch Advisory Council on Migration has called for stronger government leadership and a more coherent strategic vision for labour migration. Such a vision should be aligned with the broader objective of '*brede welvaart*', a concept that emphasises comprehensive well-being, including social cohesion, economic resilience and long-term societal sustainability. By offering a more structured and transparent approach, MSCs enable policymakers to monitor key outcomes, such as employment rates, wage development and integration trajectories, and to adjust policies accordingly. This capacity for adaptive

governance enhances not only the effectiveness but also the public legitimacy of labour migration systems.

1.6 Conclusion and discussion

In this chapter, we have argued that MSCs have the potential to align the labour market needs of European countries with the skills of migrants from outside Europe. When designed and implemented well, MSCs can be a promising strategy to address skill shortages while also supporting development goals in both origin and destination countries. However, translating this vision into practice is far from straightforward. A range of challenges complicates implementation, and these must be addressed for corridors to evolve into sustainable and inclusive frameworks.

A key concern is that, if not properly regulated, both established and emerging MSCs risk reinforcing global inequalities. They can lead to the outflow of health workers, teachers and engineers from low-income countries that are already facing critical shortages in these sectors. Such mobility patterns may undermine essential public services and hinder local development. To prevent corridors from becoming extractive, it is essential to embed strong safeguards and ensure sustained investment in education and training systems in countries of origin. The Dutch case also illustrates how the Highly Skilled Migrant Scheme can be misused, placing migrants in highly vulnerable positions. This form of abuse must also be addressed.

Equally important is the principle of reciprocity. Effective MSCs must be built as partnerships rather than one-sided arrangements. This requires the active involvement of origin countries in the design and governance of training schemes, recruitment processes and reintegration opportunities. Policy models such as the Global Skills Partnerships show how destination countries can support the development of human capital at origin in exchange for structured migration flows. Similarly, Germany's 'Triple Win' programme demonstrates how pre-departure training, cultural orientation and alignment with destination-country standards can generate mutual benefit. Reciprocity also entails developing pathways for return and reintegration, enabling migrants to apply their acquired skills and experiences in their home countries, thus enhancing the developmental impact of migration.

Although the 'Triple Win' concept, benefiting origin countries, destination countries and migrants, is conceptually appealing, its realisation is fraught with difficulty. In practice, destination countries often derive the greatest benefit, while migrants face barriers to employment and rights, and origin countries lose valuable human capital. It is therefore crucial to constantly assess whose interests are being served with different arrangements.[9] Without strong accountability mechanisms and genuine partnership, the triple win remains more rhetorical than real.

Among the most persistent bottlenecks is the recognition of foreign qualifications. Skilled migrants are often unable to work in their trained profession due

to slow, opaque, inconsistent or highly demanding credentialing processes in the destination country. This can make recognition cumbersome, even in sectors with acute labour shortages. The consequence is underemployment, loss of motivation and reduced returns on investment for the migrant, their country of origin and employer. Addressing this issue requires the inclusion of bridging programmes, fast-track procedures and common standards for assessing qualifications within corridor agreements. The corridor approach also offers opportunities for supporting migrants with language acquisition, which is another common hurdle for highly skilled migrants' economic and social integration.

Finally, while many corridor initiatives have shown promise in pilot stages, relatively few have been scaled into long-term, systematised programmes. To move beyond small-scale experiments, MSCs must be embedded into broader labour and migration strategies, supported by stable governance frameworks and cross-sectoral engagement of national and local governments, employers, education and training institutions, etc. Without such integration, they risk remaining isolated initiatives with limited reach.

In sum, MSCs hold potential as pragmatic tools for organising international mobility of skilled workers, but their success hinges on how they are designed, governed and implemented. Building reciprocal partnerships in line with International and European Law (Chapter 3), ensuring fair and efficient administrative processes, and scaling effective practices are essential steps towards realising their promise. Only through such efforts can MSCs contribute meaningfully to both workforce resilience and equitable development.

Notes

1 https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/41533.html
2 For example, Karnataka The Hague Innovation Corridor MoU between the Municipality of The Hague and the Department of IT, BT and S&T, Government of Karnataka, for collaboration in fields of Health, Cybersecurity, Agri-tech and Peace and Justice. Another example is the MoU on the deployment of healthcare professionals signed between the Philippines, the City of Vienna and the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber in July 2023 (see Huss, 2024).
3 Migrants establish their own companies and use them to 'employ' themselves under the scheme, an arrangement De Boer (2024) refers to as the 'Von Münchhausen construction'. See https://www.nlarbeidsinspectie.nl/publicaties/jaarverslagen/2025/03/20/jaarverslag-2024
4 Bundesgesetzblatt (2023). Gesetz zur Weiterentwicklung der Fachkräfteeinwanderung. *Bundesgesetzblatt I*, Nr. 217, 2294–2312. https://www.recht.bund.de/bgbl/1/2023/217/VO.html
5 Introduced in 2020 as part of the *New Pact on Migration and Asylum*, Talent Partnerships aim to create legal pathways for labour migration by linking skills development in third countries with labour market needs in EU Member States. These partnerships integrate vocational training, capacity building and job matching, and are implemented through cooperation between public and private actors – including governments, employers, training institutions and civil society organisations.

6 Moreover, asymmetrical power relations between destination and origin states raise concerns about who ultimately benefits from such mobility (Papademetriou & Hooper, 2022).
7 It is possible that during the course of the Link4Skills research project, as we arrive at more advanced empirical findings, further dimensions will come into the radar.
8 Private actors can also indirectly influence MSCs through offshoring (that is, relocating operations abroad), which, for example, may occur through (1) recruiting workers who are based abroad and work remotely, (2) establishing partnerships with foreign companies or (3) opening branch offices abroad (Colombo et al., 2024). Offshoring to near and far places can be a substitute for labour migration where the costs of migration are too high for migrants and employers. It can possibly also encourage migration as workers gain knowledge about the employer's origin country. The Ukrainian-Dutch MSC provides an interesting example for how offshoring can turn into actual migration at the event of crisis. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Dutch employers who had previously offshored operations to Ukraine chartered buses to bring their Ukrainian employees to the Netherlands.
9 For example, recruitment agencies may benefit more from circular migration programmes than employers or migrants themselves.

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2 Skills Mobility Partnerships*

Addressing global skills shortages more fairly?

Caitlin Katsiaficas and Sabeth Kessler

2.1 Introduction

Employers across the European Union (EU) are facing widespread and severe labour shortages – particularly with regard to certain professions, including truck drivers, nursing professionals, doctors, electricians, roofers, waiters and construction workers (European Labour Authority, 2024) – with important implications for European economies and societies. While immediate labour shortages often receive the most attention, future skills needs, including those related to the digital and green transitions, remain important to address. Labour and skills shortages are set to further increase across the EU, with the ageing and shrinking of the EU population as a main driver of this dynamic (Business Europe, 2023). Labour migration is one tool to address these shortages and foster growth and innovation by widening the talent pool from which employers can recruit and enabling them to access new skills and ideas (Triandafyllidou et al., 2024, pp. 8–9).

Skills shortages are, and will continue to be, a challenge not only for destination countries in Europe and elsewhere, but also for many countries of origin. Many middle-income countries from which migrants have gone to Europe are now facing shrinking and ageing populations themselves (World Bank, 2023). Meanwhile, lower-income countries are experiencing growing youth populations, while often lacking the resources necessary to invest in education and training structures that would enable their populations to compete globally (World Bank, 2023) and help meet their nation's own needs and policy goals. Additionally, traditional international recruitment models often benefit destination countries disproportionately, potentially leading to brain drain that can have negative development impacts for countries of origin, especially as certain essential sectors, such as healthcare, are frequently targeted (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017a, p. 131; World Bank, 2023, pp. 10, 138; International Monetary Fund, 2016, p. 191).

* *Thesis 2. Skills Mobility Partnerships are a promising tool for addressing global skills shortages and mismatches more fairly.*

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In response to these challenges, there is growing momentum behind Skills Mobility Partnerships (SMPs) and similar frameworks such as Global Skill Partnerships and Talent Partnerships,[1] which combine skills development, mobility and mutual benefit for destination and origin countries. In promoting international cooperation and mutual benefits for migrants, employers and both sending and receiving countries, SMPs can support a fairer global skills flow. SMPs combine skills development with mobility, which, depending on the design of the particular initiative, helps migrants access language instruction, employment-related training, career opportunities, higher income and/or (re)integration support, while facilitating employers' access to a wider talent pool to meet their skills needs and providing assistance with the mobility process. Countries of origin stand to gain remittances, knowledge and technology transfer, economic investment, improved skills development infrastructure and/or an expanded pool of talent available locally, while destination countries are able to fill labour shortages for shorter or longer periods and strengthen their economies and social systems (Business Advisory Group on Migration, 2024; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2023).

Based on the available literature, the Link4Skills partnership inventory and ICMPD's practical experience, this chapter assesses both the current shortcomings and the potential of SMPs. The chapter proceeds as follows: It first discusses the Link4Skills partnership inventory methodology, which is followed by an examination of traditional approaches to labour migration and limitations when it comes to considering the needs of and benefits for all parties. It argues that traditional approaches to labour migration often fall short in ensuring equitable and reciprocal opportunities for countries of origin, countries of destination and participants. The chapter continues with a brief overview of ethical recruitment frameworks and other efforts to protect migrant workers. This is followed by insights into the findings of the Link4Skills partnership inventory, arguing that in contrast to other policy approaches, SMPs may constitute a more promising tool to address global skills shortages and mismatches more fairly. The chapter then outlines key challenges of SMPs that must be addressed to realise the full potential of SMPs in offering mutual benefits. It concludes with a set of recommendations for enhancing SMPs' impact and advancing fair, mutually beneficial labour migration.

2.2 Methodology

The Link4Skills project developed a partnership inventory, on which this chapter draws, in order to better understand existing governmental SMPs. The inventory contains 153 initiatives, offering valuable insights into the design and aims of SMPs. This includes a focus on how SMPs are structured with an aim to facilitate the fairer global matching of skills, contributing to the knowledge base on how this increasingly popular policy tool is being conceptualised.

This inventory mapped government-to-government partnerships that combine skills development with mobility, including bilateral and multilateral agreements, memoranda of understanding (MoUs), projects, programmes and other formal arrangements.[2] It includes partnerships that involve at least one Link4Skills project country (Austria, Canada, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Morocco, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland and Ukraine), as well as EU-wide initiatives, within the timeframe of January 2015 to April 2025. The inventory includes separate entries for initiatives that operate in tandem; for example, several pilot projects were launched following the announcement of the EU-Morocco Mobility Partnership, and each agreement and project is treated individually. Because the inventory includes both political and practical initiatives, there is some overlap (e.g. programmes that are based on a series of bilateral agreements); in these cases, the larger number of inventory entries may skew the overall trends identified. For instance, Canada's Young Professional Programme has 28 entries, 1 for the programme itself and 27 for the related bilateral agreements. The development of the inventory was based on extensive desk research, drawing on publicly available primary sources such as international agreements, MoUs, project websites and news articles, as well as secondary sources including academic publications, policy analyses and project evaluations. The team collected information about each initiative's governance, design and implementation, such as the partnership type, countries involved, target sectors, eligibility criteria, duration of mobility, type of training and (re)integration support specified.

While the inventory offers a robust evidence base, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the dataset only includes initiatives that involve at least one of the project countries, whether as a country of origin or destination, and EU-level agreements. Second, the inventory is limited to government-to-government partnerships (at the local, regional, national and supranational levels). Although some of these include private sector actors, the exclusion of public-private and private-to-private initiatives inevitably excludes some partnerships at the skills-mobility nexus. The same can be said with regard to civil society. Third, the mapping concentrated on initiatives with a clear and structured practical skilling element. Thus, while study-related internship programmes, for example, were included, the inventory does not cover SMPs that only include academic university study, such as student exchanges or scholarship programmes. Working holiday programmes were also excluded because there was no work or skilling requirement as part of the design. Fourth, the inventory focused on partnership design, meaning that less attention was paid to outcomes and impact here; data on participation in skilling and mobility were gathered where possible. Finally, the depth of information available varies considerably across initiatives. Detailed data on design, implementation and outcomes are often particularly scarce for high-level agreements and for newer initiatives that have not yet undergone evaluation. These limitations may affect the broader applicability of the findings; however, the methodology employed was rigorous and comprehensive and provides a sizable picture of the SMP landscape.

2.3 Approaches to addressing skills shortages via mobility

This section critically examines current approaches to addressing skills shortages via mobility. To guide this discussion, we pose several key questions that reflect underlying tensions and limitations in existing frameworks: How do skills mobility schemes benefit countries of origin, countries of destination, employers and migrants? How are the costs and benefits of migration distributed? What are the long-term impacts on all parties?

Traditional approaches to labour migration often focus either on the needs of the destination country or more specifically on the needs of the employer in the destination country. For instance, in employer-driven models, a job offer is a prerequisite for international mobility and employer sponsorship is central to the visa process and the ability to maintain residency rights (Wright et al., 2016). At the same time, government policies both offer flexibility and set certain conditions regarding whom employers may recruit (Knoll, 2024). Recruitment may be limited, or eased, by sectoral quotas, nationality, labour market tests or shortage occupation lists, which aim to reflect national workforce needs (Bauböck & Ruhs, 2021; Knoll, 2024) and protect domestic workers. In contrast, points-based systems take more general skills considerations into account, granting points for education, professional experience, language skills and other factors. These may award a certain number of points for a job offer, making those with offers more competitive. Thus, points-based systems can combine immediate destination-country labour market demand with longer-term development of the country's talent pool. Concerns related to integration, whether into the labour market or society more generally, have led some countries to prioritise applicants with a job offer or prior work or study experience in the country (Papademetriou & Hooper, 2019, p. 2). Some countries using employer-driven systems have begun using points tests when evaluating employer-sponsored applications, and the majority of both employer-driven and points-based labour migration systems consider labour market and human capital factors (Papademetriou & Hooper, 2019, p. 2). In both approaches, considerations centre on the concerns of destination countries, not origin countries.

These two approaches focus on existing skills and experiences, often developed (and invested in) by the origin country. Current European labour migration channels overall favour those deemed 'highest skilled' (Knoll, 2024), meaning that many incoming labour migrants were first trained to a high level elsewhere before using their skills and experience in destination countries. Imbalances in where skills are developed, by whom they are funded and where they are ultimately used raise questions about fairness at the systems level.

At the same time, migration contributes to building skills, as skills are not static. Migration can support the development of human and social capital in several ways. It may enable the acquisition of valued professional experience. Additionally, through exposure to another culture, adjusting to a new environment and overcoming challenges, migration can foster interpersonal skills. In this way, skills are not only prerequisites but also outcomes of migration

(Triandafyllidou et al., 2024, p. 5). Migration offers a chance to gain new professional, practical, linguistic and soft skills, although possibilities can vary by migration duration and employment type (ETF, 2024). Even those practicing the same job abroad have reported learning opportunities, including (re)training and learning from new colleagues (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2024). Nonetheless, skills may be more or less transferable or useful for addressing skills shortages in the country of origin or destination. In cases where migrants are unable to fully apply their skills during migration or after return, benefits for all parties will be more limited.

There are certainly other ways in which mobility and skills intersect to meet labour market needs. International students may remain in their country of study after graduation and transition to a work-based residence permit, while trainings for migrants already in the destination country may provide re-skilling or up-skilling opportunities to reflect evolving skills needs in the labour market. In these cases, the destination country plays a larger role in preparing individuals for employment in the country by investing in and conducting employment-related training. Still, employer-driven and points-based systems are more common approaches that governments rely on to secure needed skills through international mobility.

Lower skilled migration is usually distinct from points-based models and typically more regulated than general employer-sponsored migration. It is often facilitated through temporary mobility schemes such as seasonal work programmes and bilateral labour agreements (and previously, guest worker arrangements) (Knoll, 2024). These channels primarily serve to address short-term labour shortages in destination countries, with limited emphasis on long-term settlement or skills development. While workers can gain on-the-job experience, most programmes do not prioritise up-skilling or the transfer of skills to origin countries, raising broader questions of fairness, transparency and justice, particularly for migrants from lower-income countries (Hooper & Le Coz, 2020; Lenard & Straehle, 2010). That said, some such initiatives are designed to bring development benefits for origin countries. Australia's Seasonal Worker Program, for example, includes optional add-on skills training, with 91% of participants reporting improved employment prospects upon return to their home country (World Bank, 2018). In addition, New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer programme has introduced soft skills and financial management modules, while one of the implementers of the UK's Seasonal Workers Pilot is targeting agriculture students to combine income generation with further skills development (Hooper & Le Coz, 2020). These efforts suggest that temporary, lower-skilled migration channels could make a more meaningful contribution to development if designed intentionally.

Discussions on labour migration and development point out the potential development benefits of migration for countries of origin, such as reducing labour market pressures due to high unemployment rates (OECD, 2017a, p. 214); setting the stage for the sending of remittances and the transfer of ideas and investments (World Bank, 2025); and higher wages, spending and economic growth (Clemens et al., 2019, p. 4). In the longer term, migration can

boost human capital in origin countries by incentivising investments in education, particularly if returning migrants' knowledge and experience are harnessed and emigration rates are moderate (World Bank, 2024b, pp. 2, 14). Mobility indeed makes such benefits possible, yet generally speaking these have not been specific aims of destination-country labour migration systems. Meanwhile, migrants contribute to countries of destination by providing needed skills and labour and paying into taxation systems, thus funding public infrastructure (Clemens et al., 2019, p. 4), contributions that can lead to net welfare gains (World Bank, 2024b, p. 2). They also contribute to population growth (World Bank, 2024b, p. 6). Returning migrants can increase productivity and job creation in countries of origin (World Bank, 2024a, p. 184).

Conversely, challenges for countries of origin include a loss of return on investment in education and loss of skilled workers that may disproportionately impact certain high-priority sectors (e.g. healthcare, construction and information and communications technology), leading to a shortage of expertise and contributing to reduced economic growth. According to the World Bank, emigrants from the majority of European and Central Asian countries are higher skilled than those who stay; their departure shrinks the talent pool in countries of origin (World Bank, 2024b). In destination countries, challenges with the recognition of foreign qualifications and local language proficiency are two barriers that can hinder migrants in putting their skills to full use (World Bank, 2024b, p. 7; OECD, 2017b). While migration brings net economic gains in Europe, it does bring financial costs for destination countries, both real and perceived; it can also pose challenges related to integration, particularly in cases where there are large numbers of new migrant workers (World Bank, 2024b, pp. 6–7). At the end of the day, it is clear that the development impact of migration, and how mutually beneficial it is, hinges on how it is governed (Angenendt et al., 2023, p. 8; World Bank, 2024b) – as well as on the decisions of migrants themselves, for instance on whether to remain abroad in the longer term (Hooper, 2019, p. 2).

What about fairness for migrants? In recent decades, the rise of private recruitment agencies – particularly in the context of international labour migration – has raised concerns about exploitative practices. These agencies, often profit-driven, may charge excessive fees and expose migrant workers to rights violations and debt (Open Working Group on Labour Migration and Recruitment, 2015). However, challenges in labour migration governance extend beyond recruitment practices. Labour mobility schemes may restrict migrants' ability to switch employers and can increase their vulnerability to the abuse of power and exploitation, as their residence rights are contingent on their employment (Lenard & Straehle, 2010; Wright et al., 2016). Furthermore, as also pointed out in the typology of the German case (see Chapter 5), some frameworks treat labour migrants as commodities, focusing on specific short-term labour market needs of the more affluent destination country. Current models also often fail to invest in the skills development or long-term integration of migrants, relying instead on the workers themselves or their countries of origin for training and preparation. Moreover, labour migration schemes

would benefit from strategic long-term approaches and an increased focus on fundamental issues such as poor working conditions and worker well-being (Hooper et al., 2025).

Ethical recruitment has gained traction as an approach to addressing regulatory gaps and protecting workers (see Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion). Although there is no single definition, ethical recruitment generally refers to a lawful, fair and transparent hiring process, particularly for migrant workers, that upholds international human and labour rights (IOM, 2025; Open Working Group on Labour Migration and Recruitment, 2015). It aims to prevent exploitation, coercion, discrimination, recruitment fees and document confiscation, while ensuring that recruitment is voluntary, informed and free of deception. At its core, ethical recruitment seeks to balance the needs of employers with the rights and well-being of workers and to reduce inhumane recruitment methods, human trafficking and forced labour (IOM, 2019; World Employment Confederation, 2019). To support ethical recruitment, various standards and initiatives have been introduced, including the International Labour Organisation's Fair Recruitment Initiative, IOM's International Recruitment Integrity System and the World Employment Confederation's Code of Conduct, as well as sector-specific initiatives such as the Fair Labour Association's Fair Labor Code for Manufacturing and the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel. Despite such efforts, significant structural issues persist, and human rights abuses in migrant recruitment processes continue as gaps in law, policy and practice are exploited (Open Working Group on Labour Migration and Recruitment, 2015; World Employment Confederation, 2019). At the same time, government and international organisations have increasingly introduced pre-departure trainings and rights-based orientations into mobility schemes, seeking to mitigate these risks (IOM, 2025). Indonesia, Nepal and the Philippines, for instance, have all introduced national pre-departure frameworks to equip their nationals with essential skills and information to safely obtain employment abroad (Asis & Agunias, 2012).

Although the WHO's Global Code of Practice has also been criticised for its degree of implementation, which is partly linked to its voluntary nature, and for its monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (Brugha & Crowe, 2015; Tankwanchi et al., 2014), it nevertheless deserves special attention. In contrast to other approaches, the WHO Code goes beyond individual worker protection to also consider the broader, system-level impacts of international hiring practices, particularly on countries of origin. In particular, it aims to ensure that healthcare, a key sector, is not weakened by the departure of skilled professionals. Thus, the Code advises against active recruitment from countries already facing critical labour shortages or of workers holding existing domestic contractual obligations. It emphasises the importance of strengthening health systems in origin countries and asserts that destination countries should contribute to long-term capacity building in origin countries via technical or financial support. The Code also promotes circular migration to help reach a

more equitable balance, allowing workers to gain international experience while also supporting their origin country (WHO, 2024). In this sense, ethical recruitment is not only viewed as protecting individual rights but also as fostering fairness and sustainability within global labour mobility systems.

In contrast, SMPs are designed to go beyond traditional labour migration frameworks and ethical recruitment practices by promoting a joint, more balanced and development-sensitive model. They typically involve multi-stakeholder cooperation addressing the specific skills needs of both origin and destination countries, seeking not only to avoid 'brain drain' but also foster 'brain gain' by investing in education and training (European Migration Network [EMN] & OECD, 2022). In other words, beyond ethically recruiting from the available pool of skills, they are generally working proactively to develop the available pool of skills. Training and other related costs are typically covered by destination-country actors such as public bodies (e.g. national and local governments), international entities (e.g. the EU) and the private sector (e.g. future employers), rather than by the origin country or migrants themselves. This contrasts with other approaches to labour migration and can contribute to a better skills match and a more equitable distribution of the costs and benefits of migration. SMPs ultimately aim to achieve a more sustainable, 'quadruple win' outcome, benefiting migrants, countries of origin, countries of destination and employers, all while striving for long-term development impact beyond individual mobility (EMN & OECD, 2022).

2.4 Review contribution

The Link4Skills partnership inventory not only fills a gap in the literature but also provides a valuable empirical foundation for understanding current trends and practices in SMPs. The inventory identified 153 initiatives that met the eligibility criteria. These insights inform the analysis presented in the following sections, complemented by additional research and ICMPD's practical experience in the areas of international partnerships, labour mobility and (re)integration, contributing to the broader discourse on migration and development policy.

2.5 Findings: SMPs go a step further in facilitating a fairer movement of skills, yet face key challenges

Despite significant heterogeneity across these initiatives, several patterns and trends were identified in the partnership inventory:

- Agreements are the most common type of partnership, with formal bilateral and multilateral agreements the most frequent (64 initiatives), followed by MoUs and other arrangements including declarations of intent and memorandums of cooperation (32). After agreements, projects are the most common (38), followed by programmes (15) and other types of initiatives (4).

- In terms of sectoral focus, 48 initiatives are open to participants from any sector, 39 do not specify a targeted sector, 43 focus on a single sector and 23 target multiple sectors. The most frequently targeted sector is healthcare (29 initiatives), followed by construction (14), information and communications technology (11), agriculture (7) and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (6).
- A notable emphasis is placed on the participation of younger individuals: 56 initiatives specify a particular age range (often those who are 18 to 30–35 years old). In addition, 52 target recent graduates, 18 address current students and 1 is designed for young professionals, with some overlaps across these categories. Most initiatives do not specifically target underrepresented populations; however, six initiatives focus on enhancing women's participation and two of these six also target the involvement of persons with disabilities.
- Regarding the duration of mobility, the majority of initiatives support short-term mobility (80) or medium-term mobility (79), while long-term mobility is planned by 42 initiatives and circular migration by 22. There is some overlap, as many SMPs facilitate more than one mobility duration type.
- In terms of skilling, 122 initiatives provide some form of on-the-job training, including vocational training[3] (32), internships (28), apprenticeships (10) and traineeships (6), with the highest number focused on employment itself (48).
- Support for social integration in the destination country is specified for 62 initiatives. Of these, 45 offer language courses, 9 provide cultural training, 2 include mentoring schemes and 2 feature buddy programmes. Reintegration support is offered by 25 initiatives; this includes assistance with the job search (9), additional skills training, for example in CV writing and interview preparation (7), entrepreneurship support (7), professional guidance or mentorships (5), financial support (5), networking (4) and reintegration opportunities at the initial employer (1).

The inventory identified different ways in which SMPs design mobility to achieve mutual benefit. First, some schemes use home and abroad tracks, whereby some participants move abroad, while others remain in the country of origin. Other schemes enable mobility for all participants. Second, where mobility takes place, there are three main types of mobility design:

1 Return foreseen. The SMP facilitates short-term, medium-term and/or circular mobility.
2 Mixed-duration mobility planned. The SMP enables a combination of long-term mobility and short-term, medium-term and/or circular mobility. Return is thus foreseen for some, but not all, participants.
3 Long-term mobility planned. Return is not envisioned; benefits for the country of origin mainly come through the general benefits of migration and possible, voluntary return in the future.

In a similar vein, SMPs take varying approaches to skills development, with implications for the degree of mutual benefit realised by each particular partnership. For instance, they may provide training in the origin country, destination country or both. Of the 153 initiatives in the inventory, 122 include on-the-job training as a key or primary component; this may be in the form of an apprenticeship, traineeship, internship, other work-based learning or job placement. Nearly one-third of initiatives (45) provide language training, while just a few (11) provide intercultural training. Some SMPs essentially provide training to enable individuals to practice the same job elsewhere (14), offering language instruction and assistance in qualification recognition, which may necessitate supplemental training. Other SMPs invest in skills development in a way that adds more substantially to the global skills pool. Similarly, some SMPs invest more heavily than others in the origin country education system, for instance by co-designing curricula to facilitate mutual recognition (3) or improving training quality. On these last two points, a complete picture could not be obtained due to a lack of consistent information from secondary research.

2.6 Key challenges

While SMPs can provide livelihood opportunities and enrich the talent pool across the board, they face some key challenges that limit their ability to fairly address global skills shortages and mismatches. One important consideration is that it takes time to put a partnership in place and see the results – they are a long-term, and often resource-intensive, strategy, not a quick fix (EMN & OECD, 2022, p. 10; Hooper & Sohst, 2024, p. 1). Securing buy-in from the private sector is a frequent challenge (EMN & OECD, 2022), especially due to uncertainty about the training and qualifications of SMP participants and long processing times (Hooper & Sohst, 2024, p. 2). These actors are essential for linking to employment opportunities for participants as well as obtaining funding to support the long-term sustainability of SMPs. While public financing is a core element of many SMPs, particularly pilot projects, other funding sources are essential and indeed private sector financing may be expected once initiatives are proven to provide relevant skilling. However, employers most likely expect to recover their investment costs, which raises questions of fairness and concerns about exploitation, as tying employees to a single employer (for a certain period of time) would increase their vulnerability (Carens, 2008). Adding 'buy-out' options for employees has been mentioned as one possible measure to address this (Clemens, 2015). An additional concern about public-private financing models is that the public sector absorbs the financial risks, while the private sector benefits from the profits, which are not necessarily reinvested in the partnership to enhance its sustainability (van de Pas & Hinlopen, 2020).

As far as public funding is concerned, funding sources each come with their own aims and restrictions. Strict eligibility criteria for official development

assistance (ODA), for example, mean that this funding must primarily benefit the economic development of recipient (origin) countries and cannot be used for initiatives that predominantly serve donor (destination) countries, such as for addressing their domestic labour shortages (OECD, 2018). Nonetheless, ODA may be used for SMPs if the primary purpose is to benefit the migrants' countries of origin, for instance by supporting knowledge transfers, enabling skills development or addressing local skills shortages; circular or return-oriented models may also meet ODA criteria (OECD, 2018, n.d.). Thus, the funding source may influence what is possible – or require that multiple types of funding are pooled together. The hope is that, over time, the testing of approaches, expansion of SMPs and capacity building in countries of origin will enable economies of scale that can sustain these activities in a more cost-effective manner.

In addition, SMPs rely on existing migration systems (e.g. visas and permits) and their requirements, which often prioritise those deemed highest skilled (Knoll, 2024). In addition to potentially overlooking individuals with the knowledge and skills actually needed by employers (Business Advisory Group, 2024, p. 10), this can limit the scope of mobility under SMPs, especially if they do not sufficiently consider existing migration systems and their requisite requirements. Many current SMPs, however, lack thorough consideration of challenges and uncertainties around work visas, processing times and related costs, which may pose a barrier for workers to participate in SMP schemes (Hooper et al., 2025).

All of the above challenges connect to size and impact: SMPs overall remain relatively small in scale. Moreover, most agreements and many projects are bilateral in nature rather than multilateral, limiting the ability of a single partnership to be more 'global' in scope and resulting in a patchwork of different initiatives, each with their own goals, approaches and eligibility criteria. In this patchwork, some countries are more frequent participants than others, on both the origin and destination side. Additionally, within participating countries, certain groups are more likely to be targeted by SMPs in terms of sectors and life or career stage. This means that there is still a certain imbalance: particular skills and individuals are able to move more easily than others.

Imbalances also persist regarding negotiating power during the development of SMPs. Although aimed at cooperation and mutual benefit, destination countries tend to retain the upper hand in decisions on partner countries and stakeholders, as well as on the sector, focus and conditions for mobility. Thus, in practice, SMPs often focus on short-term economic return on investment in the destination country, or other destination-country policy goals, rather than on development objectives in countries of origin or human rights, raising concerns about the transferability of skills back to the country of origin and hence the persistence of asymmetric power dynamics and one-sided benefits (Papademetriou & Hooper, 2022; van de Pas & Hinlopen, 2020).

The review of different SMP approaches based on the Link4Skills partnership inventory illustrates that there is room to increase the mutual benefit derived from such partnerships, thus contributing to a fairer movement of skills globally.

2.7 Generating further benefits for all parties involved

There are several ways in which the mutual benefit elements of SMPs could be strengthened to further support countries of origin, countries of destination, migrants and employers.

- In many cases, (re)integration support is not explicitly mentioned in SMPs; where such support is specified, it is often only language training. More robust (re)integration support can support SMP participants to settle in and secure better long-term prospects, thereby improving their outcomes and increasing their contributions, whether they build their careers in the country of origin or destination. When it comes to integration, this can include language courses as well as cultural orientation, social and professional networking events, buddy or mentorship schemes, and soft skill training that support both labour market and social integration. Reintegration support can include networking events, education and career guidance, support to find a job or start a business, mentoring and continued training.
- Short-term or circular migration, especially if strictly defined, may not align with employer or migrant interests, potentially limiting uptake in these programmes. Policymakers might consider being more flexible, for instance incorporating incentives to return while also making it possible for employers to retain some temporary workers for longer. For example, South Korea's Employment Permit System[4] requires individuals to return – unless their employer makes a special request. International Experience Canada designed its Young Professional Program to last for two years, but if participants meet certain criteria, the country's migration system allows for them to change to another permit and remain in the country.
- Given the increasingly digital world of work, it may be fruitful to explore how SMPs could be linked with remote work. This could enable some employers who invested in skills development to retain employees after they return to their country of origin. Employers in destination countries would be able to retain talent in their companies, while origin countries could benefit from the presence of these remote workers in the local economy. Here, tax and benefits implications would need particular consideration and be highly relevant to the question of mutual benefit.
- To expand the pool of talent and improve alignment with skills shortages, destination governments can consider creating or expanding migration pathways for lower- and middle-skill jobs, such as those reflecting in-demand

vocational skills. Germany's Skilled Immigration Act, for example, expanded the definition of skilled workers to include those with qualified vocational training, making it easier for employers to recruit skilled workers.

- Many skills development schemes preparing people for mobility reach individuals who have already benefited from educational opportunities, limiting the ability of these schemes to address traditional development goals such as poverty reduction. In the future, SMPs could better reach the target populations of international development interventions, such as members of disadvantaged groups including women and girls, persons with disabilities and minority populations.
- Displaced persons are often overlooked in discussions about skills and talent and face particular mobility challenges (Katsiaficas, 2021; Wagner et al., 2023). Skills development interventions targeting this population largely lack a mobility element, with the exception of pilot complementary pathways initiatives. Incorporating people in need of protection in skills development and mobility initiatives, alongside members of host communities, could ensure more inclusive opportunities.
- Formal, public evaluations of SMPs are often unavailable, partly because some initiatives are relatively young. More and publicly accessible evaluations will enable the measurement of actual impact and identification of lessons learned, both of which are essential for programme improvement and peer learning. They are also important for making the business case for SMPs, which can help foster buy-in from the private sector and other stakeholders and support sustainability and scaling. Additionally, more research is needed on the impact of SMPs on countries of origin and destination, as well as the longer-term trajectories of participants.
- While SMPs show considerable promise in supporting the fairer matching of global skills, at present they remain small in scale and limited in impact; despite growth, SMPs still account for a small share of international labour migration. Thus, expanding the scale and scope of SMPs will also be key to increasing their impact and benefits.

2.8 Conclusion

While SMPs exhibit challenges and limitations, they also show opportunity. They are a promising tool for addressing global skills shortages and mismatches in a fairer manner, and one seeing increased interest from policymakers. While migration contributes to skill building generally speaking, SMPs make the process more intentional, aligned and robust. Such partnerships might be used to meet a range of different policy goals, including addressing skills shortages and surpluses and increasing the pool of needed skills in both countries, and can also bring benefits beyond the realm of skills. Whether any of these goals are met depends on all parties coming to an agreement and on the design and operationalisation of the resulting partnership.

Notes

1 This chapter will refer to all such schemes as SMPs.
2 The inventory distinguishes between various types of mobility-related agreements based on their scope and level of specificity: *Agreements* refer broadly to bilateral or multilateral understandings that outline general principles for cooperation; *MoUs* typically provide more specificity, defining roles, responsibilities and areas of cooperation without being legally binding; *programmes* establish broad, structured frameworks for cooperation, often encompassing multiple agreements or projects; and *projects* are the most specific and operational initiatives, which may operate under broader programmes or agreements, or independently.
3 Generally, vocational training includes some form of work-based training. For detailed and country-specific information, see https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/compare.
4 While this SMP fits the criteria for inclusion, it is a case where fairness may not be achieved due to concerns about its design and implementation (see https://mfasia.org/recruitmentreform/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Policy-Brief-South-Koreas-EPS-A-Successful-G2G-Model.pdf).

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3 Pursuing an ethical labour migration process in transnational recruitment [GS4S]*

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3.1 Introduction

In the discourse on international labour migration, a pivotal hypothesis is that ethical recruitment practices are fundamental to enhancing the fairness and efficiency of global skill flows, thereby yielding positive economic outcomes for receiving countries and improving the well-being of migrant workers (Baubock & Ruhs, 2021; De Lange et al., 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2013). In short, without the services of international recruiters, transnational labour migration schemes would not have developed as they have. Yet, the schemes and the recruiters have been critiqued by scientists, politicians and human rights and advocacy actors alike because transnational recruitment leads to negative if not exploitative conditions for migrant workers globally, irrespective of skill levels (Aaronson & Higham, 2013; Esbenshade, 2004; Pittman, 2016). We concur with the thesis that transparent, non-discriminatory and legally compliant recruitment can significantly reduce exploitation and bias in the migration process (Walton-Roberts, 2022). However, to test this thesis, we ask: what are the current narratives and social assumptions underlying the ethical thinking behind governance of recruitment, and why are they falling short?

In light of the above, we offer an initial review of the normative frame of the ethical labour migration process and a literature review that explores how ethics are defined in international criteria and instruments pertaining to ethical recruitment. Then, we perform a multi-step (four part) analysis in light of our theoretical framework relating to the critical-thinking – viability nexus and understanding of neoliberalisation processes: in the first two sections of the analysis, we critique two instruments referenced and identified as key in the normative overview: the ILO Fair Recruitment Strategy 2021–2025 and IOM's International Recruitment Integrity System (IRIS). Finally, we examine the case study of Talent Partnerships as evidenced in the GS4S project more generally, before zooming into the case of Bangladesh more specifically in the fourth step. Ultimately, ethical recruitment is at stake given the reality

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of these five resulting findings: (1) lack of legal remedies, (2) Global North hegemony, (3) neoliberal interests, (4) migration management emphasis and (5) lack of transparency or evidence in current recruitment setups.

3.2 Thesis formulation and contribution

How did we arrive to the thesis formulation that more transparent, legally compliant and non-discriminatory recruitment could mitigate exploitation in international migrant labour recruitment? Before we continue, we would like to qualify the use of the term 'ethical'. We understand that speaking to the 'ethical' is necessarily adopting a normative approach, and perhaps for this very reason, there is nothing close to an international migration regime that has achieved cooperation and governance on a global scale (Pécoud, 2021). At the same time, we argue that ethics necessarily apply to migration governance for several reasons, including that migration governance decisions affect individuals and the course of their lives, and potentially the infringement of a person's will (Barrero and Pasetti, 2015; Seglow, 2005). As such, in this work, we situate ourselves within a liberal democratic perspective: we take a stance and embrace the concept of ethical recruitment practices as transparent practices of connecting employers and prospective workers while treating workers fairly (Carens, 1997; De Lange et al., 2022).

With this caveat in mind, firstly, in this thesis, inspiration most importantly comes from our (ongoing) work on the perspectives of origin countries. In a mapping of skilling initiatives in the countries of Bangladesh, Egypt and Nigeria, Abdel Fattah et al. find that evaluation mechanisms and transparent practices are lacking in these initiatives, which obstruct any overall aim to treat workers more fairly and fail to (equitably) meet collective origin, destination, employer and worker interests (2024). Moreover, our mapping of mobility schemes points to the numerous problematic issues in recruitment, many of which have also been highlighted in previous literature (Hooper & Slootjes, 2025).

Secondly, in formulating this thesis, we reflect and draw upon neoliberalisation as a dynamic process inextricably intertwined with labour migration recruitment. We take neoliberalisation in the broadest sense to be understood as a process of commodification or marketisation (Knio, 2022). We argue that this can be clearly witnessed in the case of migrant labour. As Grabowska and Boatemaa Setrana rightfully signal in the introduction to this volume, these labour markets are inextricably intertwined with historical structural inequalities based on gendered, racialised and classed migrant labour (cf. Introduction in this volume).

Finally, in terms of theoretical approach, we employ the 'critical thinking–viability nexus' with an ultimate purpose of not only ethical concern for migration management, but identification and assessment of current patterns from a critical standpoint of normative inquiry. This approach represents 'a hermeneutic change of ethical inquiry on migration: while investigating how to deal with international migration from a normative point of view, ethical thinking

tries to be pragmatic in its conclusions' (Zapata-Barrero & Pasetti, 2015). It aims to deconstruct prevalent narratives and premises in revealing the ethical rationale behind international labour migration governance.

Inspired by these GS4S research lines, and equipped with this theoretical framework and understanding of neoliberalisation processes, we test our thesis by asking the research question: what are some current narratives and assumptions underlying the ethical norms behind governance of recruitment, and why do they fall short? The five findings in this work represent our contribution.

3.3 Methodological approach

To answer this question, our methodological approach is as follows. We begin with a desk review based on regulation and recommendations (binding and non-binding instruments), including various international treaties and relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Compact for Migration (GCM). The desk review also draws on relevant academic and grey literature meeting the appropriate standards for academic rigor, that latter of which includes guidelines propagated by international organisations.

Then, adopting the previously outlined theoretical approach and in light of our research question, we perform a multi-step analysis, which is divided into four sub-sections. In the first two sub-sections, we analyse two pivotal texts identified in the literature review, respectively: the ILO Fair Recruitment Strategy 2021–2025 and IOM's IRIS. In the third, we draw on GS4S working papers and relevant literature to inquire into the case of the EU Talent Partnerships in light of our research question. In the fourth stage, we further zoom in to analyse the case study on Bangladesh and the EU Talent Partnerships. This case study finds its evidence in the expert insights gathered at the GS4S 12 November 2024 online webinar 'Migration More Important than Ever: Reflecting on the Situation in Bangladesh, its Relationship with Italy, and Insights for EU Policy' (GS4S, 2024). As emphasised in the Manifesto's Introduction, ethical considerations remain at the core of this research; we obtained the informed consent of experts and participants in this exchange.

3.4 Literature, policy and legal instruments review: The legal void in ethical recruitment

In canvassing the relevant soft and hard legal instruments, we note that there is a legal void on ethical recruitment standards and legal remedies. Relevant international treaties restrict who is eligible for recruitment, presumably to prevent uncontrolled, unregulated and possibly unethical practices. Article 66 of the 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and Their Family Members restricts the right to conduct operations with a view to the recruitment of migrant workers to public services or a body established by virtue of a

bilateral or multilateral agreement (United Nations Treaty Collection, 2025). Moreover, it was agreed that agencies and prospective employers *may* also be permitted to undertake said operations, depending on national law (United Nations, 2025). Thus, this opens the door to virtually unregulated practices in the signatory states. It is noteworthy that no EU member state is a signatory state to date (United Nations Treaty Collection, 2025).

The ILO also sets out various articles relating to agencies and recruitment in its Convention No. 181: Private Employment Agencies Convention in Articles 7(1) and 8, explaining private agencies cannot charge fees and costs to workers, and that members to the Convention should penalise and prohibit such agency practices and abuses, as well as consider bilateral agreements to prevent them. The ILO also adopted general principles and operational guidelines for fair recruitment, with principles 4, 5, 7 and 8 particularly taking into consideration transparent practices and active regulation enforcement, as well as prevention of fees levied on workers, with specific and verifiable contract terms (ILO, 2019). The guidelines define fees specifically to make it clear that they cannot be collected indirectly from wages and benefits. The ILO document's appendix in particular notes the lack of consolidated guidance on fair recruitment, with a mix of binding and non-binding standards in various conventions, as well as presenting findings and guidance from international supervisory bodies or NGOs (ILO, 2019).

In the EU context specifically, we first want to flag the recent SAMOA agreement signed in 2023 and in force since 2024 (8372/1/23 REV 1). It provides an overarching migration framework between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. In brief, it specifies that parties should implement transparent and effective requirements for work and residence, research or training to facilitate circular migration (Art. 63(2)) and cooperate to verify that migration *and recruitment* are guided by fair and ethical principles (Art. 64(3)). This Treaty is unique in EU migration law in that it brings the topic of recruitment in close connection with migration, although setting a rather vague standard. Another EU instrument, Directive 2008/104/EC on Temporary Agency Work, establishes that temporary-work agencies cannot charge workers fees in exchange for recruitment, concluding an employment contract or carrying out an assignment. However, this concerns workers protected under national employment law; workers recruited from outside the EU would thus not fall under this Directive until a contract is signed (Davies, 2010).

EU labour migration directives, which are a patchwork of instruments (De Lange & Groenendijk, 2021), do not touch on the topic of fair recruitment. Under the Blue Card Directive 2021/1883 employers may be offered certain procedural benefits if accredited, though the conditions for accrediting are left to the Member States and do not by definition include the recruitment stage. Moreover, recital 41 of the Blue Card Directive calls on the Member States to develop ethical recruitment policies and principles that apply to public and private sector employers. Other than that, the EU legal instruments are silent

on setting ethical recruitment standards. Thus, the EU legal migration framework is missing an important stage in international labour recruitment.

Also relevant are the soft law SDG and GCM objectives (United Nations, 2015; United Nations General Assembly, 2018). SDG8 promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth stipulates in 8.8 the imperative to 'Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment' (2019).

The GCM provides detailed articles on fair and ethical recruitment (United Nations General Assembly, 2018), within the Objective 6 for facilitating fair and ethical recruitment and safeguard conditions that ensure decent work, and Objective 12, stipulating: 'Strengthen certainty and predictability in migration procedures for appropriate screening, assessment and referral'.

Several instruments and documents of the ILO and IOM also remain highly relevant and are described here before further analysed in Part V. The ILO 'Promoting fair and ethical recruitment in a digital world: Lessons and Policy Options' addresses new ethical issues with the rise of digitalisation (ILO, 2021). Then, the ILO Fair Recruitment Strategy 2021–2025 is underlined by the authors as particularly relevant and analysed in Part V, alongside the IOM's IRIS initiative. However, there are several other relevant IOM initiatives and documents. For example, there is the 2016 Standing Committee session on 'Promoting the Ethical Recruitment of Migrant Workers' (IOM, 2016), which, in addition to lowering recruitment costs on workers, outlines unethical practices and references Article 7 of the ILO Convention 181, likening exploitative recruitment to modern-day slavery (S/19/5). The IOM Fair and Ethical Recruitment Due Diligence Toolkit, in turn, offers businesses a guide for safeguarding human rights in international recruitment context (IOM, 2025).

Also more broadly beyond the EU context, there are further guidelines and documents from the UN and other international bodies or networks. The UN Network on Migration, Guidance on Bilateral Labour Migration Agreements contains a provision as to ensuring fair and ethical recruitment of migrant workers, and in their document, 'The role of recruitment fees and abusive and fraudulent recruitment practices of recruitment agencies in trafficking in persons', the UN Office on Drugs and Crime cautions on how lack of transparency and ethics in recruitment practices can ultimately lead to trafficking in persons (United Nations Network on Migration, 2022; UNODC, 2015). In 'Defining the Business Case: Ethical Recruitment', the World Employment Confederation discusses the benefits to business that come to adhering to ethical recruitment standards and also lists different national initiatives in its 'Compendium of voluntary initiatives promoting ethical recruitment practices by the national federations' (WEC, 2019a, 2019b). Finally, the Institute for Human Rights and Business provides a guide to implementing the Dhaka Principles, a 'set of human rights based principles to enhance respect for the rights of migrant workers from the moment of recruitment, during

employment, and through to safe return' (Institute for Human Rights and Business, 2023).

While not covered extensively here, we would also like to draw attention to how normativity and the ethical question in migration governance are not limited to international, national or EU law and the purview of international organisations; another actor to take into account when thinking about norm-making and defining ethical recruitment includes inter-state consultation mechanisms. These state-led, on-going information-sharing and policy dialogues can operate at either regional, inter-regional or global levels, among states interested in promoting cooperation in migration (De Sena, 2023). Here we point to the example of the Colombo process. The Colombo process was established in 2003 to serve as a platform for dialogue and cooperation among 12 states in Asia, regarding employment and contractual labour (including migrant worker protections); it is member-driven, non-binding, flexible and informal forum (Sena, 2023).[1]

In short, while it is debatable how this process translates to ethical commitments and implementation in practice, it at least signals the initiative in so-called 'countries of origin' to adopt an ethical approach. Moreover, De Sena (2023) argues that the Colombo Process' thematic area focusing on promoting ethical recruitment contributed to creating space for new norms on ethical recruitment, including those adopted by the ILO. At the same time, we note here again actor lines are blurred, IOM holds a crucial role in convening and facilitating dialogue among this group of countries and facilitating dialogue among them, and could be argued to hold great influence (Rother, 2020).

To conclude, much of this normative framing is concerned with preventing abuse or rights violations of migrant workers, ranging from arguing against exploitative fees, to conditions of de facto slavery. Although these instruments indicate a general consensus that recruitment practices should be fair, require transparency and respect human rights (of the worker), these instruments fall short in achieving ethical recruitment on the ground. They also do not present migrant workers or other parties with legal remedies to challenge unethical practices (Farbenblum & Nolan, 2017; Hooper, 2023).

3.5 Findings and analysis

3.5.1 The ILO Fair Recruitment Initiative: A failure to hold Global North actors accountable

Next, our analysis entails examination of two international soft law instruments that we would argue represent key references expected to tackle non-ethical recruitment practices. The first is the ILO's 2024 Fair Recruitment Initiative, which we find speaks to a Global South gaze.

The ILO Fair Recruitment Initiative was launched in 2014 as part of the fair migration agenda (2024). The ILO maintains that this initiative's achievements cover 50 countries, involves 110 countries in regulating recruitment

fees and has pursued 133 new ILO Convention ratifications related to fair recruitment (2024). Its pillars include enhancing knowledge on recruitment processes, improving laws, policies and enforcement as well as promoting fair business practices empowering workers (2024). Achievements under the initiative to date include over 100 knowledge products, capacity-building tools and advocacy materials, new regulations and policies, global interventions for business practices and assistance to migrants in collaborating in trade unions (2024).

However, a critical eye must be turned towards holding the European Union accountable. Throughout a document detailing ten years of achievement under the initiative, there is barely any mention of Europe, with main achievements touted by the ILO occurring in Asia, Africa and the Americas (2024). Moreover, a map displaying initiatives also only highlights the Global South (2024). In assessing the empowering migrants pillar, there is mention of facilitating seven bilateral cooperation agreements across migration corridors, mainly in Africa and Asia (2024). We note that the migrant empowerment pillar does not focus on legal remedies that migrants could engage themselves.

The exception is a description of the ILO FAIRWAY project taking place in the Arab States, which explains that it has resolved 2,398 worker 'complaints' (ILO, 2024). Still, while there has been a shift to recognising the importance of ethical recruitment in the past decade, the inequalities underpinning such recruitment remain unaddressed particularly because they focus solely on better regulation of recruitment in Global South countries and more targeted enforcement actions (Jones, 2022). This fails to recognise how recruitment remains often leveraged to harness profitability and destination-country interests in the Global North (Jones, 2022). This is where a more holistic approach, including for example, the migration skills corridors (see Chapter 1) and that Grabowska and Boatemaa Setrana (2025) highlight in the introduction, becomes key. In sum, we argue the ILO instrument adopts a Global South gaze, leaving the Global North to act according to its own standards, standards which often fall short of being sufficiently ethical.

3.5.2 Neoliberalisation in the discourse: Looking at IOM IRIS

The second instrument we examine is the IOM IRIS initiative, which we argue ultimately illustrates the neoliberal underpinnings rampant in international labour recruitment ethics narratives. IRIS is a flagship multi-stakeholder initiative launched by the IOM in 2014 to promote ethical recruitment of migrant workers, while simultaneously emphasising the recruitment process should also be fair for employers, labour recruiters, governments and other affected stakeholders (IOM, 2016). This vision is set forth in the IRIS Standard. It consists of a series of seven guiding principles, two of which are referred to as general principles: (a) Respect for Laws, and Fundamental Principles and Rights at work, and (b) Respect for Ethical and Professional Conduct (2019). Some of the other principles include: the prohibition of recruitment fees and

related costs to migrant workers (Principle 1), respect for transparency of terms and conditions of employment (Principle 3) or respect for access to remedy (Principle 5) (2019). Each principle is accompanied by specific criteria and indicators and seems to unequivocally support our initial thesis.

However, promoting a set of principles is a far cry from ensuring their implementation. In this vein, legal scholarship has criticised IRIS as reflective of the 'IOM's neoliberal tendency to rely on markets and individuals to bring about social change' (Chuang, 2022). IRIS outsources the assessment of whether a recruiter is 'ethical' to a powerful and lucrative private audit industry that has an underwhelming track record with respect to identifying, much less addressing, rights violations (Chuang, 2022; Hooper, 2023). This example is a testament to neoliberalisation (see Knio, 2022) processes at work. We critique this, pointing to the role of dominant international frameworks and organisations in upholding and promoting ethical recruitment and market rule. The IRIS emphasis on *fairness for all* is an example of the omnipresent policy language that dangerously ignores existing power dynamics and imbalances in recruitment processes and realities faced by migrant workers.

We note that in all international treaties, EU law and soft law instruments discussed so far, legal remedies for migrant workers are lacking in the ethical dimension of fair recruitment. Opportunities for such legal remedies have been signalled by stakeholders before. The European Union Trade Confederations and other actors recently demanded that the EU Talent Pool, for example, hold migrant work employers accountable with tangible measures, set conditions for reputation of recruiters and screening procedures, and exclude employers from the Pool in case of misconduct (2024). They note that in its current version, the Pool facilitates 'a race-to-the-bottom for the conditions of these workers and also encourages recourse to ever more exploitative cheap labour, at the expense of all working people', thanks to its insufficiencies in holding migrant work employers in Europe accountable (2024). In its current proposed form, the Talent Pool fails to set conditions for recruiter reputation, screening procedures and penalisation for misconduct (2024).

Moreover, while not directly related to recruitment, in considering legal remedies more broadly, the recast Single Permit Directive has improved complaint mechanisms, monitoring, assessment, inspections and penalties, especially those in sectors at high risk of labour rights violations (2024/1233/EU). In the case of transnational labour recruitment, binding norms should go one step further and ensure third parties (for example, labour unions) are able to act (on behalf of) migrant workers before national courts.

In addition, and resulting from the above reflections on the connection between neoliberalisation and normative frameworks in the area of ethical recruitment, we warn that opportunities for legal remedies should not be assessed only by their approach to issues such as employer accountability or transparency on paper. Rather, it is vital to examine whether, how and to what extent legal remedies and frameworks may exacerbate that which they

aim to resolve. Who proposes them, and with what interests in mind? In continuation, we revisit these points on an example of EU Talent Partnerships, where our fourth and fifth observations emerge.

3.5.3 The EU Talent Partnerships as demonstrative of migration management transnational labour recruitment strategies

We are now turning to the examples of Talent Partnerships as examined with the GS4S project. Talent Partnerships fall under the more general umbrella of Global Skills Partnerships, the latter of which were first coined by Clemens (2015). GSPs constitute bilateral labour mobility agreements between so-called origin and destination countries, where individuals at origin are trained in specific skills demanded in both origin and destination labour markets. They also have a purported aim of human capital gain at origin, as well as serving interests at destination and that of the migrant worker (Acosta et al., 2025). Envisioned as public-private partnerships, private engagement has proven challenging, and overall Global Skills Partnerships face issues of funding and sustainability, difficult timelines, obstacles to scaling up, complexity in terms of stakeholders and political and legal constraints; overall, literature points to continued need for a more scalable organisational format and consistent regulatory component (Poeschel et al., 2025; Acosta et al., 2025). For example, to combat these scalability challenges, the recent work of Poeschel et al. explores how business-to-business partnerships could be designed to function well as a GSP, presenting various schemes or scenarios with the criteria of a triple win (2025).

In the EU context, Talent Partnerships are no exception, despite the buzz surrounding them. Formally launched in June 2021 by the European Commission, migration management and broader cooperation with third countries constituted a priority, arguing that a shrinking workforce and persisting skills shortages required greater coordination, including via mobility schemes particularly to abet irregular pathways (Hooper & Slootjes, 2025). Since then, Talent Partnerships have proven difficult to operationalise, and the timeline for launches has been repeatedly delayed (Hooper & Slootjes, 2025). Finally, and most importantly, as of early 2025 there were ten Talent Partnerships with Bangladesh, Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan and Tunisia, but also with Colombia, Nigeria and Ethiopia (Hooper & Slootjes, 2025). At the same time, scant public information is available on their status, other than general information available on the not widely known International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) Migration Partnership Facility (MPF) website (Migration Partnership Facility, 2022). The line between what constitutes a Talent Partnership or simply MPF-funded projects is unclear; while some of the MPF projects prioritise the five original TP countries, the range of projects underway currently is much more geographically diverse.

The framing of EU Talent Partnerships could imply interests other than a 'triple win' and a lack of both prioritisation of fair recruitment and active

pre-emption of unethical practices with consequences for the migrant worker. For example, a 2022 call for concept notes requires that it check off whether the contribution is to:

> To strengthen implementation of the common European asylum system's external dimension; To support legal migration to the EU Member States, and the integration of third-country nationals; To counter irregular migration and ensuring effectiveness of return and readmission in third countries.
>
> (MPF, 2022)

As such, we note that EU Talent Partnerships seem to primarily serve migration management or regional cooperation interests (and less so development objectives, see De Lange, 2024), in addition to solving skills shortages. To demonstrate, and despite lack of documented evidence as noted before, we turn to an example particularly close to the GS4S project: the EU Talent Partnership with Bangladesh.

3.5.4 Transparency and data scarcity in the case of the Bangladesh Talent Partnership

The programme 'Supporting a Talent Partnership with Bangladesh' is a 3 million euro initiative launched on 8 July 2024, or, in Bangladesh, on 8 January 2025 (European Commission, 2024; UN Bangladesh, 2025). This initiative will be implemented by the ILO (not through ICMPD and their facility) and runs from 2024 to 2027. Its aims are in line with the broader brand of EU Talent Partnerships. For example, the Talent Partnership aims to: (i) foster dialogue between Bangladesh and the EU, (ii) support safe and legal migration pathways while reducing irregular migration, (iii) improve matching between Bangladeshi workers and employment opportunities in Bangladesh (notably by strengthening the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment online job-matching platform – its potential link to the EU Talent Pool matching platform unknown) and in the EU, (iv) upgrade skills of Bangladeshi workers in target sectors and (v) facilitate skills recognition between the two regions while aligning skills development in Bangladesh with EU standards. These purported goals are meant to pursue the triple win for migrant workers, Bangladesh and the EU Member States participating in the Talent Partnership.

However, at the time of writing (March 2025), information about the implementation and precise content of the Talent Partnership with Bangladesh is not publicly available, speaking to the need for further transparency and evaluation in these programmes (Migration Partnership Facility, 2022). Following the first communication in July 2024, the Talent Partnership was discussed during an online workshop organised by the EU Labour Mobility Practitioners' Network on 10 July 2024 (DG Home, 2024). The workshop

was also a moment to officially present a study by the MPF, where authors had assessed the potential of Bangladeshi sectors (notably IT, construction and care) for a Talent Partnership with the EU. Since this event in the Talent Partnership's early days, little to no details have followed ((DG Home, 2024).

As a result, it is unclear how the Talent Partnership with Bangladesh will achieve a 'triple win', meaningfully addressing challenges for ethical recruitment of Bangladeshi migrant workers. It requires overcoming flaws inherent to TPs themselves, which we describe above. Experts examined these questions during a GS4S webinar in November 2024 (GS4S, 2024). In their focus on the booming migration corridor between Bangladesh and Italy (which is experiencing both regular and irregular flows), GS4S researchers from FIERI (Italy) and OKUP (Bangladesh) pointed to unethical recruitment practices and lack of adherence to guidelines, with an asymmetry tilting strongly against the migrant worker (GS4S, 2024). OKUP illustrated how recruitment agencies and their associates often charge from 12,000 to 20,000 euro in 'migration fees', accompanied by inaccurate information and promises leaving households in debt (GS4S, 2024). At the same time, Bangladesh is a 'champion' country for implementation of the GCM; still, it remains heavily reliant on remittances coming from its 7.4 million migrant workers (GS4S, 2024). As highlighted during the webinar, remittances are 4.5 times higher than the amount of overseas development aid. Bringing the conversation back to the new Talent Partnership and its comparably negligible target of 3,000 up-skilled Bangladeshi workers, it is difficult to envision how a small-scale programme surrounded by a veil of ambiguity aims to make meaningful steps towards ethical recruitment.

3.6 Concluding summary and policy directions

Employing a critical thinking approach, we asked which are the current narratives and premises underlying the ethical standard setting in governance of transnational labour recruitment. We encountered underlying assumptions that contribute to interrelated factors resulting in 'ethical neglect': (1) the legal void and absence of legal remedies, (2) the Global South gaze, (3) the neoliberalisation drive, (4) a migration management focus and (5) data scarcity or non-transparent reporting.

Firstly, a review of the normative frame of the ethical labour migration process covers various hard and soft law instruments purportedly addressing this aim. We find a striking lack of legal remedies for workers, not least due to, in the European case, states failing to sign on to international protections currently in place. In our view, the normative framing perceives the Global South as problematic in isolation, and this remains a key underlying factor for why standards fall short.

In our analysis, we then encounter four more findings. Firstly, we then note how the ILO Fair Recruitment Initiative only calls for accountability from the Global South. Secondly, we explore how the IOM IRIS initiative is plagued

with neoliberal underpinnings. Then, we proceed to the case of the Talent Partnerships, which point to our final third and fourth observations: on the one hand, preoccupation with migrant management, and on the other, lack of transparency and programme evaluations and data.

In this sense of overall, comprehensive approaches to recruitment, TPs are a crucial research object in the GS4S project and highlight many of our points. As TPs are becoming increasingly leveraged or at least announced as an EU instrument for filling its labour shortages (and migration management), engaging with their prospects and the implications for ethical recruitment of migrant workers is warranted. We did so with a succinct reflection on the EU Talent Partnership with Bangladesh and are left with similar takeaways to those regarding normative frameworks for recruitment of migrant workers.

Our thoughts on policy directions are as follows. To support safe and legal migration for workers, including ethical recruitment, this must entail more than declarative terms: the design and implementation of Talent Partnerships or any partnership must be transparent, clear and engaged with concerns such as ethics, scalability and sustainability. If these are continuously ignored (and more critiques have been raised and remained unaddressed over the years) there is little option but to assume that the benefit of migrant workers is not a top priority. We must stop and ask *for whom and why?* before proceeding to practical matters.

As the literature review also suggested, we underline that in the case of TPs in no small part due to being largely in temporary projects in the development stages, their legal dimensions remain understudied. This is due to, as noted earlier, the lack of transparency around their design and functioning, and few programme evaluations. Moreover, against the larger backdrop, they remain criticised for their overall protections. As part of these criticisms, we would add that by the very nature of who holds the negotiating power in even instituting them in the first place (even if solely in pilot stages), the Global North and Global South dynamic and imbalance remain in play.

Actionable recommendations in the case of the TPs include evaluations and benchmarking. We advocate for transparent programme evaluations performed in a timely manner to clarify the currently obfuscated nature of how TPs operate. We also argue that there should be a benchmarking exercise for the extent to which Global North actors, including destination-country states and private companies, are held into account in the recruitment process. Rubrics could include best practices rating systems as to how these companies assist migrant workers in their legal paperwork (obtaining improved visa conditions), wage differentials as compared with non-migrant workers and overall incorporation into welfare schemes beyond bare minimum labour protections.

In sum, the GS4S research and this chapter's contribution explain the five factors observed to underly the ethics of transnational labour recruitment schemes. The factors collectively demonstrate why schemes like the EU Talent Partnerships are falling short on ethics and legal remedies in case of ethical neglect. Global hegemonies that lack transparency and neoliberalisation bent

on migration control hinder truly ethical migration processes. This not only harms the well-being of migrant workers, but also impacts sending and receiving societies, co-workers, families and legitimate employers. Rather than pleading against these partnerships all together, we urge to better consider these factors and fully maximise their potential. However, we also insist that any future instrument should consider binding norms on ethical recruitment standards and real access to legal remedies to fight non-compliance.

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Notes

1 Also worth mentioning, when considering the triple win and looking beyond the EU context, is the intra-regional consultative mechanism, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue. Established in 2008, it brings together member states of the Colombo Process (countries of origin) and destination countries (De Sena, 2023).

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Part II

Empirical pathways of skill mobility

Case studies across continents

4 Reciprocal skill exchange mechanisms as a strategy to mitigate skill flow and promote mutual development*

The case of Ghana

Mary Boatemaa Setrana, Justice Richard Kwabena Owusu Kyei, John Narh, and Joseph Kofi Teye

4.1 Introduction and thesis formulation

The promotion of fair and sustainable exchange of skills between origin and destination countries provides sustainable environment for brain circulation that fosters mutual development and reduction of local tensions. In an ecosystem where interdependence between origin and destination countries is inevitable in ensuring balanced growth, a springboard approach to labour distribution is the win-win option. There are 169 million migrant workers in the world which means that for every 20 workers, 1 is a migrant worker (Dhaka Principles, 2025). Migrant workers are crucial in filling skills shortage gaps globally in addressing major development impediment. Globally, about 75% of employers have reported that they find it difficult to get skilled workers to fill their vacancies (ManpowerGroup, 2024). Key sectors that are affected by skill labour shortages include STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), healthcare and construction (Causa et al., 2022; ManpowerGroup, 2024). The dominant literature emphasises skills shortages in most of the advanced or Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, for the obvious reason that they exceed the global average – for example, Japan (89%) and Germany (82%) (ManpowerGroup, 2024). This chapter argues, however, that shortage of skills is experienced also in the Global South. As such, the transfer of skills is not a Global South to Global North phenomena only, as the Global South-Global South transfer of skills is gaining momentum, challenging the dominant narrative.

To address skill shortages, many developed countries, particularly the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA), have prioritised labour recruitment from other countries, often the less developed ones,

* *Thesis 4. A level playing field is necessary in ensuring that skilled personnel mutually benefit both destination and origin countries in addressing labour shortages and enhancing mutual development.*

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over skills development (Green et al., 2020; Lyons et al., 2020). As such, skill flow has dominated migration discourse due to the quasi-inexistent bilateral engagement between destination and origin countries. The conflicting agendas of the diverse stakeholders in destination and origin countries make it difficult to address the problem of skill flow. The loss of these skilled personnel to developed countries through migration retards development. As such, any form of unregulated international recruitment further endangers healthcare delivery and, in effect, socio-economic development. There is, therefore, the need for reciprocal skill exchange mechanisms that mitigate skill flow and promote mutual development. Although there are arguments that suggest how skill flow is translating into brain gain (Lartey, 2024), the fundamental problem of unfair and sometimes unethical process of recruitment is not redressed. There is a paradigm shift in literature (Adepoju, 2007) and within international organisations (United Nations, 2003) exploring measures for reverting the problem of skill flow. The ethical recruitment principles of migrant workers established by IRIS Standard (IOM, 2025) provide practical ways of curbing skill flow and enhancing mutual development.

This chapter seeks to understand how Ghana interacts with destination countries in the management of skilled labour migration. This chapter argues that a level playing field is necessary in ensuring that skilled personnel mutually benefit both destination and origin countries in addressing labour shortages and enhancing mutual development. The chapter further questions how fluid migration skill corridors create sustainable skill circulation. The chapter proceeds with a historical trajectory on Ghana's labour migration followed by the conceptualisation of migration skill corridor as a triple win strategy. The following sections describe the findings and discussion and end with conclusions and recommendations.

4.2 Methods

Data for this chapter are drawn from grey documents and in-depth interviews. The grey documents were mainly government reports and agreement. We employed purposive sampling to select institutions responsible for policymaking, policy implementers and experts in labour migration, as well as current and potential migrants. Specifically, we selected the Ministry of Employment, Labour Relations and Pensions and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration of Ghana as key institutions for migration policymakers and mediators for bi-and multilateral agreements between Ghana and other countries. The policy implementers included the Canadian Embassy in Ghana and international labour recruitment agencies, recruitment agencies and experts. We also conducted in-depth interviews with recruitment agencies, potential skilled migrants and skilled migrants. Through semi-structured interviews, we gleaned data on migration policies, bilateral labour migration agreements and the benefits and challenges associated with such relationships, best practices in labour recruitment, as well as the aspirations of potential migrants.

With permission from research participants, the interviews were audio-recorded in English language. Data triangulation was key during the data collection process. The interviews were transcribed and the textual data subjected to content analysis. The analysis of the data proceeded as follows. First, we read the interviews at least twice, then we highlighted content areas using different colour codes. Similar contents were highlighted with the same colour codes across the transcripts. For instance, contents on bilateral agreements were highlighted in light blue in all the transcripts. Then we grouped similar contents while maintaining their sources to identify similarities or differences among them and to detect patterns. This analysis was based on description of content analysis. We used quotations from the interviews and grey documents where necessary.

4.3 Labour migration from Ghana

The initial post-colonial period saw a focus on nation-building and industrialisation, which required a stable workforce within the country. However, economic downturns in the 1970s and 1980s, characterised by high unemployment and inflation, led to increased emigration as Ghanaians sought better opportunities abroad. By the 1980s, between 1.7 and 2.5 million Ghanaians migrated to Nigeria (Anarfi, 1982). Skilled workers such as teachers, tailors and architects migrated to Nigeria due to the booming oil economy at the time. Migration within the West African subregion also remains predominant due to the Economic Community of West African States Protocol on Free Movement, which facilitates cross-border mobility. The implementation of structural adjustment programmes with the aim of improving economic growth further exacerbated economic challenges, pushing more Ghanaians to migrate, particularly to Europe and North America.

Currently, Ghana is largely an emigration country as emigration exceeds immigration (Setrana et al., 2025; UN DESA, 2025). Specifically, most Ghanaian migrants living outside West Africa are found in OECD countries (OECD, 2022; UN DESA, 2025). It is estimated that about 3% of the Ghana's total population are migrants and 2.3% move to OECD countries (OECD, 2022). Ghanaian migrants in OECD countries are concentrated in a few member states. The USA, the UK, Italy, Canada and Germany host 90% of Ghanaian migrants in OECD countries (OECD, 2022). The emigration rate among people with tertiary education is more alarming at 14% (OECD, 2022).

It is estimated that 24% of nurses and 56% of doctors trained in Ghana migrated to the USA and the UK (Boafo, 2016). In the first quarter of 2022 and the first half of 2023, over 3,000 and 4,000 Ghanaian nurses, respectively, migrated to OECD countries (Hinneh et al., 2023). From the data, this trend is bound to sustain, as nurses undergoing training have aspiration to migrate, and many more trained ones are seeking clearance to migrate.

Since the 1980s, migration trends have indicated a notable increase in women migrant workers who were migrating within the continent for trading and care work. However, recent years have seen a surge in migration to the

Gulf States, driven by increased demand for domestic and construction workers. There is a notable increase in the movement of women migrant workers towards Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan for domestic work. The recruitment of Ghanaian labour migrants is both through formal and informal recruitment. Formal recruitments are through licenced recruitment agencies with the Labour Department, while the informal recruitment includes individual agents, friends and family networks whose activities are not supervised and recognised by the Labour Department in Ghana.

4.4 Conceptualising migration skill corridor as a triple win strategy

This chapter proposes that for labour migration to achieve the desired goals of benefiting all stakeholders involved, namely the origin country, destination country and migrants themselves and their families, there is the need for a triple win strategy. We argue that the triple win strategy is achievable through the establishment of migration skill corridor with policies and regulations that meet the needs of all stakeholders. In this section, we highlight some of the practical and theoretical international labour migration recruitment models, then we argue for a migration skill corridor.

Unilateral policies are recruitment policies that exist when developed countries vigorously and proactively attract and recruit skilled labour from the international labour market (Adepoju, 2007). These policies target skilled labour from developing countries as they facilitate the migration process, resulting in skill flow. Germany, France, the Netherlands and the UK have point system policies that attract certain skilled personnel. The private sector in developed countries acts as agencies and agents in the recruitment of labour from developing countries. The 'diversity visa' or the Green Card lottery programme attracts skilled labour into the USA. The unilateral policies have created labour shortages in the healthcare sectors of developing countries, and according to the WHO health workforce support and safeguards list 2023, 55 countries across the globe are included (World Health Organisation, 2023). Thirty-seven of these countries are in Africa alone, and Ghana is one of these countries. In Ghana, for example, the nurse-to-population ratio was 1:600 and the medical doctor-to-population ratio was 1:4,000 in 2023 (Ministry of Health, 2024). These figures from Ghana are below the Sustainable Development Goals' health workforce threshold of 4.45 physicians, nurses and midwives per 1,000 population (World Health Organisation, 2023). The WHO discourages active recruitment of healthcare workers from these countries but recommends government-to-government agreements as the way out in ensuring the domestic supply of health workers. Unilateral policies in the recruitment of skilled personnel to developed countries without any labour circulation agreement with the origin country are detrimental to mutual development.

International organisations like the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and International Organisation for Migration (IOM) sought to explore ways of providing fair international recruitment to combat unilateral recruitment policies. In 2014, the ILO launched the Fair Recruitment Initiative under the Fair Migration Agenda (ILO, 2024). Principally, countries like Ghana conform to the 13 principles of the Fair Recruitment Initiative, but implementation and enforcement are far from being achieved and it is also short of a conceptual model. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration also provides significant avenues in improving migration governance . The IOM, in collaboration with governments, civil society and the private sector, has established frameworks in the ethical recruitment of migrant workers, which is referred to as the IRIS standard (IOM, 2025).

The IRIS Standard has seven core principles that provide practical ethical recruitment values to guide labour recruiters, employers and state actors (IOM, 2025) in combating skill flow and the exploitation of migrant workers. The first two IRIS Standards are general ethical recruitment principles, and the rest are specific principles. The first two IRIS principles call for respect for laws, fundamental principles and rights at work, as well as respect for ethical and professional conduct. The other five IRIS standards are the prohibition of recruitment fees to jobseekers, which is also called the employer pays principle; respect for freedom of movement; respect for transparency of terms and conditions of employment; respect for confidentiality and data protection; and respect for access to remedy (IOM, 2025).

Drawing from the above international recruitment models, this chapter proposes Migration Skill Corridor model as the pathway to Triple Win. Migration corridor is described as the hypothetical connection between two places, through which people, goods, money, knowledge and skills may or may not migrate (Carling, 2010: 2). The conceptualisation of migration corridor enables the comparison of migration experiences, processes and outcomes that facilitate the exploration of the complex and sometimes contradictory relationships between countries (MIDEQ, n.d.). Migration corridor is not determined by the level of activity as it can be empty, inactive or active. Migration corridors with bilateral agreements, memorandum of understanding, memorandum of agreement, private and public agencies and agents' engagements are referred to as established migration corridors. Those migration corridors with traces of bilateral engagements, exchange activities that are yet to materialise or at the initial stages of engagements, pockets of private and public agencies and agents operating are termed as emerging migration corridors. Moreover, the direction of flow is not predetermined, as it can be unidirectional, bidirectional or multidirectional. There are multiple units of analysis within a migration corridor that are categorised under macro, meso and/or micro.

The chapter is interested in the transfer of skills and how skills are trained to meet the needs of nation states in the migration corridor, with particular

attention to healthcare, STEM fields and construction. Migration skill corridor is conceptualised here as the training, skills recognition, reciprocal skill exchange, ethical recruitment of labour and sector-specific workforce planning between nation states. The mode of operation in the migration skill corridor is fluid as the actors in the public and private sphere engage with different stakeholders as and when they are deemed necessary. There are no strict rules of engagement in keeping the migration skill corridor active, semi-active or non-active. The underlying principle in migration skill corridor is the establishment of a novel migration governance that fosters mutual benefit in a globalised economy and moves away from the dominant migration discourse that separates receiving from sending countries. The process and the actions within the Migration Skill Corridor model aim at benefiting not only a section of the stakeholders or actors but all actors engaged in the field directly and indirectly. The chapter conceptualises this process as triple win. The Global Skills Partnership and the EU Talent Partnership initiatives are practical Migration Skill Corridor models with government-to-government engagement in addressing global skill shortages through the adoption of ethical recruitment principles in tandem with the IRIS standard. Interestingly, the Global Skills Partnership and the EU Talent Partnerships blend study, work and training in the migration skill corridors, as in the case of Philippines-Germany Global Skill Partnership, in which Philippine nurses are trained in both countries and subsequently provided jobs in Germany.

4.5 Findings and discussion

This section explores thematic areas that emanated from the data, namely: transfer of skills and technology; and curtailing skilled unemployment.

4.5.1 Transfer of skills and technology

The development agenda of Ghana immediately after independence in 1957 experienced constraints due to inadequate skilled personnel. The government of Ghana through the Ghana Scholarship Secretariat entered into migration partnership agreements with several Western and Eastern Bloc countries such as the USA, the UK, the Soviet Union and Cuba to develop the skills of Ghanaian at the tertiary level and/or on-site training since universities and specific jobs were few in the subregion at the time (Laqua, 2023). The receiving countries offered scholarships and/or jobs, and after completion or at the end of job contracts, beneficiaries returned home to support socio-economic growth.

A remarkable achievement of the Ghana-UK migration skill corridor is the Commonwealth Scholarship. There are about 31,000 people who have benefited from the Commonwealth Scholarship since its inception in 1960 (Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, 2025). The Commonwealth Scholarship enhanced the development of Ghanaian students and workers who

migrated to the UK for various tertiary programmes. Some of these migrants transferred these skills and technical know-how back home to enhance development of local tertiary institutions and other sectors of the economy. Prof. Owusu-Daaku, a 1988 scholar and 2000 academic fellow of the Commonwealth Scholarship, narrated during the 65th celebration of the scheme in Kumasi that:

> I would say that the Commonwealth Scholarship paved the way for me to be the first Ghanaian female PhD holder in the Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry and the Faculty of Pharmacy at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Ghana, and thanks to the Commonwealth Scholarship I obtained these.

The Ghana-Soviet Union migration skill corridor was novel at independence but rapidly became established due to the socialist political affinity with President Nkrumah and the Convention People's Party. The Ghana-Soviet Union migration skill corridor planned to obtain the triple win strategy with the acquisition of skills by Ghanaian students through Soviet Union scholarship. The students had to transfer the skills and technical know-how back home and the government of Ghana on her part, enhanced socialist-inspired domestic policies. The trained students were also expected to be socialist-minded intelligentsia promoting socialist principles back home. Data showed that most of the students enrolled in the fields of engineering, medicine, agricultural sciences, industrial and communication technologies (Katsakioris, 2021). About 45,000 Ghanaian students studied in the Soviet Union between 1959 and 1984 (United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 1986). According to the Ghana Medical and Dental Council's Standing Register, there were 322 Soviet Union trained doctors plus 31 doctors trained in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union as of 2014 (Ghana Medical and Dental Council, 2014). The fall of the Soviet Union dwindled the activeness of the corridor, but individual countries in the former Soviet Union continued to engage with Ghana; for example, there are traces of engagement in the Ghana-Russia corridor and the Ghana-Poland corridor.

The Ghana-Cuba corridor also provides an interesting scenario in which the government of Ghana through the Economic, Scientific and Technical Co-operation entered into bilateral agreement with the Cuban government in the early 1980s. The Cuban government offered scholarship at the secondary and tertiary levels to Ghanaian students in Cuba under the Isle of Youth programme. The Isle of Youth programme saw the up-skilling of about 1,200 Ghanaian students from secondary to tertiary education from 1983 until 1989 (Lehr, 2008). The students were trained in natural science-related programmes such as pharmacy, medicine, engineering and agronomy which were essential to the developmental needs of Ghana. From the data, the return rate of students after completion of their studies in contributing to the socio-economic development of Ghana was robust.

The collapse of the Soviet Union dwindled the financial resources of Cuba and so an agreement was reached between Ghana and Cuba to terminate the training of skills. The migration skill corridor, therefore, dried out but it was revived in 2008 when the Cuban economy started to take shape once again with the signing of the Permanent Joint Commission Cooperation. The two countries agreed that 200 Cuban specialists were to be sent to Ghana to support training in the medical schools. Cuba agreed to offer 30 scholarships to Ghanaian students, out of which 20 were to be trained in medicine and the rest pursued other fields of study (Daily Guide, 2008). During a visit by the Cuban Ambassador to Ghana to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Accra in 2018, the Ambassador informed Ghana's Minister of Foreign Affairs that:

> the bilateral relations between Ghana and Cuba which has been in existence for 60 years has been very fruitful. He indicated that about three thousand (3,000) Ghanaians have over the years studied in Cuba and some of the names had been complied in a book which he presented to the Minister.
>
> (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018)

The shortage of facilities for the training of medical doctors persists in Ghana, for which reason, at the beginning of the Ukraine-Russia war, the government of Ghana signed an agreement with Grenada to secure 200 spaces for Ghanaian medical students fleeing Ukraine at St. George's University of Medicine, Grenada (africanews.com, 2022). The Registrar at the Ghana Scholarship Secretariat mentioned that: *the arrangement was made because Ghana Medical Schools could not have placement for such continuing students* (africanews.com, 2022). The data revealed that the establishment of migration skill corridors through memorandum of agreement or understanding at the macro level fosters local development of human capital essential for socio-economic growth in the fields of healthcare, engineering and agriculture.

4.6 Curtailing skilled unemployment

Migration skill partnership is also an avenue for addressing skilled shortages in the host country and skilled surplus in the origin country. On 15 November 2019 when the government of Ghana signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the government of Barbados, Ghana agreed to send 120 specialised nurses to work on a two-year contract in Barbados. Preceding the MOU, the Prime Minister of Barbados (Citi Newsroom, 2019) noted that:

> we have indicated that we are searching for just under 400 nurses, so it is not a small number, and we really do believe that this is a wonderful opportunity of co-operation between our two countries. We also agreed to provide joint education programmes going forward, all in an attempt to secure Barbados' healthcare sector.

The president of Ghana on his part explained that:

> we have a surplus of nurses in Ghana and placing them all in our public health system is one of my headaches. There have been a lot (of nurses) produced, which, for several years, we have not been able to do anything with.

It is complex and difficult to reconcile the surplus labour discourse held by policymakers in the origin country and the concerns raised by WHO's Health Workforce Support and Safeguard list in which Ghana is included. The Ghana Registered Nurses and Midwives Association noted that 500 experienced nurses moved abroad monthly. In 2022, about 1,200 Ghanaian nurses joined the UK's nursing register (Grimley & Horrox, 2023). It is important to note that the framing by policymakers in the origin country that there is surplus skilled labour conceals a critical economic challenge. The fact is that the government lacked economic standing to employ additional trained nurses.

A specialist nurse noted during the in-depth interview that:

> The shortage is not experienced in the field because there are still nurses that have not been posted. There are no discussions on the shortage of nurses with financial or any other form of incentives to curtail travel plans.
>
> (Ann, 22 April 2025)

Another nurse lamented that

> The exodus of nurses is not going to stop because of our poor conditions of service. Our salary is nothing to write home about and in two weeks you spend it. It's from hand to mouth.
>
> (Joel, 10 May 2025)

A Ghanaian nurse recruited to the UK recounted that:

> I was recruited from Ghana by an agency in Ghana to work in the United Kingdom in 2003 due to shortage of nurses in the UK. It is not linked to any government of Ghana arrangement. I got a two-year working visa for the UK but upon arrival I worked in a care home until I found a vacancy advert for nursing in a hospital and applied and got employed. I have been working here for 17 years, and I remit home to my family.
>
> (Joy, 12 April 2025)

An agency in Ghana recounted how care workers are recruited to Canada:

> There is no bilateral agreement between Ghana and Canada on labour recruitment but there are general avenues at the federal level through which as agency we find slots in Canada to recruit from Ghana. When

> the Canadian government releases quota for international recruitment of care workers, we, as agents go directly to employers to look for vacancies based on which we recruit nurses from Ghana. The worker therefore applies for visa with the working contract plus the English language test results.
>
> (Sam, 25 May 2025)

Presently, the Minister for Employment and Labour Relations, Dr Rashid Pelpuo, also revealed that

> the government is working on a strategy to export Ghanaian labour to countries in need of skilled workers as part of efforts to reduce unemployment in the country. If we have all these people with such high regard, and they are unemployed in Ghana, the logical thing is to look elsewhere.

From the data, the transfer of skills and technology is not uniquely a Global North-Global South agenda but multidimensional and complex as there is also the Global South-Global South flow in human capital growth and labour imbalance. The South-North and South-South flow address a fundamental problem of youth and graduate unemployment in the origin country. There is also dichotomy in the governance of South-North and South-South flow of labour grounded in the ethical and transparent process of recruiting labour.

The Ghana-UK and Ghana-Canada migration skill corridors avoid engagement with the government of Ghana and engage employees directly or through agents and/or agencies. Ethical observance of the basic principles of international recruitment and transparency is not guaranteed, especially in relation to the IRIS standard and the employer pays principle. The absence of local policymakers in negotiating the flow of labour in the migration skilled corridor, such as the case of Ghana-UK corridor, breeds skill flow and the loss of a systematic development agenda for the local economy. The scenario demonstrates unequal power relations, exhibiting the power of the Global North in manipulating the 'weak' Global South in the field of labour recruitment. Persistent neglect of the origin country in the macro-level governance of the recruitment process deepens the Global North-Global South binary, which has skill flow consequences, since the provisions do not transparently establish how brain circulation is enhanced. In compensating for the recruitment of health workers, the UK government gave $18.6 million to Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya to train their healthcare workers (Horrox & Grimley, 2023), but without any bilateral agreements or MOU, any contribution towards local growth is based on goodwill without any obligation and sense of reciprocity.

The data show how South-South labour recruitment systematically goes through a step-by-step process involving all forms of stakeholders from macro to micro levels, considering mutual development agendas. Government-to-government engagement in the recruitment of skilled labour has ripple effects

for both the local economy and the host economy. In the instance of Barbados, there is a conscious effort to promote joint education programmes to enhance the quality of education in Ghana to meet the current market needs of both countries in the migration skilled corridor. The South-South recruitment of labour brings a paradigm shift from the dominant literature on South-North labour recruitment which introduces a more balanced discourse in the conversation.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter set out to examine how reciprocal skill exchange through structured migration skill corridors is a solution to skill flow as it enhances local socio-economic development with the case of Ghana's migration partnerships. Migration skill corridor provides fluid fields in which multiple actors at the macro, meso and micro levels operate in the flow of labour, skills, technology and other resources that aim at promoting socio-economic development in the host and/or origin country. As shown in the data, the transfer of skills and technology in the migration skill corridors of Ghana with the former Soviet Union, Cuba, Barbados and the UK contributes to the development of educational infrastructure in Ghana through human capital development due to the structured nature of the process.

Skilled labour supply in the migration skill corridor curtails unemployment in the origin country due to the existence of surplus skill labour, but a structured approach ensures migration skill circulation as in the case of Ghana-Barbados. The South-South migration partnership introduces a novel discourse of level playing ground in international recruitment of labour as it generates systematic contribution to the socio-economic growth of both origin and destination countries. Due to the unstructured nature of labour supply in the Ghana-Canada/UK corridors, there is no guarantee of skill circulation nor structured contribution of the host country towards local development in sustaining the training of labour. This scenario depletes skilled labour in the origin country, causing skill flow and retarding development. From a policy perspective, we found that for all parties engaged in the migration skill corridor to effectively benefit from the exchange and transaction that occur, a structured migration skill corridor heralded by the nation states is inevitable. It is only through a government-to-government approach that countries, institutions, migrants themselves and all other actors can achieve a win-win deal, which we refer to as triple win strategy. Bilateral cooperation between governments addresses ethical recruitment challenges and offer transparency in the entire process at origin and destination countries.

In conclusion, the implementation of balanced skill exchange mechanisms between Ghana and destination countries, facilitated through well-structured migration skill corridors, mitigates the negative impact of skill flow on Ghana's local development. By ensuring that the flow of skills is not unidirectional but reciprocal, these corridors serve as conduits for skill enhancement, knowledge

transfer and capacity building, benefiting both Ghana and the receiving nations. This balanced approach to skill migration leads to a more equitable distribution of human capital, fostering socio-economic development in Ghana while meeting the skill demands of destination countries.

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5 Who bears the costs for vocational or academic training and education?*

The case of Germany's skilled migration programmes

Helen Schwenken and Johanna Ullmann

5.1 Introduction[1]

The education of a nurse in India costs around US$14,000 and globally the average is US$32,000 (Times of India, 29 October 2022). For countries with a high outflow of trained skilled citizens, the expenditure related to their education is significant. At the same time, the countries of destination and employers save money for education when they recruit already trained personnel. No wonder that questions such as 'who pays' and 'where does the training take place' are among the most critical issues to be discussed when bilateral labour migration agreements or skill partnerships are negotiated and their effects are evaluated.

Our chapter on thesis 5 of the manifesto typologises Germany's skilled migration programmes with regard to the question of the pre- and/or post-migration location of professional training and education. We propose the thesis that the programmes, despite their well-crafted design and balanced partnership governance, are limited in their ethical outcomes as such programmes remain small-scale, patchy, difficult to implement and unable to overcome the structural challenges in an unequal global economic order as they put the interests of the receiving states first and neglect the well-being of both migrants and societies of origin.

This chapter looks into the case of Germany, because it is considered a pioneer for state-led initiatives and bilateral governmental cooperation that foster skill and talent mobility partnerships with multiple countries of origin. The programmes focus on sectors such as health care; science, technology, engineering and mathematics; and crafts with continuously high skill shortage in the German economy. They vary in their skilling format, with technical and/or language training fully or partly conducted in the origin country, in Germany,

* *Thesis 5. The programmes despite their well-crafted design and balanced partnership governance are limited in their ethical outcomes as such programmes remain small-scale, patchy, difficult to implement and unable to overcome the structural challenges in an unequal global economic order as they put the interests of the receiving states first and neglect the well-being of both migrants and societies of origin.*

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or in both. Cooperation also entails the establishment of joint curriculum standards of regular programmes of the vocational education and training (VET) system. The political agenda is ambitious, as the programmes intend to produce economic benefits for Germany by directly addressing skill shortages and recruiting (that is, targeted selecting, preparing and hiring) of skilled or to-be-skilled migrants for specific sectors or occupations, while also contributing to the development of the origin country, as well as providing new options for personal and career development and integration process of migrants themselves.

5.2 Methodology and data

The research that informs this chapter follows a migration skill corridor approach (see Chapter 1). Methodologically it works along the logics of doing research from both ends of the corridor, as migration corridors can be understood as the 'dyads of origin and destination' (Bakewell, Kubal & Pereira, 2016, p. 10). We are aware that the migration corridor approach tends to simplify more complex and realistic conceptualisations of migration patterns and movements, as it omits, for example, multi-step migrations. However, for the purpose of investigating the bilateral programmes and policies that have such an inherent corridor logic themselves, it makes sense to heuristically apply the dyadic logic. It is a valuable tool for capturing dynamics and perspectives from not just one perspective, which is often the case in labour migration research.

Practically, the Link4Skills consortium built teams for the corridor cases with researchers from both ends of the corridor. Each team conducted interviews on the same case (such as India-Germany) locally; some of the interviews were conducted by researchers jointly.

The basis for this chapter is practitioner interviews conducted on German programmes with India, Indonesia, Morocco and the Philippines (most of them conducted by the authors of this chapter, some together with our colleagues). The dataset contains also stakeholder and expert interviews. The data collection took place between February and June 2025. All interviews were transcribed and anonymised. The quotes have been translated into English when they were conducted in German, French or Arabic by the authors. Further, the empirical data is complemented by the analysis of documents (laws and policies, programme descriptions, etc.). Ethics clearance for the qualitative parts of the study was granted by Kozminski University (5 November 2024).

In this chapter, we focus on the location of the vocational or academic training and education as a proxy for the question of who bears the cost – which is one important aspect of fair and ethical recruitment. There are obviously other aspects in cross-border recruitment that lead to unethical practices, such as how well the integration into the new environment works. Even the high-standard 'Triple Win' programmes for health care professionals are not without critique, as, for example, some Keralite nurses felt 'dumped at Frankfurt Airport' (L4S_IN_prac_04). As we do not intend to provide a comprehensive analysis of the programmes, we concentrate in this chapter on the location of training.

5.3 The case of Germany: Strong state-led initiatives and cooperation

Germany's political economy of (skilled) labour migration has ever since oscillated between liberalising and restricting policies. Openings and closures were often rather ad hoc, with openings justified by high labour force demand and closures reflecting anti-immigrant resentments and political climate. Due to Germany's delayed and reluctant recognition of itself as a country of immigration in 2000, a welcoming environment and labour migration policies aiming to attract large numbers of (to-be) skilled immigrants are not yet a given.

With the 2019 Foreign Employment Promotion Act (2019), the Skilled Immigration Act from 2020 and the law on its further development dating from 2023, Germany has recently adopted a proactive approach to secure skilled labour migrants. The reforms mark a paradigm shift from highly selective policies (mostly targeting migrants that were highly skilled in specific bottleneck sectors or professions and beforehand formally recognised) to large-scale employment and training migration policies across sectors and professions. In addition to targeting experienced experts, these large-scale policies also facilitate mobility for medium- or low-skilled employees or trainees in specialist areas and jobseekers with employment or training potentials – regardless of profession, skill level and formal recognition. To attract international 'talents' and to remain competitive in the global labour market, the policies and programmes aim to accelerate and ease recruiting, recognition, entry and residency. They are also designed to support integration and retention of those recruited, while also including the option of return, be it because the person does not meet the requirements any longer for a residence permit or due to developmental considerations to mitigate skill flow effect.

The domestic policy changes include the expansion of the skilled worker definition by equally addressing and recognising vocationally and academically trained migrants, recognition partnerships, facilitated immigration and residency options, and fast-track administrative procedures. However, the policies do not always match reality. Both employers and labour migrants themselves have argued that these new procedures, with multiple and often uncoordinated institutions involved and underlying constantly changing and differentiated regulations, take too long and remain highly complicated. Some insights by practitioners will be presented in the remainder of this chapter.

The German government also defines countries of preferred cooperation – read: recruitment. Among the indicators are structural factors such as the level of capable, but un(der)employed youth and working-age population, the NEET rate (people not in employment, education or training), the level of education and quality of professional training, the population size, positive demographic developments and 'soft' factors, such as the willingness among professionals to emigrate, certain assumed national characteristics ('empathy' for recruitment in the health professions) and cultural factors such as religion (e.g. Christian faith in Southern India, Mexico and Brazil). For each of the

countries of preferred cooperation, the Federal Employment Agency (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit*) produces dossiers estimating the 'potential' in a certain 'source country', including the development of certain focus sectors/occupations (e.g. in digitalisation), the existing institutional partnership networks and experiences and the political and security situation. Based on these factors a strategy for initiating the recruitment partnership is developed. Bilateral interagency committees are set up and negotiate the conditions under which the recruitment and the training and (up-)skilling are to take place.[2]

Compared to other destination countries, the German government invests significantly into the strategic establishment[3] of bilateral state-funded or state-subsidised infrastructures on all levels, from the federal to the local level (language and professional courses, recruiting, integration, preparation and orientation programmes, etc.) to support and accompany the desired skilled mobility to Germany. Private companies, from large transnational enterprises to start-ups, including language and vocational schools, employment agencies, labour migration facilitators, travel agencies, health-check related providers and influencers, mushroom transnationally and in particular in regions where skilled labour emigration is on the increase. News about the new policy approach and presumably eased entry into Germany for employment and training purposes travels fast and is partly facilitated by social media actors (Rahnoma et al., 2025).

Skill mobility partnerships (SMPs) such as the much cited and advertised *Triple Win* approach are implemented through cooperation with multiple stakeholders on both corridor sides, including ministries at different levels, public and private employment agencies, educational institutions, training and language centres, professional chambers, welfare and civil society organisations, migrant and returnee associations as well as employers. Often together with so-called Centres of Migration and Development, they constitute a key political instrument. Some of the sophisticated state agency-designed programmes work along the whole 'mobility axis', as a project officer of one of the bigger programmes explains: 'We are […] working on the mobility axis, […] from sector selection to recruitment, preparation, placement, integration and departure' (L4S_MA_prac_14). Depending on how the German side estimates the 'employability' (L4S_MA_prac_14) of the potential future workforce for the German job market, the training elements are conceptualised and positioned either on one or both sides of the corridor. There is, as we will show in this chapter, a broad variety in terms of the location of education and training. We argue that the decision where training and education take place is more than a pragmatic decision, but has labour market and ethical implications.

As such, Germany is an example of high-demand-driven, state-led investment into skill and talent mobility partnerships and bilateral political regulations and agreements on recruiting, recognition, retention and return. Compared to other recruiting countries (see Chapter 1 for the Dutch case, Chapter 7 for the

Canadian case), the government and related state agencies take a very active role in shaping the future of skilled labour migration to Germany.

5.4 Training and up-skilling – when, in what ways and where?

In the concept paper for 'Skills mobility partnerships' (SMPs) (see Chapter 2), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines five elements as key: (1) formalised (bi- or multi-lateral) state cooperation or agreement, (2) multi-stakeholder involvement, (3) training, (4) skills recognition and last but not least (5) migration or mobility (IOM, n.d., p. 1). As 'de-skilling' is a well-known risk in large parts of skilled labour recruitment, skills mobility partnerships intend to counter skill waste or misuse (particularly in the destination countries' economies) as well as 'brain drain' in origin countries (that is, the net loss of human and social capital due to emigration). 'De-skilling' is

> the underemployment of migrant workers who experience downward social mobility in the receiving nation by taking up jobs with a lower social status and recognition. (…) [It] is generally the result of administrative barriers to qualification equivalence and accreditation, gender and ethnic stereotypes on WMWs' [women migrant workers'] skills, and language obstacles, which lead to an erosion of skills and underuse of competences and formal training.
>
> (Ruiz & Donato, 2024, p. 6)

One of the remedies against 'brain waste' and 'brain drain' and the related training and wage cost differential (and inequality) is to allocate training (full training or elements in case it takes place in origin and destination) in the countries of origin to qualify for local labour markets. In some programmes, the dual orientation is called 'home and abroad track'. For the professionals, this leaves the decision whether to migrate or to stay rather longer open or they can change their decision when, for example, family constellations change. For the governments of a country with risk of 'brain drain', the two tracks mean a tool to promote not to migrate. Thus, we look in this chapter on the question where the training takes place. Methodologically, the analysis of the location of the education and training can only be a proxy for the more complex question of whether the idea of creating opportunities beyond emigration do exist or do hold what they promise. More detailed case studies – as planned in further publications of the Link4Skills project – will be able to look beyond the programme ideas. However, the programmatic location of the education and training already hints at whether the idea of actively promoting choices to migrate or not to migrate is part of the skilled labour (e)migration policy. Rising the qualification of the local population and, thereby, increasing the skilled worker coverage of the origin country is, namely, a promising approach to link development and migration policies.

In this sense, we distinguish five types:[4]

Type 1: Recruiting apprentices and providing full vocational training and education in the country of destination
Type 2: Skilled potential migrants do internships in destination countries
Type 3: Skilled professionals have absolved their complete vocational training and education in the origin country and take up directly skilled employment in the destination country
Type 4: Skilled professionals have absolved their complete vocational training and education in the origin country, are directly employed in the destination country, but below their qualification level, followed by skill recognition and/or up-skilling measures
Type 5: The vocational training and education take place in the country of origin and/or in both countries and are based upon a jointly agreed curriculum

Later in the chapter, we elaborate on common characteristics and implications as well as what some of the involved actors think about these.

5.5 Where do training and up-skilling take place in the programmes in which Germany participates?

For the World Development Report 2023, Jan Schneider (2023) mapped 15 pilot skills mobility projects and programmes in the period of 2012–2024 in which the state of Germany has been involved together with Bosnia-Herzegovina, China, Ecuador, Egypt, Georgia, India (Kerala), Indonesia, Jordan, Kosovo, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, the Philippines, Tunisia, Vietnam and others. The projects included smaller numbers, such as 79 geriatric nurses from Mexico to the so far biggest programme with 3,395 nurses and health care professionals in the period of ten years in the *Triple Win* programme.

Education and training are allocated in these projects and programmes in different constellations[5] (Table 5.1).

The overview shows that German state agencies have entered into agreements and programmes with a variety of countries.[6] The programmes are different in size, sector/occupation and format. Also, their success differs as the overview contains discontinued and reformulated programmes. All programmes have in common that the German government takes an active role; this is not always welcomed to the same degree by the other partner (fieldwork data and contextual knowledge), and each negotiated programme implicates significant personal capacity until it is agreed upon (L4S_MA_prac_14[7]). Most of the programmes or projects rely on screening and selecting suitable participants in the countries of origin and then professional training mainly in the destination country. In the next section, we will look closer into that aspect.

Table 5.1 Skill Mobility Programmes with Involvement of the German State Differentiated by Main Training Sites

Type 1: Full Vocational Training in Germany	*Type 2: Internship Placement for Skilled Employees in Germany*	*Type 3: Full Training in Origin Country and Taking Up Skilled Employment in Germany*	*Type 4: Employment Below Qualification Level in Germany, Followed by Recognition and/or Upskilling*	*Type 5: Training in Both Countries or Origin with Agreed-Upon Curricula*
Geriatric nurse programme (with Vietnam, 2012–2016, 200 participants). TAPiG (Transformation partnership in the health care sector, with Tunisia, 2012–2013, 25–50 participants, project failed). Youth Project (with Morocco, tourism, hospitality; 2016–2017, 110 participants in the pilot phase, 104 participants in the second phase with extension to construction, engineering, manufacturing). Pilots on nurse recruitment (with Vietnam, 2016–2019, 150 participants). THAMM – Fair recruitment of skilled workers and apprentices (with Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia; tourism, hospitality, 2019–2023, 400–750 participants). Triple Win Nurses follow-up (with Vietnam, 2019–2023, 150 participants per year). PAM (with Ecuador, Kosovo, Nigeria and Vietnam; construction, engineering, industrial mechanics, early childhood education, etc.; 2019–2024, number of participants not available).	Engineering programme (with Tunisia, 2012–2013, 120 participants, most stayed in DE to study or work). Programme with Georgia on circular migration (health care, hospitality, 2013–2016, 24 participants of 28 completed, some returned, some stayed and worked in DE). German-Tunisian Mobility Pact (construction, engineering, manufacturing, 2014–2016, 150 participants received B1 language course, 101 participants came to DE, 73% were then hired by DE company). PAM (with Ecuador, Kosovo, Nigeria and Vietnam; construction, engineering, industrial mechanics, early childhood education, etc.; 2019–2024; number of participants not available).	THAMM – Fair recruitment of skilled workers and apprentices (with Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia; tourism, hospitality, 2019–2023, 400–750 participants). Nurse recruitment (with Mexico and the Philippines, since 2021; VET curriculum development, full training in origin; 103 participants in the first cycle).	Sustainable geriatric nurse recruitment programme (with China, 2013–2018, 15 participants; came with BA degree, started as nursing assistants, training, after recognition working as full geriatric nurse). Triple Win Nurses (with Bosnia-Herzegovina, India/Kerala, Indonesia, Jordan, the Philippines, Tunisia and others; since 2013; skilled employment plus adaptive training and recognition; 3,395 participants).	Youth project (with Kosovo; construction, 2017–2020; training in DE and Kosovo; oriented at both labour markets; 38 participants placed in VET in DE, 2,400 internships, 600 start-ups kick-start funding in Kosovo). PAM (with Ecuador, Kosovo, Nigeria and Vietnam; construction, engineering, industrial mechanics, early childhood education, etc.; 2019–2024; number of participants not available).

Source: Based on Schneider (2023), with own assemblage and additions.

5.6 What are the implications of the location of training and education?

The overview of some of the skill mobility or partnership programmes in that the state of Germany is involved and/or has conceptualised shows that they offer different answers to the question where the education and training take place. The choice of location is either deliberately chosen or a result of pre-existing pathways and infrastructure. Some of the programmes can be considered pilot programmes to actively experiment with certain programme features or to provide examples for labour migration recruitment outside of the state-led programmes. In the following, we do not evaluate the programmes from the previous section in detail, instead we focus on the question of the location of the training, the implications and the perception of some of the involved actors.

5.6.1 Type 1: Recruiting of apprentices with full vocational training and education in the destination country

When apprentices are recruited in their countries of origin for their training in the destination country, for the destination side there are no recognition issues. The training is done in the institutional context and with established curricula and employers know what to expect. That is the key reason why such schemes currently are in demand. For the country of origin, there are, at first sight, no (or significantly less) 'brain drain' issues as not yet qualified persons are recruited. However, particularly in smaller countries, the outflow of qualified youth cannot easily be compensated. For those countries with a large reservoir of capable youth to be trained and high un(der)employment rates, though, there is less concern.

The selection, counselling and preparation (in particular: language courses) and regular professional VET training are, though, time and cost intensive. It is also unclear whether the investments pay out for the employers in the destinations as it depends on retention rates. Retention, among other reasons, depends on the region and whether these match the expectations of the recruited personnel. A practitioner of a hospital in a rural area said:

> The young people perhaps don't know exactly what they're getting themselves into. Compared to highly-skilled professionals, they don't prepare themselves as professionally for the move to Germany. They may also be disappointed by what they find in Germany. Above all, many of them naturally dream of working in a metropolitan region. But we also need skilled workers in the countryside. They dream of Berlin and end up in Buxtehude.
>
> (L4S_DE_prac_09)

Also, the recruitment of young, future apprentices is not easy, particularly in crafts:

> There are also many problems in the selection of people. For example, language acquisition is often a major challenge because these are young people who might not have learnt a foreign language. In Jordan, they may not even know the Latin alphabet.
>
> (L4S_DE_prac_09)

There are also differences in sectors:

> Things are actually going best in the electrical sector because the same voltage flows worldwide. The technical requirements are relatively identical or comparable worldwide. (…) In the metal sector, it's much more difficult because the requirements in Germany are also very high. In the construction sector, it's also usually very, very good.
>
> (L4S_DE_prac_09)

The less experienced and the smaller negotiating actors are (be they federal states, human resource departments or small and medium-sized companies), the more can go wrong in the deliberations and often more experienced staff from German state agencies are then involved in 'translation work' (L4S_MA_prac_14) to lessen intercultural misunderstanding and conflict. The booming apprentice-type of international skills mobility thus comes with a number of uncertainties and the implications depend on sector and regional specificities.

5.6.2 Type 2: Internship placement for skilled to-be-employees in the destination country

Some programmes address young, fully trained professionals for internship placements in firms and regions that are interested in international recruitment. As a key advantage is seen that this mode is low-risk for all involved, as an internship can be a probation and orientation period for the professionals as well as the employers. Selection and preparation are less time and cost intensive compared to cross-border finding and screening apprentices or regular employees; and often visa entry regulations are easier than for regular employment.

However, there is a high risk of 'brain drain', as investment in professional skilling and related investments have already taken place in the country of origin. Also, in case the intern remains in the destination country, recognition remains a cumbersome and risky issue that might lead to de-skilling of the migrant.

5.6.3 Type 3: Full vocational training and education in origin country and directly taking up skilled employment in the destination country

This type is low-cost for the employers and the destination society; yet direct employment may entail mismatches, the need for add-on qualification measures and dropouts. There is a risk of 'brain drain', as investment in professional skilling has already taken place in the country of origin. The recognition of diploma and credentials in the destination country remains a critical issue, as curricula are not institutionally harmonised and the selection and preparation are time and cost intensive. Yet, this type is widespread in all sectors.

5.6.4 Type 4: Direct employment below qualification level in the destination country, followed by skill recognition and/or up-skilling

This type comes with cumbersome, lengthy and potentially only partial processes of recognition in the destination country. Also, often time- and cost-intensive up-skilling is necessary, and it might be unclear who takes over the investments. Also, 'brain drain' in the country of origin is a serious problem. For employers, though, this type can be the solution to staff shortages, including profiting from the official non-recognition of skills as their recruited staff might be in fact higher qualified than their actual employment and payment.

The quote from a practitioner in the crafts sector shows that the employment below qualification is not always done deliberately: 'For us, it is of course best if the persons are already highly qualified. … But that's often not the case and they usually bring only 60, 70 percent of the needed qualifications' (L4S_DE_prac_09). Hence, this type is in practice very common outside of skill partnership programmes, but also the case in some of the programmes that consider the completed qualification in the country of origin an indicator for the future employability at a higher level. There is often a mismatch of perceptions: while for the employer it appears obvious that the completed skills training from abroad is not sufficient or adequate, for the migrant professionals it is considered a misrecognition not only of their education, but also of their personal capabilities.

5.6.5 Type 5: Vocational training and education take place in the country of origin and/or in both countries with agreed-upon curricula

Having the vocational training carried out in the country of origin that contains two tracks, one for working abroad and one for the domestic labour market, and a curriculum that reflects the requirements in both countries is considered the ideal model in 'Global Skill Partnerships'. There exist also programmes that are designed with the vocational training in both countries.

As the most distinctive feature, the partnership idea is very strong in this type. Partners agree upon professional curricula and, importantly, the skill-demanding country pays for the regular education. The training matches requirements in both the skill-demanding and skill-providing country, thus there are rather short recognition procedures. The risk of 'brain drain' is less extreme as the skill-demanding country or employer pays for the training or provides (parts of) the technology and/or teaching staff.

Despite the partnership idea, global power relations remain and can lead to unequal partnerships in practice when the country of origin is just seen as a source for extracting 'talent' according to the needs of the more affluent country. Besides this structural issue, a tricky question is which curriculum is chosen for the training. The most ambitious mode is the institutionalised harmonisation of qualification standards (training content and duration, sector- or occupation-specific curricula and examination modalities, etc.) between those who collaborate with each other. Besides these professional skills, there are general, soft or technical skills such as language competences or IT/computer skills as well as intercultural knowledge to have an easier start in the destination region. When every country of destination has its own vocational training curriculum taught, it leads to a new fragmentation of the VET system of origin countries that fosters competition between destination countries and that produces professionals who are only employable in one destination country. So far, there is no globally agreed-upon curriculum. And it depends on the sector how compatible skills are.

A more practical issue is raised in a sceptical view of a practitioner who works with craft professionals and cannot imagine having professionals trained according to a German curriculum abroad beyond pilot programmes: 'This is very difficult to implement in the countries of origin. Because you'd need to set up whole training centres according to German standards. Who should be the instructors?[8] We cannot detract them from Germany and send them abroad' (L4S_DE_prac_09). What sounds as a Germany-specific problem is indeed a more general one as the scale of cross-border recruitment in the future is likely to increase in many countries. In some cases, train-the-trainer-courses are established. Former programme participants are also recruited after gaining work experience in Germany to return to their origin country as trainer within the respective programme.

5.6.6 Summary of the different types of the location of training and education

In a nutshell, existing skill mobility programmes in which the German state is involved offer a broad portfolio with regard to the question where the training is mainly offered. All types follow certain logics and speak to different sector-specific or situational/contextual demands. If employers/companies could choose, which of these models would they prefer? A practitioner

working with a variety of small and medium-sized companies in crafts said that it depends on the type of company and their approach:

> Both ways have their advantages and disadvantages. … I wouldn't know which is best if I had a company. … There are some companies that say I like to look after trainees. … Others say I need a skilled worker who I can deploy quickly.
>
> (L4S_DE_prac_09)

The latter seems to be the safest and most efficient or feasible way for employers in the destination countries to ensure smooth and quick matching of qualifications with specific local demands. The traineeship type currently seems to gain in popularity and is also attractive for origin countries as it reduces their educational costs. And the most challenging but also promising are projects in which trainings are partly held in both countries and that train for either the local labour market or the one abroad (or both) – which is the key idea of ethical and sustainable 'Global Skill Partnerships'. As this holistic approach requires close collaboration between employers, states, educational sectors and private entities of both countries, it is highly demanding, cost and time intensive and institutionally and politically complex and seems only to work (yet) for small numbers of participants and pilot projects and with well-selected vocational schools. Given that picture, the promise of mutual gains of all involved is a key element of 'Global Skill Partnerships', but the qualification and recruiting reality plays out elsewhere. Last but not least, the decision-making of skilled migrants (to move, (how long to) stay or return) is an important individual factor beyond the exact control of the other involved actors on both corridor sides and their interests.

5.7 Concluding discussion

In this chapter, we shed light on the case of Germany that has globally the most advanced portfolio and repertoire of state-led skills partnerships (and similar programmes). Most include provisions that are considered 'ethical' or 'fair' as they formally build on a strong partnership idea and take remedies against 'brain drain'. We sorted the programmes according to the location of the education and training as a proxy for understanding who bears the main cost for the educational investments and what related implications of these programmes are. As a conclusion of this exercise, our assessment remains sceptical.

On the plus side: the partnership agreements and programmes offer innovative approaches and can be seen as a strategic reaction against critiques of recruitment as 'brain drain' and of a widespread de-skilling practice of migrants working far below their qualifications after arrival in their destination country and hardly finding a way out and up. Intentions are thus to develop alternative modes of recruitment that do less harm to the development of countries of origin and make better and more sustainable use of the human capital of the

mobile professionals, both for the (selfish) good of Germany's economy and the migrants and their families who benefit from the facilitated mobility and residency options and access to higher wages and remittances than in lesser skilled jobs. To closely synchronise and link different political fields – migration, education, employment and development – seems also promising, yet challenging as the mixing of agendas produces conflicts and confusion of the main mandate on the ground. One example: when support and counselling of skilled migrants on the local level prioritises long-term integration, other actors prioritise a developmental agenda that requires or incentivises the return of the skilled citizens to counter 'brain drain'.

On the minus-side of the equation, there are, first, practical limitations, such as the issue of scale. The programmes are so far only comparatively small in numbers and de facto from the aspiring migrants' perspective on a large scale more a promise than a realistic migration path. Second, initial field work results from the Link4Skills corridors show some of the practical challenges. Third, the mind-set of the programmes carries a bias towards one side of the involved partners. Although the branding subtitle of the 'Global Skills Partnerships' (https://gsp.cgdev.org/) website, for instance, is 'Migration that works for everyone', there are underlying legacies of global economic inequalities: what is a 'skill-demanding country'? One side demands, the other delivers – that indicates a clear direction in a relationship in which one side has the power to demand and pay, and the other to deliver and provide what is demanded. The rise in populist currents in many of the destination countries also provides a challenging context. As a reaction to pacify these voices, it is publicly argued that only the most needed and fitting persons are selected to immigrate. A side-effect is that a utilitarian discourse is promoted, dividing migrants into the ones who are 'well-selected', 'productive', 'highly adapted' and 'just in time' delivered migrant workers who fit into the German system without major incompatibilities or malinvestments – and those who are not. This is a dangerous discourse as violent and racist reactions are a logical consequence. Unironically, also the 'well-selected' are the target of racist attacks. Fourth, although the GSPs are built around the idea that all involved parties need to see their interests reflected, there are imbalances. In the training handbook for policymakers and professionals implementing the SMPs, it reads that in the countries of origin, the (political or institutional) decision needs to be taken whether it 'is interested in aligning its own education standards and adopting those of the destination country or countries for the skills or sector in question or for specific curricula' (International Organization for Migration, 2023, p. 49). The preferences of the actors on the countries in the Global North are recommended to guide and determine the concept and design of the programme, although the origin countries can decide to stop a collaboration or change partners. The more a country occupies a certain niche or controls a demanded segment of the labour market, the more self-confident their governments become.[9] Other countries cannot and do not have the same degree of leverage. Further, migrants are not the central figures in the planning of

such programmes, although it is their lives and decisions that matter. At first sight, the SMP training handbook appears inclusive: 'Involving migrants in the design of skills development interventions can ensure interventions are provided according to migrants needs and not solely the needs of employers […] or a solely market-responsive approach to skills development' (International Organization for Migration, 2023, p. 51). It reads as a disclaimer as there seems to be the tendency in SMPs to forget about the (to-be) skilled migrants' perspectives and needs. We, therefore, conclude that despite an ambitious inclusive discursive framing, there remains a deeply hierarchical and neo-colonial mode of thinking, design and governing in programmes such as the SMPs or 'Global Skills Partnerships'.

On the other hand: given the highly selective global mobility, opaque, complex and differential visa and migration regimes and given the fact that many migrants end up below their qualification level in their destinations, such skill mobility programmes do provide (new) legal migration opportunities for individuals. And they do offer horizons and options for young people to (further) invest into their educational and personal development, be it in their societies of origin or abroad. Our concluding assessment on thesis 5 is thus mixed: concerning the substance and scale we come to a sceptical conclusion. However, taking the lack of alternative options for aspiring migrants, participating in such programmes opens up new skilled mobility options, often with ethical recruiting principles, and is better than openly running into the risk of indebtedness with programmes from private agencies or working in low-wage sectors and experience de-skilling in countries of destination.

Abbreviations

DE	Germany
GSP	Global Skills Partnerships
IN	India
MA	Morocco
PRAC	practitioner
PAM	Partnerships for development-oriented vocational training and labour migration
TAPiG	Transformation partnership in the health care sector
THAMM	Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Notes

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Migration' (SFB 1604), both funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), contributed significantly to the conceptualisation and elaboration of this chapter.

2 As the negotiations take place behind closed doors and necessitate trust on both ends, our insights into these are limited and remain anecdotal.

3 Some political and infrastructural legacies do exist in countries of origin from the 'guest-worker' period and Germany's recruitment of workers between the mid-1950s and early 1970s mainly from countries in the Mediterranean regions, but also from South Korea, Vietnam or India/Kerala. Institutions and agreements for skills-testing and health checks existed and the German labour bureaucracy (*Bundesanstalt für Arbeit*) was present in major source regions. These long-established migration corridors are partly revitalised today under the prelims of skilled migration. The definition of countries for preferred cooperation contains as one criterion the 'affinity to Germany', thus large numbers of returned former migrants to Germany often result in the likelihood that their children or grandchildren consider Germany as a potential destination for their own migration projects.

4 Drawing on Schneider (2023), but modifying the types.

5 The programme or project titles are shorter than the original ones for questions of readability. Data on participants are not available for all programmes and differ whether participants or those who completed the programme are counted. The 'Inspire' programme in Schneider's compilation was left out here due to lack of data.

6 Some programmes or projects follow multiple approaches and offer VET training for some participants and for others employability courses, language courses or internships. We mention these cases under more than one category.

7 The interviews are cited in the following mode: DE = Germany, MA = Morocco, but in this chapter a German institution's Moroccan branch; prac = practitioner/person working on programme implementation interviewed.

8 In the German system of vocational training in the crafts, it is not sufficient to be knowledgeable about the skills, but the permission to act as an instructor is (depending on the profession) regulated by guilds or other craft regulations. There is a shortage in many companies and trades of persons who are allowed to act as instructors (*Ausbilder*). The differences between destination countries' vocational training systems are regular issues in negotiations of skill mobility programmes (L4S_MA_prac_14).

9 See observations and interviews with Nepalese diplomats and labour migration bureaucrats in the ongoing research on gender-differentiating labour emigration policies in Nepal and India as part of the Collaborative Research Centre on the 'Production of Migration' (SFB 1608, funded by the German Research Council DFG, B3 PI Helen Schwenken).

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6 Bilateral labour agreements and migrant worker protection*

The Philippine experience

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6.1 Introduction

The Philippines is one of the largest migrant worker-sending countries in the world, with about 2 million workers deployed annually in recent years, including both new hires and rehires (DMW, 2025). Overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) are present in more than 100 destination countries worldwide, with a stock estimate of 3.9 million as of December 2022 (DFA, 2022). OFWs are found in diverse occupations, but most prominently in seafaring, domestic work and healthcare.

The Philippines is recognised as one of the countries that offer relatively strong social protection support to its citizens working abroad (IOM, 2017). This is buttressed among others by a statutory framework promoting the protection of OFWs, specifically the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 (Republic Act or RA No. 8042 and its later amendment RA 10022 in 2010); a dedicated government agency, the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), tasked with the protection and promotion of the rights and welfare of OFWs and their families;[1] a trust fund established especially for OFWs and funded by contributions from OFWs and employers;[2] and active engagement with destination countries and regional and multilateral institutions on migration-related issues.

Under the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act (Section 4), the government is mandated to permit deployment of OFWs only to destination countries where their rights could be protected. Protection in destination countries could come in any of four forms: (a) the existence of labour and social laws protecting the rights of migrant workers; (b) their signing or ratification of multilateral conventions, declaration or resolutions relating to the protection of migrant workers; (c) bilateral agreements or arrangement with the Philippine

* *Thesis 6. The Philippine model of labour migration governance combines the capacity to respond to the global demand for workers of all skill levels while also promoting the protection of its nationals working overseas through various means, including the forging of bilateral labour agreements with destination countries.*

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government on the protection of the rights of OFWs; and (d) evidence of positive, concrete measures to protect the rights of migrant workers.

This chapter examines the role of bilateral labour agreements (BLAs) in the promotion of the protection of OFWs. Particularly in the Asian region, the Philippines stands out among the origin countries of migrant workers by the number of BLAs it has forged with destination countries. It reviews the BLAs the Philippines has signed with destination countries between 1968 and 2018, specifically looking into provisions concerning the protection of Filipino nationals working outside the Philippines. There is no publicly available repository that contains the complete set of BLAs signed by the Philippines with other countries. The review covers only BLAs that are publicly available and downloadable at the website of the DMW. Up until 2018, the Philippines had signed 45 BLAs with 26 countries. This includes only BLAs that pertain specifically to land-based workers and excludes those specifically for seafarers.[3]

6.1.1 General features of BLAs

Bilateral labour agreements are formal written agreements entered into by the Philippines with countries of destination to govern deployment, labour cooperation on the protection and promotion of the rights and welfare of OFWs and human resource development. There are two broad categories of BLAs: a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) (DOLE, 2018; Mangulabnan & Daquio, 2019). An MOU is an instrument in which parties agree on general principles of cooperation and describes broad concepts of mutual understanding, goals and plans shared by the parties. An MOA, on the other hand, is a legally binding agreement detailing the specific responsibilities of each party and the actions to be taken by each party with a view to the accomplishment of their stated goals.

The parties to the BLAs are typically the respective labour ministries of the Philippines and the corresponding destination country, representing their respective governments, with the labour minister of each country (or the secretary of the DOLE in the case of the Philippines) as signatory. With its creation, DMW takes the place of DOLE as the party representing the Philippine government in the BLAs concerning OFWs. The BLAs have initial validity ranging from one to five years, and usually with automatic renewal unless terminated by either party.

Of the 45 publicly available BLAs that were signed as of 2018, 26 are explicitly labelled as MOUs, 4 are labelled as MOAs, 12 as Agreements, 1 as a Recruitment Agreement, 1 as an Arrangement and 1 as an Agenda for Cooperation. Based on their content, the Agreements and the Recruitment Agreement are essentially MOAs, while the Arrangement and the Agenda for Cooperation are MOUs, so effectively, there are 28 MOUs and 17 MOAs among the 45 publicly available BLAs. In some cases, the Philippines initially engages in an MOU with a partner country, and then later engages on a MOA with the same country.

The earliest recorded BLA is an agreement with the government of the USA in 1968 concerning the recruitment (coursed through the Philippine government) and employment of Filipinos by the US military and contractors of military and civilian agencies of the US government for assignment in certain areas of the Pacific and Southeast Asia. The document itself, however, refers to a much earlier (1947) exchange of notes between the two countries, which effectively already functioned as a BLA and established the procedures and conditions for the recruitment of Filipinos for offshore employment by the US military.[4] This 1968 BLA was already oriented towards the protection of the rights and welfare of OFWs with specific provisions stating their right to self-organisation and collective bargaining and the benefits they are entitled to, including social security, free transportation, quarters, facilities for remittance, health insurance and medical care, and Christmas bonus, among others.

The Philippines started engaging in BLAs in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which coincided with the country's foray in temporary labour migration. The BLAs were primarily with some countries in the Middle East, which benefited from the oil boom during the period and experienced a surge in the demand for workers. The 1990s saw the expansion of BLAs to other Middle Eastern countries and other territories. But it was in the 2000s and 2010s, when the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act was already firmly in place, that there was a rapid increase in the BLAs, including with European countries. The number of signed BLAs went from two in the 1970s, to three in the 1980s, to four in the 1990s, to suddenly 20 in the 2000s and 15 in the 2010s to 2018, the rapid rise coinciding as well with the intensification of labour flows across the globe (Chilton and Woda, 2022).[5]

By region, the highest number of BLAs is with Middle Eastern countries (17), followed far behind by Asian countries (9), Europe (7), North America (7) and Oceania (5). This regional ranking corresponds roughly with their importance as destination countries for OFWs. The BLAs signed by the Philippines with countries in East and Southeast Asia, Oceania and North America (Canada, specifically) are mainly in the form of MOUs. The BLAs with European countries, on the other hand, mainly take the form of MOAs. There is roughly an even split between MOUs and MOAs among the BLAs signed with partner countries in the Middle East (Figure 6.1).

The majority of the BLAs (31 out of the 45) are broad in coverage and are not for any specific skill or occupation. They apply to any skill where there is shortage in the destination country. Meanwhile, seven BLAs are specifically for healthcare workers and four BLAs are specifically for domestic workers. There is one BLA for construction, communication and transportation workers; another one for English teachers (in China); and the one with the United States for military and military-adjacent workers.

Older BLAs allowed only for government-to-government recruitment, while more recent ones allow for involvement of private recruitment agencies. Recruitment via private recruitment agencies is the stated mode of recruitment in the case of the three BLAs specific to domestic workers. In

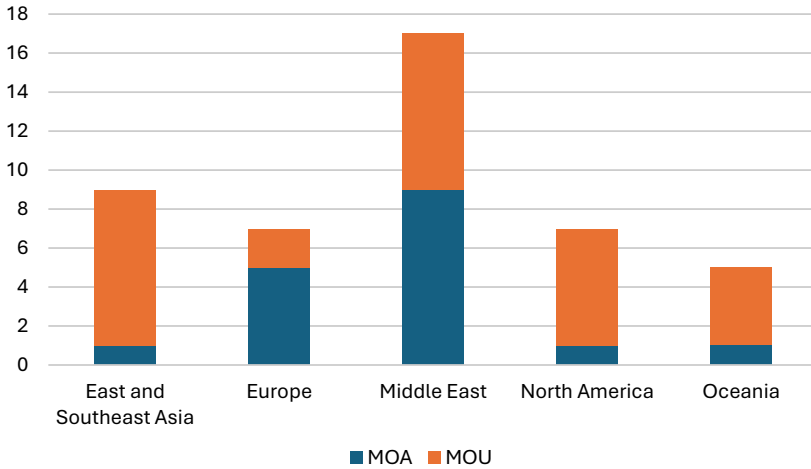

Figure 6.1 Number of BLAs signed by the Philippine Government by region of partner country.

Source of data: Department of Migrant Workers.

contrast, where the mode of recruitment was clearly specified in the BLAs, government-to-government recruitment is the stated mode for healthcare workers.

6.1.2 Worker protection in the BLAs

The 1979 Agenda for Cooperation with Libya was only three pages long. The provisions were general, containing agreement to 'use all appropriate means to promote and strengthen areas of cooperation in the field of labor, employment and manpower development'. The document identified the sectors in which Libya desired to avail of Filipino workers. One rare specific provision was to put efforts in the implementation of the cooperation activities to 'encourage Filipino Muslim participation' and to train them in the Arabic language, showing that integration of migrant workers was an early concern of BLAs. The BLA included a statement of promise for the two countries to enhance the welfare and protection of the rights of Filipino workers, consistent with the laws of Libya and the Philippines and the international and bilateral covenants to which both are signatories, and to treat them similarly to other third-country nationals in Libya.

The 1981 MOU with Jordan for employment of Filipino workers in the 'public and private sectors in Jordan' contained roughly the same provisions as the BLA with Libya, but with an agreement to follow up with another BLA that contains the specific protocols and procedures for the deployment of Filipino workers to Jordan.

The 1982 MOA with Iraq included more important modifications. Iraq was obligated not just to submit the number and type of workers it needed but also their job descriptions and terms of employment, specifically duration, wage and allowance, working and living conditions, accommodations, and welfare and other benefits. The individual employment contracts are to be signed in both English and Arabic with a copy furnished to the worker and sending country government. The BLA specifically states that the 'workers shall enjoy the rights, duties and privileges accorded to the national workers of the receiving country', which is different from the 1979 Libya BLA which only promised similar treatment to third-country nationals in Libya.

The 1988 Agreement for Cooperation with Jordan hewed closer to the 1982 Iraq MOA. Like the latter, the guest workers are to fully enjoy 'the rights and privileges accorded the workers of the host country' in accordance with the laws of Jordan. One difference is that the contract is now to be prepared not just in English and Arabic but also in the Filipino language. But more significantly, it contains a provision allowing a Filipino worker whose contract has expired or has been cancelled with consent of both worker and employer to search for another job in Jordan within a period of 30 days. Within this 30-day grace period, the employer is to ensure the protection of all the rights of the worker and, in case the worker is unsuccessful in finding another job, to pay for the worker's travel expenses back to the Philippines.

A 1994 MOU with the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) included three innovations. The first is the mandate to establish offices in both Manila and CNMI for closer coordination. In CNMI, the DOLE is to establish a Filipino Workers Resource Center, attached to the consulate office. The second innovation is the agreement by CNMI not to employ any Filipino worker for the first time unless the worker has been processed by DOLE through the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration. The third is a commitment by CNMI to assist the Philippine government in reaching out to Filipino workers already in CNMI at the time of the signing of the MOU to require them to become full members of OWWA so the workers can avail of benefits and services.

The first BLA signed by the Philippines pertaining specifically to healthcare workers was with Norway in 2001. Its objectives were couched in terms of the wins it provides to both Norway and the Filipino health workers who will be employed through the BLA. Specifically, the BLA aimed to 'reduce the need for professionals in the health sector in Norway and equally promote employment opportunities for Filipino health personnel'. The BLA was not targeted specifically at nurses but is broader and includes different types of health personnel. The Norwegian Directorate of Labour is mandated to finance, organise and administer intensive Norwegian language courses in the Philippines for approved applicants. In turn, POEA is to make sure candidates start processing their necessary documentation and application for licence to practise as health personnel in Norway as well as work/residence permit in Norway while

undergoing language training. At the end of the language training, the participants must pass a test to practice their profession in Norway.

A 2002 Recruitment Agreement with the UK was targeted specifically at nurses for employment with National Health Service (NHS) employers. The objectives are similar to the BLA with Norway, which are to 'respond to the need for professionals in the healthcare sector in the United Kingdom' and to promote 'employment opportunities for Filipino health professionals'. The Agreement delineates the responsibilities assigned to each party in the process of recruitment. Under the BLA, the recruitment is to be done government-to-government, with the POEA tasked with pre-screening the nurse applicants based on specifications given by NHS employers. The POEA must ensure the candidates have adequate communication skills, but since English is one of the Philippines' official languages, there is no provision for language training. The NHS employer is responsible for making the work permit application for successful applicants and is to reimburse the applicant for the cost of obtaining a UK entry visa. Repatriation expenses are to be shouldered by the NHS employer, except when the employee resigns less than 24 months after taking up employment.

A 2003 MOU with UK followed the 2002 Agreement. The 2003 MOU was broader in coverage and includes other healthcare professionals, specifically physiotherapists, radiographers, occupational therapists and bio-medical scientists. Unlike the BLA with Norway on healthcare workers, which was spearheaded by the ministries of labour, that with the UK identified the Department of Health and DOLE as implementing partners in the Philippines, and the Department of Health on the UK side. The BLA also mentions gearing the project towards 'sustainable recruitment and employment' of healthcare professionals from the Philippines, which is an implicit recognition that such recruitment can negatively impact the healthcare system of the sending country. Finally, the BLA contains a promise to engage in technical cooperation in education and training towards a mutual recognition arrangement in healthcare professions.

In 2004, the Philippines signed its first MOU with South Korea concerning the sending of workers to the latter's Employment Permit System (EPS) for Foreign Workers. The programme is for employment in small and medium business enterprises which have obtained permission to employ foreign nationals. The MOU specifically assigned DOLE, via the POEA, to be responsible for the recruitment of the Filipino workers, aged 18–40, for Korea. A unique feature of the MOU is the requirement for the workers to pass a Korean language proficiency test and later, a skills test was added, to qualify under the programme. The MOL-Korea prepares the standard labour contract, which is signed by the employer and the worker. With some minor changes, the Philippines and Korea signed an MOU again in 2006. Further details about this BLA are discussed in the case study section.

A 2006 MOU with Saskatchewan, Canada, is the first BLA with a province rather than with an entire country.[6] It is also the earliest BLA that explicitly

specifies private recruitment mode. Under the BLA, Saskatchewan's Ministry of Advanced Education and Employment (AEE) is to notify DOLE of qualified employers and occupations in which workers may be employed, and the role of DOLE is to provide its counterpart with a list of licensed sending agencies. The qualified employers and the licensed sending agencies are to communicate directly with each other on recruitment. The sending agency is mandated to orient the worker on the employment contract and provide the worker with a copy of the employment contract, which should contain minimum employment standards set by DOLE and AEE, and provide pre-departure training to the worker. The BLA contains a promise to support initiatives to promote human resource development in the Philippines, via education and training of youth in the Philippines, through contributions or donations from Saskatchewan companies employing workers under the MOU. Subsequent BLAs with other provinces of Canada in 2008 (Alberta, Manitoba and British Columbia) followed this template but with the explicit provision that employers, not workers, should shoulder the recruitment costs, and that third-country recruitment of Filipino workers should be coursed through the Philippine Overseas Labor Office in Canada.

A 2007 MOA with Bahrain also targeted health workers and differs from previous BLAs on health workers in having more provisions for developing the health capacity of the sending country, in particular, provisions such as upgrading health facilities, strengthening training institutions, technology transfer, scholarships for Filipinos in leading Bahrain universities who after completion are to return to the Philippines to serve in hospitals or universities.

The innovation of a 2008 BLA with Qatar was its inclusion of a model employment contract that was to be used in the contracts signed by Filipino workers in Qatar. The model contract includes information on monthly salary, contract period, travel expenses, loan, wage and gratuity, accommodation, medical care and leave entitlements of the worker. It also contains a provision that the worker is not to engage in political or religious affairs. The contract is to be prepared in English and Arabic in four originals, to be given to the employer, the worker, the Ministry of Labour of Qatar and the Embassy of the Philippines in Qatar.

A 2012 BLA with Jordan is the first to focus specifically on domestic workers. It differs from previous BLAs in that recruitment of Filipino workers is to be coursed through licensed agencies in Jordan in cooperation with licensed agencies in the Philippines (private-to-private). It specified that only domestic workers at least 23 years can be hired, with the agencies on both sides liable if there is a violation. The employer is mandated to obtain a life insurance policy for the domestic worker and to open a bank account in the name of the worker, in which the worker's salary is to be deposited. The employer is to provide the domestic worker decent accommodation, food, clothing and medical care, and to give her or him one day off each week. No restrictions should be placed on the correspondence and religious practice of the domestic worker. Daily working hours is limited to 10 hours under the BLA, consistent with the laws of

Jordan. On the side of the Philippine government, DOLE is to ensure deployed domestic workers have undergone pre-departure orientation seminar. The agencies on both sides are to be liable for expenses in case the domestic worker is found physically or mentally unfit or is pregnant and is to be sent back. In case the domestic worker runs away from the employer to the Philippine Embassy in Jordan, the embassy is required to notify Jordan's Ministry of Labour.

A 2013 BLA with Germany also focused on health professionals. It is a government-to-government agreement on the placement of Filipino nurses in Germany and has come to be known as the Triple Win programme. Notable provisions include the promise to take in to account 'the interest of both countries concerning their respective employment markets' and the requirement that Filipino health professionals working in Germany get equal treatment, in terms of working conditions, as comparable German workers. Employers are mandated under the BLA to provide or at least ensure adequate accommodation for the worker. The worker is subject to compulsory insurance in the German social security system, which includes health and long-term care insurance, pension, accident and unemployment insurance. Similar to previous BLAs on healthcare workers, there is a provision to explore projects to sustain human resource development in the Philippines.

A 2015 Agreement with Italy on a general category of migrant workers from the Philippines has several notable provisions: (1) the involvement of Philippine associations in Italy, with support from the Italian government and the Philippine Overseas Labor Office, to assist in the social integration of new migrants; (2) the promise to provide language and vocational training to migrant workers, with cost to be fully shouldered by the Italian party; (3) the promise by the Italian party to disseminate accurate information on remittance costs to aid the workers in selecting their best option to remit; and (4) equal treatment and full equality of rights for migrant workers compared to workers in Italy, with respect to work conditions, social protection and social rights.

Finally, following the examples of Jordan and Saudi Arabia (discussed in the case study), a 2018 BLA with Kuwait on domestic workers contained additional provisions intended to protect the rights and welfare of domestic workers. Under the BLA, the Kuwaiti government prohibits the employer from keeping possession of the domestic worker's personal identity documents, including passport, and allows the domestic worker to 'have and use cell phones and other means to communicate with their families'. The Kuwaiti government is to disqualify employers with records of contract violations or worker abuse and to establish a mechanism for 24-hour assistance to domestic workers.

6.1.3 Effectiveness of BLAs

From the Philippine side, the two primary goals of BLAs are, first, the protection and promotion of the rights and welfare of OFWs and, second, the facilitation of their legal employment abroad, especially during periods of high

domestic unemployment. So far, there has been no rigorous quantitative evaluation of the extent to which the BLAs have accomplished these goals. A WHO assessment of BLAs on healthcare workers worldwide would be true of Philippine BLAs in general – that there is no quantitative evidence of their effectiveness because they do not include any data collection mechanisms to facilitate the evaluation of their impacts (WHO, 2024).

The Philippine government strongly believes in the usefulness of BLAs. Successive editions of the Philippine Development Plan (PDP), which is the blueprint guiding the government's development efforts, make specific mention of BLAs. According to the PDP 2023–2028, safe and orderly overseas migration can be ensured by strengthening the 'enforcement of bilateral and regional agreements through better arrangements with host countries' (NEDA, 2023). The previous PDP 2017–2022 discussed intensifying BLAs, especially in vulnerable labour sectors such as domestic work, 'to help ensure that rights are protected and well-being is improved' (NEDA, 2017).

In light of the reluctance of destination countries to sign multilateral treaties on the protection of migrants, BLAs present an alternative. Battistella and Khadria (2011) noted that less than 9% of OFWs are in countries which have ratified multilateral treaties such as ILO Conventions 97 and 143 and the International Migrant Workers Convention, while 30% are in countries with BLAs with the Philippines at that time, making BLAs a more practical tool for migrant protection.

In what follows, we give two case studies highlighting the potential as well as the limits of BLAs in promoting migrant worker protection. The first case study discusses the landmark agreement signed between the Philippines and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the protection of domestic workers; the second case study presents the agreement between the Philippines and South Korea concerning the recruitment of factory workers under the latter's EPS, hailed as a 'courageous experiment in decent work' (ILO, 2010) and considered a good global practice of co-development between origin and destination countries (Cho et al., 2018).

Case study 1 BLA between the Philippines and Saudi Arabia

Transnational labour migration from the Philippines was initially male-dominated due to the demand for construction-related workers in the 1970s in the oil-rich Gulf countries. With the changing labour market needs in the Gulf region and the growing industrialisation in East and Southeast Asia in the 1980s, women also started migrating overseas for work driven by the demand for domestic workers in the more developed economies. Since 1992, women mostly have outnumbered men among the newly hired OFWs. Although the Philippines sends workers to many

countries, Saudi Arabia remains as the major destination of OFWs. The stock estimate of the overseas Filipino population (mostly OFWs) in Saudi Arabia stood at 1.04 million as of December 2022 (DFA, 2022).

The protection and welfare issues attendant to women migration in domestic work intensified the Philippine state's efforts towards migrant worker protection. This led to the household service workers reforms of 2006 aimed at reducing domestic worker migration or at the least, redirecting deployment to migrant-friendly destinations.[7] The reforms included setting the minimum age at 23 years old, setting the monthly minimum salary to US$400, waiving the placement fee, requiring certified training for domestic workers and requiring a comprehensive pre-departure orientation for domestic workers. As needed, the Philippines also imposes a ban or suspension in sending domestic workers to certain countries in response to cases of abuse or dangers.

After a temporary drop in migrant domestic worker deployment in 2007 and 2008, deployment started to increase in 2009. Continuing and high demand for domestic workers was unable to reduce the number of women migrating to work as domestic workers. Among new hires each year, domestic workers generally account for 30% of the total deployment of land-based workers. In 2024 alone, 53.5% were domestic cleaners/helpers and domestic housekeepers combined (DMW, 2025). While data on the annual deployment of domestic workers to Saudi Arabia are not available, the profile of Filipino workers in the kingdom suggests that about 70% are skilled and highly skilled and the remaining 30% are in less-skilled occupations, including domestic workers. The latter account for most of the welfare cases.

In June 2011, the Philippines stopped the deployment of newly hired domestic workers to Saudi Arabia after failure to reach an agreement on the minimum wage. The Philippines pushed for a minimum monthly wage of US$400, which was rejected by Saudi Arabia, which then suspended the processing of new contracts (Rappler, 2013). In September 2012, Saudi Arabia lifted the ban after agreeing to the minimum monthly wage and paving the way for broader discussions on migrant worker protection and, eventually, the signing of the BLA in 2013. Limiting the recruitment of domestic workers to recruitment agencies licensed by Saudi Arabia, accreditation of contract verification as well as the banking system that would monitor the payment of the US$400 monthly salary are among the key items that went into the BLA.

The BLA between the two countries is a breakthrough for several reasons: (1) it is the first BLA that Saudi Arabia signed with an origin country. Destination countries generally avoid signing a BLA with one country because of the pressure to reach similar agreements with others; and (2) the BLA specifically for domestic workers is an important step in addressing the risks and vulnerabilities of workers in this sector.

One of the outcomes of the BLA is the drafting of the standard employment contract for domestic workers. Among others, the contract specifies the following terms and conditions: continuous rest of at least 8 hours per day; one rest day per week; opening of a bank account by employer for the deposit of the workers' salary; employer-provided transportation to place of work and return to the Philippines at the end of the two-year contract; paid one-month vacation at the end of the two-year contract or additional one-month's pay should worker decide not to go home; and the provision to worker of adequate food or the equivalent cash for food purchase. Special provisions include the worker working only for the employer's family; the worker having possession of his/her passport and work permit; and the employer shouldering the repatriation of the worker in case of civil disturbance, natural calamities, or should the worker fall ill and can no longer work. There is no mention of working hours.

The BLA contains the minimum terms and conditions of what constitute decent employment for Filipino domestic workers. As to whether it actually contributes to better protection is not easy to answer in the absence of data and benchmarks. Saudi Arabia continues to rank among the countries with many workers' complaints (CMA, 2020). In 2021, the Philippine government suspended the sending of newly hired Filipino domestic workers to Saudi Arabia because of cases of abuse by a retired general who got eight Filipino workers using fake employer names and fake addresses (Ramos, 2021). This case underscores that the signing of a BLA is a good signal for bilateral cooperation and paves the way to introduce interventions, but it takes more than a BLA to protect domestic workers. In 2024, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia issued guidelines on the rights of domestic workers (Human Resources and Social Development, 2024) – a first in the Gulf region – which includes many provisions from the BLA between the Philippines and the kingdom. This initiative by the Saudi government is an important step by a major destination country to do its part in promoting the protection of migrant domestic workers.

Case study 2 BLA between the Philippines and South Korea

With the launch of the EPS in 2004, South Korea signalled its acknowledgement of its need to bring in migrant workers. In previous years, Korea responded to labour shortage challenges by implementing a trainee programme. The programme bred abuses as migrant workers were paid and treated as trainees instead of workers, resulting in runaway workers and high levels of irregular migration. Strong advocacy for workers' rights contributed to the dismantling of the trainee system. Under the EPS,

employers and companies can apply to hire foreign workers who must be treated similarly to local workers. Korea attracts migrant workers because of higher salary, around US$1,500, the highest in the Asian region. The EPS has other key features aimed at protecting migrant workers: (1) it is a government-to-government arrangement which involves the relevant government agencies in Korea and those of the 16 origin countries where the migrant workers are recruited working together at all phases of migration; (2) private recruitment agencies are excluded as intermediaries, thereby eliminating exorbitant placement and other fees charged by these entities; and (3) support to EPS workers before migration, while they are in Korea, and upon their return to the Philippines.

The Philippines and Korea signed the EPS in 2004. The Philippines was one of the first six countries to be part of the EPS, which has since expanded to 16 countries in Central and Southeast Asia. Prior to workers' departure, the Philippines through the DMW (previously, the POEA) manages the registration of applicants; language and skills testing; documentation of workers selected by Korean employers; and pre-departure orientation on working and living in Korea, rights and responsibilities, and accessing support while in Korea, among others. Upon arrival in Korea, EPS workers can count on the Migrant Workers Office, the Embassy of the Philippines and the Foreign Workers Support Centres for support. Meanwhile, the Human Resource Development-Korea EPS Center in the Philippines cooperates with local partners in holding job fairs inviting returnees for possible job matching with Korean firms in the Philippines (Lee et al., 2018).

An assessment of the EPS by Cho et al. (2018) found the cooperation to facilitate the recruitment of low-skilled workers between origin countries and Korea beneficial to both parties. From 2004 up to the time of assessment, EPS provided employment to 540,000 individuals from the 16 origin countries. They also noted the reduction in recruitment fees and stronger worker protection – migrant workers receive the same treatment as local workers, social insurance coverage and access to support services. A study comparing the rights of Filipino EPS workers compared with those in Taiwan who were recruited by private recruitment agencies confirmed higher wages in Korea. However, because of the limited number of workers recruited per country per year (5,000 workers), many aspiring migrant workers who invested in language training and testing and skill testing and were not selected incur opportunity costs (Asis et al., 2020).

Up to now, Korea's EPS system continues to be a unique arrangement in the Asian region. While EPS has mainstreamed migrant worker protection, some challenges remain in translating the provisions into actual practice. While government-to-government arrangements are idealised, these arrangements are not responsive to the needs of industries, especially the need for large numbers of workers (Asis et al., 2020).

6.2 Conclusions

The Philippines has had a long history of labour migration. Over that long period, the country has increasingly relied on BLAs to protect the rights and improve the welfare of its overseas workers. The Philippines found BLAs to be especially useful when dealing with countries who, at the time of the BLAs at least, had no or very limited labour and social laws protecting the rights of migrant workers (or specific categories of migrant workers such as domestic workers) and were not signatories of multilateral conventions targeted to the same, such as Middle Eastern destination countries. BLAs were also relied upon to facilitate skilled migration, such as in the case of healthcare professionals, which required some form of skill accreditation and recognition. Geopolitics seem to matter little, with the Philippines engaging on a BLA on English teachers with China, a country with which it has some long-standing territorial conflict.

In view of the difficulties of securing multilateral agreements, BLAs fill a void or fill-in the cracks to some extent. In theory, BLAs can facilitate social integration and professional recognition – as with healthcare professionals – and reduce exploitation, precarity and vulnerability by safeguarding rights, wages, safe working conditions and other opportunities (Brubakk et al., 2024; Hennebry et al., 2022; O'Steen, 2021; Panhuys et al., 2017). In practice, the diversity and variety of BLAs could lead to different outcomes for source countries, as not all BLAs offer the same kind of rights recognition and protection for migrant workers (Hennebry et al., 2022; Maximova & Paraschiv, 2022). At the very least, BLAs serve as a framework for cooperation between origin and sending governments, which is useful when problems arise, as it gives a starting point for discussing the issues and finding solutions. In fact, as utilised by the Philippines, BLAs are dynamic documents, with periodic reviews, renegotiations and revisions of the BLA provisions whenever issues and problems arise. As illustrated by the examples provided, Philippine BLAs have evolved over time, both overall and within partner countries, to include stronger provisions for the protection of Filipino overseas workers,

There remain issues and challenges concerning BLAs. For one, it is difficult to rigorously measure their success as there are typically no agreed-upon indicators of the target outcomes or for monitoring implementation. Enforcement monitoring is also made difficult because the parties involved are usually limited to government stakeholders. Finally, the terms of BLAs appear tilted towards destination countries because of power imbalance, with origin countries often lacking leverage. In this aspect, other origin countries likely have even weaker leverage than the Philippines.

Our review of the evolution of Philippine BLAs over time and our two case studies strongly suggest that despite their limitations, they are useful tools, but are not sufficient, in protecting the rights and improving the welfare of migrant workers. The participation of other stakeholders, notably trade unions and migrants' associations, employers and the research community, is important for monitoring the implementation of BLAs and in identifying meaningful indicators to evaluate their effectiveness and to suggest ways forward.

Notes

1 The DMW came into existence in 2022 by virtue of RA 11641. Before the DMW, there was the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) under the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). The DMW took on the functions and mandate of POEA as well as of other offices, including those previously under DOLE and the Department of Foreign Affairs whose mandates were geared towards migrant workers.
2 This refers to the Overseas Workers Welfare Fund, which is administered by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), an attached agency of the DMW. OWWA is mandated to provide welfare and service benefits to member OFWs and their families and to ensure the capital build-up and viability of the fund.
3 This counts the BLAs with Canada as for one country, but the Philippines has separate BLAs with four provinces of Canada (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan). Regarding seafarers, as early as 2009, the Philippines had already signed 43 BLAs with partner countries concerning the recognition of seafarers' certificates under the 1978 Convention on the Standard for Training, Certification and Watchkeeping.
4 The Philippines was a US territory from 1898 to 1946.
5 More BLAs were signed in recent years. According to a resource person from the DMW, to date, more than 60 BLAs have been signed (personal communication, 20 June 2025).
6 Not counting the BLAs with Taiwan, which is not considered as an independent country by the international community.
7 Migrant women in domestic work face the additional risk of gender-based violence, apart from abuses encountered by migrant workers in general, such as illegal recruitment, exorbitant placement fees, contract substitution, delayed or non-payment of wages, and difficult working and living conditions. Saudi Arabia is among the top sources of complaints by migrant domestic workers (CMA, 2020: 6).

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7 The role of stakeholder engagement in skill corridors*

The case of Canada

Homayoun Shirazi and Emma Bouillard

7.1 Introduction

Stakeholder engagement refers to the processes and structures that enable individuals, groups and organisations to interact with decision-makers, provide input and potentially influence decisions. Engaging stakeholders in policymaking can enhance the robustness and legitimacy of policies while fostering mutual learning. Stakeholders bring diverse perspectives, expertise and ways of interpreting uncertainty, which help policymakers better understand and address complex issues. Involving stakeholders in the policy process can also lead to greater public acceptance and smoother implementation. However, the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement depends largely on how well both stakeholders and policymakers navigate uncertainty both in terms of policy content and outcomes, as well as procedural aspects of policymaking (Bijlsma et al., 2011). It also relies on how inclusive the process is and whether power imbalances are acknowledged and addressed.

Stakeholder engagement in immigration policymaking contributes not only to the design of efficient and responsive immigration pathways but also to the development of inclusive and equitable policies that address integration challenges, humanitarian commitments and regional priorities. Today, stakeholder engagement is no longer an optional activity; it has become an integral and systematic part of the immigration policymaking process. This formalised and standardised approach is often mandated by legislation, regulations or internal government policies.

In the context of immigration policymaking, three distinct types of relationships between stakeholders and policymakers can be identified, each reflecting different levels of engagement and influence (Rowe and Frewer, 2005). The first is a communicative relationship, in which the government adopts a largely top-down approach, primarily informing stakeholders such as immigrant-serving organisations, employers and community groups about policy decisions

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or programme changes. This form of interaction is often limited to public announcements, official reports or government websites, with little to no opportunity for stakeholders to respond. The second type is a consultative relationship, where the government seeks input from stakeholders on policy proposals, often through public consultations, surveys or targeted roundtables. This model establishes a limited two-way exchange: stakeholders are invited to express opinions, concerns or recommendations, but ultimate decision-making authority remains with the state. The third type is a collaborative relationship, characterised by joint decision-making and co-production of policy. In this model, stakeholders play an active role in shaping both the design and implementation of immigration policies. The relationship is reciprocal: stakeholders not only provide input but also help define problems, assess options and build consensus. Each of these relationship types reflects a different vision of governance and stakeholder involvement in immigration policymaking. While communicative and consultative approaches are more common in centralised systems, collaborative models offer greater potential for inclusive, context-sensitive and community-driven immigration policies, especially in areas like integration, refugee resettlement and regional immigration planning. From a migration corridor perspective, communicative mechanisms often fail to address employer bias or integration barriers and thus weaken corridor inclusivity. By contrast, consultative and collaborative mechanisms shape how skill corridors function in practice – broadening opportunities when stakeholder input is meaningfully integrated, but limiting inclusivity when engagement remains symbolic or uneven.

This chapter argues that while stakeholder engagement has evolved significantly in Canada's migration system, persistent power asymmetries and limited collaboration between the federal government and stakeholders have constrained its full potential to create inclusive and sustainable migration policies. The first section outlines the methodology used in the chapter. The second section provides a brief historical overview of Canadian immigration policies and legislation from a stakeholder engagement perspective. The third section analyses recent immigration policy developments, while the fourth section explores how stakeholders have shaped recent Canadian immigration policy through consultative processes. The fifth section presents a broader consultative model to support improved immigration policy design. The chapter concludes with a summary of key findings and reflections.

7.2 Methodology

Our methodology combines historical and policy document analysis with statistical data to trace the evolution of stakeholder involvement in Canada's skilled immigration system and its implications for inclusion and exclusion. Official statistics from Statistics Canada (2024) and quantitative administrative data from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) were analysed to show the evolution of skilled migration policy. We also conducted

qualitative observational fieldwork, gathering insights from IRCC, as well as stakeholders involved in government consultations. From there, we conducted a desk review of six Immigration Acts (Government of Canada, 2001), ten consultation reports published by IRCC (IRCC, 2025a) and five Annual Parliamentary Reports on Immigration (IRCC, 2025b), covering the period from the mid-19th century to the present. This legal and policy review allowed us to examine shifting roles of stakeholders, the nature of consultation mechanisms and structures of multi-level governance over time.

7.3 A historical review of Canadian immigration policies and acts: A stakeholders' perspective

Over the last 160 years, the roles of the key stakeholders in shaping the Canadian immigration policies have evolved significantly, reflecting the transformation of the government's role from a colonial administrator to a modern welfare state within a multicultural society. The development of stakeholder engagement in policymaking in general, and in immigration specifically, shifted from top-down, state-cantered decision-making towards more inclusive and collaborative governance models during the last 60 years. This evolution reflects changes in public expectations, governance models and the growing complexity of immigration policy challenges.

Canada is a settler colonial state built on immigration. Its initial policies were based on racial exclusion. However, the country experienced a major socio-economic shift after World War II and particularly since the late 1960s.

Driven by economic growth and rising labour demand in construction and manufacturing, the government liberalised immigration policies, inviting more people to come to the country and gradually doing away with its discriminatory provisions. While policies in the 1950s still favoured white immigrants from Western countries, restrictions on Southern and Eastern Europeans eased, and limited humanitarian admissions began.

Continued economic prosperity enabled Canada's transition towards a comprehensive welfare state during the 1960s and 1970s. Concurrently, immigration policies underwent significant shifts, fundamentally reshaping stakeholder engagement and power dynamics. Order-in-Council P.C. 1962–1986 officially ended overt racial discrimination in immigration policy and allowed immigration applications from skilled individuals irrespective of nationality or racial background, provided they possessed suitable education, training or employment arrangements. These reforms, resulting from lobbying efforts by ethnic groups, advocacy organisations and several trade unions, paved the way for later reforms – notably the introduction of the points system in 1967 – and signalled Canada's evolving identity as a multicultural society.

The shift towards a consultative relationship continued with the publication of the Green Paper on Immigration and Population in 1974, which invited public debate on its recommendations, as well as Canada's broader immigration policies and demographic growth. In response, a broad group of

stakeholders, including business alliances, politicians, church organisations and ethnic associations, participated in public hearings commissioned by a joint Senate–House of Commons committee.

Public consultations following the Green Paper helped shape Canada's multiculturalism policies and led to the Immigration Act of 1976 – a turning point that introduced a more decentralised and transparent immigration framework. The Act mandated provincial consultation, limited Cabinet discretion and expanded the role of refugees, civil society and family sponsors. It prioritised family reunification and economic growth by admitting skilled immigrants. These reforms broadened stakeholder participation and empowered provinces to address regional needs, paving the way for programmes like the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP). Employers and labour unions also became key beneficiaries; the emphasis on economic suitability in immigration facilitated a more predictable and skilled labour supply for businesses while addressing labour unions' concerns about workplace fairness and immigrant integration. It is worth noting that while these policy reforms were promising, immigration levels continued to be regulated in response to cyclical economic fluctuations.

During the 1980s and 1990s and in response to concerns about the ageing of the population, the economic stream gained prominence (Figure 7.1), and the point-based selection system was refined to attract skilled immigrants aligned with labour market needs. The 1990s marked the beginning of greater decentralisation in immigration governance, most notably through the introduction of PNPs, which gave provinces the authority to select immigrants based on regional economic priorities. These programmes incorporated input from the public and stakeholders such as local businesses, economic development agencies and community groups to help define selection criteria and

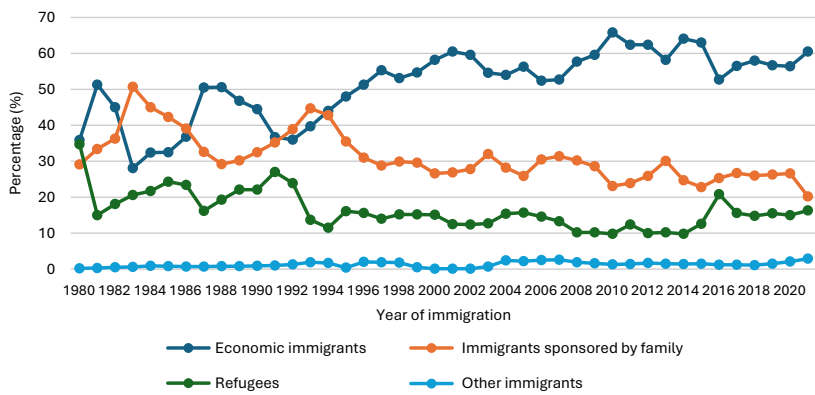

Figure 7.1 Distribution (in percentage) of admission categories of immigrants by year of immigration, Canada, 1980–2021.

Source: Prepared by the authors using data obtained from Statistics Canada (2022). Focus on Geography. Series. 2021 Census.

regional needs within immigration streams. Additionally, the federal government initiated a national conversation about the future direction of immigration by releasing *Into the 21st Century: A Strategy for Immigration and Citizenship* in 1994. This Green Paper invited public input, sparked consultations across the country and engaged a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society organisations, academics, businesses and provincial governments.

Over 160 years, the development of Canadian immigration policy has reflected a gradual but significant expansion in the range and influence of stakeholders involved in shaping it. At each stage, immigration legislation reflected the priorities of the government of the time and the interests of influential stakeholders. For example, early policies lacked public consultation and were racially restrictive and initially served settler and business interests.

By the mid-20th century, organised labour, advocacy groups and government departments began influencing policy debates. The 1970s marked a turning point, with the 1976 Immigration Act reducing the Cabinet's discretionary powers and mandating provincial consultation and recognising refugees and civil society. In the 1990s, we saw decentralisation through PNPs and the federal government's willingness to form consultative relationships, which allowed greater input from local businesses and communities. Public engagement peaked with the 1994 Green Paper, which launched nationwide consultations and broadened stakeholder participation. It is worth noting that, while immigration policy became more inclusive and participatory, immigration levels were still adjusted in response to economic cycles most of the time.

7.4 Recent trends: The growing involvement of stakeholders in selecting skilled immigrants

Recent Canadian immigration policies have been characterised by an increased emphasis on economic immigration, the decentralisation of immigration governance and a more structured and inclusive approach to stakeholder engagement. These reforms have responded to demographic and labour market pressures and reflect growing demands for greater accountability, provincial autonomy and public input. The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) was introduced in 2001 (Government of Canada, 2025). Although stakeholder engagement began emerging in the 1970s, it became more structured under IRPA, with provinces, employers, civil society and service providers increasingly integrated into policymaking and implementation.

Provinces began to emerge as uniquely positioned stakeholders within Canada's multi-level governance framework, playing an essential role alongside the federal government in managing skilled migration through a process of responsibility-sharing and the gradual federalisation of immigration policy (Paquet, 2015). The expansion of the PNP, first launched in Manitoba in 1998, was a transformative development that targeted regional shortages in sectors such as healthcare, trades and agriculture. The PNP became an important innovation at IRCC and emerged as a cornerstone of immigration policy

and stakeholder engagement in the 2000s. It allowed provinces and territories to nominate immigrants based on regional labour market needs and demographic goals *and enhanced responsiveness to regional needs, widened migration corridors to smaller regions.* The programme enabled the Prairie provinces and Atlantic Canada to better compete with major urban centres such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver in attracting and retaining immigrants. This decentralisation reflected the demands of provincial governments, employers and community organisations, who argued that federal programmes were too generalised and unresponsive to specific regional needs.

As shown in Figure 7.2, the PNP accounted for only 0.9% of all economic immigrants in 2000, but had grown to become the largest economic immigration stream, accounting for 39.8% of all admissions under economic programmes in 2023. Stakeholder engagement has been central to the evolution of PNPs. Provinces regularly consult with local employers, chambers of commerce, economic development agencies and immigrant-serving organisations to identify skill shortages and develop relevant streams. Provincial selection mechanisms through PNPs also show the dual effects of stakeholder involvement. On the one hand, PNPs help distribute immigration more evenly across Canada, especially to smaller cities and regions facing demographic and economic challenges. On the other hand, they tend to be less rigid in formal education requirements, broadening access for a wider range of skilled workers (Kelley et al., 2025).

Introduced in 2015, the Express Entry system was a major innovation in the economic immigration category. This online, invitation-based and points-driven model replaced the first-come, first-served approach and introduced a

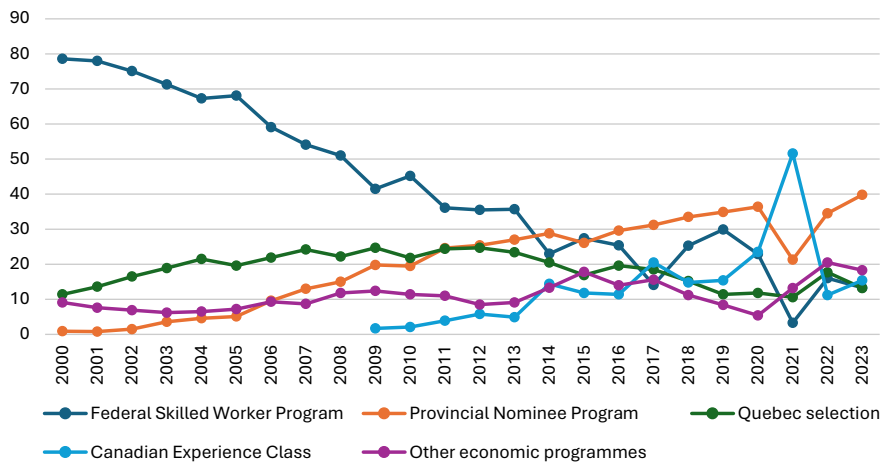

Figure 7.2 Share of new economic immigrants by admission programme, Canada, 2000–2023.

Source: Statistics Canada, Longitudinal Immigration Database.

different method for selecting skilled workers and prioritised human capital (education) but also employer-validated shortages. The system is designed around multi-stakeholder engagement: the federal government, through IRCC, manages the overall framework and selection process; provinces and territories participate via Express Entry-aligned PNP streams; employers play a critical role by offering job opportunities that enhance candidates' scores and offering valuable work experience necessary for access to the Canadian Experience Class (Reitz, 2023). Express Entry's ranking and the associated streams aim to prioritise human capital over traditional high-skill markers like formal educational attainment or income levels. The system creates important pathways for temporary workers already in Canada to transition to permanent residency, through a 'two-step' immigration process. Yet employer practices can affect the inclusion of skilled migrants. For example, a persistent lack of recognition of foreign credentials among employers limits the number of invitations issued to applicants from non-Western countries, creating a mismatch between available skills and labour market opportunities (Kelley et al., 2025). Furthermore, the Canadian experience bias, where having Canadian work experience, diplomas or employer sponsorship significantly increases the chances of selection, facilitates the transition for those already embedded in the Canadian labour market but disadvantages skilled foreign workers who lack Canadian contacts or recognised experience, despite having comparable qualifications abroad.

Since 2017, the Canadian government has released Multi-Year Immigration Levels Plans. These plans are developed through formal consultations with a broad range of stakeholders, including provincial and territorial governments, municipalities, settlement service providers, academic institutions, employers and business groups. Feedback from these consultations with stakeholders is summarised in the 'What We Heard' reports published by IRCC (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2025a). To develop the Immigration Levels Plans, the Minister must also consult with the governments of the provinces respecting the number in each class who will become permanent residents each year, their distribution in Canada taking into account regional economic and demographic requirements, and the measures to be undertaken to facilitate their integration into Canadian society.

The IRPA grants the authority to the Minister not only to set immigration levels, but to issue ministerial instructions to create new immigration categories and programmes, especially those tailored to fill specific labour needs with skilled foreign workers. Through a 2022 amendment to IRPA, to establish new categories under the economic class, the Minister of IRCC must engage in a public consultation process with relevant agencies and stakeholders, including provinces and territories, industry and civil society organisations, to obtain information, advice and recommendations in respect of the labour market conditions, including occupations expected to face shortage conditions, as well as on how categories can be formed to meet economic goals. For instance, in 2024, specific pilot programmes were introduced at

the federal level for skilled construction and health workers, after lengthy lobbying by those industries, employers and worker organisations. This stakeholder engagement, and the inclusion of a large variety of actors, has led to a proliferation of a variety of immigration programmes, with different economic goals matching the different needs and interests of those actors (Xhardez & Tanguay, 2024).

To better illustrate the dual outcomes of recent policy innovations, Table 7.1 summarises the main immigration policies shaping Canada's migration corridors, outlining both their successes and their implementation challenges. While each policy has contributed to making the system more transparent, responsive and regionally tailored, their limitations highlight the ongoing tensions between efficiency, fairness and inclusivity. This comparison

Table 7.1 Recent Canadian Immigration Policies: Successes and Challenges (Migration Corridor Perspective)

Policy/Programme	*Successes*	*Implementation Challenges*
Provincial Nominee Program (PNP)	• Allowed provinces to tailor immigration to regional labour shortages (healthcare, trades, agriculture). • Helped distribute migration flows beyond major cities to smaller provinces/regions. • Strengthened provincial role in multi-level governance.	• Uneven standards across provinces created inconsistencies in migrant selection. • Some programmes prioritised immediate employer needs over long-term integration. • Limited portability of credentials between provinces.
Express Entry	• Modernised the system by replacing first-come, first-served with a transparent, points-based ranking. • Improved efficiency and responsiveness of selection. • Created a two-step pathway from temporary to permanent residence.	• Employer bias and reliance on Canadian work experience created barriers for highly skilled applicants abroad. • Foreign credential recognition remained weak. • Risks of privileging those already embedded in Canadian labour market networks.
Targeted Pilot Programs	• Responded directly to lobbying by sectors facing acute shortages. • Allowed rapid adaptation of immigration categories to labour market needs.	• Risk of privileging certain industries over others. • May reinforce a segmented approach to labour migration. • Uncertainty about sustainability once pilot funding ends.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

shows how stakeholder engagement has both advanced and constrained the full potential of these corridors.

In sum, we see the emergence of three distinct types of agencies and stakeholders, with different roles and relationships with the federal government and IRCC. First, given Canada's multi-level governance of immigration, the provincial and territorial governments participate through an increasingly decentralised process of selection of skilled immigrants. Industries and employers also play a role by identifying labour needs, as well as sponsoring and boosting skilled immigrants' applications. Civil society organisations, to a lesser degree, inform the selection of skilled immigrants by providing advice and recommendations to the Minister through consultations.

7.5 How stakeholders shape recent Canadian immigration policy: A consultative relationship

Stakeholders have played an increasingly important role in shaping recent Canadian immigration policies. The expansion of the PNP reflected provincial and employer lobbying to address regional labour shortages, while Express Entry incorporated employer input through the weighting of Canadian work experience and arranged employment. More recently, the Multi-Year Immigration Levels Plans have institutionalised consultations with provinces, settlement agencies and industry groups, showing how stakeholder engagement refines government priorities and enhances policy responsiveness.

Maintaining the support of key stakeholders is widely regarded as one of the main reasons behind the success of Canada's immigration policies (Triadafilopoulos, 2022). With the development of governance, immigration policymaking is increasingly viewed as a long-term partnership among government, civil society, businesses and affected communities in Canada. This partial shift from communication to consultation redefines the role of stakeholders from passive recipients of information to active participants who also share responsibility for shaping, implementing and evaluating immigration policies.

Under Section 94 of the IRPA, the Minister of Immigration is legally required to table before Parliament an annual projection of the number of permanent residents Canada intends to admit in the following year. Both the federal and provincial governments can legislate on immigration matters, with federal paramountcy. The federal government engages provinces and territories on an ongoing basis multilaterally through the Forum of Ministers Responsible for Immigration (FMRI, 2025). Provincial representatives chair this body on a rotating basis. This type of stakeholder engagement is heavily institutionalised and based on collaboration, with a strong inclusion of shared policy design; however, they are limited to other government actors.

Growing demands for transparency and accountability have created the impetus for more open consultation processes, and IRCC has expanded its efforts to include a broader range of stakeholders in the consultation process in recent years. These efforts include online surveys, roundtable discussions

Table 7.2 Primary Focus of Stakeholder Organisations

	2019 (%)	*2020 (%)*	*2021 (%)*	*2022 (%)*	*2023 (%)*	*2024 (%)*
Academia, research foundation or think tank	11	11	16	6.7	7.4	12
Business	4	8	4	10	17.5	15.2
Educational organisation	–	–	–	14.1	8.5	30.9
Not-for-profit, charitable or NGO	–	25	26	35	30.5	22.9
Settlement and resettlement organisation	37	22	18	20.3	17.4	13.9
Number of responses from stakeholders and partners	247	394	243	448	633	997

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data obtained from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Consultations on Immigration Levels reports (various years).

and the publication of 'What We Heard' reports (summarising the input from civil society stakeholders), which began systematically in 2019. Such consultations help inform policy directions such as increasing economic immigration or prioritising family reunification. As shown in Table 7.2, non-profit and charitable organisations, settlement and resettlement agencies, as well as businesses, have been among the most active contributors to IRCC's consultation processes since 2019. Over the years, the majority of stakeholder organisations have expressed a preference for prioritising growth in the economic immigration class over the family and refugee classes.[1]

The 2023–2024 Strategic Immigration Review was the longest consultation exercise undertaken by IRCC in recent decades (IRCC, 2023). Conceived in the wake of COVID-19 and the announcement of significantly higher immigration intake targets, its purpose was not to fine-tune individual programmes but to re-evaluate the overall strategic direction of Canada's immigration system. Engagement was deliberately broader and more participatory than IRCC's usual reliance on surveys and thematic roundtables. In addition to bilateral meetings and written submissions, the review introduced externally facilitated, in-person regional roundtables. Participants included settlement agencies, unions, business groups such as the Business Council of Canada and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, Indigenous partners, academics and sectoral organisations, with provinces and territories consulted separately through the Forum of Ministers Responsible for Immigration. Input was qualitative rather than statistically representative. The outcomes were compiled in a report titled 'An Immigration System for Canada's Future', which summarised proposals and identified 39 action items.

7.6 A broader consultative model for better immigration policy design

Based on our analysis of the Canadian model, an appropriate stakeholder engagement process could be modelled as follows (Figure 7.3). Stakeholder engagement begins with identifying and including key groups such as the general public, organisations and institutions (e.g. NGOs, employers, civil society), special interest groups (particularly Indigenous representatives and Francophone communities) and various provincial and territorial government bodies. In countries where such territorial units are not relevant, regional or municipal bodies may be included, in line with the overall institutional structure of each state. Tensions can often arise between stakeholders' varied priorities, public interests and the needs of immigrants, underscoring the government's role in consultation processes to reconcile divergent feedback (Triadafilopoulos, 2022). It also highlights to need to include academic experts to foster informed debate.

The scope of the consultations is defined before gathering insights. IRCC holds separate consultations based on the policy and programme which are in question (e.g. the Immigration Levels Plans, the PNP or a new immigration category like Francophone immigration). This defines the consultation method, whether it is open or closed, and the timeline, whether it is cyclical or a one-time consultation, as well as the depth of the engagement and the feedback gathered. In a context of labour shortages, this method ensures that the consultation can address a wide variety of needs or concerns, for instance through region-specific or industry-specific programmes.

These stakeholders are engaged through diverse methods, including online surveys, roundtable discussions, focus groups and structured dialogue sessions. The aim of employing multiple engagement methods is to capture a wide spectrum of perspectives, enhancing the representativeness and comprehensiveness of the consultation process. Such variety of methods allows the government to dig further into proposals and understand the concerns of the stakeholders, while also facilitating a broad representation of interests and viewpoints. Having such an active engagement with civil society allows for citizens and immigrants to raise their voices through civil society organisations. For instance, in Canada, the Council of Newcomers is a 2024 initiative that brings together up to 12 immigrants who came to Canada in the past ten years and have lived experience of Canada's immigration system. Council members are invited to share their views, ideas and experiences on various immigration-related topics on a voluntary and non-attributional basis (IRCC, 2025b).

The insights collected are then analysed, sometimes shared through summaries known as 'What We Heard' reports, along with documents that track policy changes and promote transparency. This ensures that there is accountability and a written record of the consultation process. Policymakers at IRCC and the Immigration Minister's office may use this feedback to shape new or adjust existing policies. The Strategic Immigration Review went further to

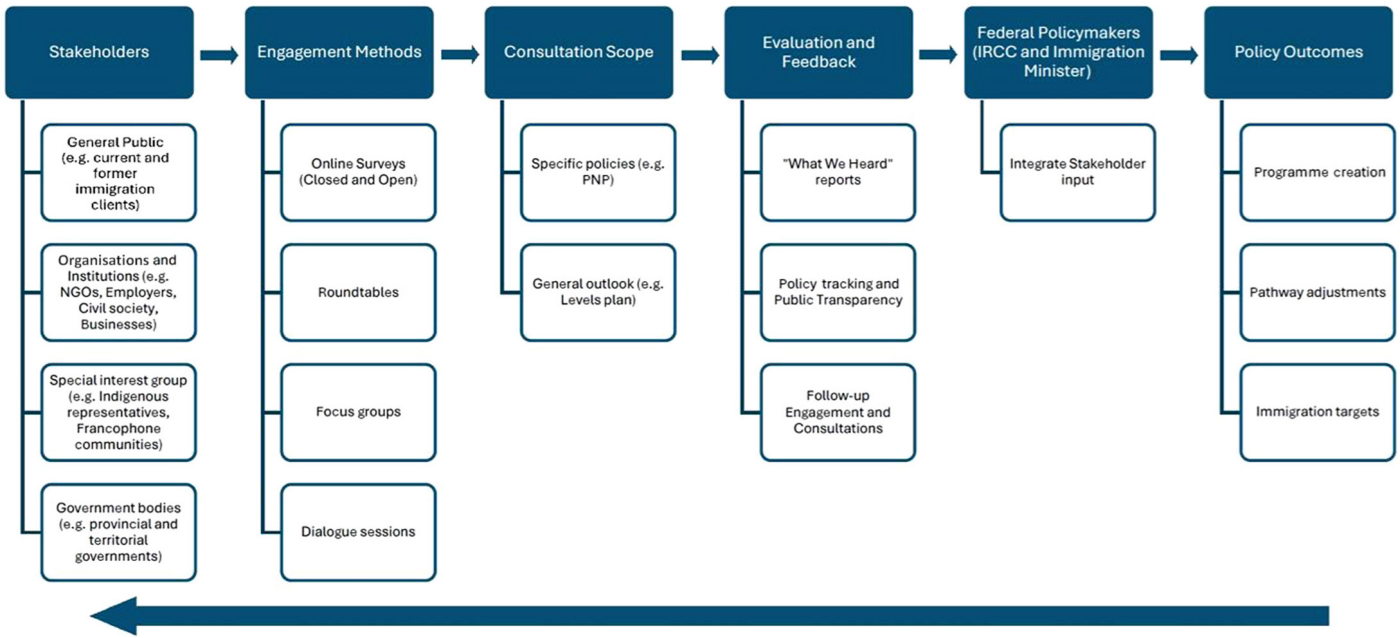

Figure 7.3 Stakeholder engagement process in Canadian immigration policy.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

promote transparency and collaboration than most consultations; it included 39 action steps in its reporting, making it possible for stakeholders to track the policy changes directly resulting from their engagement (IRCC, 2023). For instance, such a process is important for all countries as immigration flows may affect differently large cities compared to small towns; central areas vs peripheral territories near borders; areas that have higher needs in seasonal immigration (e.g. touristic areas or areas focusing on agriculture) vs areas that need immigrants year-round (e.g. manufacturing, construction or IT services).

In the proposed system, even though the (federal, in the case of Canada; national in other cases) government retains authority over the administrative and legislative frameworks, determining the conditions under which most skilled immigrants are selected, certain areas of policymaking demonstrate a collaborative relationship, where policy solutions are co-created, responsibility and implementation are shared. This relationship, in the area of skilled migration, is limited to other governmental actors (not stakeholders) within Canada's multi-governance framework, notably provinces and territories. In other countries, such consultative and co-creation process could include regional or city authorities. We could however envisage a system of more inclusive consultation where civil society stakeholders, including industry representatives and immigrant-serving organisations, become part of the policy design process.

In sum, immigration policymaking needs to include significant consultation with civil society stakeholders and collaboration at the subnational level, even if it remains under federal or national jurisdiction when it comes to final decision-making.

Broad, systematic and transparent consultation (including feedback loops, written documents and a clear process) is important for a number of reasons. First, it increases the trust of stakeholders in the government and the legitimacy of the adopted policies. Second, it provides important outlets for different stakeholders to express their concerns, support their interests and get involved. It can facilitate implementation as the relevant stakeholders are informed, connected and likely to get on board as needed. It can also provide legitimate avenues for discussing disagreements, easing tensions and find collaborative solutions.

The absence of such consultative processes includes important risks such as the over-representation of specific interest groups (e.g. big employers or trade unions or specific diaspora groups for instance), a lack of government accountability and eventually a lack of trust in the institutions.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the evolution of stakeholder engagement in Canadian immigration policymaking, highlighting its gradual shift from limited, top-down communication towards more inclusive, consultative and, in some instances, collaborative governance models.

Canada has progressed from a centralised to a consultative and multi-level governance models albeit not without tensions or difficulties. While stakeholder engagement at the federal level largely remains consultative rather than collaborative, it offers an important avenue for stakeholders, interest groups, even interested citizens and experts, to express concerns, support their views and participate in the process. Building on this experience, we have proposed a model that could be adopted in different countries, adjusted to their institutional make up. Sustained engagement with stakeholders – ranging from provincial and municipal governments to employers, settlement agencies, advocacy groups and immigrant communities – is essential for ensuring that Canada's immigration system remains adaptive, inclusive and reflective of the country's evolving social and economic realities. This success has been reflected also in broad societal support for immigration and a significant consensus over immigration policy goals and instruments. The Canadian experience demonstrates that stakeholder engagement is not merely a procedural formality but a substantive mechanism that contributes to the design and durability of successful immigration policies.

In the context of migration corridors, Canada's experience shows that the type of stakeholder engagement fundamentally determines whether these pathways promote inclusivity or reinforce exclusion. Consultative mechanisms have provided greater transparency and predictability but remain limited in addressing structural inequities. Collaborative mechanisms, though less common, have shown greater potential to balance economic objectives with fairness and inclusivity when stakeholders share responsibility for outcomes. By contrast, purely communicative approaches risk entrenching narrow interests and weakening corridor legitimacy. Strengthening engagement along more collaborative lines therefore represents a key step towards building migration skill corridors that are both fair and sustainable.

Notes

1 Stakeholders could select multiple categories.

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8 The impact of Russia's full-scale invasion on Ukrainian-Polish and Ukrainian-German migration skill corridors*

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8.1 Introduction

Contemporary Ukrainian migration began with Ukraine's independence in 1991. Since then, Ukraine has experienced two major phases of labour migration and large-scale forced migration caused by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Kyliushyk & Chról, 2025).

During the early years of Ukrainian independence, the most significant migration corridor (see Chapter 1) was observed between Ukraine and Russia, followed by corridors between Ukraine and Italy, and Ukraine and Poland. During this period, Russia emerged as the predominant destination for labour migration among Ukrainians. This phenomenon can be attributed, in large part, to the lingering influence of the Soviet era and historical colonial connections (Kyliushyk et al., 2025). These factors ensured a degree of linguistic and cultural familiarity, as well as facilitating ease of movement under a long-standing visa-free regime.

The Revolution of Dignity – a series of pro-European protests in 2013–2014 – along with Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine, marked a turning point that intensified Ukrainian migration and ushered in the second phase of contemporary Ukrainian international mobility. Russian aggression fundamentally reconfigured Ukraine's labour migration geography, diminishing the long-dominant Ukraine-Russia corridor and elevating Poland as the primary destination. While in 2008 nearly half (48.1%) of Ukrainian labour migrants worked in Russia and only 8% in Poland, by 2017 these proportions had reversed: 26.3% migrated to Russia, and 42.4% to Poland (Kyliushyk et al., 2025).

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 resulted in Europe's largest refugee crisis since World War II, significantly altering Ukrainian migration patterns. As of September 2024, nearly 6.8 million Ukrainians had

* *Thesis 8. Ukrainian outmigration has eased labour shortages in Poland and Germany but deepened Ukraine's workforce deficits, highlighting the need for policies that support migrants' labour market inclusion in host countries, their choices and Ukraine's voluntary return efforts.*

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migrated globally, with over 6.2 million residing in Europe (UNHCR, 2024). Initially, Poland became the primary destination country, with more than 1.5 million Ukrainians registering for temporary protection by the end of 2022. However, the number of Ukrainian migrants in Poland has since decreased, while Germany has emerged as an increasingly popular destination (Lapshyna, 2025). By 2024, Germany had received over 1.2 million Ukrainians, in comparison to Poland's 970,120 and the Czech Republic's 370,980 (UNHCR, 2024). It is evident that the migration skill corridor between Ukraine and Poland persists in holding significance; at the same time, the migration corridor between Ukraine and Germany is developing rapidly.

This chapter aims to explore the labour market integration of Ukrainian forced migrants in Poland and Germany, while also analysing the impact of this large-scale outmigration on Ukraine's own labour market. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the methodology, followed by analyses of Ukrainian migrants' labour market integration in Poland and Germany. It then examines the impact of outmigration on Ukraine's labour market and concludes with a synthesis of findings.

8.2 Methods and data

To achieve the aim of this chapter, we employed a mixed approach combining a data and literature review with empirical qualitative research. The data and literature review analyses existing studies, policy frameworks and their outcomes in relation to Ukrainian migration and labour market dynamics in Germany, Poland and Ukraine.

This chapter draws on empirical material collected within two research projects: the Horizon 2023 research project Link4Skills (2024–2026) and research project 'Should I stay or should I go? Transition, Uncertainty and Transnationalism of Ukrainians in Germany' conducted by Iryna Lapshyna, co-author of this article, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (2023–2024).

The empirical basis of the analysis for the first project consists of in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted with policymakers, practitioners and experts in the field of Ukrainian migration. Participants included actors from recruitment and labour intermediation agencies, migrant support organisations (local and international), employer association and governmental ministries, as well as researchers from academic institutions. The research was carried out in two national contexts: in Poland, by the research team from Kozminski University, who conducted 13 IDIs; and in Ukraine, by the research team from the Ukrainian Catholic University, who conducted 12 IDIs. The interviews were carried out between April and May 2025. The aim of this empirical study was to gain a deeper understanding of migration dynamics within the Ukrainian-Polish skills corridor. Specifically, we sought to explore how this established migration corridor might function more effectively and equitably to address skill shortages in both countries. The research design was approved by the

Research Ethics Committees of both participating universities. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised with the informed consent of participants. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the guidelines proposed by Nowell et al. (2017).

The empirical data of the second research project is based on 25 IDIs with Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany. The interviewees (6 male and 19 female) were between 18 and 60 years old. This reflects the general characteristics of the displaced population from Ukraine in Germany.

Based on the stated aim and the adopted methodological framework, this chapter puts forward the thesis that the large-scale outmigration of Ukrainian citizens – driven by successive movements of economic and refugee migration – has partially alleviated labour shortages in countries such as Poland and Germany, while simultaneously generating significant challenges for Ukraine, including growing deficits in its own labour force. In this context, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive and balanced migration policy, one that supports Ukrainians' labour market inclusion in residence countries, migrants' choices and Ukraine's voluntary return efforts.

8.3 Ukrainians in the Polish labour market

Migration from Ukraine to Poland has been a long-standing phenomenon throughout the history of Ukraine as an independent state. In consequence, a considerable number of Ukrainian labour migrants had already established themselves in Poland prior to the full-scale Russian invasion. By the end of February 2020, the number of migrants in Poland had reached 2,213,594, of whom 1,390,978 (62%) were Ukrainians (GUS, 2020). During this period, migration was predominantly male, with women accounting for 44% of migrants, the majority of whom resided in large cities (53%) (Cope et al., 2021). Most Ukrainian labour migrants were of working age, with over two-thirds aged 21–40. As noted by one of our interviewees from one of the largest recruitment agencies hiring migrant workers in Poland:

> There was no need to fill the labour market with additional nationalities. Ukraine was readily accessible, culturally and linguistically close. [They] fit perfectly with the needs of the Polish labour market. (…) coming primarily for economic reasons, interested in short-term migration, aiming to work as many hours as possible, earn as much money as they could, and then return home with those earnings.
>
> (IDI_PL_6)

The initial sectors in which Ukrainians found employment in Poland were agriculture, construction and domestic work (Fedyuk et al., 2023). Over time, the presence of Ukrainian labour migrants expanded into other industries, including food processing and manufacturing, transportation and logistics, gastronomy, hotel industry, administration and other services. The significant

presence of Ukrainians in the Polish labour market has been identified as a contributing factor to the country's economic growth. Between 2014 and the onset of the COVD-19 pandemic, the Polish economy expanded by 22%, with a minimum of 2.5% of this growth being attributable to the contribution of Ukrainian migrants (Cope et al., 2021).

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 triggered a large-scale displacement of Ukrainian citizens, many of whom sought refuge in neighbouring European Union (EU) countries, primarily Poland. Poland's response to the 2022 arrival of Ukrainian refugees was shaped by these earlier migrations and the long-standing presence of Ukrainians in the country. Prior to the full-scale invasion, successive movements of labour migration and the Ukrainian minority that had resided in Poland for generations contributed to the development of minority- and migrant-led NGOs and civic infrastructures. These structures, together with a broader civic ecosystem involving local authorities, businesses and civil society, enabled a rapid and relatively 'soft reception' of displaced Ukrainians (Czerska-Shaw & Dunin-Wąsowicz, 2025). Within a very short period, by May 2022, 1.1 million Ukrainians had registered for temporary protection (Duszczyk et al., 2023). By the end of 2022, over 1.5 million refugees from Ukraine had been granted Temporary Protection or similar national protection schemes (UNHCR, 2022). However, by September 2024, the number of Ukrainian refugees in Poland had declined to 975,975 (Grabowska et al., 2025). The decline is linked to return migration but, most notably, to the relocation of refugees to other countries, primarily Germany (Chról & Kyliushyk, 2025; Lapshyna, 2025).

As men of conscription age were not allowed to leave Ukraine, most forced migrants arriving in Poland were women (78–84%) accompanied by children (Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2023). Their average age ranged between 39 and 41 years, and approximately two-thirds (66%) were mothers. Moreover, two-thirds of Ukrainians fleeing the war held higher education degrees. Most of them had no prior migration experience, as they belonged to Ukraine's middle class and held a relatively stable and satisfactory position within Ukrainian society. As noted by the leader of a Ukrainian civil society organisation in Poland, this background brought with it a distinct set of challenges:

> It's an emotional, ethical, and deeply personal challenge. They [Ukrainian women] lose everything. And arriving in a new country, they find themselves in a completely different environment, with a different mentality, language, culture, system (…) they must learn how to function within it from the beginning.
>
> (IDI_PL_8)

The stay of Ukrainians is legalised due to the temporary protection status activated by the EU Directive on 4 March 2022, which Poland further endorsed in the Act of 12 March 2022, titled 'On assistance to Ukrainian citizens in connection with the armed conflict'. This legislation provided both newly

arrived forced migrants and previous economic migrants with free access to the Polish labour market. Ukrainians with temporary protection status also could run businesses and have access to social assistance and health care. When it comes to financial support, Ukrainian refugees in Poland can primarily rely on payments from the 800+ programme, a government benefit that provides 800 PLN (approximately 185 EUR) per month for each child under 18.

The main source of livelihood for Ukrainian migrants is paid work. For pre-war migrants, income from work accounts for around 90% of their total income. Ninety-three per cent of adults in the group of pre-war migrants are employed, with 81% working full-time (NBP, 2024). In comparison, the percentage of employed adults among war migrants is 78%, with 65% working full-time and 17% working part-time. This is due to the necessity of combining childcare with work in this group (Fedyuk et al., 2023). Overall, the economic situation of war migrants is more difficult than that of pre-war migrants. Among war migrants, 44% live with children, while the percentage is 36% among pre-war migrants (NBP, 2024). The differences also extend to family circumstances: 35% of war migrants live with a partner, compared to 51% of pre-war migrants, indicating a higher degree of family separation among the former group.

Ukrainians in Poland remain very economically active and the employment rate of Ukrainian migrants (78%) exceeds the average level among Polish citizens (NBP, 2024). In 2023, 784,545 Ukrainians were registered in the Polish labour market, a number that increased to 1,078,041 in 2024 (MRPiPS, 2023). Ukrainians were primarily employed in manufacturing (334,076), followed by administrative and support services (201,692), transportation and warehousing (192,688), construction (76,612), and accommodation and food services (66,611). According to data presented in the Deloitte report (2025), the net macroeconomic impact of Ukrainian refugees in 2024 amounted to 2.7% of Poland's GDP. For every 1 PLN received by Ukrainian migrants through the 800 plus benefit, approximately 5.4 PLN is returned to the state in the form of taxes and social security contributions paid by these migrants (BGK, 2025).

The structure of the Polish labour market, where jobs predominantly held by men are valued higher, contributes to deepening income inequality (NBP, 2024). The median wages of women, especially war migrants, are 25% lower, which further complicates their economic situation. There is also a gradual change in the employment structure: the share of migrants doing unskilled work fell from 53% in 2023 to 44% in 2024. At the same time, the share of those employed in jobs requiring higher qualifications increased from 33% to 38%. Nevertheless, only 14% of migrants use their higher education in their work (NBP, 2024). The main barrier to career advancement for highly qualified specialists among Ukrainian refugees in the labour market remains the language barrier (Kyliushyk et al., 2025): 'The language barrier is a serious challenge to making full use of one's potential in the labour market' (IDI_PL_8). Knowledge of the Polish language among migrants has gradually

improved, but the level of language proficiency varies between groups. In 2022, 21% of war migrants reported lacking knowledge of Polish, while by 2024, this percentage dropped to 9.4% (NBP, 2024). In comparison, only 2% of pre-war migrants do not know Polish. However, basic language skills are not sufficient for employment in positions that require higher qualifications.

Deskilling among Ukrainian refugee women is also experienced through challenges related to skills transferability, requalification and diploma recognition (Kyliushyk et al., 2025). Despite their high qualifications and experience, many women face difficulties in having their credentials recognised in Poland, which limits their access to professional positions in their field.

> (…) regulated professions, require special authorisations. And this is where another problem arises – the recognition of foreign qualifications. The process is time-consuming and often discourages Ukrainian citizens. Many simply choose not to go through it.
>
> (IDI_PL_2)

Furthermore, the process of transferring skills to the local labour market is often hindered by the need for additional training or certification to meet the standards of the Polish labour market. Consequently, many women are forced to take up lower-skilled, lower-paid jobs, which does not reflect their qualifications or previous work experience.

> There is a significant mismatch. The individuals who come to us are generally highly educated. But often in the humanities, for example, in law. And it is very difficult to transfer those qualifications and competencies into the Polish context. (…) re-skilling or up-skilling is simply necessary. Employers are often not willing to wait for someone to acquire the necessary qualifications or competencies.
>
> (IDI_PL_2)

In recent years, Poland has seen a clear shift in the discourse on Ukrainian migrants. Initially, it was positive and supportive, focusing on solidarity with refugees and their rapid social and labour market integration. After the 2023 change of government, work began on an integration policy strategy not seen since 2015. Over time, however, growing populist trends have increasingly framed public debate around 'state burden', competition for jobs and access to public services. This situation has further exacerbated the challenges faced by Ukrainians in Poland.

When it comes to future mobility plans, pre-war migrants are more likely to consider staying in Poland permanently: 50% express such intentions, compared to only 20% of war-time migrants (NBP, 2024). A significant share remains undecided – 39% among pre-war migrants and as many as 56% among those who arrived after the invasion – likely due to uncertainty about their career prospects.

8.4 Ukrainians in the German labour market

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a massive humanitarian and displacement crisis. More than 1 million people have fled from Ukraine to Germany since the start of the war, most of them being women and children. According to the Central Register of Foreign Nationals (AZR), 1.1 million war refugees from Ukraine were registered as residents in Germany (as of 1 June 2024). Prior to the war, around 331,000 persons with a Ukrainian migrant background lived in Germany. More than half of them have German citizenship (196,000), and others (135,000) Ukrainian (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021). The share of Ukrainians in German society rose from 0.2% before the Russian invasion to 1.2% by the end of 2023; they were the second largest foreign national group in the country after Turkish nationals.

The conditions for fleeing Ukraine differ from those from other countries of origin. Ukrainian citizens can enter EU member states without a visa. Men of compulsory military age were banned from leaving the country alongside general mobilisation. Finally, refugees from Ukraine have been granted temporary protection without an asylum procedure following the activation of the so-called 'Temporary Protection Directive' (Directive 2001/55/EC). Similarly to Poland, reception of Ukrainians in Germany was crucially managed by civic society actors. The Ukrainian diaspora has actively responded to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by mobilising resources, providing humanitarian aid and advocating for Ukraine's cause internationally. As a result of the extensive diaspora networks developed following the Euromaidan Revolution in 2013, Ukrainians in Germany were able to mobilise rapidly in response to the onset of the full-scale war. The Ukrainian diaspora was fast, efficient and often a first-responding actor. In contrast to Poland, municipalities in Germany have refugee reception experience and learned from the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 when over 1 million refugees, primarily from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, arrived in Germany how to deal with large-scale influx of refugees, how to receive and integrate them.

Once forced migrants have been granted a residence permit in Germany, they are entitled to social benefits from the Job Centre, which they must apply for. This 'Bürgergeld' (citizen's income) offers basic security for the unemployed. A single person is entitled to €563 in monthly spending money. Couples can receive €506 per person, and children's benefits are between €357 and €471 each month, depending on their age. German states also cover health insurance and accommodation costs (rent and heating). Funds are also provided for home furnishings and school supplies (Kinkarz, 2024). Thus, social benefits offered by Germany are rather generous compared to other host countries receiving Ukrainian refugees.

Ukrainians in Germany differ from other refugees in terms of their demographic and social characteristics, as well as their integration prospects. Most adults are women (80%) with higher education. Seventy-two per cent of them

hold a tertiary degree (Brücker et al., 2023). However, according to the Institute for Economic Research in Germany (IFO), many of them are reluctant to accept jobs that do not align with their qualifications.

Compared to Poland, very few of Ukrainian displaced migrants are active in the labour market in Germany. At the end of 2023, only 214,000 of refugees were working (Kinkarz, 2024). In Germany, access to the labour market is particularly challenging due to numerous restrictions and barriers. The process of verifying and recognising foreign professional qualifications and academic degrees is complex and time-consuming. A woman, 40 years old, from Kyiv described the situation as follows:

> There is too much bureaucracy in Germany if you want to work. On the one hand they all want you to work, but on the other hand there are so many barriers, including the language barrier, recognition of diplomas etc.
>
> (IDI_DE_2)

The lengthy process of diploma recognition and insufficient command of German result in 49% of economically active Ukrainians employed below their qualifications. A 21-year-old trained journalist from Sloviansk works below her qualifications in a warehouse, handling incoming and outgoing goods. She sees this job as temporary and argues that:

> (…) the best thing is that I can practise my German. I also attend a language course and I must say that my German is at a more advanced level than that of my group mates. And this is because of my work.
>
> (IDI_DE_9)

Around 60% of Ukrainian refugees in Germany perceived language barrier as the biggest challenge in their new environment, according to an OECD survey (2023). As one man (36 years old) from Horlivka reported: 'There is endless paperwork, we have to fill in hundreds of documents in German'. A 47-year-old woman from Kryvyi Rih explained: 'I have a PhD, but I am not sure if I can find a job in German academia. People say that a good knowledge of German is the key, I am learning German but it is very slow' (IDI_DE_21).

One of the major hurdles in refugee integration is their adaptation to the labour market and the issue of labour mobility. Since Germany's labour market is under severe pressure it is hoping for a rapid increase in employment among Ukrainian refugees soon. Currently, about 70% of the economically inactive Ukrainian refugees are attending language or integration courses (62%) or vocational schools (8%). When they join the labour market, this will allow local employers to partially fill the country's labour shortage, which according to estimates from Institute for Employment Research will rise to 7 million people by 2035. In Ukraine, a relatively large number of women used to work as

academic, technical or medical staff, and it is these market segments which are suffering serious staff shortages in Germany.

In 2024, the Job-Turbo initiative, spearheaded by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, was started in Germany. It aims to integrate refugees into the labour market at an early stage and as permanently as possible after having acquired basic German language skills. The objective is to provide active support for placements in jobs directly after successful completion of the integration course. This is intended to boost integration processes and ensure that refugees are put in a position of securing their own livelihoods and shaping their career prospects more rapidly. While some Ukrainian refugees are already employed in Germany, others are critical of the services provided by the Job Centres. Forced migrants refer to 'faceless' bureaucracy, skills-job mismatch and complain that well-educated women are offered unskilled jobs (Lapshyna, 2025). For example, a woman (42 years old) from Poltava commented:

> I hear a lot about what the job centre offers to our women, especially this 'turbo job' initiative, which was launched to quickly employ migrants after they have acquired basic German language skills. They offer well-educated women, sometimes with several master's degrees, unskilled jobs as cleaners, cashiers, etc.
>
> (IDI_DE_19)

Labour market considerations are prominently featured in the German public discourse. This is largely driven by a combination of factors, including demographic shifts, the ageing population and a growing demand for skilled workers. The focus often revolves around finding ways to integrate more immigrants into the labour market and leveraging their skills to address shortages in various sectors. As a result, the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Germany blurs the traditional concepts between refugees seeking humanitarian protection and migrant workers primarily driven by employment opportunities. The complexities of integrating highly educated individuals into a restrictive labour market have sparked debates about how best to balance humanitarian obligations with the economic potential of these displaced populations. This evolving situation highlights the need for flexible policies that can address both immediate protection needs and long-term labour market integration.

Although many Ukrainians plan to return to Ukraine after the war, the duration of the war is resulting in an increasing number of them to consider staying in Germany for an extended period or permanently. In the second half of 2023, approximately 59% of Ukrainian refugees who immigrated to Germany between the end of February and the end of May 2022 plan to stay permanently. Of those who arrived in Germany from June 2022 onwards, around 69% want to stay permanently, 10% points more than in the first immigration cohort (Kosyakova et al., 2025). Additionally, as a response to many uncertainties Ukrainian refugees experience in political, economic, social and linguistic domains, transnational living models are becoming more prevalent, affecting their integration into the labour market (Lapshyna, 2025).

8.5 The impact of migration on the Ukrainian labour market

The full-scale war triggered an unprecedented movement of forced migration, which initially involved many skilled individuals who had not previously considered leaving the country (Kyliushyk et al., 2025). While much of the existing research and policy discourse has focused on the reception and integration of displaced Ukrainians in host countries such as Poland and Germany, it is equally important to examine how this large-scale outflow is reshaping the Ukrainian labour market itself.

However, over time, and particularly after more than two years of continuous displacement, the nature of migration from Ukraine has begun to shift. Increasingly, Ukrainian professionals – especially women – are making strategic decisions to leave the country, driven not solely by safety concerns, but also by the lack of viable opportunities for career advancement and professional fulfilment in wartime Ukraine (Zanuda, 2024). This shift points to a potential new phase in Ukraine's migration trajectory – one in which long-term structural constraints within the national labour market are becoming key drivers of skilled migration, supplanting the initial, immediate imperative of fleeing war.

This reorientation of migration motives has been significantly facilitated by the legal and institutional frameworks established in the EU, where Ukrainians have been granted facilitated access to residence, labour markets, education and healthcare. As a result, migration to EU countries – particularly to Germany and Poland – has become not only a response to the crisis, but also a viable channel for long-term relocation. According to Eurostat data, from February 2022 to the end of July 2024, 4.1 million Ukrainians had obtained temporary protection within the EU, with the vast majority residing in Germany and Poland (Zanuda, 2024). Between January and August 2024, Ukraine recorded a net loss in population mobility, with nearly 300,000 more people leaving the country than returning. These figures suggest that even in the third year of the war, outward migration remains substantial, raising concerns about its cumulative effects on the Ukrainian labour market, public services and national recovery capacity.

The continued movement of Ukrainians – especially those of working age – has turned international migration into one of Ukraine's most pressing demographic challenges, second only to the long-standing trend of natural population decline (Libanova et al., 2022). As a result of combined factors including war, migration and demographic ageing, Ukraine's population has shrunk dramatically – from 52 million in 1991 to approximately 35 million by 2024. This demographic contraction poses severe risks not only to the labour supply, but also to the future viability of Ukraine's economy and welfare system. According to a survey by the Institute for Economic Research and Policy Consulting (Ukraine), the shortage of workers – caused both by military mobilisation and the migration of skilled labour abroad – was cited as the second most critical constraint facing businesses during wartime (Zanuda, 2024). In August 2024, 65% of businesses surveyed named power outages as a key obstacle, while 63% identified the lack of personnel. These figures highlight

the extent to which migration is no longer merely a social or humanitarian issue, but a structural economic threat.

By 2024, Ukraine was already facing a serious challenge: a significant decline in the availability of skilled workers, particularly in sectors requiring medium- to high-level qualifications. These included engineers, technicians, IT specialists and mid-level managers – often English-speaking and internationally mobile professionals referred to as the 'white-collar middle tier' (Zanuda, 2024). As Rabets (2024) observes, this phase of labour migration not only weakened Ukraine's short-term economic performance but also undermined its prospects for long-term socio-economic recovery. Unless effectively addressed, the demographic and workforce crisis is likely to intensify further (Rabets, 2024).

The definitive return of Ukrainians currently abroad appears increasingly unlikely, particularly as the war drags on and more individuals adapt to life in host countries. The longer displacement lasts, the stronger the social, economic and psychological ties to the country of settlement become – reducing the probability of return. Moreover, there is a significant risk of a male emigration once exit restrictions are lifted, either at the end of the war or following the cessation of active hostilities. Many men whose families have already settled abroad may seek reunification, further exacerbating the labour force deficit and deepening the demographic crisis in Ukraine (Libanova et al., 2022). According to the Ukrainian government, between 200,000 and 500,000 men could leave Ukraine after the war ends and all travel restrictions are lifted. (Fornusek & Sorokin, 2025). To mitigate the long-term economic risks associated with continued outmigration, Ukraine urgently requires a coherent demographic and migration policy framework that addresses both current losses and future reintegration prospects (Rabets, 2024).

In late 2024, the Ukrainian government established the Ministry of National Unity, a new institution tasked with strengthening policy coordination concerning Ukrainians abroad. The Ministry's primary objective was to design and implement strategies that facilitate the return of migrants while maintaining strong transnational ties with the diaspora. As noted by one of the representatives of the newly established ministry:

> To ensure communication, support, and reintegration into the Ukrainian context for our citizens who were forced to go abroad. And secondly, to connect the diaspora to the Ukrainian context and provide state interfaces that they have not had throughout the years of independence.
>
> (IDI_UA_4)

In July 2025, following criticism from the human rights community that called for relaunching the Ministry of National Unity to address the needs of all those affected by the war, the government decided to reorganise it by merging with the Ministry of Social Policy, Family, and Unity.

Despite the long history of Ukrainian migration, Ukraine has not signed any bilateral agreements. Moreover, according to our interlocutors, the conclusion of a talent partnership (see Chapter 2) as an agreement to facilitate the recruitment and placement of skilled professionals between Ukraine and, for example, Poland or Germany is not feasible due to demographic challenges, Ukraine's aspirations for EU membership and its own demand for workers: '(…) the Ukrainian strategy is completely different. It is about the return of Ukrainians, Ukrainian labour force, to their places, creating competitive conditions, and so on' (IDI_UA_4).

Despite the absence of formal bilateral partnership agreements or targeted talent-attraction frameworks specifically aimed at Ukrainian nationals, such instruments are not perceived as necessary by both Polish and Ukrainian practitioners and policymakers. As they emphasised, Ukrainians already benefit from visa-free short-term entry and full access to the Polish labour market.

In my view, it is already functioning independently of any formal agreements, often relying on established migration networks. So, Ukraine's openness to such cooperation seems unlikely – because the country itself needs its people (IDI_PL_2).

Considering the growing concern over the potential for skill flow, Polish authorities have also adopted a permissive stance towards Ukrainian state-led return migration initiatives. Therefore, Poland's policy towards Ukrainian migrants is relatively complex, as it seeks to balance the intention to retain Ukrainian migrants with an awareness of Ukraine's demographic challenges and its efforts to facilitate the return of its citizens.

> These two goals should not be in conflict. On the one hand, we must pursue an integration policy for Ukrainian citizens in Poland, but at the same time we cannot, in any way, obstruct Ukraine's efforts to promote return migration. Conversely, Ukraine should not block our integration initiatives while simultaneously making use of all available opportunities to encourage returns.
>
> (IDI_PL_7)

Although the Polish government does not intend to develop policies that would explicitly discourage Ukrainian migrants from returning to Ukraine, it has made clear statements about the need to prevent their further migration to Germany. This position stems from concerns over the potential loss of human capital, which is urgently needed in Poland considering its rapidly ageing population. Notably, the number of temporary protection holders in Germany has already surpassed that in Poland, further intensifying fears of losing a valuable and much-needed workforce: '(…) as a state, we should not strongly discourage Ukrainian migrants from returning to Ukraine [but] prevent them from leaving for Germany' (IDI_PL_9).

To support Ukraine's post-war recovery and enhance its long-term resilience, the Skills Alliance for Ukraine was launched in 2024 as a multilateral initiative aimed at addressing critical labour market shortages and facilitating socio-economic reintegration. Coordinated by the Ukrainian Ministry of Economy and supported by over 70 international actors, including EU member states, global corporations and development agencies, the Alliance seeks to provide vocational training and re-skilling opportunities to more than 180,000 individuals, with a focus on displaced persons, women, youth and veterans. By fostering skills in strategic sectors such as construction, logistics, digital services, healthcare and renewable energy, the initiative not only strengthens Ukraine's internal reconstruction capacity but also promotes alignment with EU labour standards and qualifications. As such, the Skills Alliance represents a pivotal mechanism for mitigating wartime skill flow, supporting return migration and preparing the country's workforce for sustainable development and European integration.

In 2025, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted Presidential draft law No. 11469 on multiple citizenship. The law is designed as a strategic response to Ukraine's pressing demographic and security challenges. By legally enabling Ukrainian nationals to hold more than one citizenship, the law offers an important instrument for strengthening transnational identity and sustaining engagement with millions of Ukrainians living outside the country. As former Minister for National Unity, Oleksii Chernyshov, has emphasised, 'multiple citizenship is one of the tools that will help preserve the future of the nation' (2025). In addition to its symbolic importance, the law could facilitate voluntary return, encourage diaspora contributions to reconstruction and reduce the social and legal trade-offs typically associated with mobility.

Our interviewees emphasised that while it is important to create adequate opportunities to encourage Ukrainians to return, the final decision ultimately rests with the individuals themselves:

> The best solution should be guided by the invisible hand of the market. That is, Ukraine will offer its opportunities, the host country will offer its opportunities. And the individual, possessing freedom of choice, will decide where to stay.
>
> (IDI_UA_ 2)

8.6 Conclusion

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has profoundly reshaped migration patterns, reinforcing and transforming migration corridors between Ukraine and Poland as well as Ukraine and Germany. These two countries, having demand for migrants work, have adopted distinct approaches to integrating Ukrainian refugees into their labour markets, shaping the experiences of skilled migrants in different ways.

First, Poland has followed a 'work first' approach, prioritising immediate labour market access to facilitate rapid employment and self-sufficiency. This has resulted in a high employment rate among Ukrainian women, who actively participate in the Polish economy. However, many skilled migrants continue to work below their qualifications, reflecting persistent language and structural barriers.

Second, Germany has adopted a 'settle first' policy, focusing on long-term stability through structured integration measures before encouraging full labour market participation. This strategy provides refugees with language courses and vocational training, aiming to prepare them for sustainable employment. However, it has also resulted in a slower rate of labour market entry, with a significantly lower employment rate among Ukrainian refugees compared to Poland.

Despite these contrasting strategies, Ukrainian forced migrants in both countries face common challenges in securing white-collar jobs that match their qualifications. Many highly educated migrants remain underemployed, with almost half of Ukrainians in Poland and the majority in Germany working in low-skilled positions or remaining economically inactive. The persistent mismatch between skills and job opportunities highlights the structural limitations of both strategies – while Poland enables rapid employment, it does not fully address the issue of skills utilisation; conversely, Germany's emphasis on long-term preparation risks delaying economic self-sufficiency.

Third, while the policies of host countries, particularly Poland and Germany, have shaped the economic integration of Ukrainians, the broader impact on the Ukrainian labour market is undeniable. Ukraine faces a critical challenge in reconciling the outflow of skilled workers with the demands of urgent post-war reconstruction and long-term development. The large-scale emigration of human capital – coupled with the fact that less than half of those displaced intend to return – risks deepening Ukraine's demographic and economic crisis.

In conclusion, we recommend that countries such as Poland and Germany consider designing their migration policies in ways that are responsive to the needs of Ukrainian workers in their labour markets, while also supporting Ukraine's efforts to facilitate voluntary return. Achieving this fair balance may require closer coordination between residence and origin countries. At the same time, it is essential that migrants retain the freedom to choose their own paths – whether to stay, return or move onwards based on informed decisions and opportunities.

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9 Mobilising skilled people abroad*

A strategic challenge for Morocco

Mehdi Lahlou

9.1 Introduction

Since the early 1960s, Morocco has evolved into a major country of emigration to Europe, a trend shaped by geographical proximity, historical ties – particularly with France and Spain – and subsequent economic linkages. France, followed by Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, constituted the earliest significant destinations, with Spain and Italy becoming important only from the late 1990s. From the 1980s to 1990s onwards, Moroccan migration extended to Canada and the Arab Gulf States. By the close of the 20th century, Morocco had also emerged as a key corridor for African migration to the EU, particularly between 1998 and 2010, and again from 2016/2017.

Notwithstanding its reputation as a major hub for African-European mobility, migration from Moroccan territory remains predominantly Moroccan: over 3 million nationals reside in EU member states, while annual irregular crossings by foreign nationals rarely exceed 20,000. Morocco thus remains, principally, a country of emigration rather than reception or transit.

This reality has shaped policy priorities, especially concerning the potential role of Moroccans residing abroad (MRA) in national development. Over the past quarter-century, demographic change, technological transformation, climate transitions and geopolitical crises have reshaped global migration dynamics, creating both pressures and opportunities for skilled and high-skilled persons' mobility. Morocco faces the dual challenge of facilitating skilled emigration while mitigating the loss of critical professionals – most notably doctors and engineers, whose departure constrains domestic human capital and, by extension, economic and social development.

Since the mid-1990s, the Moroccan state has sought to develop a governance model linking skills mobility with national development. This approach integrates demographic and economic considerations; digital and environmental transitions; and international cooperation in migration, education and

* *Thesis 9. Morocco's evolving role as both a source and transit country underscores the challenge of balancing emigration and skilled labour retention, necessitating data-driven, coordinated migration policies that align diaspora engagement with national development objectives.*

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training. It is underpinned by the conviction that Moroccan professionals abroad constitute a vital conduit for technological, scientific and financial progress, owing to expertise acquired overseas in an era of global competition for highly qualified individuals. This vision aligns with Morocco's broader development strategy, premised on deeper integration into global markets and adaptation to transformative international trends.

Yet, existing research and policy evaluations indicate limited success in fostering the return of skilled nationals. This chapter examines why efforts to mobilise Moroccan talent abroad have yielded modest results, why return rates remain low and why most returnees operate outside official reintegration programmes. It further analyses the 2013 EU-Morocco Talent Partnership Agreement, which, despite political significance, has produced limited measurable outcomes. Rather than facilitating substantial skilled persons' mobility, it appears primarily to have prompted Morocco's adoption of a 'New Migration Policy' (in late 2013) focused on regularising irregular migrants within its territory, with only marginal gains in skilled Moroccan mobility, whether outbound or return.

9.2 Methodology

To write this chapter, we used bibliographic resources made available by the Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Living Abroad and the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad, as well as relevant documents and statistical data published by the EU and by the High Commission for Planning, among others.

We also referred to analyses, findings and other results from a project aimed at Mobilising Moroccan Skills Abroad. Mehdi Lahlou coordinated this project, which was conducted with the support of the ICMPD between 2021 and 2022.

In addition, we carried out a number of primarily qualitative interviews with current and former officials at the Moroccan Ministry in Charge of Moroccans Living Abroad, as well as with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We also spoke, on the same topic, with individuals responsible for vocational training and employment issues in Morocco, as well as with staff members from the International Labour Organization and the International Organisation for Migration. Interviews were also conducted with executives of Moroccan private sector groups, who have a particular interest in the issue of skilled mobility.

9.3 Morocco as both a sending and receiving country for skilled labour

9.3.1 Morocco as a country of emigration

Morocco became a country of emigration initially due to its historical ties with France and Spain, the two colonial powers that occupied it for over half a

Table 9.1 Evolution of the Number of Moroccans Living Abroad 1990–2020

Year	*Moroccans Residing Abroad*
1990	1,748,251
1995	1,884,066
2000	2,077,160
2005	2,473,209
2010	2,863,810
2015	2,984,804
2020	3,262,222

Source: The United Nations, cited by the European Training Foundation (ETF) in Skills and migration country fiche Morocco. September 2021.

century (from 1912 to 1956). Later, following independence, a certain convergence has emerged between the growing demand for labour in certain European countries (notably France[1] and Belgium[2]) and Morocco's own economic and social policies.

Until the mid-1980s, there was no systematic monitoring of emigration from Morocco to Europe, which was, until that time, the main, if not the sole, destination for Moroccan migrants. However, according to estimates provided by the World Bank, the number of Moroccan-born individuals living abroad was around 650,000[3] in the 1960s, rising to nearly 800,000 in the following decade, before reaching just over 1.5 million in 2000 and 2.8 million in 2010 – nearly 9% (8.8%) of the country's total population at that time. The trend indicated by United Nations figures reveals a sharp acceleration in Moroccan migration from the early 21st century, with an estimated 60,000 Moroccans leaving the country annually between 2000 and 2020, as indicated in Table 9.1.

9.3.2 Reasons for emigration[4]

In the case of Morocco, it's generally considered that the emigration movements are attributed to four main factors: (1) the search for employment and better working conditions, (2) education, (3) family reunification and (4) marriage. Thus, according to the HCP,[5] more than half of actual MRA (53.7%) left Morocco for economic reasons; nearly a quarter (23.4%) did so to pursue their studies; and 20% for social reasons, mainly family reunification and marriage. The search for an improved living environment and quality of life, along with family-related reasons (such as securing a better future for their children), comes fourth, with 8% each. The remaining motives are due to political reasons, such as a lack of political or religious freedoms or the violation of individual rights, including failure to respect gender equality.

This last factor – the respect for women and their rights, as well as the pursuit of gender equality – appears to be decisive not only in the decision to leave Morocco, but also in the refusal to return for many women. As emerged from a field study conducted between 2021 and 2022 on skilled Moroccans living abroad,[6] the latter mentioned the injustices they face in their society, such as the unequal inheritance laws, and, notably, the exclusionary practices like being denied the right to stay alone in hotels, even classified ones, in major tourist cities such as Marrakech, which are theoretically more open to the world.

9.3.3 Level of education and fields of specialisation of Moroccan migrants

Historically, MRA were characterised by low and/or medium skill levels. At the beginning of the 1960s, when the modern trend of emigration from Morocco has started, Moroccan migrants were largely unskilled (or even illiterate), mostly men, who travelled to Europe (first in France, followed by Belgium and the Netherlands) to plug gaps in the workforce: 53.2% of migrants had no qualifications at all, 14.3% had some qualifications and highly qualified profiles were very rare.[7] The level of qualifications of migrants started to improve from the 1980s onwards. Today, MRA has a higher level of education than the population residing in Morocco: one-third of migrants (33.5%) have completed higher education, 44.7% of women compared with 28.4% of men; another third has completed secondary education and 4.8% have undergone vocational training. 16.9% of migrants have completed primary education (20.2% for men), and 10.2% have no school education. The most common profiles among skilled migrants or those with vocational, technical and specialised training are workers in the trade and management sector, New Technologies of Information and Communication (NTIC), engineers and doctors.

Education levels vary by destination country. MRA in North America had the highest education levels, while those in newer European host countries, like Italy and Spain, had the lowest. For instance, almost no MRA in North America (0.2%) lacked education, compared to 16.2% in countries where undocumented migration is more common.

Among those with higher education, 74.1% obtained their qualifications in Morocco, and 25.8% abroad. Of the latter, France led with 14.9%, followed by Canada (2.4%), the USA (2.2%), Germany (1.8%), Spain (1.2%), Belgium (0.6%) and Italy (0.5%). There were no major gender differences.

9.3.4 Employment and occupation of MRA in destination countries

The bulk of the following data is from the HCP's 2018–2019 survey. According to these, the employment among Moroccan migrants varies with age: from 37.9% among those aged 15–29 to 79.6% among those aged 40–49. Remarkably, 44.2% of MRA aged 60 and over remained economically active. Employment rates also vary by host region. It's higher in Arab countries (78%)

and newer European destinations (71.3%) than in North America (63.7%) and older European destinations (56.6%). This may be due to a greater proportion of students and retirees in the latter.

Most employed MRA were salaried workers (82.2%), more so among women (84.9%) than men (81.5%). The self-employed accounted for 10.4% (11.5% of men, 6.1% of women), with a higher presence among older adults (28.8%) than younger ones (6%). Self-employment was more common in newer European destinations (13.6%) and Arab countries (8.9%). Employers formed a small minority at 3.3% (4.7% of women, 2.9% of men).

In summary, from this section, the community of MRA is predominantly male (68%) and relatively young, with 60% under the age of 40. It is also increasingly well-educated, not only compared to the first waves of migrants in the 1960s and 1970s, but also in comparison with the general Moroccan population, among which one in three Moroccan adults is illiterate.

9.4 Policy strategies for balancing domestic skill needs with global migration flows

In response to a dual trend that began to emerge in the 1980s – namely, the increasing proportion of skilled individuals among Moroccan migrants and the growing belief that the development of the national economy cannot be promoted without effectively mobilising the scientific, managerial and financial capacities of Moroccan professionals based abroad – the Moroccan authorities launched several initiatives aimed at encouraging such mobilisation.

Three of these initiatives, TOKTEN, FINCOME and MAGHRIBCOM, are worth mentioning, even though they were abruptly discontinued without any thorough assessment of their outcomes.

TOKTEN was the first programme to attract skilled individuals. This initiative was launched in 1976 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to support development policies in Morocco, particularly in agricultural, scientific and technical fields. Following its adoption by Morocco in 1993, three meetings were held without necessarily capitalising on their outcomes. The establishment of the State Secretariat for Scientific Research in 1998 marked the first institutionalisation of TOKTEN and the development of a national plan. The programme, led by the UNDP, was effectively implemented in 1999. Its objective was to encourage the temporary return of targeted professionals.

Research identifies TOKTEN as an opportunity to reshape perspectives on Moroccan migration. It highlights, in particular, the evolution of this migration, from labour migration in the 1960s to countries like France, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, to family reunification in the 1980s and ultimately to skilled migration.

Following the shortcomings of TOKTEN, Morocco launched the FINCOME,[8] which brought together different departments, notably through collaboration between the UNDP and the National Centre for Scientific and

Technical Research (CNRST, in French). FINCOME served as a networking and intermediary tool designed to institutionalise and facilitate the participation of Moroccan professionals worldwide in the country's development and to involve them sustainably. It also aimed to support all initiatives and potential investment projects involving the Moroccan diaspora, with the possibility of financing them.

Since 2014, FINCOME has sought to diversify its activities by introducing a mobility programme ranging from 6 to 12 months. But, although the FINCOME programme and strategy were validated in 2004, it received no public funding and relied solely on UNDP resources. This situation appears to be one of the main reasons for its failure as a lever for mobilising skills in support of national development.

The latest initiative in this area was launched by the Ministry for Moroccans Abroad on 31 January 2013, under the name MAGHRIBCOM.[9] From the outset, MAGHRIBCOM positioned itself as a CV platform for Moroccan professionals abroad. It aimed to function as a formal framework for the exchange of information concerning business opportunities, short-term collaborations, investment or employment. It promoted some partnerships between economic stakeholders, universities and research institutions in Morocco and Moroccan professionals living abroad, whether temporarily or permanently.[10]

More recently, the 2021 report on the 'New Development Model'[11] – an ambitious national framework aimed at transforming Morocco's economy and society, between 2019 and 2035, with a target annual growth rate of 6.5% – devoted a chapter to MRA. The report highlights their potential as key contributors to national development.

It emphasises, in particular, the strategic importance of the MRA and recommends implementing policies that respond to the specific needs and expectations of them, encouraging the return of highly skilled professionals in key sectors such as NTIC, biotechnology and renewable energy and creating a comprehensive database of MRA, accessible to Moroccan institutions, to facilitate collaboration with them.

The NMD also stresses the importance of mobilising the Moroccan diaspora in scientific research, R&D and innovation, leveraging the experience and expertise they have acquired abroad. It also notes the importance of remittances from MRA,[12] which play a vital role in stabilising Morocco's balance of payments. It recommends enhancing this contribution through tailored financial products, particularly for the newer generations of the diaspora.

However, the NMD, in its entirety, appears to have been largely sidelined following its publication, most likely due to the negative economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and a lack of financial resources needed for its implementation. In any case, no action has been taken since its publication in spring 2021 regarding the involvement of MRA in the country's development. This may have led to two speeches by the king, in 2022 and then in 2024, confirming, in a way, the low achievements of all the initiatives/programmes adopted

by Morocco until 2024 to significantly benefit from the skills of its population living abroad.

In one of his addresses, largely dedicated to the issue of mobilising Morocco's skilled diaspora, King Mohammed VI, after having observed, on 20 August 2022,[13] that 'the country has a community estimated at approximately five million individuals', noticed that 'many among them, regrettably, still encounter numerous obstacles in managing their administrative affairs or initiating their projects'.

Accordingly, he affirmed that

> The time has come to provide this community with the appropriate framework, as well as the means and conditions necessary for it to contribute to the best of its ability, in the well-understood interest of its country and its development.

Related to this, he called for 'the establishment of a dedicated mechanism whose mission would be to support Moroccan talents and professionals abroad, and to assist their initiatives and projects'. This mechanism, he emphasised, 'must operate in a coordinated manner with the relevant institutions and stakeholders, identifying Moroccan talents abroad, establishing channels of communication and exchange with them, and creating opportunities for them to contribute to national development'. He also urged the Government to 'adopt a more proactive and responsive approach towards our citizens abroad, to strengthen their ties with the homeland and fully recognise the role they can play as a lever for economic and social progress'.

Again, in another speech, delivered on 6 November 2024,[14] the King proposed the creation of a new structure – the 'Mohammedia Foundation for Moroccans Residing Abroad' – which, once established, would be responsible for 'bringing together the responsibilities currently dispersed among a multitude of actors and coordinating the development and implementation of the National Strategy dedicated to MRA'.

Furthermore, this new structure would oversee the management of a 'National mechanism for the mobilisation of the Skilled MRA', the institution of which the King has called for. The aim is '*to open the way for Moroccan talents and expertise based abroad and to support those carrying out initiatives and projects*'.

As of mid-June 2025, neither the Foundation has been created nor the promised mechanism has been implemented.

9.5 Bilateral agreements and the mobility of Moroccan Skills

In an approach combining the management of irregular migration with labour mobility within a regular framework, Morocco and the European Union signed, in June 2013, a general Mobility agreement directly involving nine European states. This agreement was followed, over time, by innovative Talent partnerships, which nevertheless suffered from certain limitations.

9.5.1 EU-Morocco mobility partnership

The EU and Morocco decided, in 2013, to establish in 2013, a Mobility Partnership[15] with the objective, among three others: 'to manage the movement of persons for short periods and legal and labour migration more effectively, taking into account, with regard to the latter, the labour market of the signatories'. This agreement[16] aimed, in particular, to strengthen the mobility of Moroccan talent; it also emphasised the need to provide better information to qualified citizens about employment, study and training opportunities available in participating EU Member States, notably through enhanced cooperation between European and Moroccan employment services. At the same time, close collaboration is needed to facilitate the mutual recognition of vocational and academic qualifications, thereby enabling smoother professional and educational transitions. Furthermore, greater coherence should be pursued between mobility policies and other areas of sectoral cooperation such as trade, education, research and culture – in order to ease the entry and stay of Moroccan vocational trainees, students, academics, researchers and entrepreneurs in EU countries.

The Mobility Partnership, thus signed, appears to have contributed to changing the Moroccan migratory approach. Notably, it probably contributed to Morocco's adoption, in September 2013, of what it then called a 'New Migration Policy', treating irregular migrants on its territory more humanely, in particular by facilitating their integration. It also facilitated Morocco's co-chairmanship, alongside Germany, of the Global Forum on Migration and Development, which was held in Marrakech in December 2018. In the same year, Morocco also endorsed the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, thereby positioning itself as a prominent advocate for migration governance within the Global South.

However, despite these policy advances, several shortcomings have hampered the overall objectives of the Talent Partnership. These include, in particular:

- Limited progress on Visa facilitation. Thus, in contrast to the stated goal of enhancing legal migration pathways, Moroccan citizens have seen little to no relaxation in visa requirements. This issue was exacerbated in 2021 when France, a key EU member state and co-signatory of the 2013 Mobility Partnership, unilaterally reduced by half the number of visas issued to Moroccan nationals. Although this decision was reversed in 2023, it highlighted a significant inconsistency between EU migration discourse and actual policy implementation, wherein punitive measures are at times prioritised over cooperative approaches.
- Insufficient engagement with the Moroccan diaspora. A further shortcoming lies in the inadequate collection and analysis of data concerning Moroccan migrants residing abroad, particularly in Europe. Indeed, the lack of targeted research (on both sides) and institutional collaboration prevents a comprehensive understanding of their socio-economic characteristics, challenges and potential contributions to both host and home countries – an objective that Moroccan initiatives to mobilise skills have stumbled upon, as indicated above.

9.5.2 Talent partnership facility: Key lessons learned so far about

Several years after the signing of the Mobility Partnership Agreement with the European Union, Morocco engaged in three talent partnership initiatives: HOMERe, PALIM and the Young Generation programme. However, these initiatives appear to have yielded limited results, as evidenced by the following key findings.

The reach of these programmes has been notably narrow, with only 250 students across three countries participating in HOMERe, 80 individuals in PALIM and 100 in the Young Generation initiative. Such restricted participation risks diminishing the engagement of Moroccan stakeholders, particularly public authorities, who may perceive the projects as lacking substantial impact. This perception is reinforced by the view that such initiatives are primarily symbolic or cosmetic ('poudre aux yeux'), offering limited training and few viable legal migration pathways. To enhance the credibility and effectiveness of future projects, a significantly larger number of beneficiaries should be targeted. Following an initial pilot phase, this expansion would require improved preparation, sustained support and systematic monitoring. Dedicated institutional structures in both European and partner countries would be essential to ensure the effective implementation of mobility partnerships.

The involvement of a large number of stakeholders, particularly in the case of HOMERe, has led to reduced project visibility and diluted accountability. In the absence of a formal agreement clearly delineating the roles and responsibilities of each partner, there is a risk that tasks may be neglected under the assumption that others will fulfil them. A more effective approach would have been to assign responsibilities by country, for example Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt from the outset. This structure would still permit the exchange of experiences during implementation, particularly regarding methodologies, encountered challenges and achieved outcomes.

Although the risk of beneficiaries not returning to their country of origin was inherent to the programmes, it appears to have materialised only marginally. In the Young Generation initiative, for instance, only eight participants remained in Europe, having secured legal employment.

Given the interest of receiving partners in attracting skilled, legal migrants, future programmes/initiatives should aim to significantly increase the number of beneficiaries. Even if a portion of participants remain abroad, in Europe in particular, the return of a substantial number would still offer meaningful benefits to the departure country, Morocco, in our case. In this context, private companies employing beneficiaries in Europe or North America, or/their governments, could contribute by various means (financial, programmatic/institutional, human, etc.) to the amplification and the sustainability of those programmes, taking into account the criticisms addressed to them.

9.6 Conclusions and recommendations

Despite acknowledging the strategic importance of its diaspora, Morocco continues to face significant constraints in mobilising its expatriate talent. Key

barriers include the need to uphold individual freedoms, ongoing dependence on remittances, a lack of precise data on skill shortages across sectors and institutional fragmentation. Additionally, the absence of a cost-benefit approach to public investment in human capital limits the country's ability to recoup training costs or design effective incentive schemes. To move forward, a more coherent data-driven policy framework is needed, one that aligns national development priorities with targeted diaspora engagement, clarifies institutional responsibilities and integrates both financial and non-financial incentives to harness the full potential of Moroccan professionals abroad.

And in fact, the Moroccan authorities appear to be constrained, when it comes to mobilising the country's human resources living and working abroad, by several factors, each of which seems to represent an obstacle to such mobilisation:

- The desire to respect individual freedoms, in particular the freedom of movement between Morocco and the wider international environment. This issue has become increasingly relevant as a large number of expatriate Moroccans, especially among the qualified, have acquired the nationality of their host country. In other words, they may no longer be considered fully Moroccan.
- The perception that the mobility of Moroccans continues to help reduce pressure on the domestic labour market while increasing remittances to the country. These transfers remain vital for Morocco, which still relies heavily on them to mitigate the growing imbalance in its financial deficits.
- The ongoing inability of both public administrations and private sector companies to determine and articulate their needs in terms of scientific, technical or managerial skills, not to mention artistic, sporting or journalistic talent, for example. Apart from the health sector, higher education and information and communication technologies – fields in which the 2020/2021 health crisis highlighted the country's significant shortages (particularly in terms of numbers) – no relatively accurate quantitative data is ever mentioned for other sectors. And yet, it is widely recognised that Morocco has pressing needs in agriculture, agri-food industries, water resource management and preservation, renewable energy, rail transport (especially at a time when the country is expanding its high-speed train network), digital transformation of the economy, the development of e-commerce, the fight against cybercrime, etc.
- A genuine inability to assess the actual cost of training these skilled individuals, as well as a lack of strategic thinking that could lead to proposals enabling the state to recoup part of the expenses (both operational and capital expenditure) it incurs annually for such training.
- A persistent hesitancy, over the years, between different measures, numerous programmes and various institutions aiming to mobilise skilled MRA. As already noted, this means that after each four/five-year cycle, public authorities often find themselves back at square one. Each time, at least our key questions are raised again: How many Moroccan professionals are

working abroad? What institution or structure should be established to ensure the national economy benefits from its financial, social and knowledge/experience capital? Should this be achieved through compulsion or financial and tax incentives? And is it possible to seek compensation from the countries or companies benefiting from their expertise, to help offset the cost of their training and the economic loss their departure represents?

All this leads us to propose the following main recommendations:

- Establish a comprehensive national skills assessment and forecasting system across all key sectors to accurately identify Morocco's current and future needs in scientific, technical, managerial and creative talents. This data-driven approach will enable both public administrations and private companies to develop targeted training, recruitment and retention strategies, particularly beyond traditionally monitored fields like health, education and ICT to support critical sectors such as agriculture, renewable energy, transport, digital economy and cybersecurity.
- Create a single, permanent and well-resourced institutional framework dedicated to the mobilisation of skilled MRA, with a clear mandate to coordinate programmes, collect data and ensure continuity across political cycles.
- Develop and implement a structured incentive policy, including financial, tax and professional benefits to attract and engage Moroccan professionals abroad, while exploring international cooperation mechanisms to recover part of the public investment in their training.

Promote a strong and multifaceted partnership with host countries aimed at strengthening training and the recognition of qualifications and other acquired skills. Such a partnership should also aim, in line with the objective of establishing a credible system of fair migration, to facilitate the mobility of skills not only from South to North, but also in the opposite direction, whether for a limited period or for the long term.

Notes

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10 Navigating skill flow*

The case of India

S Irudaya Rajan and Varsha Joshi

10.1 Introduction

Over the past decade, India has made remarkable strides in positioning itself as a significant player in global affairs. This shift is not only evident in its increasing participation in multilateral forums, bilateral trade agreements and regional alliances, but also in the expanding scope of its engagement in global labour mobility. India's G20 presidency in 2023 emphasised global consensus, leading to the unanimous New Delhi Leaders' Declaration and securing the African Union's permanent G20 membership. India advanced its Global South leadership while deepening economic ties through key trade agreements like the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement in 2022 with the UAE and the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement with Australia, which have opened large export markets in labour-intensive sectors. Responding to Europe's growing demand for skilled labour, India is now shaping its diplomacy to match workforce skills with global needs. Beyond the Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility with Europe at large, post-pandemic, India has signed targeted migration agreements with Germany, Austria and Italy to strengthen bilateral mobility partnerships.

India's deep historical roots in migration and the widespread presence of its diaspora, estimated to be over 30 million globally, have created strong transnational linkages that contribute to its global visibility. The Indian diaspora includes a significant number of highly skilled professionals, especially in sectors such as healthcare, information technology, academia and finance. Their success in destination countries not only enhances India's soft power but also underscores the country's capacity to produce globally competitive talent. In this context, India's migration profile has evolved from being primarily a sender of low-skilled labour to a strategic contributor to the global skilled labour force.

* *Thesis 10. India's role as a leading contributor to global skill mobility, both as a significant source of skilled professionals and as an emerging destination for foreign expertise, exemplifies its dual position in the global skill migration landscape.*

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Historically, India's migration patterns were often described in terms of a 'brawn drain', reflecting the large-scale emigration of workers engaged in manual and low-skilled labour (Khadria, 2023). However, in the decades following independence, there was a notable shift, with increasing numbers of professionals from sectors such as information technology, healthcare and engineering seeking opportunities abroad. This trend sparked widespread discourse around the 'brain drain', as India began to lose a significant share of its skilled workforce to international markets. Data from destination countries consistently highlight the prominence of Indian nationals within their skilled migrant populations. For instance, in 2023, Indian professionals received 24% of all EU Blue Card permits granted to highly skilled non-EU workers, with Germany alone accounting for 69,000 of the total Blue Cards issued across the EU (Eurostat, 2024). Of these, approximately 21,000 were granted to Indian nationals, primarily in sectors such as IT, healthcare and engineering.

Although there is a dearth of recent statistics on skilled migration from the origin country perspective, the latest round of the Kerala Migration Survey 2023 offers few insights into the shift in migration patterns in Kerala (Rajan, 2024). While overall migration to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has slightly declined, there has been a rise in skilled migration, particularly among professionals such as nurses and IT workers, and a drop in low-skilled migration. This decrease in GCC-bound migration from 89.2% in 2018 to 80.5% in 2023 is balanced by an increase in migration to European countries, especially among students and skilled workers. Migration to non-GCC countries rose from 10.8% in 2018 to 19.5% in 2023. Table 10.1 shows a noticeable increase in Skill Level 4 (Managerial and Professional Occupations), while Skill Levels 1 and 2 (Elementary and machine operations related occupations) have experienced a significant decline over the past decade (Skill level of Indian migrants in GCC).[1]

Table 10.1 Trends in Occupational Skill Levels in India over the Past Decade

Skill Level	*2013*	*2023*
1	174,215	97,627
2	651,587	518,630
3	422,213	312,927
4	255,021	262,017
Others*	115,835	230,534
Total	1,618,872	1,428,242

Source: Special Tabulations from KMS 2023 data.

* Others refers to occupation level/type which could not be assigned/identified at the time of survey.

Yet, while India positions itself globally as a leading skill hub, it is essential to understand the deep-seated structural issues within its domestic economy. Persistent unemployment, underemployment and regional development disparities continue to challenge inclusive growth in the country. These systemic problems not only drive outward migration but also hinder India's ability to fully harness its demographic dividend and secure an efficient workforce absorption. Thus, even as India becomes a central player in global skill mobility, addressing internal economic vulnerabilities remains crucial to ensuring that migration serves both global and domestic needs.

10.2 Thesis formulation

The thesis of this chapter posits that India's role as a leading contributor to global skill mobility, both as a significant source of skilled professionals and as an emerging destination for foreign expertise, exemplifies its dual position in the global skill migration landscape. Additionally, the thesis also looks into the potential of migration skill corridors (MSCs) as mechanisms for fair skill flow (Grabowska & Setrana, 2025). This approach also aligns with the principles of fair migration, ensuring that skill migration contributes to the economic and social development of the corridor countries while respecting the rights and aspirations of migrants. On the contrary, the null hypothesis suggests that India's engagement in both outbound and inbound migration has no significant impact on the distribution and utilisation of skills domestically or internationally.

In support of the hypothesis stated, the thesis argues that India's active participation in managing both outflows and inflows of talent through structured MSCs contributes to more balanced and sustainable skill exchanges, benefiting its own economic development and addressing skill shortages in partner countries. The first section of this chapter explores the structural issues in the Indian economy, particularly focusing on current domestic labour market challenges. The following sections assess how India's growing engagement in global skill mobility may help address these internal constraints. Using the India-Germany corridor as a case study, the chapter illustrates how MSCs support the hypothesis that India holds significant potential to play a dual role in the migration landscape, both as a source of skilled professionals and as a destination for foreign expertise. These analyses are further informed by interviews conducted under Link4Skills.

10.3 Methodology

This chapter uses three methodological components. Through a systematic desk-based review of scholarly journals, policy chapters, official databases and reputable media sources, the chapter establishes India's dual position as both a major sender of skilled labour and an importer of foreign expertise. Further quantitative dataset analysis was used to map recent shifts in migration

patterns and skill composition. Large-scale data sources, notably the Kerala Migration Survey 2023, Eurostat Blue Card statistics and All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) tertiary-enrolment records, were referred to for the same. Finally, the chapter also uses qualitative key-informant interviews, and the preliminary insights were drawn from 20 semi-structured interviews conducted under the Link4Skills project with pivotal actors in the India-Germany, India-Austria, India-Netherlands and India-Canada corridors. These stakeholders include migration scholars, policymakers, public and private recruiters and diaspora organisations. For the purposes of this chapter, only excerpts from five interviews focused on the India-Germany corridor are used. These interviews were carried out in Delhi and Kerala between March and June 2025.

10.4 Indian paradox

10.4.1 India's structural transformation challenges

Since gaining independence in 1947, India has adopted a mixed economy model, with development strategies largely shaped by Five-Year Plans. These plans were grounded in state-led industrialisation and public investment, aimed to enhance living standards, and foster economic growth. However, over the decades, structural challenges have surfaced, complicating India's developmental trajectory. One of the core issues in understanding the outpour of Indian migration is the uneven nature of the country's structural transformation. India presents a paradox: while it is one of the fastest-growing major economies globally, it also faces persistently high unemployment rates and widespread underemployment. Significant outmigration and skill flow are not only the result of a surplus labour force but also the inability of the domestic economy to fully absorb this workforce, given limited employment opportunities that meet the country's youth aspirations. This contradiction highlights the limitations of India's industrial and employment policies over time. The industrial policy framework of post-independence India, particularly the Industrial Policy Resolution of 1956, emphasised state-led industrialisation. The policy prioritised heavy industries, such as steel, shipbuilding and atomic energy, primarily under the public sector, limiting the scope for private enterprise. This approach, while fostering initial growth, restricted the development of a competitive manufacturing base. The Mahalanobis model, which underpinned the planning strategy, focused on capital-intensive sectors, often at the expense of labour-intensive industries that could have better absorbed the country's vast workforce (Binswanger-Mkhize, 2013). As a result, although the agriculture sector's contribution to India's GDP has declined over time, the workforce remains disproportionately concentrated in this sector; approximately 50% of India's labour force is still employed in agriculture. Unlike many industrialised countries that successfully transitioned their labour force into manufacturing and services, India has struggled to achieve this transformation. In India, however, the

service sector has outpaced manufacturing, becoming the dominant contributor to GDP. While this sector has witnessed remarkable growth, it has not generated employment at a scale sufficient to address the country's labour market challenges.

10.4.2 Labor surplus vs Labor market absorption and increased youth migration

On the supply side of the labour market, India produces a vast number of graduates each year, supported by the growing number of engineering, medical and other higher education institutions (HEIs). Over the past decade, the country has witnessed a significant expansion in its higher education infrastructure. The AISHE 2022–2023 notes that the total number of HEIs increased from 51,534 in 2014–2015 to 58,643 in 2022–2023, reflecting a 13.8% rise (Ministry of Education, 2024). In the same period, the number of universities grew from 760 to 1,213, a substantial 59.6% increase, while colleges rose from 38,498 to 46,624, marking a 21.1% increase. The number of medical colleges in India is also reported to have nearly doubled during this period. The government has increased the number of medical colleges and subsequently increased MBBS seats. There is an 82% increase in medical colleges, from 387 before 2014 to 706 as of now. Further, there is an increase of 112% in MBBS seats, from 51,348 before 2014 to 1,08,940 as of now, and PG seats have been increased to 127%, from 31,185 before 2014 to 70,674 as of now.[2] Despite these numbers, questions remain about the quality and relevance of employment available to India's growing youth population. While headline unemployment figures have declined over the years, much of this reduction can be attributed to the rapid growth of the gig and freelance economy. This shift raises important concerns about the quality and sustainability of employment, particularly for educated youth.

The challenge of labour market absorption in India was evident in the World Economic Forum report in 2025, which revealed that of the 13 million people who aim to join India's workforce each year, only one in four management professionals, one in five engineers and one in 10 graduates are employable. Burgeoning educated but unemployed youth for a country like India, where 50% of the workforce is below 25 years, is the nation's highest priority. Many technical skills taught in Indian HEIs often do not align with actual industry requirements. Some of the industry experts interviewed as part of Link4Skills reported that young Indian graduates lack the specific technical, professional and problem-solving skills needed for modern job roles. The shortage of graduates trained in high-demand areas such as data analysis, strategic planning and advanced technology also came up in these interview responses, which was believed to further widen the industry-academia skills gap. At the same time, India is witnessing rapid growth in key sectors like engineering, manufacturing and pharmaceuticals. Government initiatives are aimed at boosting innovation and investment in these areas, along with

emerging industries like automotive technology, particularly electric vehicles. These trends indicate significant employment opportunities for students in STEM and healthcare, provided skill development aligns with industry needs. Naturally skill development of Indian youth is of major concern for the central as well as the various state governments.

The rise in student migration from India is another telling indicator of the shifting aspirations of the Indian youth. According to the latest data from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), over 1.8 million Indian students are currently studying abroad in 2025, a significant rise from 1.3 million just two years ago. Increasing numbers of Indian students are pursuing education abroad, not only for academic advancement but also as a strategic pathway to long-term residency and better career prospects. This trend reflects a growing perception that the Indian labour market is unable to absorb or adequately reward the skills of these graduates. The case of Indian nurses further illustrates this point. Despite being highly skilled and in demand, many nurses in India earn only a fraction of what they could earn abroad. Countries in Europe and elsewhere not only offer significantly higher wages but also provide pathways for family reunification, making international migration a far more attractive option for skilled professionals seeking economic security and improved quality of life for themselves and their families (Rajan, 2019).

10.4.3 Skilled workforce in health and STEM vs inefficient vocational education and training

While Indian professionals such as nurses, doctors and engineers are in high demand internationally, vocationally trained individuals often face significant barriers due to the non-recognition of their certifications abroad. Despite tertiary education or professional experience appearing to be objective indicators of skill, their recognition is not guaranteed internationally since the standards of these skills are shaped by the destination country's economic and regulatory context (Triandafyllidou, Shirazi, & Engbersen, 2024). This makes skill evaluation highly contingent and context-specific rather than universally acknowledged. Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), central to India's vocational education and training (VET) system, are designed to meet the country's skilled labour needs across various sectors. However, despite their scale, ITIs face several challenges. According to the 2023 NITI Aayog report, India, as of 2022, had approximately 15,000 ITIs with a total capacity of 2.5 million seats, yet only about 48% of these seats are utilised (NITI Aayog, 2023). Although employability among ITI graduates rose from 34.2% in 2023 to 41% in 2025, this still reflects a considerable mismatch between training and industry requirements. Although the establishment of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) in 2015 was to make progress in skill development, the transformation of ITIs remains incomplete. ITIs face major challenges: underutilisation of capacity, subpar training quality, outdated infrastructure and graduates who are often neither employable nor entrepreneurial. The

government spends around INR 10,000 crore (close to 1 billion USD) annually on 3,500 government ITIs. Yet, low student placement rates and ongoing industry concerns about the lack of skilled technical workers persist. Quality and standardisation remain inconsistent, and better alignment with global benchmarks is urgently needed. Nevertheless, government-led initiatives have trained over 14.2 million individuals to date in various trades of six months, one year or two years in duration. As a result, they are often required to undergo additional training and accreditation to qualify for overseas opportunities. Since vocational trainees in India typically come from economically marginalised backgrounds, the financial burden of meeting international standards becomes a significant barrier, limiting their mobility and upward economic prospects.

India's structural constraints present a paradox of mixed opportunities, wherein rising unemployment and surplus labour in low-productivity, traditional agriculture coexist with increasing outmigration of youth for overseas education. At the same time, the country produces globally competitive engineers, doctors and nurses, yet exhibits a persistent deficit in high-quality vocational training, underscoring a pronounced duality in human capital formation. As discussed in the thesis formulation, these arguments support how India functions as a dual actor: it not only exports surplus labour, but given its structural limitations and contradictions, also serves as a destination for foreign expertise to support the optimisation of domestic resources to resolve the persistent challenges discussed.

10.5 The MSC model

It is evident that the migration of skilled labour from India is a product of the limited employment opportunities and increasing aspirations of the youth in the country (King & Sondhi, 2018). While the previous section provided a holistic view of India's overall challenges and the potential role of foreign expertise in addressing them, it is equally crucial to account for the country's significant regional diversity. In a nation as varied as India, these subnational differences add another layer of complexity, shaping distinct contexts in which migration corridors develop and transform.

Regional variation is often overlooked in discussions on India's labour challenges. As a union of diverse states with distinct socio-economic and cultural characteristics, India's internal diversity significantly shapes the composition of its labour force and the patterns of migration from each region. Recognising this is crucial for effectively applying the concept of MSCs in the Indian context and leveraging the country's dual role in global skill mobility. The challenges of structural transformation discussed earlier in this chapter have impacted Indian states in varying degrees. Differences in demographic factors and development indicators have led to the emergence of distinct state-level identities, particularly in terms of labour force composition and migration patterns.

To explore this more concretely, this chapter focuses on the example of Kerala, a state often considered an outlier in the Indian context. Kerala consistently ranks at the top of key development indicators, including literacy and education, producing a steady stream of graduates across sectors. However, limited industrialisation and the absence of large multinational corporations have constrained employment opportunities within the state. As a result, both internal and international migration become necessary pathways for economic advancement, particularly for the educated youth. When it comes to labour profiles, Kerala and states like Telangana have emerged as major sources of international healthcare workers, especially nurses. These regional dynamics underscore the importance of tailoring migration frameworks to local contexts. Talent mobility partnerships tend to be more effective when designed with regional variations in mind. A prime example of this is the Triple Win initiative, a government-to-government (G2G) agreement between India and Germany, implemented through NORKA (Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs) Roots in Kerala. This programme facilitates the migration of trained nurses through structured pathways that emphasise fair recruitment, proper training and language acquisition. On paper, it is supposed to represent a sustainable model of migration that benefits both the sending and receiving countries, while aligning with the specific labour market realities of the state.

However, this continuous outflow also exacerbates existing skill shortages domestically. As discussed, regional disparities in socio-economic development result in varying labour profiles across states; some states may have a surplus of skilled workers, while others face significant shortages. These disparities are further compounded by rural-urban divides, where employment and training opportunities are often concentrated in urban centres, leaving rural areas underserved. Even in states like Kerala, known for high levels of international migration, there is a notable shortage of labour for domestic, lower-skilled jobs. This gap is increasingly filled through internal migration from the northern and eastern parts of India. Such patterns underscore the importance of developing a more balanced and sustainable approach to skill mobility, to ensure mutual benefit for both sending and receiving regions, within or outside the country.

10.5.1 The India-Germany case

The following section attempts to demonstrate how the MSC can address the challenges of the origin country that were discussed. This chapter will use the example of the India-Germany MSC to further reinforce how India's dual role as a sender of skilled migrants and a large potential for receiving foreign expertise helps in creating a sustainable model of skill mobility.

To position India as a global skills hub, the government has launched key initiatives to manage and enhance skill migration. NSDC International, launched in 2015, a branch of the National Skill Development Corporation,

facilitates overseas employment by aligning Indian training with global standards. Additionally, the MSDE has signed bilateral agreements with countries such as Germany, Japan and the UK. These agreements focus on training, certification and placement, creating structured and mutually beneficial migration pathways that improve opportunities for Indian workers abroad.

Within the potential destination countries India is working with, Europe has emerged as an increasingly attractive destination for Indian migrants, offering higher salaries and favourable family reunification policies (Guha, 2018). Among European countries, Germany stands out as a particularly appealing option due to its significant labour shortages and targeted efforts to recruit skilled Indian workers (Ullmann & Schwenken, 2024). Over 43,000 Indian students are currently enrolled in German universities, according to the 2024 DAAD, Annual Report. Indian professionals in Germany earn an average gross monthly salary of approximately €5,400 (around ₹4,92,000), which is 41% higher than the country's median wage.[3]

Germany continues to view India as a dependable source of skilled labour, as evidenced by various talent mobility agreements between the two nations. While early migration under this corridor was largely driven by healthcare workers and remittance benefits for India, the partnership has evolved into a more balanced, mutually beneficial arrangement rather than merely positioning India as a key supplier of skilled talent (Faist, Aksakal, & Schmidt, 2017).

Germany, recognising regional labour profiles within India, signed the Triple Win agreement directly with NORKA Roots in Kerala, rather than with central bodies like NSDC, due to the state's strong nursing workforce. Telangana, another state with a robust healthcare infrastructure, was later included in the programme. While the initiative has shown promise, Indian recruiters such as NORKA have highlighted key challenges, including inadequate language training and delays in the migration process due to long turnaround times. To address these, collaborative solutions are being developed by both countries, such as bringing in German master trainers to enhance the quality of language training in India. These efforts will contribute to strengthening India's overall migration infrastructure and improve long-term outcomes for skill mobility.

Another key initiative in the India-Germany skill corridor is the iMOVE programme, led by Germany's Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB). iMOVE has played a meaningful role in strengthening vocational education in India, especially by facilitating the training of Indian master trainers. More broadly, it forms part of the larger push to make India's VET system more practical, industry-relevant and responsive to evolving skill needs. At the same time, iMOVE has helped deepen long-term cooperation between Indian and German institutions, allowing Indian trainers to benefit from German expertise.

Apart from the G2G initiatives, several private players from a vast number of sectors have also forayed into India. Offshore Development Centres (ODCs) or Global Capability Centres are emerging as strategic solutions for companies

aiming to manage operations globally while maintaining central control. For Germany, establishing such centres in India offers a range of advantages spanning cost, legal ease and skilled talent. Talent costs in India are 50–70% lower in key sectors like IT and engineering. New business units in India benefit from a lower corporate tax rate of 15%. India produces over 2.5 million STEM graduates annually, many with multilingual proficiency, ensuring a robust talent pipeline. With a 3.5 to 4.5-hour time zone overlap, German firms can operate 24×7, benefiting from India's cultural alignment with Germany's precision-driven, results-oriented work ethic. On the other hand, Indian youth benefit from the employment opportunities and international standards of technology exchange offered by such centres. Listed below are some of the German companies that have established their ODCs in many of the major cities in India (see Table 10.2).

Similar to talent mobility partnerships, German stakeholders have strategically identified regions within India that are well-positioned to benefit from Germany's expertise in technology transfer and skill development. One such region with immense potential is the state of Kerala, which has demonstrated a strong commitment to research and development, with R&D expenditure accounting for 0.3% of its GSDP, above the national average. Recognising the importance of foreign expertise in translating research into market-ready innovations, Kerala has proactively engaged with German institutions. Findings from the interviews with several state bodies in Kerala (recruiters and promoters) revealed the forthcoming plans for improving the international employability of Kerala's workforce in collaboration with destination-country partners. One of the major initiatives that has immense government backing is focused on improving German language training and cultural orientation programmes, creating a network of training institutions in collaboration with Goethe Zentrum, Indo-German Chamber of Commerce, ProRecognition and GIZ. Their partnerships with major German organisations such as FESTO, Siemens, TUV Rheinland and Senior Experten Service have helped introduce globally recognised technical training models in

Table 10.2 German Companies with Offshore Development Centres in Major Indian Cities

Company	*Area of Focus in India ODC*
Mercedes-Benz	Automotive software, digital solutions, IT services
Bosch	R&D, engineering, software development
Siemens	Technology, automation, healthcare IT
Deutsche Bank	Banking software, analytics, digital transformation
Continental AG	Automotive electronics, safety systems, R&D
SAP	Enterprise software, cloud solutions, R&D
BMW	Automotive software (via Tata JV)
Lufthansa	Digital and IT transformation (with Infosys)

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

automation, mechatronics and industrial maintenance. The International Skill Training and Employability Programme in Kerala further supports this effort by inviting international bodies to contribute to Kerala's skill development ecosystem. These initiatives not only help up-skill Kerala's highly educated youth but also align their training with international industry hiring standards.

As seen through the India-Germany MSC, destination countries like Germany stand to benefit significantly by investing in the skill infrastructure of origin countries. While Kerala gains access to quality training and global employment pathways, Germany addresses its labour shortages through a steady pipeline of skilled professionals. What began as healthcare-specific recruitment has now evolved into a broader, more strategic partnership spanning multiple sectors, showcasing a model of mutual benefit, sustainable skill flow and long-term collaboration.

10.6 Conclusion

India's role as a leading contributor to global skill mobility is both a reflection of its demographic and educational landscape and a result of deliberate strategic positioning. As a significant source of skilled professionals, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, engineering and IT, and increasingly as a destination for foreign expertise and investment, India exemplifies a dual position in the global skill migration ecosystem. However, capitalising on this role demands systemic strengthening across multiple fronts, including migration infrastructure, technical capacity, vocational training and international alignment of skill standards. While India shares many structural challenges with its South Asian neighbours, its scale (population) and regional diversity set it apart. The coexistence of high levels of unemployment, a burgeoning youth population and a vast unorganised labour sector presents a paradox of labour surplus without sufficient pathways for productive engagement. Although vocational training systems such as those offered by ITIs are helping address skill mismatches domestically, their global recognition remains limited. As a result, even vocationally trained individuals often require additional certification and language training to qualify for overseas roles, highlighting the need for alignment with international standards.

The emergence of MSCs enabled through talent mobility partnerships and bilateral cooperation is an encouraging step towards addressing these gaps. Migration should be understood to be beyond a temporary response to labour market gaps or economic inequalities, but rather an element of global workforce planning. MSC framework moves beyond the conventional view of migration as a one-directional flow of human capital from less developed to more developed countries, but also looks at how skilled mobility can be facilitated through structured pathways (see Section 10.1). These structured initiatives ensure that migration is not merely an economic escape valve but part of a planned and ethical process that meets labour demand in destination countries while fostering skills development at home. The India-Germany corridor,

with its focus on language training, cultural orientation and sector-specific up-skilling, is a compelling example of how mutually beneficial collaboration can operate in practice. However, such partnerships must be grounded in empowerment rather than extraction. Destination countries should move beyond a transactional approach to migration and actively invest in source-country capacity building, whether through curriculum design, trainer training or infrastructure support. Unlike Anglophone countries, where English provides a smoother path for Indian workers, many European nations face the barrier of language. Overcoming this requires bilateral commitment, including investment in language instruction and cultural acclimatisation on both sides. When addressed holistically, these partnerships not only enhance mobility but also foster meaningful cross-border collaboration. For elaborating on the thesis, Kerala was widely used as an example to highlight the regional specificity within India. With focused investment in R&D, strong human capital and an openness to foreign expertise, the state is evolving into a knowledge economy that exemplifies India's future potential.

To summarise the points discussed into effective policy recommendations with regard to strengthening India's migration corridor, it involves improving the country's migration governance and infrastructure.

10.6.1 Migration governance

A coherent migration governance framework for India requires institutional synchronisation across key ministries in India's migration ecosystem, namely, the MSDE, the Ministry of Labour and Employment, the MEA and the Ministry of Education. These bodies must collaboratively design to improve corridor-specific protocols that address recruitment standards, credential recognition, migrant welfare and reintegration mechanisms. A synchronised approach to migration governance can help in addressing some of the key issues discussed in the chapter, including skill harmonisation and skill gaps. In terms of governance, another point is that the long-overdue amendment to the Emigration Act of 1983, which should reflect the diversification of Indian emigration beyond low-skilled workers in the Gulf, encompassing new destination countries and a broader range of occupational profiles. With the dissolution of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, currently the migration governance is a subfile under the MEA; thus, establishing a statutory body such as a National Migration and Mobility Commission would restore focus to emerging discussions in Indian emigration, including improving the quality of MSCs. Equally important is the strengthening of subnational migration hubs such as NORKA (Kerala), TOMCOM (Telangana) and platforms like the Loka Kerala Sabha, which have demonstrated the value of state-led engagement. These bodies should be authorised to sign sector-specific MoUs and include diaspora representatives in their governance structures. A decentralised, regionally attuned governance model will help align migration strategies with local labour markets and improve the effectiveness of India's migration corridors.

10.6.2 Migration infrastructure

Improving India's migration infrastructure is crucial for India to uphold its dual role as posited by the thesis. The need to expand consular and visa-application centres, particularly in the underserved southern and eastern regions, is a necessity. Coupled with real-time application-tracking and grievance dashboards, such measures would curb informal intermediation and lower the financial and time costs borne by migrants. A national Migration Database that integrates e-Migrate records, passport office flows and labour-market intelligence into accessible dashboards can also help feed state skill-mapping portals and placement agencies for evidence-based policy changes. This architecture would enable predictive analytics to anticipate demand in emerging sectors as well as identify high-volume corridors and spotlight new origin states for targeted interventions. Another point of concern is the chronic bottleneck of language testing, especially for Europe-bound workers. This can be eased by accrediting additional test centres in migration-intensive districts through partnerships with the destination-country partners, such as the Goethe-Institut, Alliance Française and similar bodies. Along with expanding the centres, another crucial step towards improvement of the soft skills training needs to focus on master trainers. This can be a collaborative step wherein destination-country institutions will certify Indian instructors and ensure high-quality language modules within the government-accredited language institutes.

Ultimately, India's growing prominence in the global skill migration landscape is not an accident of geography or demography; it is the result of intentional and evolving policy interventions. The country's ability to manage both inflows and outflows of skilled labour through ethical, structured and mutually beneficial arrangements positions it uniquely among developing nations. The Link4Skills Manifesto proposes reframing migration not as skill flow but as skill circulation, rooted in shared growth and transnational cooperation, and offers a more constructive and realistic vision for global mobility.

Notes

1 Skill levels are defined by the ILO's International Classification of Occupations (ISCO)-08.
2 Ministry of Health and Family Welfare: https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1947690
3 EURES (European Employment Services), Labor Market Information: Germany. https://eures.europa.eu/living-and-working/labor-market-information-europe/labor-market-information-germany_en

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Part III

Optimum allocation of skills of migrants, skill recognition and AI-assisted skill navigation

11 Optimum allocation of skills of migrants and automation*

Izabela Grabowska and Agnieszka Bezat

11.1 Introduction

Migration has traditionally been seen as a response to economic disparities, with workers moving from low-income to high-income countries in search of better opportunities (Todaro & Smith, 2009). However, this perspective overlooks the potential of migration as a strategic driver of co-transformation and global innovation, economic growth and social equity. The rise of automation and artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly reshaping labour markets, making it essential to rethink migration policies and workforce strategies. This book considers a shift from outdated narratives of 'brain drain' to a model that emphasises fair, ethical and balanced skill mobility, ensuring benefits for migrants, origin countries and destination economies alike (Mandelman & Zlate, 2022).

Automation and AI have a dual impact on migrant workers. On one hand, they create new opportunities for high-skilled migrants in digital and green industries, where technical expertise is in high demand. Countries such as Germany and Canada are actively recruiting AI specialists, engineers and healthcare professionals to fill workforce gaps (Ross et al., 2024). On the other hand, automation is displacing low-skilled workers, particularly in industries such as manufacturing, agriculture and retail, where migrants are overrepresented. This shift exacerbates labour market polarisation, leaving many low-skilled migrants vulnerable to job losses and economic instability (del Rio-Chanona et al., 2021), without chances for re/up-skilling (see also in this book: Chapter 5 (Schwenken and Ullmann) on Germany's approach to aligning migration with labour market needs, and Chapter 10 (Irudaya and Joshi) for India's strategic positioning of skilled labour in high-skilled global sectors).

* *Thesis 11. Current global and EU migration frameworks fail to fully harness the potential of skill mobility due to systemic mismatches between origin-country human capital and destination labour market needs. Reframing migration as a collaborative mechanism for skill development and circulation, rather than a transactional labour supply, can enable the EU to align automation-driven demand with inclusive, sustainable growth.*

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The aim of this chapter is to examine how international labour migration can be strategically realigned in response to the twin forces of automation and AI, with a particular focus on the European Union (EU), which is the focus of the Link4Skills project from which this data was collected. It investigates how skill mobility systems might be redesigned to better achieve the *Optimum Allocation of Skills of Migrants* (OASM) between origin and destination regions. By analysing the structural disconnects between origin-country human capital and destination-country labour demand, especially in light of rapid technological change, the chapter explores how migration can evolve from a reactive, transactional model into a more reciprocal and co-development skill-enhancing process (cf. Chapter 1 for framing Migration Skill Corridors' concept, Engbersen and Reinold). Drawing on both a scoping systematic literature review (SLR) and practitioner insights, the chapter seeks to identify the institutional, technological and policy factors that hinder or enable such a shift. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates about equitable and sustainable workforce governance and aims to clarify under what conditions migration can support inclusive economic growth in a labour market increasingly shaped by automation and AI enhancement.

11.2 Thesis formulation

In an era of accelerating automation and technological transformation, achieving an *OASM* between migrant-origin and migrant-destination regions is vital for building non-draining labour markets. This chapter hypothesises that current global and EU-specific migration frameworks are failing to certain degree to fully harness the potential of skill mobility due to mismatches between origin-country human capital and destination-country's needs. By reimagining migration as a collaborative mechanism for skill enhancement, rather than merely a labour market transactional response, the EU can pioneer a model of skill circulation that aligns automation-driven demand with inclusive growth.

The following section presents the core research questions that guide this thesis.

RQ1: How international migration can be facilitated to support the optimal allocation of migrant skills, particularly within the context of automation-driven labour market transformations and the EU's evolving migration governance?

The additional research question focuses on eventual barriers that might occur while achieving the optimal allocation of labour.

RQ2: What institutional, technological and policy barriers currently hinder the effective matching of migrant skills between origins and destinations?

11.3 Theoretical foundations

The dual labour market theory highlights that migrants are often absorbed into secondary labour markets, where jobs are unstable, poorly paid and offer limited opportunities for advancement (Piore, 1979). This mismatch leads to systemic inefficiencies, as migrant skills are frequently underutilised relative to their potential contribution (Borjas, 2012; Clemens, 2011). In response, the OASM, our authored framework, is introduced as a guiding conceptual model for rethinking migration governance and allocation of skills.

OASM is based on the principle that migration should not be understood as a one-way transfer of labour from an origin to a destination, but rather as a *reciprocal and co-development process.* Drawing on the cumulative causation theory (Massey, 1990) and brain circulation literature (Saxenian, 2005; Agunias & Newland, 2012), the framework promotes circular migration, where skills, knowledge and experience flow in both directions supporting development in both origin and destination countries (cf. Examples of this reciprocal approach are discussed in Chapter 4 (Setrana et al.), which examines Ghana's implementation of reciprocal skill exchange mechanisms, and Chapter 9 (Lahlou), which highlights Morocco's efforts to mobilise its diaspora and promote skill return through circular migration initiatives).

Crucially, OASM adopts a macro-meso-micro analytical lens (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2010). At the macro level, it encourages alignment between migration policy and national strategies on workforce forecasting, demographics and technological transformation (Frey & Osborne, 2017; Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2018). At the meso level, it promotes institutions such as credential recognition and skill restoration systems, recruitment partnerships and diaspora networks that translate macro strategies into practice (Faist, 2000; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014; OECD, 2022). At the micro level, OASM incorporates employers' decisions but also takes into account migrant aspirations, education and household decision-making (Timmerman et al., 2014; Bakewell et al., 2016), recognising that individual agency must be considered in policy design. Tools like the Link4Skills Navigator illustrate how these levels can be operationally connected: labour market data (macro) feeds into Migration Skill Corridors (meso) that help employers make informed decisions (micro) (cf. Stroinska et al., 2024).

By integrating these levels, OASM supports new forms of skills partnerships that respond not only to demographic and economic imbalances, but also to the accelerating pressures of AI and automation. As evidenced by Link4Skills meta-analyses (Sowa et al., 2024), automation is increasing demand for high-skilled workers in IT, robotics and data-intensive sectors, while low-skilled migrants, often lacking digital competencies, face growing risks of displacement (Chiswick & Miller, 2009).

To address this, OASM emphasises targeted up-skilling, re-skilling and accessible credential recognition and credential restoration, particularly for migrants from non-EU countries who face persistent systemic barriers

(European Commission, 2024). While destination countries require to provide transparent recognition systems and access to vocational and language training (Chiswick & Miller, 2015), origin countries in collaboration with destinations can share a responsibility to strengthen pre-departure training and align qualifications with international standards (Clemens, 2015). Through bilateral or multilateral skills partnerships, OASM envisions a model of shared responsibility that distributes benefits and obligations more equitably across sending and receiving states (ILO, 2021b; see also in this book Chapter 12 for Aligning Skill Formation and Mobility – connection to sustainability and skills ecosystem design; Tūtlys et al. in this volume).

OASM supports international standards such as the Global Compact for Migration (UNGA, 2018) and encourages the design of reciprocal and regulated migration skill corridors (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Triandafyllidou et al., 2024; see also Chapter 1 of this book on Migration Skill Corridors by Engbersen and Reinold). These corridors should prevent skill flow, protect migrant rights and promote fair outcomes for all stakeholders. OASM advocates the use of data-driven governance tools to inform real-time decision-making. Knowledge-based expert systems like the Link4Skills Navigator (Stroińska et al., 2024) integrate labour market data and human capital inventories to forecast shortages, align migration corridors with actual demand and track skill flows. These tools support evidence-based policy design and promote more adaptive, transparent and inclusive systems (see also Chapter 13 on AI-Driven Decision Support by Wierzbicki as a direct complement discussing AI and fair migration navigation).

11.4 Methodology

This chapter employs a hybrid methodology combining an AI-assisted scoping SLR and a participatory World Café workshop with key stakeholders, including line managers from European Employment Services (EURES). The objective is to analyse the intersection of AI, automation and labour migration, and to co-develop the OASM framework.

The first component of the methodology involves a SLR, drawing from the corpus of 9,717 peer-reviewed studies initially compiled for a broader meta-analysis on automation, AI and employment (Sowa et al., 2024). Only qualitative and causal studies were selected for this analysis. This corpus was supplemented by targeted manual searches for migration-related terms, including 'migration', 'migrants', 'labour migration' and 'Third-Country Nationals', ensuring thematic relevance to the research focus on migrants in the context of technological change.

The screening was conducted at three levels, with AI-powered assistance provided by a custom-designed, offline GPT-4o model configured for rigorous literature analysis:

- Level 1 Screening: GPT-4o was used to evaluate abstracts for thematic alignment, empirical methodology and causal inference design. This stage reduced the pool to 35 studies.

- Level 2 Screening: The model extracted migration-specific criteria such as geographical context, migration-related variables and economic indicators. Human reviewers validated results, narrowing the selection to 24 studies.
- Level 3 Screening: Full-text analysis was undertaken by two independent human reviewers to ensure methodological rigour and relevance. A final selection of ten peer-reviewed articles was retained.

In parallel, grey literature from international organisations and migration policy bodies was identified and screened using equivalent criteria. This systematic review provided the evidence base for the second, applied research phase: stakeholder engagement and participatory workshop.

The development of the OASM framework was also informed by a structured participatory workshop based on the World Café methodology. To validate and refine the framework, a follow-up session was held on 26 March 2025 in Bratislava with 13 line managers from EURES (European Employment Services), representing eight EU member states (Portugal, Latvia, Romania, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, the Netherlands and Cyprus). This session was titled 'Mobility/Migration, AI, Automation, and the EU Labour Market'.

11.5 Literature and policy review

Building on the findings from the SLR and practitioners' initial insights, the following sections present an in-depth discussion structured around the chapter's core research questions.

11.5.1 Facilitating strategic skill mobility through migration in the age of automation: Insights from policy and practice

The accelerating pace of automation and digitalisation across European labour markets is reshaping demand for skills, compelling a rethinking of how international migration is governed. As tasks shift towards high-skilled digital work and human-centric, non-automatable services, the allocation of migrant skills is no longer just a matter of economic efficiency – it is crucial to social cohesion and sustainable development in the EU. Addressing Research Question 1 (RQ1): How can international migration be facilitated to support the optimal allocation of migrant skills, particularly within the context of automation-driven labour market transformations and the EU's evolving migration governance? This section integrates theoretical insights and policy recommendations with practical feedback from European Employment Services (EURES).

Most migration policies still react to shortages instead of anticipating automation-driven skill shifts. The evidence in the Horizon Europe Link4Skills Meta-analysis supports a shift towards anticipatory, skills-based governance that integrates migration policy with technological and economic strategies (Sowa et al., 2024). This approach requires forward-looking labour market intelligence and dynamic skills forecasting mechanisms that actively engage both origin and destination countries.

A recurring theme in both empirical literature and practitioner discussions is the disruption of middle-skill routine jobs (Autor, 2015), alongside growing demand for high-skilled cognitive tasks and low-wage service roles (Goos et al., 2014). Migrants often find themselves in mismatched or precarious employment despite possessing relevant qualifications (OECD, 2019a, 2020). To address this, pre-departure training, credential recognition and credential restoration in a destination, and active matching mechanisms are required to be strengthened to anticipate automation-driven shifts and demographic pressures.

In operational terms, EURES representatives emphasised the importance of evolving beyond the short-term 'gap-filler' model of mobility/migration. Instead, they advocated for proactive investments in the long-term up-skilling of movers, also including their right for circulation and return. These services are increasingly tasked with addressing structural labour market changes, not just cyclical shortages.

Moreover, automation alters occupational mobility pathways. As shown by del Rio-Chanona et al. (2021), occupational networks constrain the ability of migrants to move into better-paid, lower-risk jobs. Public employment services are thus critical in facilitating transitions into 'bridge' occupations through portable skill certifications and lifelong learning pathways, enabling upward mobility and resilience (OECD, 2019b).

EURES managers flagged fragmented policies and slow-moving education systems as the key barrier. Despite strong awareness of the challenges, services often lack the mandate or capacity to implement forward-looking strategies, also with a use of AI.

Equity concerns were also central. Migration policy needs to avoid exacerbating 'brain drain' in critical sectors like healthcare (ILO, 2017). Structured circular migration programmes with guaranteed re-entry and skills upgrading could offer a balanced model, also for TCNs within the EU.

The responsible use of AI in placement and profiling was another major concern. Zhao (2020) warns that machine learning systems can reproduce bias against older workers or immigrants. EURES participants echoed the need for transparent, explainable AI tools to ensure that digitalisation supports inclusion rather than marginalisation.

Finally, supranational coordination is indispensable. A fragmented national approach fosters inefficiencies and labour arbitrage. A collaborative EU framework for skill-based migration, supported by labour market analytics, could improve allocative efficiency while building public trust.

To ensure that migration genuinely fills skill gaps in an increasingly automated EU economy, policy needs to shift from reacting to short-term labour shortages to proactive forecasting of market needs. A shift from reactive to strategic migration governance is possible by combining anticipatory skill matching, modular certification, circular mobility, ethical AI and transnational cooperation.

In this context, anticipatory skill matching refers to the proactive alignment of workforce skills with future labour market demands through data-driven forecasting and planning. Rather than reacting to existing shortages, this

approach uses labour market intelligence, demographic trends, technological developments and sectoral projections to predict which skills will be needed and where in the coming years. Education and training systems can then be adapted in advance to prepare individuals for these emerging opportunities (see also Chapter 7 (Canada – Shirazi and Bouillard): for stakeholder coordination in skill corridor planning; and Chapter 8 (Ukraine – Kyliushyk et al.): for coordination during crisis-driven skill flows). In the context of migration, anticipatory skill matching enables origin and destination countries to design targeted mobility pathways, up-skilling programmes and bilateral partnerships that ensure migrants are equipped with the right skills for evolving economic needs, promoting both employability and development impact (cf. Link4Skills Navigator, Stroinska et al., 2024).

Modular certification schemes are flexible systems that divide full qualifications into smaller, independently certified components or 'modules', allowing individuals to build or update their skills progressively. Especially relevant for migrants, these schemes facilitate the recognition of partial or prior learning, whether gained formally or informally, enabling workers to demonstrate competencies without repeating entire training programmes. By aligning with international or regional qualification frameworks, modular certifications enhance cross-border portability and support tailored learning pathways that respond to specific labour market needs. This approach reduces barriers to employment, speeds up skill recognition and fosters circular and ethical mobility, making it a vital tool in strategic, inclusive migration governance (Sanchez Barrioluengo, 2025).

Circular mobility refers to the managed movement of migrants between origin and destination countries in a way that allows for the temporary or repeated transfer of skills, fostering knowledge exchange and development in both contexts. Ethical AI plays a supporting role by enabling fair, transparent and data-informed decisions in migration governance such as in skills assessments or job matching while minimising bias and safeguarding personal data (cf. EMN, 2025). Transnational cooperation, meanwhile, is essential for aligning migration policies, training standards and legal frameworks across borders, ensuring that mobility systems are equitable, mutually beneficial and responsive to shared demographic and economic challenges. Together, these elements form the backbone of a forward-looking and balanced global skill mobility framework.

Real-world feedback from EURES officials confirms both the urgency and the feasibility of such a transformation. Migration and mobility, if properly governed, can become a pillar of Europe's inclusive and resilient digital transition.

11.5.2 Facilitating international migration for optimal allocation and barriers to the effective matching of migrant skills with labour market needs in the EU

The capacity of the EU to harness international migration as a strategic response to labour shortages and technological change is significantly constrained by

persistent institutional, technological and policy-related barriers. While the EU faces growing demographic pressures and sectoral imbalances intensified by automation, it continues to underutilise the skills of migrant workers, particularly those from non-EU countries. This misalignment undermines both economic performance and social cohesion. This part of the chapter addresses the second research question of the thesis, RQ2: What institutional, technological and policy barriers currently hinder the effective matching of migrant skills between origins and destinations? The effective matching of migrant skills to labour market needs in EU member states remains constrained by a combination of institutional inertia, technological limitations and fragmented policy frameworks. These barriers not only reduce the economic contribution of migrants, both to destinations and origins, but also perpetuate inefficiencies and social exclusion across labour markets increasingly shaped by automation and demographic change. The following analysis unpacks these barriers in greater detail, focusing on the institutional, technological and policy-level constraints that hinder effective skills matching between origins and destinations.

11.5.2.1 Institutional barriers

A primary institutional obstacle lies in the misalignment between national-level migration policies and actual regional or sectoral labour demands. Migration policy is often formulated at the central level, while employment shortages, particularly in healthcare, eldercare, construction and ICT, are highly localised (European Commission, 2020). As a result, migrants may legally enter a country under general quotas but face structural difficulties in accessing occupations where shortages are most acute. Furthermore, the recognition of foreign qualifications remains inconsistent. Despite the existence of the EU's directive on professional qualifications (Directive 2005/36/EC), implementation varies considerably. In practice, many skilled migrants, particularly from non-EU countries, are unable to obtain recognition for credentials in healthcare, engineering and education, leading to widespread skill underutilisation or 'brain waste' (OECD, 2018). National authorities often apply opaque and protracted procedures, discouraging both employers and potential migrants.

11.5.2.2 Technological barriers

On the technological front, labour market information systems in most EU countries are not sufficiently integrated or predictive. They typically rely on outdated or static vacancy data and lack the granularity to guide real-time matching of migrant profiles with evolving skill needs. Moreover, digital tools used by employment services rarely incorporate task-level analysis or competency-based profiling, which are essential in a labour market transformed by automation. Even when advanced tools are deployed, for instance, algorithmic matching in public employment services, they may inadvertently reinforce existing biases. As Zhao (2020) notes, machine learning models used in profiling the unemployed often over-predict risk for minority or migrant groups,

leading to lower service prioritisation. Thus, rather than enhancing efficiency, such systems may institutionalise disadvantage.

11.5.2.3 Policy fragmentation

A further barrier is the lack of coordination between migration, education and labour market policies. Skills recognition and vocational training often operate on parallel tracks, with limited alignment to immigration pathways. For instance, asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection are frequently excluded from mainstream up-skilling programmes, despite clear long-term labour shortages (Jeon, 2019). Moreover, the EU's Blue Card scheme, which has been designed to attract high-skilled migrants, has been underutilised due to restrictive salary thresholds, bureaucratic hurdles and a narrow focus on formal qualifications rather than demonstrable competencies (European Commission, 2021; Czaika & Parsons, 2017). Simultaneously, pathways for medium-skilled or care-sector workers remain fragmented or non-existent, despite persistent demographic pressures (ILO, 2021a). Policy also fails to account for the dynamic effects of technological change. Automation is reshaping occupational structures, eroding traditional job categories and creating new hybrid roles. Yet migration systems remain focused on rigid occupational classifications, such as the International Standard Classification of Occupations, which do not reflect emerging task profiles or transversal skills (del Rio-Chanona et al., 2021), rather than the new ESCO: European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations classification.

11.6 Discussion on policy implications: Operationalising the OASM framework for balanced and strategic skill mobility

This section brings together the key insights from earlier parts of the chapter to articulate a coherent set of policy implications, fully guided by the OASM framework.

As established throughout the chapter, the accelerating effects of automation and demographic shifts across Europe are reshaping the landscape of labour demand. Migrants, particularly from non-EU countries, often find themselves in precarious, low-mobility jobs – a dynamic explained through the dual labour market theory (Piore, 1979) and evidenced by persistent skill underutilisation (Borjas, 2012). The OASM framework addresses these inefficiencies by offering a structured way to design policy that is anticipatory, developmentally reciprocal and embedded in principles of ethical governance.

Drawing on the earlier discussion of algorithmic bias and unequal treatment in employment services (Zhao, 2020), a first tenet of the OASM framework is to ensure recruitment systems are transparent and fair. This includes regulating the use of AI tools in matching migrants to jobs, always with a human decision at the end, and embedding safeguards to avoid reinforcing systemic discrimination (Lane, Williams & Broecke, 2023). Ethical recruitment is not an adjunct

but a precondition for all other interventions (see Chapter 6 (Philippines – Ducanes et al.): addressing protection mechanisms and bilateral labour agreements; and Chapter 3 (Ethical Recruitment – Boland et al.): for ethical governance and systemic recruitment challenges).

As discussed before, fragmented credential recognition mechanisms represent a meso-level barrier to optimal mobility. Under OASM, skills recognition and restoration need to be modular, portable and interoperable across borders. The value of this approach has been affirmed by both empirical literature and practitioner input, particularly in the context of transitional occupations and career mobility networks (del Rio-Chanona et al., 2021). Aligning recognition with EU-level digital credentials and bilateral agreements would facilitate smoother transitions and reduce underemployment.

Previous sections emphasised the need to move beyond reactive training systems. OASM confirms that pre-departure and post-arrival training need to be aligned with forward-looking labour market forecasting. The value of digital tools such as the Link4Skills Navigator has already been highlighted: these allow identification of emerging skills demands and enable more responsive, AI-informed training programmes. Practitioners at the EES workshop pointed out that training without clear linkage to market demand often fails to translate into employability, which is a gap that OASM directly addresses.

Another principle reiterated throughout this chapter is the need to reframe migration as a circular and co-transformation process, not a one-way transfer of labour from an origin to a destination. This was explored through the lens of the brain circulation literature and reflected in case examples such as the Mobility Skills Partnership model (see Chapter 2). Within OASM, such partnerships support capacity building in origin countries while meeting destination labour needs, especially in sectors vulnerable to both shortages and automation. They also help mitigate the 'brain drain' dilemma by embedding reintegration pathways and mutual investment in skill development.

A cross-cutting theme across the macro, meso and micro levels is the need for policy coherence. The earlier discussion of institutional fragmentation and siloed policymaking underlines why OASM calls for a unified governance approach that integrates labour market forecasting (macro), recognition infrastructures and employment services (meso) and individual employers (micro)[1]. These levels are not separate silos but interdependent. For instance, a predictive labour shortage identified at macro-level needs to be translated into accessible up-skilling pathways at meso-level, and ultimately enable informed decisions by employers at the micro-level.

11.7 Conclusions and policy directions

This final section of the chapter brings together the conceptual insights, empirical evidence and practitioner perspectives discussed thus far to directly address the two guiding research questions. Anchored in the OASM

framework, the analysis shifts from diagnosis to direction, offering a structured reflection on how international migration can be more effectively governed to meet the evolving skill needs of the EU in a context shaped by automation, demographic change and geopolitical uncertainty, such as wars, conflicts and populist shifts.

The sections provide targeted responses to each question, drawing upon the OASM framework to outline what is needed for international migration to serve as a driver of inclusive labour market resilience in the EU and beyond.

The first question (RQ1) asked how international migration can be facilitated to enable the optimal allocation of migrant skills, particularly within the context of automation-driven labour market transformations and the EU's evolving migration governance? The answer lies in reframing migration not as a reactive response to shortages, or transactional mechanism, but as a co-transformational and long-term strategy for human capital development, one that is deeply embedded in workforce planning and digital innovation.

The EU is required to weave migration rules into long-term workforce plans. This includes:

- Developing joint skills partnerships with origin countries to co-invest in training and ensure pre-departure alignment with EU labour market needs;
- Expanding portable and modular recognition and skill restoration systems, enabling migrants to transition across roles and countries as labour demands evolve;
- Embedding circularity in migration pathways to allow for return, reintegration and skills transfer to origin countries, thus transforming skill flow into mutual human capital development;
- Using AI-supported labour market crowd intelligence to identify sectoral gaps and guide recruitment and up-skilling initiatives;
- Ensuring ethical and transparent recruitment processes that prevent systemic bias and promote fair access for diverse skill sets; and
- Creating an EU dashboard that tracks, in real time, how and how fast migrant skills are recognised, and allocate them in an optimal way.

These points built a set of policy directions for the EU's migration and labour-market governance. Through this approach, skill mobility becomes a dynamic, reciprocal process, enhancing labour market resilience in the EU while supporting developmental outcomes in countries of origin.

The second question (RQ2) turned to the barriers that currently hinder this vision. Despite a growing awareness of migration's potential, institutional, technological and policy silos continue to obstruct the effective matching of migrant talent to labour market demands. These challenges are not isolated – they are systemic, multi-level and require an integrated policy response.

Despite the recognised value of migrant labour, several interrelated barriers continue to obstruct effective skill matching in the EU:

1 Migration, education and labour market policies often operate in silos, leading to inconsistent implementation and poor coordination across levels of governance (EU, national, regional).
2 Migrants frequently face delayed or denied recognition of qualifications due to opaque, rigid or non-standardised assessment systems. The lack of competency- and task-based modular recognition frameworks limits mobility across sectors and borders.
3 While digital tools exist, many public employment services lack interoperable platforms for tracking, verifying and matching skills in real-time. Existing AI systems are underused, or in some cases, perpetuate biases in candidate profiling and placement (Zhao, 2020; cf. Chapter 13 (Wierzbicki) offers a complementary exploration of AI-based decision support tools for migration, with particular emphasis on ensuring fairness, transparency and ethical implementation).
4 Migration policy is often driven by short-term shortages rather than strategic forecasting. This leads to a misalignment between migrant inflows and long-term labour market needs, particularly in sectors affected by automation.
5 Migrants, especially from non-EU countries, face limited access to upskilling, language training and support services. This entrenches underemployment and de-skilling, particularly in low-paid, low-mobility roles.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-level governance approach. Within the OASM framework, macro-level strategies (e.g. EU-wide forecasting and quota systems) must be operationalised through meso-level infrastructures (e.g. credentialing platforms, employer partnerships) and attuned to micro-level needs (e.g. employers' decisions, migrant aspirations, career pathways). Only by aligning these levels can the EU realise the full potential of international migration in building a resilient, inclusive and future-proof labour market.

Notes

1 As we do not have data about individual migrants here.

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12 Aligning skill formation and mobility strategies with sustainability goals [SKILLS4JUSTICE]*

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12.1 Introduction

The alignment of skill mobility strategies with sustainability goals is crucial to ensure labour migration contributes positively to community and economic resilience. Alignment enables a more comprehensive approach to skill shortages, emphasising not only immediate needs of various sectors but also long-term sustainability and resilience of labour markets and skill formation systems. Such an approach recognises the multifaceted nature of skill shortages, which are influenced by demographic trends, digitalisation, globalisation and green transition. By integrating these considerations into skill mobility strategies, policies not only address immediate labour shortages but also contribute to sustainable development in origin and destination countries.

This chapter explores the sustainability of the policies related to matching demand and supply of skills and sustainable labour migration pathways by focusing on the policy measures supporting the development of skill formation systems of origin countries and creating fair and transparent recognition of skills and qualifications.

Supporting origin countries in developing skill formation systems involves capacity building to strengthen systems and institutions for coping with local socio-economic challenges. Fair and transparent pathways for recognising skills and qualifications serve as fundamental preconditions for sustainable skill mobilities providing mutual benefits to origin and destination countries, especially through tools for comparing qualifications. A key development is networking between different EU and national transparency tools and databases, especially between the European Learning Model version 3 (ELM v.3),[1] the European Multilingual Classification ESCO (European Skills, Competencies, Qualifications and Occupations)[2] and national databases on qualifications and in origin countries. Creating mutual links and referencing regional qualification frameworks, such as the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong

* *Thesis 12. Sustainability of the skill formation and deployment in the origin countries and international transparency of skills and qualifications are complementary factors facilitating sustainable skill matching and labour migration pathways.*

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Learning (EQF),[3] the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF),[4] the South Asian Reference Qualifications Framework[5] and other frameworks, fosters global transparency of qualifications. Opening EU databases and transparency tools to third countries is expected to ensure effective interoperability of data on qualifications and competencies, facilitating smoother recognition of qualifications for migrant workers.

The chapter explores how these policy areas help align skill mobility strategies with sustainability goals and contribute to labour migration policies responsive to labour market needs and committed to principles of sustainable development.

12.2 Methodology

This chapter is based on findings of research executed in Horizon Europe project 'Skill partnerships for sustainable and just migration patterns' (SKILLS4JUSTICE Horizon-CL2-2023-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-03 No. 101132435). By exploring matching demand and supply of skills in the context of global migration, the project provides evidence on the nature of skill shortages and the potential of skills partnerships to tackle them. In 2024, skills shortage models for recruitment of skilled workers and the agency of existing skill partnerships were explored in destination countries: Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Lithuania, Norway, UK. Demand and supply of skilled workers were analysed in origin countries such as North Macedonia, Ukraine, Türkiye and Ethiopia.

These research activities included systematic analyses of mismatches between demand and supply of skills by exploring the supply and demand of skills in chosen sectors/occupations, clarifying the role of qualifications systems in linking supply with demand and investigating how education and training systems address skills shortages and mismatches. Between May and December 2024 interviews were conducted (face-to-face and online) and focus groups held with respondents from enterprises, employers' organisations, trade unions, government institutions and stakeholders in economic, employment, education and training and migration policies, vocational education and training, higher education, non-governmental organisations and labour market intermediaries working with migrant workers. In all, 67 interviews were conducted in Lithuania, 40 interviews in Germany, 28 interviews in France, 27 interviews and 4 focus groups involving 18 participants in Italy, 30 interviews in Poland, 40 interviews in Norway, 45 interviews in the UK, 49 interviews in North Macedonia, 40 interviews in Türkiye, 76 interviews in Ukraine and 40 interviews in Ethiopia. The data from interviews were subject to thematic analysis. The emerged themes include the factors of mismatches between demand and supply of skills in the sectors of economy, the features of social dialogue on skill formation, deployment and employment of the migrant workers, the strategies of employers, education and training providers and labour market intermediaries in dealing with skills shortages.

12.3 Sustainable skill formation and recognition of skills and qualifications of migrant workers: The policy and research discourse

Migrant workers are widely used to solve labour and skills shortages, often based on short-term economic interests, thus lacking socio-economic sustainability. The European Commission expressed concern over the reliance of sectors and enterprises on low-skilled migrant workers, regarding this as an unsustainable strategy worsening the quality of work and life for migrants and host countries (European Commission, 2020). Underutilisation of skills in the labour market raises issues that can be sources of social discontent and push factors for emigration (Livingston, 2017). Lack of VET skills and qualifications among refugees and asylum seekers is also caused by poor equipment of VET providers and absence of inclusive learning environments in VET systems of origin countries (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2021). Over-qualification and occupational downgrading are typical challenges faced by migrant workers in destination countries, with negative implications for remuneration and human capital development (Farivar et al., 2022; Rosso, 2021; Sirkeci et al., 2018; Visintin et al., 2015).

Corporate practices and economic and employment policies of destination countries can also deprive migrant workers of access to acquisition or recognition of skills and qualifications. In some discriminatory models of employment, the skills of migrant workers can be treated as management property, regarding migrant workers as unskilled independently of the complexity of executed work, autonomy and responsibility (Iskander, 2021).

Existing migration patterns can cause unsustainable utilisation of migrant workers' skills. Thompson and Walton-Roberts (2019) identify conflicts between international migration depriving origin countries of essential workers such as nurses and other health professionals, and sustainable development goals, such as access to training, orderly and responsible migration, and retention of health workers. Triandafyllidou and Yeoh (2023) argue that the pandemic and post-pandemic recovery require destination countries to revise migrant employment schemes focused on temporary immigration in favour of more sustainable and long-term immigration addressing chronic skill shortages and creating more secure employment and skill development. Triandafyllidou (2017) suggests introducing a flexible and proactive regulatory framework allowing recruitment of migrant workers according to skills shortages in sectors and regions.

Sustainability of migration policies and interventions can also be defined in terms of rights, ensuring access to fundamental human rights, policies, retaining political support, enduring over time and functioning at scale (Betts, 2021). From a skills perspective, these terms involve accessibility of migrants to skill formation, political support for skill-formation-oriented labour market and migration policies, and long-term engagement of stakeholders. Migration policies tend to ignore capacities of migrant workers by focusing mainly on their vulnerability. Recognising skills of migrants, especially forced

migrants and refugees in destination countries, enables better utilisation of human capital and changes the public image of refugees (Betts, 2021). The complementarity of refugees' skills to those of local workers is important for their acceptance.

The rights limitations and discrimination towards migrants in skill formation and employment very often concern lack of recognition of skills, skill mismatches, migrant labour exploitation and discrimination (Hurley et al., 2019; Maggini, 2021). Recognition of foreign qualifications is mainly a political decision requiring cooperation between responsible national authorities (Iskander, 2021; Sommer, 2021). Failure to recognise skills and qualifications of migrant workers in destination countries leads to further discrimination, skill wastage and unemployment of migrants (Cameron et al., 2019; Chun Guo & Al Ariss, 2015). Interventions and agency of interested organisations of employers together with proactive, inclusive and differentiated recruitment and selection practices addressing skill shortages in destination countries can help prevent unfair blocking of skilled migrants and discounting their skills (Chun Guo & Al Ariss, 2015).

12.4 Thesis formulation

Referring to the above, we suggest the following thesis: sustainability of the skill formation and deployment in the origin countries and international transparency of skills and qualifications are complementary factors facilitating sustainable skill matching and labour migration pathways.

Logically this raises the following research questions: (1) How is sustainability of skill formation and deployment addressed in skill formation policies of origin countries? (2) To what extent and how do international transparency tools of qualifications and national systems of qualifications facilitate sustainable skill matching and labour migration?

12.5 Skill formation, qualifications and sustainable migration: Findings of SKILLS4JUSTICE study

This section addresses the above questions using the SKILLS4JUSTICE research executed in 2024.

12.5.1 Sustainability of development of skill formation systems of origin countries

Skill formation systems influence sustainable socio-economic development in origin countries in several areas. The first area is general development of national human capital stock, providing basic preconditions for socio-economic progress. The main targets here are accessibility and inherent quality of education in all sectors by improving broad factors like educational infrastructure, and availability of highly competent teaching staff. The second area deals with improved matching of skill formation systems with labour market skill needs.

The main focus is on capacity building of skill formation systems and actors fostering relevance of skill formation processes to labour market needs and priorities for socio-economic development. This is done through VET and HE curricular reforms, capacity building of teaching staff and social partners, developing work-based learning and apprenticeships. The balance of these issues differs with country context.

In Ethiopia, the abundance of a young population and potential labour is both a precondition and challenge for socio-economic development. The skills formation system is challenged by large volumes of young people, and complex policies primarily address poverty reduction through investing in VET and HE to support industrialisation and achieve sustainable economic growth. Skill formation suffers from lack of structuring and differentiation of study and training programmes, strong standardisation of HE and VET curricula at national level, resulting in simultaneous skills shortages and over-supply. Strong regulatory policy interventions of skill matching, like the 70:30 admission policy implemented in 2015–2020, which mandates universities to admit 70% of students into engineering and natural sciences and 30% into social sciences, contribute to over-supply of engineering graduates who may not meet industry competence standards. Skill formation priorities include emigration as a policy measure, targeting development of graduates *to fit the international market* and mapping skills demanded internationally. The National Qualification Framework, aligning curricula reforms and referencing with regional qualifications frameworks, is expected to support regular labour emigration. Sustainable skilled worker migration benefiting employees is achieved by co-creation, where HE and VET providers in Ethiopia and companies or organisations in Europe mutually engage in identifying skill gaps, co-creating curricula, co-teaching and co-assessment. Recently, a government structure was created to study national and international labour market demand, prepare unemployed graduates and map their placement. This is still in the initial phase, involving only a few European countries.

Skill formation policies in Türkiye prioritise matching skill supply with labour market demand, which involves identifying skills needs, supporting stakeholder participation in managing education and training providers, applying quotas for enrolment of HE students, strengthening cooperation of universities with the private sector and aligning curriculum development with enterprise needs. Türkiye established the *Mesleki Yeterlilik Kurama* [Vocational Qualifications Authority] to introduce a market-oriented National Vocational Qualifications System (NVQS) aligned with the EQF (European Commission, 2023a: 107), serving also as reference for accreditation of vocational and technical education. A key challenge for skill matching of immigrants is assessment and recognition of their skills, especially for forced immigrants from Syria. Policymakers see the potential of collaboration with the EU to support the integration of Syrian immigrants though training and skills development (establishing specialised VET centres and organising integration services).

In Ukraine, policymakers and stakeholders also prioritise aligning skill formation to labour market needs as one solution to skill flow and emigration challenges, but efforts in this area are aggravated by the war. The Russo-Ukrainian war increased demand for skilled workers and significantly reduced their supply because of mobilisation and martial law. The main adjustment of the skill formation system was expanding online education and training to make it accessible for citizens who fled the country and those living in occupied areas. The volume of continuing professional training provided by enterprises was also increased and micro-credentials and micro-qualifications developed to respond to rapidly changing skills requirements. Despite these challenges, several positive trends are observed in the field of skill formation, namely: the popularity of HE and stable demand for professional (vocational and technical) education are maintained; distance and online education have increased; learners are reoriented to Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics education; career guidance and flexible educational programmes have been introduced; cooperation with employers has been strengthened; and academic mobility and international cooperation have increased. The development of the National System of Qualifications was influenced by strong engagement of big businesses. Reacting to war challenges brought increased flexibility in awarding qualifications (focus on micro-qualifications and micro-credentials) as well as improved accessibility for impacted social groups, including internally displaced persons and ex-combatants.

One of the key issues of sustainability of skill formation and employment in North Macedonia is the high level of emigration exacerbating existing skills shortages and mismatches – around 2,500 highly educated citizens emigrate each year, costing about 0.8% of GDP in lost talent. Attracting migrant workers also presents challenges when a significant proportion considers immigration as an intermediate step of onward migration to the EU. This creates a 'trap' limiting possible solutions in skill formation. Suggested policy solutions target capacity building of formal education and training to deliver immediately employable graduates, and policy transfer of work-based education from 'successful' models in Switzerland or Finland. The effectiveness of the education and training system in ensuring immediate employment of graduates is regarded by policymakers as the most effective measure to reduce youth emigration.

12.5.2 Transparency of qualifications and their systems as a precondition of sustainable development: Priorities of EU policies

EU policies and instruments designed to foster transparency and comparability of skills and qualifications target the sustainable mobility of EU citizens and the integration of third-country nationals (TCNs) to address skills shortages. For example, European Commission Recommendation EU2023/7700 of 15 November 2023 on the recognition of qualifications of TCNs[6] outlines

fundamental principles for transparent, fair and non-discriminatory recognition of qualifications (European Commission, 2023b). The 'skills-first' principle makes real skills of TCNs the central object in matching with jobs in destination countries. Following this principle helps to ensure skills of applicants fit requirements of workplaces, thus enabling sustainable employment, so comparison and recognition of formal qualifications serve only an auxiliary function. Using skills for recognising foreign qualifications also requires more intensive participation of labour market stakeholders in the recognition process, making it decentralised and focused on the individual's situation.

12.5.3 National systems of qualifications: Instruments for sustainable migration and skill formation?

Intermediation between labour market and skill formation is a core rationale for national systems of qualifications, which is well reflected in definitions. OECD defines national qualifications systems as a set of activities, processes, institutional arrangements and mechanisms linking education and training to the labour market and civil society, which results in recognition of learning (OECD, 2007). The ETF defines the national system of qualifications as

> A set of organisational arrangements in a country that work together to ensure that individuals can access qualifications that are fit for purpose, meet the needs of society and the labour market, and offer opportunities for employment, recognition, career development, and lifelong learning.
>
> (ETF, 2017)

Exploring institutional, political and socio-economic factors for matching demand and supply of skills and developing sustainable migration pathways highlights four main factors of national qualifications systems which influence the contribution of recognition of qualifications to sustainable skills matching and migration:

1 Limitations of national qualifications systems for matching demand and supply of skills and regulating migration;
2 Instrumentalisation of national qualifications systems in the regulation of migration;
3 Reforms of national qualifications systems in origin and (recently emerged) destination countries (Lithuania, Poland) are used as instruments for skill matching in conditions of emigration of skilled labour and other socio-economic challenges;
4 Adjustment of national qualifications systems to pressures created by skilled labour shortages.

These factors are discussed below.

12.5.3.1 Limitations in using national qualifications systems in matching demand and supply of skills and regulating migration

Limitations of using national qualifications systems for matching demand and supply of skills in origin and destination countries are caused by insufficient institutional development of qualifications systems; low levels of stakeholder engagement in design; and use of associated instruments, strong centralisation and governmental control of the system.

For example, the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework (LTQF) and sectoral occupational standards play a modest role in fostering international transparency and comparability of qualifications. This weakness is explained by lack of awareness of the LTQF and EQF beyond the education sector, insufficient permeability between educational programmes, inadequate participation of social partners, lack of practices for recognition and validation of nonformal and informal learning, and limited diversity of qualifications included in the LTQF. The challenges of using the LTQF are exacerbated by institutional obstacles to movement between educational programmes and insufficient flexibility of the system of qualification towards new types of qualifications demanded by the labour market, including LTQF level 5 qualifications through short cycle study programmes and recognition of prior learning and professional experience (QVETDC, 2024). Use of sectoral occupational standards for recognising qualifications of TCNs is limited by the absence of requirements of formal qualifications in many occupations from employers.

Strong centralised governance in developing the national qualifications system hinders engagement of labour market stakeholders in design and development, making the system over-bureaucratised, less responsive to labour market needs and less useable for stakeholders. There is a very low level of awareness of main stakeholders of the national qualifications system, resulting in its limited usage. The use of international qualifications transparency tools is also hindered by these effects of centralisation. For example, educational institutions in North Macedonia exhibit rather limited and unsystematic use of the North Macedonian Qualification's Framework (MQF) for recognition, comparability and transferability of their qualifications. About half of surveyed educational institutions indicated that they do not use MQF, largely because of lack of functionality in recognising competencies and qualifications. VET centres in North Macedonia rely on accreditation through Adult Education Centres rather than formal qualifications frameworks. Some institutions rely on national accreditations recognised by foreign employers but acknowledge their limitations in international comparability.

12.5.3.2 Instrumentalisation of the national systems of qualifications and their instruments in controlling migration

Qualifications systems can also be instrumentalised variously to control labour immigration, when qualification demanded in the labour market of the destination country is a mandatory prerequisite for issuing visas and work permits.

Such policy has been used to control labour immigration in Lithuania based on the shortage occupations list. The policy created dissatisfaction among employers largely relying on flexible employment of migrant workers from third countries, such as international road freight transport. Employers claim that delegating responsibility to them for recognising the suitability of competencies and qualifications of migrant workers would be the optimal solution both for enterprise human capital needs and effective migration control. The main preference is for functional company-based mechanisms for search, assessment, recruitment and training of migrant workers, often involving partner organisations, institutions or subsidiaries in the origin countries. Trade unions claim that delegating recognition of qualifications of migrant workers to employers might risk them abusing this power, including refusing official recognition of skills and qualifications of migrant workers with implications for remuneration, employment security and working conditions.

National qualifications frameworks also serve as instruments for regulation of immigration. Implementation of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) in the UK since 2015 is an example of instrumentalisation of national instruments of comparability of qualifications for selective points-based immigration policy. The RQF categorises and standardises levels of education and training qualifications to provide a consistent framework, ranging from entry-level to doctoral qualifications, enabling individuals and employers to understand the relative complexity and depth of different qualifications. The use of the RQF for recognising qualifications acquired abroad is based on the broad autonomy of regulators in the recognition, identification and specification of priority sets of occupations for recognition on the basis of demand for skills from overseas made by the government and devolved administrations. The RQF is used within the UK immigration system to set standards for sponsored worker visa applications. The UK visa sponsorship system requires that the job role being offered to the foreign worker meets skill and qualification levels.

Legal and institutional requirements for recognising qualifications in the national qualifications systems of destination countries create different barriers for migrant workers to access jobs corresponding to their qualifications and competencies. Recognition of qualifications of TCNs in regulated professions is often accompanied with challenging institutional quality assurance requirements. In France there is a requirement for practising healthcare professionals to be registered in professional bodies called orders, such as *Ordre des médecins*, *Ordre des infirmiers* and *Ordre des pharmaciens* [doctors, nurses and pharmacists, respectively] to obtain a full Licence to Practise. These professional bodies have both national and local representative branches assuring quality-of-care safeguards and patient-professional relations, but also representing the profession at different political levels.

Often access to highly skilled jobs in regulated professions requires TCNs to undergo regular specialisation studies or courses. This requirement can reduce accessibility of such studies for local students, as found in the case of integration of immigrant medical doctors in Norway. In some healthcare

professions in France, like paramedical professionals, there is a requirement for TCNs with analogous overseas qualifications to resume studies and obtain the French qualification.

National qualifications systems of origin countries and their referencing to regional qualifications frameworks can be targeted to facilitate and manage sustainable emigration under conditions of over-supply of labour. Development of the national qualifications system in Ethiopia is characterised by strong intentions of linking/referencing the national qualifications system with international/regional qualifications frameworks, including those developed in Europe and Africa, like the EQF, the European Higher Education Qualifications Framework as well as the recently developed ACQF. The comprehensive Ethiopian National Qualifications Framework is integrated with sub-frameworks like the Ethiopian VET Qualifications Framework and aligned with international standards (UNESCO, 2021). The Government seeks to facilitate recognition of qualifications of immigrants without documented credentials and to ease recognition of learning outcomes and qualifications acquired by Ethiopian nationals abroad, recruiting Ethiopian citizens for work abroad or enrolling in further learning pathways. Comparability of qualifications in this system is achieved through standardisation of curricula (MEE, 2008), and comparability in the qualifications system supports involvement of Ethiopian education and training providers in international skills partnerships.

12.5.3.3 Comprehensive reforms of the systems of qualifications in the origin countries

The comprehensive approach to reforming national systems of qualifications in some origin countries involves concertation of interests of employers and state in developing national qualifications systems, systemic efforts in ensuring qualification design is more responsive to labour market skills needs and extensive policy transfer in implementing instruments of national qualifications systems. However, it is also characterised by fragmented implementation and use of such instruments, their functioning and impact being compromised by inconsistencies in skill formation processes and practices.

In Türkiye, the reform of the national qualifications system combines centralised governance with engagement of employers' organisations in implementing its NVQS by the Vocational Qualifications Agency (European Commission, 2023a: 107). In implementing the national qualification framework, accreditation of vocational and technical education institutions is viewed as a key mechanism. However, rigid requirements and regulations of the national qualifications system in the field of curriculum design (rigid national qualifications standards and frameworks) limit the freedom and flexibility of VET providers in adjusting and updating VET curricula. Despite high international demand for skilled and qualified workers, the use of national, sectoral and regional qualifications frameworks for recognition, comparability and transferability of qualifications and competencies by VET and HE providers in Türkiye is fragmented.

The national qualifications system in North Macedonia takes place in the context of consistently high emigration and efforts of businesses and policy-makers to compensate for resulting skills shortages through labour immigration. Enhancing transparency and comparability of qualifications for international mobility of learners and employees is one of the declared goals in adopting the MQF. The Government's Resolution on migration policy (2021) emphasises the need for international cooperation and data sharing to improve transparency and comparability of qualifications, but there is no clear vision on how to apply MQF for recognising foreign qualifications or prior learning. The visibility and transparency of occupational and qualification standards are hindered by the absence of adequately operating national registers. Being at the early stage of implementation, the MQF and its potential benefits are unknown among youth. Employers have reservations that aligning the MQF with EQF and other regional qualifications frameworks would further exacerbate skill flow, whereas its potential benefit in encouraging return and circular migration is very uncertain.

Reforming the national qualifications system in Ukraine also represents a patchwork of institutional and methodological-instrumental interventions, including dealing with a resilient Soviet legacy (retaining of former Soviet type qualifications inherited from the planned economy system, strong centralisation and central planning in governance of the qualifications system), as well as broad and intensive policy transfer from EU intended to Europeanise skill formation and qualifications systems. The outcome was a market-oriented model of National Qualifications System with comparatively high state bureaucratisation. The main initiators of the development of the national qualifications system in Ukraine were big business structures, such as the Federation of Employers of Ukraine, which in 2010 developed and tested a draft procedure for referencing the requirements of learning outcomes for existing educational and professional qualifications with level descriptors of the National Qualifications Framework (Melnyk, 2022). The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine also plays a key governance role in the development of the national qualifications system, alongside the National Qualifications Agency created in 2018. An important institutional factor of sustainability of the national qualifications system is the establishment of independent awarding centres responsible for assessing competencies and awarding qualifications as well as sectoral and regional councils of qualifications. The recognition of international and foreign qualifications was facilitated by referencing the NQF with the EQF in 2023 (European Commission, 2023c).

12.5.3.4 Adjustment of the national systems of qualifications to the pressure created by the shortage of the skilled labour and contextual socio-economic shocks

Technological change and critical junctures of socio-economic development can significantly alter the demand for skills and qualifications creating pressure for national systems of qualifications to adjust supply. Hence the digitalisation

of work processes and the Fourth Industrial Revolution in Germany fostered more flexible structural elements of qualifications, such as additional qualifications (*Zusätsqualifikation*) designed and offered by different stakeholders in response to changing skills needs.[7] The shortage of skilled workers tends to soften rigid prerequisites of formal qualifications for labour market entrants, especially for migrant workers entering Germany. New regulations on 'recognition partnership' and skills analysis make it easier for people to enter Germany to have their qualifications recognised (Schröder, 2023). Occupational recognition of non-German qualifications since the Recognition Act of 2012 allows all non-German skilled workers to have their qualifications recognised. The law covers around 600 training occupations (non-state-regulated occupations), while separate state recognition laws (regulated occupations) apply to occupations that fall under the jurisdiction of the federal states, such as educators or geriatric nurses (Baczak et al., 2020). Labour market skills shortages enhance exemptions for migrant workers to have recognised qualifications for employment in skilled job positions, like Western Balkans regulation initiative. Skills shortages also force enterprises to compromise and reduce requirements of formal qualifications for vacancies.

Increasing shortages of skilled workers in Lithuania led employers to pressure the state to liberalise procedures for 'importing' skilled workers from third countries, including liberalising recognition of qualifications of migrant workers. In response to this pressure, the procedure for recognising migrant workers' qualifications has become overly liberal and subject to change. Currently, it is sufficient for the employer to provide information about the foreigner's qualifications, or professional experience, or simply confirm the plan for payment of higher salary to foreigner without proving their qualification, thus the role of qualifications frameworks in accepting migrant workers is very small.

Research in Italy suggests that skills shortages in some sectors (e.g. construction) force employers to revise work organisation towards narrow specialisation of work tasks along Fordist lines, reducing demand for workers with broad qualifications and enabling employment of low-skilled workers from third countries.

12.5.4 Consistency of the national systems of qualifications and the regional qualifications frameworks: Challenges for comparison of qualifications and learning outcomes

One of the key missions of the regional qualifications frameworks is to facilitate simple, smooth and fair comparison of the qualifications and their elements between the different countries and regions. Several conditions must be satisfied to achieve this mission. First of all, the national and sectoral systems of qualifications, especially occupational or qualifications standards, must be well established and transparently referenced to the national and regional qualifications frameworks. Secondly, the criteria and processes of referencing

qualifications to the regional frameworks must be trusted by all involved parties and stakeholders, including by the migrant workers. Thirdly, the institutions and stakeholders responsible for the assessment of competencies and recognition of qualifications in the countries making part of the migration pathways and corridors must be able to use the regional frameworks in the process of comparison and recognition. The findings of the research study conducted in the SKILLS4JUSTICE project indicate different challenges and problems in these areas. The national systems of qualifications in many countries are still rather fragmented. There is a lack of the occupational standards or qualifications in the sectors of activities. The oldest regional qualifications framework – the EQF, introduced in 2008 – is already used in the comparison and recognition of qualifications in the EU region, but the awareness on this instrument and its usage in the comparison and usage of qualifications between EU countries and other countries (for example, EU candidate countries like North Macedonia) are low and inconsistent. The later introduced European transparency tools, such as the European Multilingual Classification ESCO, as well as the first multilingual EU data model for learning, ELM v.3, are also expected to contribute to the fair comparison and recognition of the competences and qualifications of migrant workers in EU countries, but they are still at the stage of implementation and upscaling.

There is also a lack of tools to objectively compare and assess specific competences and learning outcomes, particularly in the context of partial and micro-qualifications. To address this, regional-sector competence frameworks or international professional profiles should be developed, serving as references for qualification recognition and resources for planning skills pacts between destination and origin countries. These instruments can improve transparency, standards and descriptors, and involve labour market stakeholders from the countries of origin and destination of migration. Multi-country referencing instruments of qualifications based on existing qualifications, occupational standards or profiles can also help support transnational mobility and facilitate comparison of qualifications between countries. Examples include the VQTS model, which enables transparent presentation of work-related competences and competence development.[8] The European Training Foundation's initiative in developing multi-country professional profiles in the Central Asian region[9] integrates national, sectoral and international requirements to qualifications, competences, knowledge, skills and attitudes related to selected professional areas. Such instruments can make migrant workers employment and recruitment more transparent, sustainable and responsive to labour market needs.

12.6 Summary and conclusions

Does the orientation of skill formation and mobility strategies to sustainability enable migration to contribute to resilience of communities and economies?

It varies. The focus of strategies of skill formation systems on sustainable development of human capital and employment in origin countries often faces difficulties caused by underdeveloped institutional settings and lack of capacities of policymakers, stakeholders, and education and training providers in implementing ambitious reforms. The leading role of governments in strategic development of skill formation systems ensures the legitimacy and necessary political and institutional support to targeted improvements. At the same time, centralised governance leaves less space for initiatives and active engagement of social partners and education and training providers. The implications of migration for skill formation are also very diverse. On the one hand, policymakers and stakeholders want skill formation systems and processes better to align skills supply with demand, assuming improved employability and quality of employment will reduce emigration and skill flow (North Macedonia, Türkiye, Ukraine). On the other hand, regular and sustainable emigration is also considered by policymakers as an opportunity to alleviate high structural unemployment among an abundant young workforce, and potentially to develop human capital through circular or return migration (Ethiopia).

How does the comparability of qualifications and transparency of national systems contribute to sustainability of migration and skills matching of migrant workers? The potential of comparability instruments of qualifications in enhancing sustainable migration is broadly recognised by policymakers in both origin and destination countries. Nevertheless, the realisation and exploitation of comparability remain strongly compromised by relatively low usage of national qualifications systems, their fragmented character, lack of developed instruments and low trust in formal qualifications by stakeholders. Well-established national qualifications systems facilitate effective assessment of competencies and recognition of qualifications for the local workforce through broad coverage of qualifications and developed institutional procedures. However, these institutional arrangements often do not function in the same way when dealing with qualifications from third countries, where cumbersome and challenging additional procedures and requirements effectively deprive migrant workers of recognition possibilities. Referencing national qualifications systems to regional qualifications frameworks and other international transparency instruments has limited effect on sustainable migration and skills matching, because of lack of transparent quality assurance measures and trust in formal qualifications from third countries, as well as the fragmented use of these instruments. Strong state bureaucratisation of the recognition of qualifications from third countries reduces the motivation and readiness of migrant workers to apply and avoid vertical and horizontal mismatches of their skills with labour market needs. Using the fit of formal qualifications to labour market needs as the basic criterion for regulation of work permits and entry of TCNs also contradicts the 'skills first' principle and evokes dissatisfaction of both employers in destination countries and migrant workers with the loss of time and resources. At the same time, the flexibility of national qualifications

systems in reacting to pressure created by labour shortages often improves migrant workers' access to recognition of competencies and qualifications leading to better matching with job vacancies and more sustainable employment options.

To exploit the full potential of regional qualifications frameworks and national systems of qualifications to enable sustainable skill matching and fair migration, we suggest the following policy directions:

1 It is important to support the origin countries in developing their national systems of qualifications, especially in making key instruments of these systems, such as qualifications profiles and national qualifications frameworks, operable and usable by learners, employers, and education and training providers. This could significantly contribute to improving transparency and comparability of qualifications and learning outcomes awarded in these countries.
2 When making qualifications systems in origin and destination countries comparable and transparent, one of the key targets should be the operability of these systems and their instruments by migrant workers and learners themselves. Enabling this requires communication instruments and media (e.g. accessible and easily operable online platforms) opening up the usage of qualifications systems to migrant workers. Making migrant workers active users of qualifications systems would also prevent them from being used in purely technical and discriminatory ways to screen and control migration flows.
3 Developing regional qualifications frameworks in the regions of origin countries and aligning them with the EQF could facilitate easier comparison and recognition of learning outcomes and qualifications of migrant workers both within the regions of origin countries and in European countries. Development of multi-country qualifications or professional profiles in selected occupational areas by interested stakeholders from origin and destination countries also leads in this direction.

Notes

1 https://europa.eu/europass/elm-browser/index.html
2 https://esco.ec.europa.eu/en/about-esco/what-esco
3 https://europass.europa.eu/system/files/2020-05/EQF%20Brochure-EN.pdf
4 https://acqf.africa/
5 https://mohe.gov.lk/images/pdf/SAQRF-Final-Document.pdf
6 https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/publications/commission-recommendation-recognition-qualifications-third-country-nationals_en
7 https://www.bibb.de/de/pressemitteilung_171466.php
8 https://vocationalqualification.net/
9 https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/events/darya-defining-methodology-multicountry-qualifications-pilot-central-asia

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13 AI-driven decision support for fair migration*

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13.1 Introduction: Supporting decisions for fair migration

The interaction between humans and artificial intelligence (AI) systems plays a central role in determining whether AI supports or undermines fairness in migration contexts. Beyond providing information, AI shapes how people think, decide and act, especially when navigating complex, high-stakes environments like migration. We consider three key dimensions: how AI can provide functionality that supports fair migration, what concerns arise regarding AI correctness or bias and how AI interactions influence users and institutions over time. We also present preliminary guidelines for designing AI systems that could support access to migration information in an unbiased and fair manner.

The application of generative AI (Generative Language Models, or GLMs) in the migration domain has expanded rapidly, encompassing tasks such as generating legal explanations/justifications for asylum seekers (especially relevant for justifications of refusals), checks based on spoken language, visa applications, border control systems, summarising migration policies, supporting multilingual communication and producing reports for humanitarian organisations. Given the sensitivity and complexity of migration-related information, ensuring the correctness of GLM-generated texts is both ethically imperative and operationally necessary. This chapter examines methodologies for assessing the correctness of GLM outputs in the migration context. We classify correctness into three core dimensions: factual accuracy, legal and policy coherence, and linguistic appropriateness, and we discuss the unique challenges each presents in migration discourse.

Migration discourse worldwide is rife with mis- and disinformation that exploit social anxieties and undermine public trust. False narratives often portray migrants as security threats or burdens, fuelling xenophobia and policy backlash. For example, social media analyses have documented pervasive migration-related falsehoods that harden negative attitudes and erode trust in

* *Thesis 13. Artificial Intelligence based on high quality data and expert knowledge can support and inform decisions that will lead to more fair migration.*

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authorities (Komendantova et al., 2023). Such misinformation can isolate migrants, distort public debate and even endanger lives. AI offers powerful tools to address this challenge. AI systems can scour vast online data to identify and flag disinformation, and even engage with users to correct false beliefs. By applying techniques from natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning, researchers and practitioners are developing automated systems that detect fake news about migration, monitor hate speech on social networks and generate factual counter-narratives. This chapter examines major AI approaches to countering migration-related disinformation, illustrating them with case studies from around the world. We also discuss the ethical and practical challenges of using AI in this context.

13.2 Thesis formulation

In examining the potential of AI to enhance migration decision-making processes, the hypothesis posits that AI systems, when underpinned by high-quality data and enriched with expert knowledge, can substantially improve the fairness and efficacy of these decisions. The core premise suggests that the integrity and representativeness of the data, coupled with the integration of insights from migration experts, ethicists and legal professionals, are pivotal in shaping the outputs of AI algorithms. This hypothesis operates on the notion that such enriched AI systems can outperform traditional decision-making methods, which typically do not leverage AI. In particular, AI can support decision-making by answering questions, using both fitted language models and datasets containing statistical data and forecasts. To empirically test this hypothesis, it is necessary to test several aspects of such an AI system, such as correctness of answering questions (verified by migration experts or using ground truth from specialised literature), robustness to hallucinations and the effect of anti-migration stereotypes present in language models. Another method of testing would concentrate on the robustness of AI-enhanced decision support to disinformation about migration.

Confirmation of this hypothesis could advocate for broader AI adoption in migration management, emphasising investments in data quality and expert knowledge integration, and potentially influencing migration policy at multiple governance levels. Conversely, rejection of the hypothesis would prompt a deeper investigation into the AI attributes affecting migration decisions, such as algorithmic design and socio-technical system impacts, steering further research towards understanding and mitigating these influences.

13.3 Methodology

In compiling the literature review for this chapter, we employed a structured and methodical approach to ensure a thorough exploration of existing research, particularly focusing on the fairness and ethical applications of large language models (LLMs) in this domain.

13.3.1 Research question and scope definition

We commenced by defining the core research questions: How can AI, specifically LLMs, be fairly and ethically applied to support policy decisions affecting migration flows? How can LLMs that answer questions about migration be tested for correctness, bias, robustness to hallucinations and disinformation about migration? These questions directed the scope of our review, encompassing both technical implementations and ethical considerations.

13.3.2 Search strategy development

A systematic search strategy was developed utilising key databases such as IEEE Xplore, Scopus and Google Scholar, focusing on scholarly articles, conference papers and relevant reports. Keywords and phrases such as 'AI in migration policy', 'AI for supporting fair migration', 'LLM in migration decision-making' and 'fair AI applications in policy' were strategically employed to capture a wide range of literature.

13.3.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

We formulated specific criteria to guide our selection process: articles must be peer-reviewed, published within the last five years and directly address the use of AI for supporting fair migration or decisions about migration policies. Non-scholarly articles and studies not explicitly mentioning ethical or fairness considerations in AI applications were excluded.

13.3.4 Screening and selection

An initial screening of titles and abstracts was conducted to identify studies of potential relevance, followed by a detailed review of full texts. This two-step process ensured the inclusion of studies that precisely matched our research focus.

13.3.5 Quality assessment

We assessed each selected study for quality and rigor using criteria adapted from the PRISMA guidelines, focusing on research design, analytical methods and transparency in discussing ethical implications.

13.3.6 Reporting

The synthesis was reported in a structured narrative, articulating the potential of LLMs in supporting fair migration and policy decisions, while emphasising the importance of LLM correctness, robustness to bias, hallucinations and disinformation about migration. We discussed findings within the context of enhancing just and equitable policy decisions, pointing to areas for further exploration.

This methodology facilitated a comprehensive and balanced review of the literature, ensuring that the insights and conclusions drawn are well-founded and contribute meaningfully to ongoing discussions in AI and migration policy.

13.4 Literature review

13.4.1 Fairness in human-AI interaction for migration decision-making

13.4.1.1 How can AI support fair migration?

AI has the potential to empower migrants by offering context-sensitive, adaptive support. But to truly serve this role it must do more than deliver accurate outputs. Supporting diverse user needs and user autonomy is crucial. Goyal et al. (2024) argue that agents should act as alignment leaders who adapt their behaviour based on shared knowledge, ethical considerations and user goals. Yakura (2023) highlights that instead of chasing perfect accuracy, we should design for creative failure and resilience. His generative framework encourages users to actively engage with uncertainty, making space for reflection and user control. Using multiple agents is a trend in research on generative AI (Masterman et al., 2024). The design of such systems is in many ways similar to Peer-to-Peer systems (Khan & Wierzbicki, 2008; Wierzbicki et al., 2002).

The concept of Mutual Theory of Mind (Wang et al., 2024) further suggests that effective AI interaction involves mutual adaptation. In this approach both users and AI infer each other's goals and mental states. This co-adaptive dynamic enhances trust and makes systems more intuitive. Studies on AI-supported academic writing (Nguyen et al., 2024) show that iterative, dialogic interaction leads to better outcomes than passive use. These insights point to a broader principle: AI should scaffold human decision-making, not replace it. Furthermore, human-AI interaction should embody principles of successful collaboration discovered in research on collaborative intelligence (Turek et al., 2010; Turek et al., 2011).

While AI can empower migrants by offering personalised, adaptive support, it also serves another critical user group: policymakers and public servants, educators, analysts. These actors require AI systems that can surface real-time trends, user needs and potential service gaps to inform policy decisions. For example, interactive dashboards or analytic summaries from chat logs could help identify information bottlenecks or emerging migrant concerns. This dual-use design aligns with frameworks for human-agent alignment that emphasise multi-stakeholder value reflection (Goyal et al., 2024; Stray et al., 2024).

13.4.1.2 How may interaction with AI influence its users?

The effects of human-AI interaction extend beyond single decisions. Glickman and Sharot (2025) demonstrate that repeated exposure to biased AI can amplify human bias across perception, emotion and judgement, even more so

than biased human feedback. Alarmingly, users often underestimate how much AI influences them, making it harder to detect and correct such drift. While much focus has been placed on individual users, institutional actors, such as migration officers or policy planners, are also subject to AI influence. Studies suggest that repeated AI exposure can shift not only individual but also institutional judgement patterns (Glickman & Sharot, 2025). When policymakers repeatedly engage with AI-generated insights, even small framing effects can compound into systemic biases over time.

13.4.2 Designing human-AI interaction for fair migration decision-making

To ensure AI systems support fairness and effectiveness in migration contexts, it is important to move beyond technical accuracy and consider how people engage with these systems under uncertainty, pressure and unequal power. The following design considerations synthesise key insights from recent human-AI interaction research:

1 Systems should adapt to users' intentions, values and situational needs by asking clarifying questions, especially when navigating complex decisions rather than present the same content to all users (Goyal et al., 2024; Yakura, 2023).
2 Both AI and users could be facilitated to model each other's mental states, inferring whether a user is confused, stressed or hesitant and the level of confidence of AI response, to support transparent, trust-based interactions (Wang et al., 2024).
3 Active, iterative use of AI based on questioning and refining outputs should be encouraged, for example by embedding follow-up questions, such as 'Would you like to see alternatives?' or 'Do you need more detail?' in AI answers (Nguyen et al., 2024).
4 Make it transparent how outputs are generated, by showing reasoning explicitly ('Based on your previous questions…') and allow users to view, adjust or disable inferred profiles (Chen et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023).
5 Design inclusively for varied problem-solving styles, confidence levels and digital literacy by including step-by-step prompting, visual aids and or 'simple English' options (Anderson et al., 2024).
6 Regularly monitor outputs for biased content, and act on feedback from all key stakeholders, including migrants, legal professionals, NGOs and policymakers, whose decisions may be shaped by these systems. Incorporate value-sensitive alignment approaches (e.g. Moral Graph Elicitation in Klingefjord et al., 2024 or social choice-based feedback aggregation in Conitzer et al., 2024) that reflect both user experiences and institutional needs.
7 Recognise that AI shapes users over time; repeated exposure to biased systems can amplify human biases and erode judgement, so design the interaction to take into account possible long-term effects and remind users periodically that information may be inaccurate (Ashkinaze et al., 2024; Glickman & Sharot, 2025; Shen et al., 2024).

By embedding these principles into human-AI interaction design, we can ensure that AI acts as a fair, trustworthy and empowering tool in migration decision-making, especially when interacting with vulnerable populations.

13.4.3 Evaluating the correctness of GLM-generated texts

13.4.3.1 Dimensions of correctness in migration contexts

13.4.3.1.1 FACTUAL ACCURACY

Factual correctness in migration-related outputs involves the accurate representation of laws, country-of-origin conditions, border procedures and statistics, such as refugee flows and visa quotas. Errors in these areas can have direct consequences for individuals' rights and legal outcomes. This dimension is challenging because migration data and laws vary significantly by jurisdiction and change frequently. GLMs may also hallucinate or rely on outdated knowledge, which can result in incorrect legal advice. Previous work, such as Kryściński et al. (2020), has proposed techniques for evaluating factual consistency in summarisation, which can be adapted for migration contexts. To evaluate factual accuracy, practitioners cross-reference outputs with authoritative sources like UNHCR guidelines, national migration law databases and IOM documentation. Temporal verification is also crucial to ensure the information reflects current policies and events. Domain expert reviews by migration lawyers, policy analysts and NGOs further support accuracy checks. TruthfulQA (Lin et al., 2022) provides useful methods for identifying whether models reproduce human falsehoods, which is particularly relevant in legal advice contexts.

13.4.3.1.2 BIAS

AI has also been proven to be susceptible to systematic biases. Migration-related interactions often involve vulnerable users, and biased AI systems can perpetuate harm. Chen et al. (2024) found that LLMs may infer and act on user attributes like socio-economic status in biased or opaque ways. Although giving users control over personalisation (via transparency dashboards) increases trust, it also raises concerns about profiling and surveillance. This is especially worrying as the concerns related to privacy and security are underrepresented in AI research in relation to such topics as governance or fairness (Tahaei et al., 2023).

Further, Villalobos et al. (2023) project that public human-generated data could be exhausted by 2026–2032, forcing reliance on synthetic or biased training data. Without careful oversight, this shift could compromise model quality and increase misinformation risks. These risks also apply to institutional users such as policymakers, who may unknowingly rely on biased outputs for

decision-making, further entrenching structural inequalities. Conitzer et al. (2024) emphasise that value alignment methods, like those drawn from social choice theory, are crucial not only for fairness in individual interactions but also for responsible collective decisions informed by AI systems. Design-wise, Responsible AI (RAI) practices, such as ethical audits and cross-team coordination (Wang et al., 2023), are essential but still underused in industry.

13.4.3.1.3 LEGAL AND POLICY COHERENCE

GLMs must maintain logical and legal consistency when summarising or explaining complex frameworks, such as asylum eligibility criteria or deportation procedures. Legal language often includes nuanced exceptions and conditional clauses that GLMs may oversimplify. Additionally, outputs might conflate categories such as immigration, asylum and refugee status, leading to misleading interpretations. Evaluating this dimension involves legal reasoning tests, where model responses are checked against hypothetical cases with varying inputs. Consistency analysis, using Natural Language Inference models fine-tuned on migration-specific case law or legislation, is also employed. Chalkidis et al. (2021) introduced LexGLUE, a benchmark that provides tools for evaluating legal language understanding, which can help assess legal coherence in model outputs. Policy logic tracing allows human evaluators to assess whether the reasoning steps follow correct legal logic.

13.4.3.1.4 LINGUISTIC APPROPRIATENESS

In multilingual migration contexts, GLMs are used to generate or translate texts for vulnerable populations. Here, correctness includes not only grammatical fluency but also cultural sensitivity, clarity and accessibility. Challenges include the use of over-formal or bureaucratic language that can obscure meaning for lay users, the loss of critical legal nuances in translation and cultural misalignment that can lead to mistrust or misinterpretation. These concerns align with critiques of 'technocolonialism' in humanitarian AI interventions, such as those discussed by Madianou (2019). Evaluation approaches include bilingual expert evaluation to assess semantic equivalence across languages, comprehensibility testing with target user groups such as asylum seekers and community workers, and error annotation using typologies adapted for low-resource or high-stakes contexts, such as omissions of critical rights information.

13.4.4 Methodologies for correctness testing

13.4.4.1 Migration-specific benchmarking

Few benchmarks explicitly target migration contexts. However, adapted evaluations can be constructed using case scenario generation, such as varied

asylum claims, to test model responses. Comparative prompt testing can assess how accurately GLMs summarise visa regulations or policy changes. Annotated corpora, such as refugee status determination documents, can also serve as ground truth for evaluation. Beduschi (2021) highlights the importance of legal accuracy and rights-based framing in AI systems designed for refugee support, underlining the need for domain-specific evaluation frameworks.

13.4.4.2 Prompt-based probing

GLMs may respond inconsistently depending on how prompts are phrased. Probing techniques for migration contexts include minimal-pair prompts, where slight changes in input test for consistency in legal interpretations (e.g. 'fled due to violence' vs 'fled due to political opinion'). Counterfactual prompts are used to reveal factual instability or overgeneralisations, while role-based prompting involves asking GLMs to 'act' as a legal officer or caseworker and evaluating their adherence to policy roles. The use of structured prompting techniques, such as Chain of Thought prompting (Wei et al., 2022), can enhance the interpretability and reasoning quality of model responses in complex legal and policy tasks.

13.4.4.3 Human-in-the-loop and community review

Given the diversity and complexity of migration narratives, involving humans – particularly domain experts and affected communities – in evaluation is crucial. Mixed-method evaluation combines expert review, lay user feedback and automatic checks. Participatory audits allow migrants and frontline workers to review GLM-generated materials for clarity and correctness. Cultural and ethical review boards are particularly important when outputs may affect vulnerable individuals' perceptions of legal rights or protections. As Beduschi (2021) notes, these participatory frameworks are essential for ensuring that AI systems respect the rights and agency of migrants.

13.4.4.4 Ethical and operational implications

Incorrect or misleading GLM outputs in the migration domain pose significant risks. Legal harm can result when individuals make life-altering decisions based on incorrect summaries of asylum eligibility or visa rules. Misinformation may erode trust in humanitarian actors using AI tools. Additionally, GLMs may inadvertently encode or reproduce biases found in source corpora, such as discriminatory portrayals of migrant groups. Consequently, correctness evaluation must be coupled with accountability frameworks, transparency about model limitations and fail-safes for critical use cases. This aligns with broader critiques of unregulated digital practices in humanitarian contexts (Madianou, 2019) and calls for greater oversight when deploying AI in sensitive, high-stakes environments.

13.5 Retrieval-augmented generation

13.5.1 Definition

Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) systems are systems that combine information retrieval with text generation to enhance the factual accuracy and grounding of language model outputs. In a typical RAG system, a retriever component first identifies relevant passages or documents from a large external corpus based on an input query, and a generator then conditions its response on both the query and the retrieved evidence, producing outputs that are more informed and verifiable than those generated by parametric models alone (Lewis et al., 2020; Kim & Lee, 2024). This integration allows RAG systems to dynamically access up-to-date information without retraining, making them particularly effective for knowledge-intensive tasks and applications requiring transparency and source attribution (Izacard & Grave, 2021; Shuster et al., 2021).

13.5.2 Evaluation

The evaluation and benchmarking of RAG systems require a multifaceted approach, as both the retrieval and generation components must be assessed for overall system effectiveness. Recent advances in the field have produced a diverse set of methods, frameworks and datasets designed to address the unique challenges of RAG evaluation.

13.5.3 Retrieval performance

The retriever's ability to surface relevant documents or passages is fundamental to RAG system effectiveness. Standard information retrieval metrics such as Recall@k and Mean Reciprocal Rank are widely used to evaluate how often the system retrieves passages containing the necessary information for the downstream task (Izacard & Grave, 2021). Tools like Bergen provide a benchmarking library specifically tailored for RAG, enabling systematic comparison of retrieval algorithms and configurations (Rau et al., 2024).

13.5.4 Generation quality and factual consistency

The generative component is typically evaluated using metrics like ROUGE and BLEU, which measure the overlap between generated text and reference answers (Lin, 2004). However, these metrics may not fully capture the factual accuracy or faithfulness of the output to the retrieved evidence. To address this, frameworks such as RAGEval offer scenario-specific evaluation dataset generation, allowing for more nuanced assessment of RAG outputs in contextually rich settings (Zhu et al., 2024). Similarly, Ragas provides automated evaluation pipelines for RAG, focusing on both factual consistency and attribution (Es et al., 2024).

13.5.5 Faithfulness, attribution and robustness

A distinguishing feature of RAG systems is their ability to ground responses in external evidence. Benchmarks such as KILT unify retrieval and generation evaluation across a suite of knowledge-intensive tasks, requiring systems to provide both accurate answers and supporting evidence (Petroni et al., 2021). The FEVER dataset, often used within KILT, focuses on claim verification and evidence selection, offering a robust testbed for evaluating factual consistency and evidence attribution (Thorne et al., 2018). InspectorRAGet further advances this by providing an introspection platform for RAG evaluation, enabling detailed analysis of model behaviour and evidence usage (Sznajder et al., 2025).

13.5.6 Domain-specific and scenario-based benchmarks

Recent benchmarks have expanded to cover domain-specific and scenario-based evaluations. RAG-QA arena evaluates domain robustness for long-form question answering, highlighting the importance of performance across diverse knowledge domains (Han et al., 2024). CRUD-RAG introduces a comprehensive Chinese benchmark for RAG, addressing the need for multilingual and cross-cultural evaluation (Lyu et al., 2025). RAGBench emphasises explainability in benchmarking, providing tools to interpret and analyse RAG system outputs (Friel et al., 2024).

13.5.7 Advanced evaluation techniques

Innovative frameworks such as RAGElo employ automated ELO-based ranking to evaluate RAG-fusion models, offering a scalable approach to comparative assessment (Rackauckas et al., 2024). ClashEval quantifies the interplay between a language model's internal prior and external evidence, shedding light on the 'tug-of-war' that can occur in RAG systems (Wu et al., 2024). Re-RAG enhances both performance and interpretability by incorporating relevance estimators into the retrieval process (Kim & Lee, 2024).

13.6 Combating disinformation about migration

13.6.1 AI techniques

Key AI techniques for countering migration disinformation include NLP and machine learning classifiers, social media monitoring and generative AI tools.

NLP methods (such as text classification, entity recognition and topic modelling) are widely used to detect false or misleading content. For example, supervised learning algorithms can be trained on labelled data to distinguish xenophobic hate speech or migration-related 'fake news' from factual content (Arcila-Calderón et al., 2022). Arcila-Calderón et al. (2022) developed NLP classifiers using both shallow learning (e.g. Naïve Bayes, SVM) and deep learning (e.g. neural networks) to automatically detect racist and xenophobic hate

speech about migrants in social media posts. Their work showed that deep neural models significantly improved detection of anti-immigration hate speech across multiple languages. In general, such text-mining models are central to disinformation detection pipelines: they can scan news articles and posts, score them for credibility or harmful content, and alert fact-checkers or moderators when suspect narratives appear.

Social media monitoring leverages AI to track how false narratives spread online. By combining NLP with network analysis, systems can identify coordinated disinformation campaigns. For instance, government and NGO researchers have used AI-driven topic modelling and keyword tracking on Twitter to gauge public sentiments and spot surges in hate speech directed at migrants (UNHCR Innovation Service, 2016). In 2016, UNHCR's Innovation Service partnered with UN Global Pulse to apply NLP to Twitter data, monitoring interactions between refugees and host communities in Europe. This effort used machine learning to quantify protection issues and to detect online hate speech, discrimination and xenophobic content targeting refugees (UNHCR Innovation Service, 2016). Such large-scale social listening helps identify emerging falsehoods (e.g. viral memes or conspiracy theories about migrants) so that authorities and fact-checkers can respond quickly.

Machine learning classifiers for fake-news detection are another core tool. These models analyse patterns in text and metadata (such as source credibility, writing style and network features) to flag likely misinformation. State-of-the-art AI can even predict the virality of false posts before they spread widely. Beyond text, vision-based AI is applied to detect manipulated images and videos (deepfakes) that fuel anti-migrant propaganda. Recent research has produced transformer-based detectors (e.g. the MINTIME architecture) that analyse multi-identity videos to spot deepfake manipulations (Gupta et al., 2023). Similarly, identity-aware multi-modal methods have been developed to catch audio deepfakes by comparing content to known individuals. These advances make it increasingly feasible to automatically identify synthetic media that might be used to misrepresent migrants (such as fake videos of refugee camps).

Generative AI and conversational agents have emerged as innovative countermeasures. LLMs like GPT-4 can generate tailored responses that debunk false claims. In one prominent study, researchers engaged users in personalised dialogue using a GPT-4–powered chatbot to address specific conspiracy theories (for example, that 'immigrants increase crime'). This 'DebunkBot' learned a user's belief and delivered empathetic, evidence-based arguments countering the myth. The intervention reduced belief in the targeted conspiracy by about 20%, with effects lasting for months (Druckman et al., 2024). In practice, such chatbots can be deployed on messaging platforms or web interfaces, providing real-time fact-checks when people inquire about migration topics. Generative models also support fact-checking by summarising large reports and citing evidence, helping journalists and non-profits to swiftly craft accurate narratives.

13.7 Challenges and ethics

Using AI against disinformation raises significant challenges. Data bias and fairness are central concerns: NLP models trained on online texts can inadvertently learn biases (e.g. treating certain ethnicities or religions as negative) and produce skewed results. Likewise, classifiers may mislabel legitimate criticism as 'hate speech' or fail to grasp cultural context, undermining credibility.

Privacy and surveillance issues also arise when mining social data: even public posts can contain personal information, so robust safeguards and anonymisation are needed. There is a risk of algorithmic censorship if automated systems unduly silence speech: as Pilati and Venturini (2025) warn, counter-disinformation AI must be benchmarked carefully to avoid 'forms of algorithmic censorship'.

Another challenge is the trustworthiness of AI outputs. Generative models may inadvertently produce misleading or incorrect counter-arguments if not rigorously controlled. The 'backfire effect' – when corrections entrench false beliefs – remains a danger, especially if automated messages lack the nuance of human fact-checkers. It is therefore essential that human experts supervise AI systems to verify factual accuracy and tone.

From an ethical perspective, disinformation-countering AI must respect human rights and transparency. Large-scale monitoring of online discussions can intersect with freedom of expression, requiring clear policies. Governments and companies deploying such AI are urged to follow guidelines for responsible use: for example, enacting strong data privacy laws and oversight mechanisms (Chandran, 2023). As one analyst put it, AI's benefits in countering disinformation are contingent on 'safe and fair' design, including regulatory safeguards and human rights protections (Chandran, 2023). Ultimately, AI-based interventions must balance efficacy with accountability: they should be explainable, auditable and designed in partnership with affected communities, including migrants themselves, to ensure that the solutions do not inadvertently harm those they aim to protect.

13.8 Policy and governance frameworks

AI tools must be embedded in strong policy and governance frameworks. For example, the European Union's Code of Practice on Disinformation (2018) and the Digital Services Act (2022) obligate platforms to audit and mitigate misleading content, including xenophobic migration myths. Proposed AI regulations, such as the EU AI Act, would require human oversight and risk assessments for high-impact applications like content moderation.

These legal measures are often paired with support for fact-checking and public awareness. Many governments fund independent fact-checking networks, media literacy campaigns and collaborative observatories that involve academia, tech companies and civil society.

Importantly, governance emphasises human rights and transparency. Pilati and Venturini (2025) caution that AI counter-disinformation tools must be 'transparent, carefully designed and implemented step-by-step'. In practice, this means requiring that AI-driven removals be reviewable by humans, that platforms publish transparency reports on content moderation and that free-speech protections remain in force. Civil-society watchdogs and media organisations often play a formal role. For example, the EU 'trusted flagger' system certifies NGOs and press councils to audit platforms' enforcement, and bodies like the UN's Global Compact promote information-sharing. These multi-stakeholder approaches aim to ensure AI's power is balanced by democratic oversight.

13.9 Conclusions

Supporting decisions about fair migration requires AI systems that are transparent, adaptive and reflexive – not just technically accurate. Designers must consider not only what the AI says, but how it says it, how users engage with it and how those interactions shape users over time. AI should empower users – especially migrants navigating complex systems – by supporting autonomy, trust and critical thinking, while minimising hidden influences, profiling risks and systemic bias. In this way, interaction design becomes central to the ethical promise of AI in migration.

In migration-related applications, the correctness of GLM-generated content is a prerequisite for RAI deployment. Ensuring factual accuracy, legal logic and linguistic appropriateness is not only a technical challenge but also a moral one. As the capabilities of GLMs advance, so too must our evaluative rigor, particularly in domains where lives, rights and livelihoods may be directly affected. The evaluation and benchmarking of RAG systems have evolved rapidly, with a growing ecosystem of frameworks, libraries and datasets addressing the multidimensional nature of these models. As RAG systems are increasingly deployed in complex, real-world applications, robust and comprehensive evaluation methodologies – spanning retrieval accuracy, generation quality, factual consistency and domain robustness – will remain essential for ensuring their reliability and trustworthiness.

AI has emerged as a valuable ally in the global effort to combat migration-related disinformation. Techniques from NLP and machine learning enable large-scale detection of fake news and hate speech, while generative AI (e.g. GPT-powered chatbots) can engage audiences with factual counter-narratives.

Nevertheless, technical innovation alone is not enough. Ensuring fairness, preserving privacy and involving human oversight are critical to ethical deployment. A multi-stakeholder approach (involving governments, tech companies, NGOs and migrant communities) is needed to govern AI use. If properly managed, AI's ability to amplify truths about migration can help build

resilience against falsehoods, supporting more informed public discourse and policies that recognise migration as a global asset rather than a threat.

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14 Conclusions and policy directions

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14.1 Introduction

This book began as a call to reframe international skilled migration not as a transactional movement of workers, but as an infrastructure of skill partnerships grounded in fairness. Fairness is unpacked in the book as a core operational principle that underpins the concept of Migration Skill Corridors (MSCs), encompassing ethical recruitment, transparent recognition of qualifications and balanced partnerships between origin and destination countries. In response to mounting global challenges like demographic shifts, sectoral skill shortages, unequal development and technological disruption, we set out to explore how MSCs could be designed to serve all stakeholders: migrants, origin countries and destination societies. Our aim was not only analytical, but also a format of a call to evidence-based action.

Across country cases, thematic chapters and conceptual frameworks, the book has demonstrated the diversity of MSCs and their potential when well-designed. Some MSCs have also shown the risks of poorly governed or extractive models, particularly where migration remains in the hands of unscrupulous private entities, guided by short-term economic and transactional interests. The evidence affirms the central argument: the type and governance of a MSC determine whether it reproduces inequality or fosters fairness.

14.2 MSCs, their dimensions and cases

Across the case studies: Ghana (Chapter 4), Germany (Chapter 5), the Philippines (Chapter 6), Canada (Chapter 7), Ukraine-Poland/Germany (Chapter 8), Morocco (Chapter 9) and India (Chapter 10), a wide variety of MSC types emerge. These include post-colonial and guest-worker legacies, as well as corridors focused on highly skilled, medium-skilled, sector-specific and even humanitarian mobility.

In terms of dimensions, these corridors span the full spectrum: from ad hoc to structured, emerging to established, private-led to public-led. For example,

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India's corridors with Germany (Chapter 5) and Canada (Chapter 7) are emerging, structured and increasingly public-led, government-to-government, focusing on skills alignment and mutual development. Ghana's North-South corridors with the UK and Canada (Chapter 4) are established, mainly highly skilled and sector-based but remain largely ad hoc and private-led. In contrast, Ghana's South-South corridors with Barbados and Cuba are either emerging or established, government-to-government, highly skilled, sector-based and more reciprocal in design. The Philippines' corridors with Japan, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Chapter 6) exemplify medium-skilled, structured and public-led pathways governed through evolving Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs). Canada (Chapter 7) itself represents a destination country with a highly structured, consultative and inclusive model for migration governance, engaging partners across Africa, Asia and Latin America. The Ukrainian case (Chapter 8) features humanitarian and medium-skilled corridors with Poland and Germany, each demonstrating distinct governance models: Poland's ad hoc, work-first approach vs Germany's more structured, settle-first integration path. Finally, Morocco's (Chapter 9) established post-colonial corridors with France, Spain and Belgium illustrate the risks of fragmented, ad hoc governance, particularly where diaspora engagement is weak and return migration mechanisms are underdeveloped (Table 14.1).

To sum up, the effectiveness and fairness of a corridor depend less on how long it has existed and more on how it is governed. Structured, regardless of whether they are emerging or established, are better positioned to ensure ethical recruitment, skill recognition and mutual benefits (as seen in India-Germany and Philippine BLAs).

Corridors led or co-governed by public actors with stakeholder input (e.g. Canada, the Philippines, Kerala in India) tend to offer more protective and development-oriented infrastructures than those led primarily by private actors (e.g. Ghana-UK). Consultative and collaborative governance models increase legitimacy and sustainability.

Corridors do not inherently produce circular migration or shared development. For skill circulation to work, where migrants, origin countries and destination countries all benefit, corridors need be intentionally designed with recognition mechanisms, return pathways, capacity-building investments and diaspora strategies (e.g. Indian state-level initiatives).

In short, MSCs are not neutral conduits; their type and governance structure determine whether they perpetuate inequality or foster fair mobility skill partnerships. The manifesto's typology and dimensions of MSCs offer a useful lens to assess and design corridors that are not only efficient but fair.

Table 14.1 Overview of Cases and Types of Migration Skill Corridors with Dimensions and Lessons Learned

Country	*Chapter*	*Type of Migration Skill Corridor(s)*	*Dimensions*	*What We Learned*
Ghana	Chapter 4	Post-colonial (Ghana-UK/Canada); South-South Sector-based (Ghana-Barbados/Cuba)	UK/Canada: Ad hoc, Established, Private-led Barbados/Cuba: Structured, Emerging, Public-led	Governance matters more than historical ties. South-South public-led corridors tend to be more equitable than ad hoc North-South ones.
Germany	Chapter 5	Medium-skilled/Sector-based (THAMM (Germany-Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia); Youth Project (Morocco); Mobility Pact (Tunisia); PAM (Ecuador, Kosovo, Nigeria, Vietnam); Highly skilled (e.g. Triple Win Nurses (Germany-Philippines, India, etc.); Nurse GSPs (Mexico, the Philippines); Engineering Internships (Tunisia)	Structured, Emerging to Established, Public-led	Even well-designed programmes face scale and power imbalance issues. Ethical goals can be undermined by global systemic inequalities.
The Philippines	Chapter 6	Various skills/Sectors: Philippines-South Korea (EPS, factory workers, includes reintegration programmes to prepare workers for return to the Philippines); Philippines-Saudi Arabia (domestic work, model contracts); Philippines-Jordan (domestic/general work); Philippines-Qatar (domestic workers, standardised contracts); Philippines-Kuwait (domestic workers, rights protections); Philippines-Canada (provincial programmes, multiple sectors, including nurses); Philippines-Italy (vocational training, language support, integration support); Philippines-Libya/Iraq (general workers, early BLAs) Highly skilled (healthcare): Philippines-Germany (nurses, Triple Win); Philippines-UK (nurses, NHS recruitment); Philippines-Norway (health professionals, language and licensing support); Philippines-Bahrain (health)	Structured, Established, Public-led	Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs) establish ethical recruitment and worker protection, but require enforcement and monitoring.

India	Chapter 7	Highly skilled; Medium-skilled/Sector-based (e.g. India-Germany) India-Netherlands	India-Germany: Structured, Emerging, Public-led; India-Netherlands: Established, Ad hoc, Private-led	Strong domestic infrastructure and decentralised governance (e.g. Kerala) support ethical, reciprocal corridors. The India-Netherlands corridor, though established, is under-institutionalised.
Ukraine-Poland/ Germany	Chapter 8	Humanitarian; Medium-skilled (e.g. healthcare, education)	Poland: Ad hoc, Work-first; Germany: Structured, Settle-first, Public-led	Work-first (Poland) leads to rapid access but skill mismatch; settle-first (Germany) delays access but fosters integration. Neither model resolves the skill-use gap.
Canada	Chapter 9	Highly skilled; Medium-skilled; Post-colonial (e.g. Caribbean-Canada)	Structured, Public-led, Consultative, Established	Inclusive governance fosters legitimacy, adaptability and a balanced approach to economic and social objectives.
Morocco	Chapter 10	Post-colonial (e.g. France, Spain); Medium-skilled Morocco-Netherlands (post-guest worker corridor)	General: Ad hoc, Established, Private-led, Fragmented; Morocco-Netherlands: Non-functional, Underutilised, Restrictive	The Morocco-Netherlands corridor is hindered by restrictive immigration frameworks, strained cooperation on returning irregular migrants and limited recognition of migrants' contributions.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

14.3 Skill mobility partnerships (Talent partnerships) and MSCs in dialogue

Skill Mobility Partnerships (SMPs), including Talent Partnerships (see Chapter 2), ideally are the operational bricks, while MSCs (see Chapter 1) may offer the strategic architecture.

In reality however, this empirical alignment becomes most visible when putting into dialogue types of MSCs with the operational formats of SMPs. Medium-skilled, sector-based corridors, such as Germany's *Triple Win* (see Chapter 5) programme with the Philippines (see Chapter 6) and Indonesia, strongly correspond to structured SMPs built around formal agreements, targeted training and regulated return mechanisms. These corridors exemplify how MSPs can evolve into stable migration bridges, particularly when supported by bilateral Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), skills recognition and reintegration pathways. In contrast, highly skilled corridors, such as the India-Netherlands route, tend to reflect ad hoc, privately led SMPs concentrated in sectors like ICT, engineering and STEM. These corridors are shaped primarily by employer demand with minimal state intervention, resulting in flexible but often unstructured forms of mobility.

14.3.1 Are we witnessing a new guest worker system as 'an old wine in a new bottle'?

While the link between MSCs and SMPs, especially in medium-skilled sectors, shows potential to organise migration more fairly, it also raises a key question: Are we simply bringing back guest worker systems in new 'bottles'?

Take Germany's *Triple Win* programme as an example. It's well-organised, with training, contracts and return plans. But at its core, it still resembles the post-war guest worker model, where migrants are invited to fill temporary labour gaps but are not fully included in society and often expected to return home, without long-term rights or security.

The key difference between a real development-focused corridor and a modern guest worker scheme is not just the agreements or training involved, but how much control migrants have over their own futures. In many skilled migration corridors today, migrants are selected to meet the needs of destination countries, brought in for limited periods and required to leave again, often with little say in the matter. These systems are tightly controlled, but what's most strictly managed is the temporary nature of the migrant's stay, not their inclusion or long-term well-being.

Interestingly, less formal systems, like the India-Netherlands high-skilled corridor, may actually offer more flexibility. Migrants can stay longer, apply for permanent residency and build stable lives. Humanitarian corridors, while not perfect, can also grow into more permanent routes when there is support for protection, skill use and integration.

So while today's language of 'partnerships' and 'mutual benefit' sounds like progress, we need to be cautious. If systems continue to control migrants'

movements without offering rights, stability or real inclusion, we may not be moving forward at all but simply recreating the old guest worker model in a more polished form. To avoid this, migrant rights, long-term opportunities and fair governance must be at the centre of how we build SMPs and corridors in the future.

14.4 Migration, skill recognitions, AI and automation

The chapters on automation AI and skill recognition (Part III, Chapters 11, 12, 13) reveal that current infrastructures are poorly aligned with the rapidly evolving demands of labour markets shaped by technological change. Skilled migrants, especially from non-EU countries, often face rigid and bureaucratic recognition systems that delay or deny the validation of their skills, leading to widespread underemployment and de-skilling. The Optimum Allocation of Skills of Migrants (OASM in Chapter 11) framework suggests a shift from viewing migration as a reactive fix to shortages towards treating it as a strategic, co-transformational process. This involves embedding migration into long-term workforce planning, supported by modular credentialing, circular visa pathways and AI-enabled labour market intelligence. Rather than serving only destination-country needs, such frameworks promote mutual human capital development and more resilient, future-ready labour markets.

Skill recognition systems, both in origin and destination countries, are crucial but currently fragmented and inaccessible to many migrants (see Chapter 12). National qualifications frameworks (NQFs), regional comparability tools and credentialing bodies often lack interoperability, transparency and usability. Migrant workers are rarely active users of these infrastructures due to complexity, low trust and lack of institutional support. At the same time, origin countries, especially in the Global South, struggle to align their vocational and higher education systems with international labour demands. Developing operable and accessible qualification systems, aligned with regional frameworks like the EQF, and investing in up-skilling in origin countries are essential for sustainable skill mobility. This requires stronger co-investment by destination countries, better recognition processes and a shift towards skills-based migration policies that value learning outcomes, not just paper credentials.

AI, particularly generative language models, holds transformative potential for migration governance from visa processing to misinformation mitigation (see Chapter 13). However, these tools must be ethically designed to avoid bias, factual errors and exclusion. Responsible AI systems need curation, transparency, adaptability and reflexivity, particularly in sensitive areas like asylum support and skills matching. AI should empower migrants, not just automate administrative tasks, by enhancing access to information and supporting autonomy. At the same time, policymakers are required to ensure robust evaluation mechanisms, human oversight and multi-stakeholder governance to prevent disinformation, profiling and systemic inequality. When designed responsibly, AI can become a critical ally in building fairer, data-informed and inclusive migration systems for the future.

14.5 (Re)building infrastructure in origin countries

A neglected yet essential component of fair and future-ready migration governance lies in the physical and institutional infrastructure of origin countries. While much attention has been paid to regulation, bilateral agreements and destination-country policy, far less investment has gone into ensuring that migrants are trained, prepared and supported within their local contexts before departure. The reality is that many vocational training centres in the Global South, particularly in lower- and middle-income countries, operate with outdated curricula, lack hands-on training environments and are disconnected from global labour market demands.

This mismatch between training and opportunity leads to two negative outcomes: (1) migrants arrive unprepared or under-credentialed for the jobs they are recruited into, resulting in degrading, de-skilling or precarious employment, and (2) local workers unable or unwilling to migrate are left with training that does not translate into decent work at home, perpetuating economic stagnation and brain waste.

To address this, co-financing and technical collaboration from destination countries and multilateral institutions should be directed towards rebuilding the training infrastructure in origin countries, with a focus on:

- Simulation laboratories for hands-on, practice-based training in high-demand sectors such as healthcare, construction, green technology and STEM.
- Modern, modular and portable learning systems, including micro-credentials and digital certification platforms that allow migrants to update and carry their qualifications across borders.
- Language training and digital literacy, integrated as core components of all vocational programmes, to ensure migrant workers can communicate effectively, access information and adapt to technological environments abroad.
- Apprenticeship systems aligned with international standards and employer needs, providing learners with dual-track education that bridges theory and real-world skills.

Such investments should not be seen as charity or development aid, but as strategic and mutually beneficial investments in global skill infrastructures. When origin countries have robust training capacity, they can produce skilled workers who are better prepared for international opportunities and better positioned to contribute to their origin economies either through return migration, remittances or diaspora engagement.

Crucially, this shift would reduce the dependence on private recruitment agencies, which often fill the vacuum left by inadequate public systems, and which may prioritise profit over quality, ethics or outcomes. By building strong, state-supported training infrastructures at the source, migration can be transformed from an act of individual necessity into a planned, supported and

developmentally aligned pathway creating better futures not only for migrants but for communities on both sides of the corridor.

14.6 What can be better? Recommendations from three parts of the book

Part I of this book identifies key principles for improving the design and governance of SMPs, including Talent Partnerships embedded in MSCs. These partnerships often lack balance between origin and destination countries, suffer from weak accountability and fail to fully protect migrants' rights. Drawing on lessons from research and practice, two critical strategic recommendations emerge to make these partnerships more fair.

The first recommendation is to institutionalise co-design and shared ownership between origin and destination countries. Migration partnerships are too often designed by destination countries with limited input from sending partners. To address this imbalance, countries of origin should be given equal say, and in some cases, veto power, in shaping how migration corridors function. This includes decisions around recruitment practices, training content, worker protections and reintegration plans. These elements should be formalised through binding agreements such as MoUs that include enforceable clauses on transparency, dispute resolution and mutual accountability. Shared governance is essential to building trust and ensuring that skill mobility serves the development goals of both sides.

The second recommendation is to treat qualification recognition as a labour rights issue, not just a technical or bureaucratic task. Migrants regularly face barriers in having their professional credentials recognised in destination countries, which can lead to underemployment and the loss of valuable skills. To address this, bilateral and multilateral agreements should include mechanisms for the mutual recognition of qualifications, supported by transparent audits and clear appeal procedures. Independent oversight bodies, which should be accessible to migrants, are required to monitor how qualifications are assessed and ensure compliance with fair practices. In addition, migration corridors need to be regularly evaluated through independent reviews that include all stakeholders: governments, civil society and migrants themselves. Performance indicators such as wage parity, skill matching, job retention and reintegration outcomes should be tracked and made publicly available to promote accountability and evidence-based improvements.

Based on the evidence and case studies presented in Part II, it is clear that migration partnerships often fall short of realising their full potential due to structural inequalities and limited inclusion of migrant voices. To address these issues, two strategic recommendations emerge to help reshape migration programmes into more equitable, development-oriented and participatory infrastructures.

First, migrants must be placed at the centre of migration programmes, not only as recipients of services, but as active participants in the design,

implementation and monitoring of those programmes. Migration pathways are frequently crafted without direct consultation with migrants or diaspora communities, resulting in mismatches between programme goals and migrants' lived realities. To correct this, governments and implementing agencies need to establish formal mechanisms to engage migrants in decision-making, such as migrant advisory boards, participatory consultations or co-design workshops. Including migrant perspectives improves the relevance, dignity and effectiveness of migration partnerships and supports policies that reflect real needs on both ends of the corridor.

Second, migration partnerships, particularly between Global North and South, must move beyond transactional, one-sided models towards arrangements rooted in reciprocity, joint ownership and mutual investment. Many current frameworks treat origin countries as passive suppliers of labour, with destination countries unilaterally determining the rules. To rebalance this dynamic, migration agreements need to be co-developed with equal input and shared responsibility. Promising South-South collaborations, such as those between Ghana and Barbados or Cuba, offer alternative models that emphasise solidarity, sector-based cooperation and government-to-government coordination. These partnerships need to be studied, supported and scaled up as viable templates for more balanced global migration governance.

Part III of the book focuses on the technological and governance innovations needed to make migration a forward-looking contributor to labour markets in both the EU and origin countries. Drawing from the OASM framework and the ethical use of digital tools, two strategic recommendations emerge to guide policy and practice.

The first recommendation is to embed migration policy into long-term workforce planning through joint investment in skills development. Migration needs no longer be treated as a temporary fix for skill shortages, but as part of a strategic human capital strategy. Destination countries, particularly in the EU, need to co-invest with origin countries in training, up-skilling and pre-departure preparation. This includes creating modular, portable systems for qualification recognition that are task- and skill-based rather than reliant on rigid bureaucratic procedures. Clear pathways for circular migration need to also be expanded to allow for knowledge transfer and reintegration, especially in sectors like healthcare, green energy and digital services. Supporting origin countries in aligning their NQFs with EU and regional systems will ensure smoother cross-border recognition and more balanced development outcomes.

The second recommendation is to govern AI and digital tools for migration ethically and transparently, ensuring they empower migrants and promote fairness. Digital systems such as dashboards and AI-assisted skill-matching platforms have the potential to dramatically improve the allocation of migrant skills, but only if designed with human-centred values and controlled data quality inputs. AI needs to be used not to replace decision-making but to support trust, transparency and critical engagement from users. This means

creating interoperable platforms for skills verification, ensuring inclusive access for underrepresented groups such as women and displaced persons and embedding bias mitigation into all algorithmic systems. Multi-country professional profiles, accessible communication tools and user-friendly interfaces will be essential to ensuring digital inclusion. Ultimately, ethical AI governance in migration needs to involve multiple stakeholders such as governments, migrants, civil society and technologists to build infrastructures that are not only efficient but just.

Taken together, these recommendations call for a coordinated, multi-level governance architecture that recognises migration not as a short-term, transactional fix, but as a relational and inherently social process between origin and destination contexts. To ground this perspective, it is essential to articulate the normative foundations from which a fair and future-oriented skilled migration regime can emerge. The 13 core theses of this manifesto encapsulate these principles and provide a solid conceptual basis for the development of fair skilled migration policies.

14.7 Thirteen theses for fair skilled migration

Thesis 1. MSCs can serve as strategic instruments to align global skill supply with labour market demand, provided they are embedded within fair, transparent and structured governance arrangements.

Thesis 2. SMPs are a promising tool for addressing global skills shortages and mismatches more fairly.

Thesis 3. Pursuing an ethical labour migration process in transnational recruitment is essential to the well-being of migrant workers.

Thesis 4. A level playing field is necessary in ensuring that skilled personnel mutually benefit both destination and origin countries in addressing labour shortages and enhancing mutual development.

Thesis 5. The skill programmes, despite their well-crafted design and balanced partnership governance, are limited in their ethical outcomes as such programmes remain small-scale, patchy, difficult to implement and unable to overcome the structural challenges in an unequal global economic order as they put the interests of the receiving states first and neglect the well-being of both migrants and societies of origin.

Thesis 6. The Philippine model of labour migration governance combines the capacity to respond to the global demand for workers of all skill levels while also promoting the protection of its nationals working overseas through various means, including the forging of BLAs with destination countries.

Thesis 7. Stakeholder engagement has been key to Canada's skilled migration system, but limited co-governance and persistent power imbalances reveal the need for more inclusive and transparent policymaking.

Thesis 8. Ukrainian outmigration has eased labour shortages in Poland and Germany but deepened Ukraine's workforce deficits, highlighting the need

for policies that support migrants' labour market inclusion in destination countries, their choices and Ukraine's voluntary return efforts.

Thesis 9. Morocco's evolving role as both a source and transit country underscores the challenge of balancing emigration and skilled labour retention, necessitating data-driven, coordinated migration policies that align diaspora engagement with national development objectives.

Thesis 10. India's role as a leading contributor to global skill mobility, both as a significant source of skilled professionals and as an emerging destination for foreign expertise, exemplifies its dual position in the global skill migration landscape.

Thesis 11. Current global and EU migration frameworks fail to fully harness the potential of skill mobility due to systemic mismatches between origin-country human capital and destination labour market needs. Reframing migration as a collaborative mechanism for skill development and circulation, rather than a transactional labour supply, can enable the EU to align automation-driven demand with inclusive, sustainable growth.

Thesis 12. Sustainability of the skill formation and deployment in the origin countries and international transparency of skills and qualifications are complementary factors facilitating sustainable skill matching and labour migration pathways.

Thesis 13. Artificial Intelligence based on high quality data and expert knowledge can support and inform decisions that will lead to more fair migration.

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