

Migration Skill Corridor Brief

Morocco – Netherlands

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Drawing on 27 stakeholder interviews and desk research, this brief analyses the Morocco-Netherlands migration corridor from a skills perspective. It characterises the corridor as a post-guest worker corridor with strong historical roots but limited contemporary mobility. Labour migration, and particularly skilled migration, remains marginal. Notably, negative feedback mechanisms within these networks contribute to declining migration dynamics. While it holds potential for skilled migration, skills development and private-sector involvement, the corridor is currently best conceptualised as an underutilised opportunity for fostering skill mobility.

This Migration Skill Corridor Brief is part of a Link4Skills compact publication series examining labour mobility and skills mobility pathways between select countries across Europe, Africa, Asia, and North Ame. Based on the project's more extensive Migration Skill Corridor reports, the briefs provide concise analyses of migration dynamics, policy frameworks, good practices, and challenges shaping skills mobility, with the aim of supporting fair, sustainable, and mutually beneficial migration pathways.

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1. Executive summary

The Morocco–Netherlands migration corridor is an example of a post-guest workers migration corridor. It represents a historically established but currently underutilised pathway for skill mobility. Rooted in large-scale labour migration during the 1960s and 1970s, the corridor gave rise to a sizeable and well-established Moroccan diaspora in the Netherlands. While this legacy created durable transnational ties, contemporary migration dynamics are characterised by relatively low levels of new inflows and a near absence of structured skilled labour migration.

Today, migration within the corridor is dominated by family migration, particularly family formation. Labour migration has become negligible, and highly skilled migration remains limited in both scale and institutional support. As such, the corridor does not currently function as a “Migration Skill Corridor” in the sense of facilitating targeted skill exchange or addressing labour market shortages. Instead, mobility is largely shaped by informal mechanisms, including migrant networks and community dynamics, rather than coordinated public or private recruitment strategies.

A key finding is that these migrant networks no longer act as drivers of migration. Contrary to classical theories of cumulative causation, they increasingly generate negative feedback, discouraging potential migrants from choosing the Netherlands as a destination. This dynamic is reinforced by perceptions of limited economic opportunities, restrictive migration policies, and an occasionally hostile socio-political climate. As a result, Moroccan migrants increasingly prefer alternative destinations, while return migration, particularly among second- and third-generation Moroccan Dutch, has become more prominent.

At the policy level, the corridor is governed by a combination of EU-level frameworks (notably the EU–Morocco Mobility Partnership) and bilateral agreements, including the 2021 Action Plan. However, these frameworks prioritise migration control, return, and readmission over labour mobility and skill development. Initiatives aimed at facilitating skilled migration, such as circular migration pilots and academic exchange programmes, remain small-scale and politically sensitive.

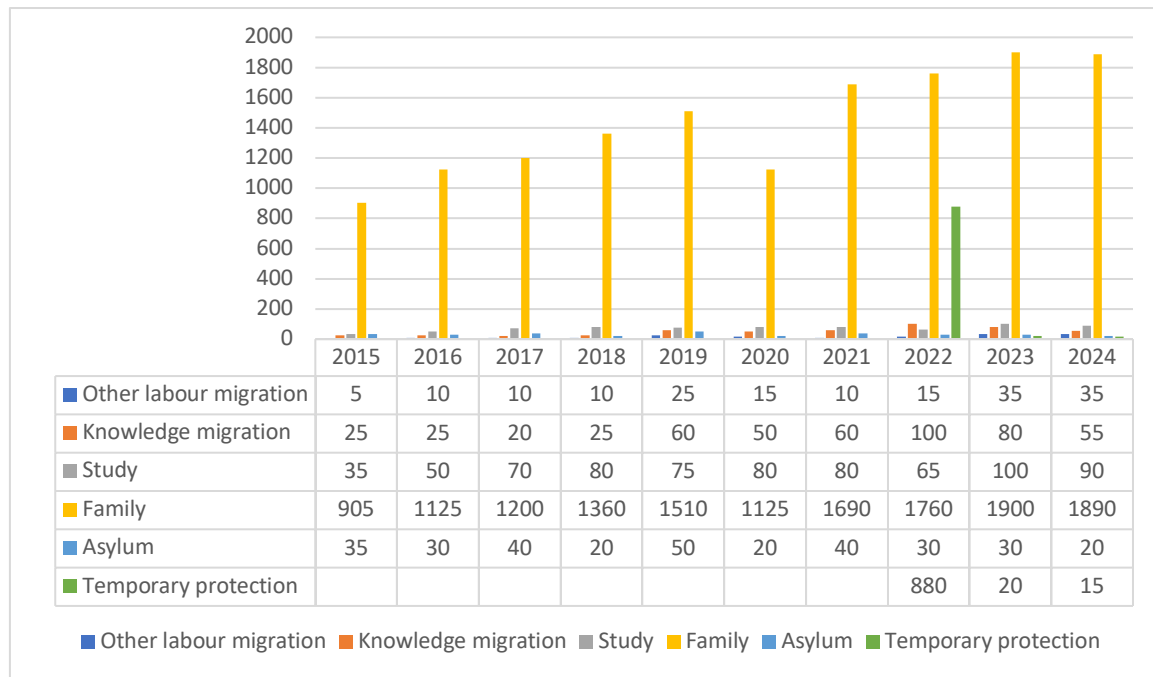
Overall, the corridor can be characterised as a corridor that is gradually phasing out. Despite its strong historical foundations and existing institutional ties, it currently fails to realise its potential as a vehicle for skill mobility. Unlocking this potential requires a shift towards a more proactive and integrated approach that aligns migration governance with labour market needs, skills development, and private-sector engagement. Without such a shift, the corridor risks further marginalisation in the broader landscape of international skilled migration.

2. Migration dynamics

The Morocco–Netherlands migration corridor is a prototypical post–guest worker migration corridor. Migration flows were initially driven by labour recruitment agreements in the 1960s and early 1970s, which led to the settlement of Moroccan workers and the subsequent formation of stable migrant communities. Over time, this resulted in chain migration, primarily through family reunification and subsequently through family formation. Today, people of Moroccan origin constitute the second largest migrant group in the Netherlands, numbering approximately 420,000 individuals. Of these, around 174,000 are first-generation migrants, many of whom migrated many years ago.

In recent decades, labour migration has declined to negligible levels, while family migration has become the dominant channel. Statistical evidence indicates that family migration consistently accounts for the largest share of inflows, whereas (high-skilled) labour migration is very small. Student migration represents a modest but stable component of mobility (see Table 1).

Table 1: Moroccan Migration to the Netherlands (2015-2024)



A notable feature of the corridor is its declining dynamism. The historical peak in labour migration (late 1960s–early 1970s) has not been followed by new forms of large-scale labour mobility. Instead, migration has stabilised at relatively low levels, with limited inflows of highly skilled migrants. Although there are indications of more educated Moroccan migrants entering the Netherlands (e.g., in technical sectors), they do not constitute a dominant trend.

Migration decisions are strongly influenced by social networks and transnational ties. However, these networks increasingly produce negative feedback effects, discouraging migration rather than facilitating it. Factors contributing to this shift include stricter immigration policies, reduced economic opportunities, and perceived social exclusion. This aligns with the concept of “reverse cumulative causation,” whereby established migration systems lose their self-reinforcing character.

At the same time, return migration has gained importance. Second- and third-generation Moroccan Dutch show a relatively high propensity to leave the Netherlands, often motivated by experiences of discrimination, identity-related factors, and emerging economic opportunities in Morocco. Transnational living arrangements, including seasonal residence and remote work, further blur the distinction between origin and destination.

Overall, the corridor is characterised by strong historical embeddedness but weak contemporary mobility, particularly in terms of labour and skill-based migration.

3. Policies and agreements

The governance of the Morocco–Netherlands migration corridor is shaped by a multi-level policy framework combining EU-level initiatives and bilateral agreements. While these frameworks provide a basis for cooperation, they are primarily oriented towards migration management and return rather than the facilitation of labour and skilled migration.

At the EU level, the Mobility Partnership between the European Union and Morocco (2013) establishes a broad framework for cooperation across several domains, including legal migration, migration and development, border management, and international protection. Although the partnership acknowledges the importance of skills, for instance through the recognition of qualifications and the promotion of circular migration, its practical implementation has focused more strongly on irregular migration control and return policies.

At the bilateral level, the 2021 Netherlands–Morocco Action Plan constitutes the main instrument for migration cooperation. This agreement emphasises coordination on migration management, return and readmission, and institutional cooperation. Legal migration is included as an objective, but it is clearly secondary to return-related priorities. This sequencing reflects broader political constraints within the Netherlands, where labour migration from third countries remains a sensitive issue.

Several targeted initiatives aim to promote skill mobility, albeit on a limited scale. These include a circular migration pilot programme involving approximately 50 young professionals, designed to facilitate temporary mobility and skills exchange. Additional initiatives include academic cooperation agreements, scholarship programmes such as the MENA Scholarship Programme (MSP), and sector-specific collaborations in areas such as renewable energy and agriculture. While these initiatives demonstrate the potential for skill-oriented cooperation, they remain fragmented and relatively small in scope.

A key characteristic of the corridor is the limited role of the private sector. Unlike other migration corridors to the Netherlands (e.g., with India), where employer-driven recruitment plays a central role, Dutch companies rarely recruit directly from Morocco. This reflects both demand-side factors (limited employer engagement) and supply-side constraints (e.g., perceived mismatches in skills or language).

Overall, the policy framework governing the corridor is best described as state-led but restrictive. Political sensitivities, particularly regarding migration control and return, limit the development of proactive labour migration policies. As a result, the corridor lacks the institutional infrastructure necessary to function effectively as a migration skill corridor.

4. Good practices

Despite its limitations, the Morocco–Netherlands corridor exhibits several practices that could serve as building blocks for future skill mobility. While these practices remain limited in scale, they highlight the potential for developing more structured and impactful forms of skill mobility within the corridor.

The circular migration pilot programme represents one of the most concrete attempts to promote skill mobility within the Morocco-Netherlands corridor. Implemented by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) in cooperation with several Dutch ministries, the scheme enables up to fifty young professionals with vocational, applied-science, or university qualifications to undertake temporary work placements of up to eleven months in the partner country. Designed as a circular migration initiative, it seeks to combine international work experience, skills acquisition, and professional networking with return and reintegration. Although modest in scale, the programme illustrates how structured mobility schemes may foster mutual ‘brain gain’ while balancing labour market needs in the Netherlands with human capital development in Morocco.

Academic cooperation constitutes a second pillar of the corridor’s skill-development potential. A 2023 Memorandum of Understanding on higher education and research promotes joint supervision of doctoral candidates, research collaboration, innovation, and graduate employability. Complementing this framework, the MENA Scholarship Programme (MSP) provides Moroccan professionals with access to specialised training opportunities in Dutch educational institutions. Together, these initiatives facilitate knowledge transfer, strengthen institutional ties, and support capacity building.

Sectoral cooperation, particularly in fields such as renewable energy and agriculture, also creates indirect opportunities for professional mobility and skills exchange. Such collaborations can foster long-term partnerships and contribute to the development of transnational labour markets.

Finally, transnational practices among migrants, including remote work, circular residence, and diaspora entrepreneurship, demonstrate alternative forms of skill circulation. These practices enable the transfer of knowledge and resources without requiring permanent migration, thereby complementing formal mobility schemes.

5. Areas for improvement

To unlock the potential of the Morocco–Netherlands corridor as a migration skill corridor, several key areas require attention.

First, a strategic shift is needed from a predominantly return-oriented approach towards a more balanced framework that actively promotes labour and skilled migration. This involves integrating migration policy with labour market needs and skills development strategies.

Second, since labour migration policy in the Netherlands is demand-driven, greater involvement of the private sector is essential. Employers play a crucial role in identifying labour shortages and facilitating international recruitment. Strengthening partnerships between governments, businesses, and educational institutions could improve skill matching and enhance the relevance of migration programmes.

Third, institutional barriers such as the limited recognition of qualifications and the lack of pre-arrival training should be addressed. Improving these aspects would facilitate the integration of migrants into the labour market and increase the attractiveness of the Netherlands as a destination for skilled workers.

Fourth, existing pilot programmes and mobility schemes should be scaled up and institutionalised. Small-scale initiatives, while valuable, are insufficient to generate significant impact without broader policy support and sustained investment.

Finally, addressing negative migration narratives and perceptions is crucial. The current climate of scepticism towards migration, combined with negative feedback from migrant networks, discourages potential migrants. Promoting more positive and evidence-based narratives could help counter these dynamics and revitalise the corridor. At the same time, stronger anti-discrimination measures, such as stricter enforcement of equal treatment legislation and enhanced labour market monitoring, are needed to ensure fair access and inclusion. Together, these measures are key to rebuilding trust and revitalising the corridor.

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About the Link4Skills project

Link4Skills is an EU-funded research and project addressing the global challenge of skill shortages and mismatches through innovative, sustainable solutions that foster fair skill utilization and exchange across continents.

Focusing on Europe, Africa, Asia, and America, the project seeks to bridge the gap between skill supply and demand by facilitating re/up-skilling, promoting automation, and encouraging migration as policy options.

Link4Skills is creating an inclusive, participatory policy decision-making environment by integrating a diverse range of stakeholders, including EU decision-makers, inter-governmental institutions, national and subnational decision-makers, employers organizations, employees organizations, and civic society co-development institutions.

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