

GFMD 2020 UAE – Thematic Note on Theme 2: Skilling Migrants for Employment

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Background and Issue Statement:

The world is changing before our eyes. The digital revolution has radically affected our way of living and our way of working. ‘Disruption is the new norm’, we used to say. Today, amid the Covid-19 crisis, we are confronted potentially with a new set of questions. The challenge is significant: we will have to work with existing data and interrogate ourselves about it as reality unfolds and our understanding of it evolves at a quick pace.

Experts estimate that in the US alone there will be 24 million more pensioners by 2030, while the workforce will grow by only 3 million persons. In Europe, while labour demand regularly increases by almost 1 percent annually, labour supply only grows by about 0.3 percent.¹ It is further estimated that globally 1 in 7 jobs will disappear and 1 in 3 will experience serious change.² Labour migration is one of the mechanisms to address the mismatch between labour market supply and demand. However, unlike in financial or goods markets, labour market optimization is not a straight-forward adjustment process. The regulation of labour markets entails consideration of human factors and social dynamics. In the age of automation, digitalisation, competition for talent and innovation, skills play a crucial role in the search for productivity and are an essential means to achieve better development outcomes, enhance career development and personal growth³. How to identify needed skills? How to ensure best skills matching? How to train or upgrade skills of workers for employment to the benefit of individuals and society? And who should bear the responsibility - and costs – for skills development? These are some of the questions at the core of the debate⁴.

Today, we need to add to these questions a new one: how is the Covid-19 crisis going to affect human mobility and impact labour markets and labour migration? And for us who are part of this process, there is a directly pertinent question to address: What can the GFMD multi-stakeholder community do to contribute to this debate? The GFMD has a unique constituency: national and local governments, business and civil society. There is no similar setting at the global level focusing on migration and development. This consultation process initiated by the GFMD Chair and focused strongly on partnerships provides a unique opportunity to reflect on some of the key challenges of our times and devise proposals for the way forward.

A look at the Policy Debate on Skilling for Employment and Partnerships on Skills-Based Mobility

The need to find a more effective approach to incorporate considerations on skills into migration governance is not new. Calls for closer partnerships on skilling migrants and linking efforts in this field to

¹ Maes/Kamer van Koophandel, West-Vlaanderen, 2020.

² OECD, The Future of Work, Employment Outlook, 2019.

³ Read more, for instance, on IOM PROMISE Project tackling poverty reduction through safer and more skilled labour migration: <https://www.iom.int/news/un-migration-agency-partners-seek-poverty-reduction-through-safer-more-skilled-labour-migration>

⁴ IOM Link It Skills Profiling Tool supports both migrants and employers to understand the challenges on both sides to foster long-term integration: <https://eea.iom.int/LINK-IT>

existing mobility schemes through multi-stakeholder approaches have been increasing over the last few years, culminating in the inclusion of skills partnerships in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. This thematic area has also been prioritised by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), International Labour Organisation (ILO), UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Organization of Employers (IoE) and International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). These five organizations have formed the Global Skills Partnership for Migration to ensure a cooperative and holistic approach and support to all stakeholders. The aim is to establish effective skills recognition systems, consider the needs of employers, relieve the burden of skills development from origin countries, empower migrants and better support members of their families. Furthermore, the aim of this initiative is to improve and modernize training and educational systems and benefit origin and destination communities, including through creating more balanced, resilient, and well managed labour markets on both sides.

To progress in such partnerships, a better understanding of five determining issues is needed on how to: 1) map labour market skills gaps; 2) harmonise skills recognition frameworks to enable portability of qualifications between countries of origin and destination; 3) prepare migrants for successful migration journeys through training and certification; 4) facilitate student mobility; 5) and create opportunities and incentives for upskilling and in-work certification for lower-skilled migrant workers. Exploration of these issues can help identify important steps that need to be considered and can lead to a better understanding of the skills and mobility nexus, increased cooperation and policy solutions for origin and destination states.

The discussion, however, needs to start with a clear understanding of what skills are, how they can be categorized and how they relate to qualifications. What skills composition is needed for each qualification and how may this differ depending on the employers, migration corridors and industry involved? Many employers list key skills they would like to see employees have, such as problem solving, critical thinking, innovativeness, knowledge of foreign languages. Soft skills are becoming particularly important: networking, punctuality, socially active, good communication. Many require computer skills even for jobs which previously had no relation to the digital sphere. In the current COVID-19 context, health workforce shortages have become painfully apparent in the response to the pandemic, highlighting the importance of health worker mobility as a coping mechanism for such gaps. What skills are in demand, considering changes in the globalized labour market, changing nature of work and relations between stakeholders, especially in times of crisis and acute needs⁵?

Existing frameworks categorize skills at the global, regional, industry and national levels, and often divide between lower and higher skills. It is important to note however that such categorization does not equate with or attest to skills quality in fulfilling a certain job. It has become apparent during the current COVID-19 crisis that higher and lower skilled workers may be equally important. In many countries, the need for qualified healthcare professionals (doctors, nurses, laboratory technicians, radiologists, etc.) has been as strong as for related health and lower skilled support staff (such as care workers and hospital cleaners). The crisis has also demonstrated how affected mobility schemes may threaten the functioning of entire industries. For instance, many states dependant on foreign agricultural workers had to set up emergency mobility schemes to address potential food shortages and proper functioning of the agricultural sector. This highlighted clearly that not just any worker can be employed in agriculture and how relative the concept of high and low skilled work is.

Skills and qualification frameworks and recognition systems are set up to support employers on the one hand and to protect local labour markets on the other. Partnership among employers and different types

⁵ See IOM COVID-19 Guidance for Employers and Labour Recruiters: <https://iris.iom.int/covid-19-crisis-response>

of training and educational institutions is key in this field. Both in origin and destination countries, stakeholders in the educational sector include formal and informal educational institutions, technical or vocational education and training centres, employer training and skills development programmes; national and regional certification institutions, which are often linked to local educational systems; and professional boards or associations. On the government side, partners include line ministries (labour, foreign affairs, health, economic development, education, interior, immigration, migration), state certification institutions and local authorities. Trade unions also play a key role, as do migrant associations and non-governmental organizations working in rights protection, representing migrants' interests, or advocating for skills recognition and decent work. Employers such as multinational corporations, as well as small and medium-sized enterprises and their networks; industrial, national or local associations, chambers of commerce or trade, local, regional and national professional associations and boards, recruiters and recruitment agencies and their networks all have critical roles to play. Communities of origin and destination, and diaspora communities and organizations are also important stakeholders.

This highlights the multi-stakeholder nature of skills-based migration and cooperation, not only on the national but also on other cross-sectoral levels between and among different constellations of actors⁶.

Discussion Questions

1. *Mapping labour market skills gaps in consultation with relevant stakeholders.* This set of questions is intended to help focus the debate on the importance of effective labour market information systems, comprehensive data collection and analysis mechanisms to identify gaps and suitable measures to address them. The mechanisms that can bring stakeholders together and provide an opportunity for cooperation are crucial. Hence, it would be beneficial to discuss examples of existing national and/or inter-governmental skills-based labour mobility schemes in different regions, based on existing data collection and analysis. What infrastructures in countries of origin and destination are in place or need to be put in place? How can we best support these initiatives and ensure labour market-driven skills development, categorisation, recognition, and retention? Who are the different actors and what are their roles in design and implementation of such schemes and initiatives?

2. *Harmonising skills recognition frameworks to enable portability of qualifications between countries of origin and destination.* This is one of the starting points for establishing effective migrant skilling systems and partnerships in skills-based mobility. National systems require maturity to start the process of harmonization with counterparts at origin or destination involving all the stakeholders. What are the main impediments to the formulation of national skills categorisation, development, and recognition systems? How can industry-specific and regional systems help? In addition, the role and training pathways for soft skills need to be considered for better integration into destination labour markets. To what extent are these policies part of long and medium-term national employment strategies and regional cooperation schemes? Importantly, how can cooperation systems between states with the involvement of other stakeholders be established, where to start from and how to progress? How to use immigration-related systems such as visa and work permits to facilitate skills-based migration? Are there examples which may be helpful?

3. *Preparing migrants for successful migration journeys through training and certification.* What data and sources are needed for informed decisions in migrant skilling programmes and how to match supply and demand bringing all partners together? How to ensure a more active role and contribution to skilling from stakeholders at destination and globally from supply chain actors and multinational corporations? What examples exist of training and certification systems which are integrated into labour mobility schemes?

⁶ See more on skills mobility partnerships by IOM: <https://eea.iom.int/publications/skills-mobility-partnerships-towards-global-approach-skills-development-and-labour>

At the same time, what safeguards need to be built-in to protect and empower migrants, ensuring their rights, well-being and access to services and procedures (e.g. further training, upskilling, recognition, and certification of skills acquired on the job)? Do these initiatives consider the needs of returning migrants in terms of their re-integration in their home labour markets? How can these initiatives be linked to the implementation of the Global Compact for Migration and the Sustainable Development Goals?

4. *Facilitating student mobility* may become an integral part of labour mobility systems that may allow for learning and improving ways to establish qualifications and skills recognition systems. How can skills-based migration and inter-state partnerships be linked with student mobility schemes? What is the role of social partners, non-governmental actors, education and training institutions, employers and the private sector in the development and monitoring of student mobility schemes? How could various actors be involved in effective cooperation and ensure sectoral policy coherence (e.g., development policy, youth, education, employment, health, etc.)?

5. *Affording opportunities and incentives for upskilling and in-work certification to lower-skilled migrant workers.* This contributes not only to upgrading the skills level of migrant workers, but also allows employers to increase their productivity and efficiency. Multi-stakeholder skills mobility partnerships are essential also in this field. A discussion to identify examples at national and more importantly at bilateral or regional levels could be very beneficial in this field. What steps may be taken to design, develop and start implementing related upskilling and in-work certification projects in the nearest future and report on their progress to the Friends of the Forum and at the next Summits as a regional good practice that can be emulated?