

Competing for Talent

What Role Can Employment- and Skills-Based Mobility Projects Play?

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Executive Summary

Governments across Europe and beyond are grappling with the challenges of attracting, retaining, and nurturing talent. But even while labor shortages are jeopardizing economic prosperity in many advanced economies, persistent unemployment in many lower- and middle-income countries is pushing individuals to seek opportunities elsewhere. Legal migration pathways that connect unemployed workers in such countries with hard-to-fill jobs abroad and reduce barriers to mobility (e.g., by improving recognition of foreign-earned qualifications) are thus gaining interest in both origin and destination countries, with support from private-sector and institutional actors. In 2023, for example, the World Bank announced its support for ten new Global Skills Partnerships in several sectors, the European Commission launched its flagship Talent Partnerships initiative, and the new director-general of the International Organization for Migration announced that legal pathways would be a priority for her five-year term. Beyond responding to pressing labor market needs, the architects of these initiatives hope that expanding legal pathways will help diminish incentives for irregular journeys and encourage countries of origin and destination to work cooperatively to improve migration management, including on thornier issues such as return and readmission. Finally, in the longer term, they hope to create lasting

incentives for people in countries of origin to invest in developing skills that are in demand both locally and in destination countries.

To date, however, employment- and skills-based mobility projects have encountered challenges in fully realizing their anticipated benefits and have generally facilitated the movement of small numbers of people. For example, the Digital Explorers project between Lithuania and Nigeria provided opportunities for 45 Nigerian ICT specialists and trainees during its first two phases, while the Young Generations as Agents of Change project between Spain and Morocco covered training for 98 Moroccan university graduates. Even in more established projects with more time and resources to pursue scale, numbers can remain comparatively low. The Triple Win project run by the German development cooperation agency (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, or GIZ) placed 4,900 nurses with German employers over a nine-year period—a sizeable number compared to some projects, but a drop in the bucket given estimates that Germany will need an additional 74,000 workers in elder care by 2035.

One likely reason these initiatives have appeared to fall short thus far is that it takes a long time—much longer than the average funding cycle—to establish new partnerships and move people. For instance, when the Belgian development agency, Enabel,

launched a project with Tunisia, where it had no prior networks, nearly three years were spent building up project infrastructure and capacity before the first beneficiaries were ready to move to Belgium. This underlines the need for a project's lead actors to either have good pre-existing networks in participating countries or, alternatively, be clear-eyed about the need to spend time developing these connections and set project timelines accordingly.

Additionally, securing private-sector engagement has proven challenging for some projects. This is often due to long administrative wait times and uncertainty among employers about foreign workers' qualifications and what training and support they would need to provide such workers upon arrival. One possible solution, brought forward by Enabel, is to offer in-person "job dating" days during which employers can meet candidates and form their own opinions about their skills and qualifications. Yet, even when private companies are interested in hiring workers via these initiatives, the requirements they impose on candidates can be quite specific to the sector and/or receiving country. This poses challenges for the Global Skills Partnership model in particular, which is based on the logic that training that takes place in an origin country can help participants develop skills that will be useful regardless of whether they migrate and work abroad or stay and seek work locally. For instance, Enabel struggled to certify a training center in Morocco so that it could deliver safety trainings to construction workers according to Belgian standards. In such cases, mobility projects face the challenge of finding a balance between ambitious goals and pragmatism, adapting promising models based on what can realistically be accomplished in a given context and addressing issues as they arise.

While there is interest in broadening the scope of migration partnerships between countries with unmet labor demand and those with large working-age populations, such as many in sub-Saharan

Africa, recent experience underscores that doing so is likely to require additional preparation and investments in local labor market analysis and training capacity. Such measures add to these projects' upfront costs, which already tend to be high, and raise questions about their overall cost effectiveness, at least in the short term. Furthermore, experience from past pilot projects indicates a need to focus on sectors experiencing long-term shortages since employers with immediate openings have limited flexibility to accommodate delays and thus may disengage with projects that cannot quickly meet such needs.

The next few years will see important questions raised about how to achieve policy goals and deliver value for money when it comes to legal migration pathways. Given ongoing demographic changes in both origin and destination countries, many have a stake in making these projects work—and at a larger scale. This will require a clearer articulation of the objectives of cooperation and what constitutes success, including recognition that initiatives lasting two or three years are unlikely to establish a cost-effective option that could compete with private recruitment channels that are already at employers' disposal. Instead, the main advantage of government-sponsored mobility projects is likely their ability to test new migration corridors or new recruitment models that respect political, economic, and development imperatives in sending and receiving countries alike while broadening cooperation opportunities with partner countries.

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1 Introduction

Governments are grappling with how to attract, retain, and develop talent in an increasingly interconnected world. Many destination countries in Europe and beyond are contending with acute labor shortages that threaten to slow or even reverse their economic growth and are looking to immigration as one policy response, alongside efforts to retrain local workers and improve productivity. Meanwhile, countries of origin with fast-growing populations are exploring ways to connect their nationals with economic opportunities at home and further afield that can provide benefits for all parties involved.

While governments design and administer the rules for migration for work or training more broadly, they are usually minimally involved in connecting migrants directly with jobs or training opportunities that could facilitate this relocation in the first place. But this status quo is shifting as concerns grow about competing for talent or, conversely, about ensuring that their talented nationals are not excluded from this race. Governments have a critical role to play in addressing barriers to the circulation of talent, such as limited pathways for people to move legally for work or training and difficulties translating foreign-acquired skills and experience for local employers with hard-to-fill jobs.

Governments can take unilateral action on certain aspects of migration and mobility policy. For example, they can create new immigration channels for workers, streamline destination-country procedures for recognizing foreign qualifications, or invest resources to help an origin country's nationals connect with potential migration opportunities. But moving the needle on more fundamental goals—such as boosting the development benefits of migration for participating migrants and their countries of origin, facilitating the development and circulation of skills, and potentially reducing incentives for irregular

journeys—requires coordinated action. Destination-country governments have also long recognized that cooperation with origin countries on legal migration can incentivize cooperation on other, trickier parts of the migration policy portfolio, such as migration management and returns.¹

As a result, legal migration pathways are a growing feature of cooperation between countries of destination and origin, and increasingly a priority for international actors such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM).² But this can take notably different forms. For example, migration partnerships might include targeted mobility schemes for work and training (such as the EU-funded legal migration pilot projects), bilateral agreements (e.g., to recruit workers or foster exchange), support for skills development (e.g., for vocational education and training), and capacity-building measures (e.g., investments in infrastructure or training public officials on administering migration policies). The European Commission's Talent Partnerships, for example, plan to include mobility schemes along with support for capacity building and skills development (see Box 1). This variety illustrates the flexibility of partnerships to address barriers to legal migration in different ways, but it can also prompt confusion or miscommunication among partners about what mobility-related objectives their cooperation can or should achieve, and on what timeline.

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mitted at the national or regional level to such initiatives, there is little consensus about what actions to prioritize. For example, while the European Commission has invested heavily in legal migration pilot projects, many of these initiatives have struggled to meet their initial targets for connecting people with work or study opportunities, let alone charting a clear path toward scale.³ This mixed record raises important questions about where policymakers can achieve the greatest impact and value for money when it comes to cooperation on legal migration pathways, including how to strike the right balance between new projects that can help test demand for labor along new corridors or trial innovative approaches to international recruitment or skills development, and other types of policy interventions to support worker mobility, such as improving procedures for recognizing foreign-acquired qualifications. This policy brief explores the case for cooperation and, specifically, employment- and skills-based mobility projects, looking at how different types of cooperation can support legal migration pathways, what challenges these projects need to navigate, and strategies for achieving economies of scale with successful cooperation.

2 The Case for Mobility Projects

Multi- or bilateral cooperation on legal migration offers countries the opportunity to address shared priorities that are typically beyond the remit of a country to manage on its own. For example, destination countries can unilaterally reform their immigration policies to make it easier (or harder) for employers to sponsor workers for jobs or to admit young professionals for training or placements, and origin countries can regulate the recruitment of workers for jobs abroad and provide support services for prospective emigrants. But international cooperation can help governments achieve much bigger wins in the race

for talent. In the case of skills transfer initiatives, for example, cooperation is essential for sharing information about different education and training systems and identifying opportunities to improve qualification recognition processes and, potentially, to move toward greater alignment or harmonization. And when it comes to facilitating mobility, cooperation can promote the exchange of information about labor market dynamics and skill profiles that may not be readily accessible to employers as well as help to connect destination-country employers with prospective workers in different countries. Pilot projects created as part of these efforts offer a way to test demand for workers along different geographic corridors or in different sectors or to experiment with innovative approaches for identifying, selecting, and welcoming workers.

Some of these goals require medium- or long-term investments and planning to realize. But even in the short term, cooperation on legal migration can be an important source of information and innovation for policymakers. Lessons from recent projects illustrate some of these potential benefits:

- ▶ **Building partner countries' capacity to participate in legal migration pathways.** The sizeable financial and technical resources allocated to partnerships can build the capacity of participating origin countries to manage legal migration—both during a time-limited pilot project and, potentially, on a longer-term basis by connecting up with broader development programming. Capacity building might include technical assistance to help origin-country public employment services identify qualified candidates and conduct labor market assessments. For example, the Migration of African Talents through Capacity-Building and Hiring (MATCH)⁴ project provided trainings on labor market analysis and employer-candidate matching to employer

organizations and public employment services in Nigeria and Senegal, while the Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortages through Innovative Labour Migration Models (PALIM)⁵ encouraged public employment services in Belgium and Morocco to exchange best practices. This type of capacity building can strengthen service provision beyond the life of a time-limited initiative and benefit a broader population. For instance, partly as a result of several partnerships with Belgium as well as the Moroccan labor ministry's considerable emphasis on the topic, Morocco's National Agency for the Promotion of Jobs and Skills (ANAPEC) dramatically expanded its international labor mobility team (established 2005) into a dedicated international division that now includes two teams facilitating Moroccans' international labor mobility.⁶ Crucially, it was Morocco's welcome of these partnerships that helped build institutional capacity over time.

- ▶ **Investing in local education and training.** Projects can also include training components, whether to help prospective migrant workers bridge skills gaps through language or technical training or to offer a more expansive curriculum for current students or recent graduates. For instance, within the EU-funded program Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa (THAMM),⁷ the Belgian development agency, Enabel, works with the Moroccan Office for Vocational Training and Employment Promotion to expand the training courses it offers, which could benefit Moroccans who move abroad for work as well as those who end up finding employment in Morocco.⁸ However, updating public training curricula can be a lengthy process, which conflicts with the relatively short time

horizons of most pilot projects, including in the THAMM-Enabel project (initially planned as a three-year project). As a result, some donors might decide to work with private training providers instead, which can be more time-effective but foregoes potential capacity gains within public institutions. In addition, destination-country employers' requirements can result in the creation of highly tailored trainings that are effective for workers' labor market integration in a certain destination country but potentially less useful for participants who plan to work locally. For example, some of the beneficiaries of the THAMM-Enabel project are required to obtain a security certificate⁹ before they can take up their work on construction sites in Belgium. The project partners initially wanted to ensure that a Moroccan training center could provide these certificates, in line with Belgian standards, but this proved difficult as it would have required getting the center accredited and then offering these tailored trainings—all for a relatively small number of beneficiaries. This raises questions about what the right balance is between investing in training opportunities in origin countries and offering very specialized trainings to workers after their arrival in the destination country.

- ▶ **Identifying priority countries and sectors.** Projects can also provide an opportunity to assess the potential for and barriers to mobility along certain corridors or for workers with certain skillsets. This scoping could include mapping relevant stakeholders in partner countries (e.g., exploring which public and private actors could recruit workers), identifying sectors and/or regions in which there are surpluses of qualified workers without jobs who could be matched with shortages in destination countries, and assessing how education and training

systems in destination and origin countries compare and the implications for recognizing foreign qualifications. For example, GIZ's Triple Win project selects partner countries based on labor market conditions, whether a country has a consistent surplus of unemployed nurses (to avoid brain drain), the country's nursing education curriculum, and the likelihood of origin-country credentials being recognized quickly in Germany.¹⁰ Scoping exercises can also allow implementing agencies to tailor their services more effectively. For example, GIZ's Partnership Approaches for Development-Oriented Vocational Training and Labour Migration (PAM) project conducted a scoping study in its early stages to help the agency tailor mobility and training initiatives to the profile of participants and the vocational education and training systems of the four participating countries (Ecuador, Kosovo, Nigeria, and Vietnam).¹¹ However, scoping efforts can be time-consuming and, if they take longer than initially envisioned, become a source of tension. This process proved to be difficult for the THAMM-Enabel project, for example, because Enabel was building its network in Tunisia from scratch. This suggests that if governments or donors wish to create projects in regions where they do not yet have established networks, they should be prepared for this process to be time- and resource-intensive, or else to consider finding a partner to lead the project that already has strong networks in the area (see Box 2).

- ▶ **Testing new approaches to recruitment, selection, or training.** Dedicated funds for pilot projects allow for more experimentation with different approaches to migrant worker selection and recruitment. For example, several national and EU-funded projects have tested different versions of the Global Skills

Partnership model (see Box 1), including Germany's 2017–21 project to train and recruit construction workers from Kosovo, the EU-funded PALIM project (2019–21) to connect Moroccan ICT graduates with jobs in Belgium and Morocco, and parts of the ongoing EU- and Germany-funded THAMM project (2019–present). Pilot projects can experiment with different variables in the recruitment and migration process. This includes different mechanisms to help match destination-country employers with prospective workers in origin countries and different training offerings (ranging from efforts to bridge skills gaps to creating dual-track programs inspired by the Global Skills Partnership model). In addition, pilot projects can experiment with the inclusion of different stakeholders. For example, when partnering with countries with weaker public employment services, destination-country governments could consider how and under what conditions to work with private actors (such as private recruitment agencies) to connect employers with workers. Similarly, working with the private sector could be considered in destination countries that have weak public reception structures for arriving migrants (e.g., engaging private relocation agents to help workers with their initial municipal registration, search for accommodation, and other tasks). The THAMM-Enabel project has taken this approach, by involving a private relocation company that supports the integration of project beneficiaries in Belgium.

The real value of this experimentation lies in allowing decisionmakers to evaluate outcomes—both positive and negative—and to identify ways to apply these lessons to immigration policies and development programming going forward. For example, while Global Skills Partnership pilots have so far

struggled to meet both their mobility and training ambitions (see Box 1), their experiences provide important insights on barriers to mobility, such as challenges navigating different qualification standards, meeting changing immigration requirements, and matching candidates with destination-country employers.¹² For instance, Enabel has found that matching can be especially difficult over long distances or via online tools. As a result, the agency now organizes in-person “job dating” days in origin countries. Employers travel to attend and conduct interviews

and other tests to assess job candidates’ skills. The in-person meetings can also help overcome biases and allow employers to get a more detailed impression of what they can expect from their new hires. Such initiatives could contribute to virtuous cycles for pursuing innovation and improving immigration and education and training systems writ large, but more work is needed to ensure their lessons are fully evaluated, analyzed, and disseminated across different policy portfolios.

BOX 1

Models for Skills-Based Mobility

As interest in migration partnerships has grown, models for work- and training-based projects have proliferated, often introducing their own branding and terminology. This diversity can lead to confusion, particularly when it comes to delineating the specifics of future cooperation with partner countries, distinguishing between new and existing initiatives, and pinpointing promising practices. The following are some of the main terms and initiatives:

The **Global Skills Partnership** (GSP) model is one of the most extensively developed theoretical frameworks for connecting training and mobility. It is a dual-track model, providing participants in a country of origin with training that prepares them for work either locally (the home track) or in another country (the away track). This model has served as inspiration for several initiatives worldwide, including the Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortages through Innovative Labour Migration Models (PALIM) between Belgium and Morocco, and Germany’s 2017–21 project to train and recruit construction workers from Kosovo. In October 2023, the World Bank announced that it would launch ten new GSPs. However, the GSP model has also encountered challenges and required adaptation. For example, while the Australia Pacific Training Coalition has expanded access to quality vocational education and training in the Pacific Islands since its inception in 2007, it has yet to facilitate much labor mobility to Australia.

Similar to the GSP, the **Skills Mobility Partnership** (SMP) model, developed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), aims to respond to labor market needs in origin and destination countries by linking mobility opportunities with investments in training and skills recognition that can benefit both migrants and people who stay and work in origin-country labor markets. One example is the EU-funded Migration of African Talents through Capacity-Building and Hiring (MATCH) project, which ran from 2020 to 2022.

The European Commission, meanwhile, launched **Talent Partnerships** as a framework that ties together the European Union’s work on legal migration pathways, including mobility projects but also broader investments in capacity building and skills development. As of early 2024, negotiations with several potential partner countries were underway to operationalize new Talent Partnerships. (The European Commission also supports skills partnerships under the Pact for Skills; these are sectoral or regional multistakeholder initiatives focused on upskilling and reskilling, without an immigration component.)

Sources: Michael A. Clemens, “Global Skills Partnerships: A Proposal for Technical Training in a Mobile World,” *IZA Journal of Labor Policy* 4, no. 2 (2015); Center for Global Development, “Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC),” accessed December 15, 2023; IOM, “Skills Mobility Partnerships (SMPs),” accessed November 15, 2023; European Commission, “Talent Partnerships,” accessed November 15, 2023; European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Attracting Skills and Talent to the EU” (COM [2022] 657 final, April 27, 2022); Center for Global Development, “Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortages Through Innovative Labour Migration Models,” accessed September 15, 2023; post by Mamta Murthi, Vice President for Human Development, World Bank, on X, October 10, 2023; European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Labour and skills shortages in the EU: an action plan” (COM[2024] 131 final, March 20, 2024).

3 Common Challenges

Partnerships can struggle to deliver on their potential when it comes to expanding legal migration pathways. While partnerships are often framed in ambitious terms—for example, pointing to their potential to promote the circulation of talent, address labor shortages, and open up labor markets to employers in other countries¹³—the commitments made as part of these efforts, including to government-sponsored mobility projects, tend to be more modest. Recent mobility projects have tended to move comparatively small numbers of people: the EU-funded Digital Explorers project between Lithuania and Nigeria, for example, provided opportunities for 45 Nigerian ICT specialists and trainees during its first two phases, and the Young Generations as Agents of Change project between Spain and Morocco covered master’s degrees and training for 98 Moroccan university graduates.¹⁴ Similarly, in the first phase of the legal migration pilot projects funded by the EU Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund, the budget for projects was usually 1–2 million euros and projects typically benefited 50–100 people.¹⁵ Even for more established projects, which can benefit from additional resources and time to streamline their approach, numbers can remain comparatively low; for example, GIZ’s Triple Win project placed 4,900 nurses with German employers over a nine-year period—a considerable number for one project, but a drop in the bucket given estimates that Germany will need an additional 74,000 skilled workers in elder care by 2035.¹⁶

This speaks to the importance of managing expectations for how many additional legal migration opportunities a project can unlock for prospective migrants, and over what timeframe. In fact, many pilot projects run for relatively short periods of time (often between two and four years, including scoping and preparation activities), which does not allow them to serve large numbers of beneficiaries.

The European Commission’s main focus thus far has been on such pilots, largely through the Talent Partnerships. Yet, without a route to achieving scale, this cycle of pilots can quickly lead to fatigue among partner countries. For instance, after the PALIM pilot project finished in Morocco in 2021, it was followed by another Belgian pilot initiative, the THAMM-Enabel project. The continuation of work was useful for several reasons, including picking up activities from PALIM that had been blocked by pandemic-related restrictions and refining the program model (e.g., moving from a reskilling to an upskilling approach in the recruitment of Moroccan candidates, and choosing a new set of shortage occupations).¹⁷ Yet, the initiatives’ slow progression and low job placement numbers also created frustration among participating institutions that had dedicated their own financial resources to these projects and faced pressure to deliver more tangible outputs to justify continued investments.

Another challenge is securing destination-country employer buy-in. Choosing the right employers and job opportunities goes beyond simply establishing whether an employer is genuinely unable to fill a vacancy with a local worker. Pilot projects can take months to set up, and even once established, their recruitment and immigration processes can be slow, creating uncertainty for employers. For instance, Belgium’s Single Permit for potential recruits can take months to be processed, partly because it is a shared responsibility between the country’s regions and the federal Immigration Office.¹⁸ Recruitment for time-sensitive positions is thus unlikely to be a good fit for these initiatives; instead, destination-country employers may be more willing to participate if they are recruiting for predictable and recurring vacancies on a rolling basis (e.g., peak season in the hospitality industry or an ongoing need for health-care workers) rather than trying to fill a specific role. The question of who pays is also an important one. Many of these programs are established using public funds, and as a consequence, may end up subsidiz-

ing some of the recruitment expenses for participating employers. But if successful initiatives are to take root, they will need to offer a competitively priced set of services for employers who may otherwise look for alternatives such as using private recruitment agencies.

Managing expectations for participating governments and private-sector and civil-society actors will require a clear articulation of both the objectives of migration cooperation and what constitutes success, including possible metrics. Governments should be candid about what can be achieved in a short timeframe and where the added value of partnership lies. For example, projects lasting two or three years are unlikely to establish a competitive and cost-effective recruitment option within that timeframe that rivals other private recruitment channels at employers' disposal. This is true even when an initiative could yield positive longer-term benefits (e.g., added tax revenue or benefits for the target industry).¹⁹ Instead, messaging around such initiatives should focus on the benefits this type of time-limited project could offer in the short-to-medium term—including gauging demand for and the supply of migrant workers along different corridors, or testing innovative approaches to recruitment or selection, as discussed in Section 2. The impact of these insights hinges on the extent to which and how they are shared with immigration policymakers, and the process for equipping policymakers to use them to inform immigration policy going forward. When designing and implementing partnerships, governments could also consider pairing them with other interventions to help unlock mobility and migration opportunities

at a greater scale for partner countries; such measures could include visa liberalization, bilateral labor migration agreements (e.g., for temporary work or training placements or seasonal work), and scholarship programs for students or recent graduates. This speaks to the importance of getting broad buy-in across government for cooperation, since this work often touches on different policy portfolios such as education, labor, and trade.

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A final key challenge is navigating changing political winds. Previous assessments of mobility projects point to the importance of having political champions in all participating countries who are willing to make the case internally for cooperation and to utilize their political capital to address roadblocks (e.g., processing delays).²⁰ Having clearly articulated shared objectives for cooperation on legal migration and an agreed-upon path forward for achieving these goals is important to sustaining such support. Focusing on pilot projects that may offer short-term results, but little in the way of meaningful scale, does little to meet these ambitions. Another common challenge is the need to weather shifting domestic political dynamics, especially if support for legal migration opportunities wanes and, with it, efforts to pursue longer-term goals such as visa liberalization that can facilitate mobility.

BOX 2**The Promise and Pitfalls of Skills-Based Mobility Projects: Lessons from THAMM-Enabel**

Belgium’s mobility partnership with Morocco and Tunisia—Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa (THAMM-Enabel)—offers lessons on the opportunities and challenges of mobility projects, including on the important role of local networks, overarching political support, and private-sector engagement.

When THAMM-Enabel launched, one of the key challenges for the project (as for other mobility projects) was the cool welcome it received from the private sector. Both Enabel and Belgium’s public employment agency invested heavily in employer engagement, yet found fewer employers willing to participate than anticipated. This reluctance appears to have various causes, including unfamiliarity with international recruitment protocols, lengthy administrative procedures, and a lack of experience with or capacity to support newly arrived workers’ reception and integration. To address the reception and integration concerns, Enabel eventually decided to hire a private relocation company to help new recruits settle in after arrival and to help them with tasks such as municipal registration and finding accommodation.

Enabel also ran into difficulties with the implementing partners. In Tunisia, for example, the Belgian agency did not have a country office at the start of the project. The newly hired team had to build up networks and political backing from scratch, which proved challenging. In Morocco and Belgium, Enabel succeeded in gaining the support and participation of two new partners that had not participated in the pilot project that preceded THAMM-Enabel (the Office for Vocational Training and Employment Promotion in Morocco and the public employment service in Belgium’s Wallonia region). Yet, integrating these actors into the project required significant effort, including frequent consultations and coordination between partners and within institutions in order to clarify the scope of the project and to distribute roles and responsibilities. As a result, after almost three years, no workers had moved to Belgium.

Finally, political support for the project has wavered on the Belgian side since it was launched in 2020. The impacts of COVID-19, the influx of Ukrainians fleeing war, and political sensitivities in Belgian regions with high unemployment rates have all made it more difficult to mobilize political support for international recruitment initiatives. As a result, high-level support for the initiative, which can help navigate politically sensitive situations, has waned.

THAMM-Enabel is now in its fourth and final year, scheduled to wrap up in Summer 2024. As of late 2023, the effort invested in the project had begun to yield some results: The initial cohorts of workers in Tunisia and Morocco had completed their training, and the employer matching phase (to determine which participants would get a job offer in Belgium) was starting. Looking ahead, it is likely that the project will need revived political support and private-sector interest in Belgium to be able to achieve meaningful impact. This will be all the more important as other countries, both within and outside the European Union, are following attentively to see what potential benefits EU mobility projects such as this may hold.

Source: Information gathered during a mid-term review conducted by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) for the THAMM-Enabel project in February–June 2023, which included interviews with 56 key stakeholders in Belgium, Morocco, and Tunisia.

4 Strategies for Achieving Greater Scale and Impact

While the case for cooperation on skills-based legal migration pathways is clear, the results of such joint efforts have to date been mixed. Migration partnerships have waxed and waned as political priorities have shifted, and high-profile initiatives such as the European Commission's legal migration pilot projects and early Global Skills Partnerships have struggled to move many people and chart a sustainable pathway toward scale.

As governments dedicate more resources to improving access to labor migration pathways, including through further international cooperation, it is important to assess what types of interventions should be prioritized in order to provide the most impact and value for money. Mobility projects often appeal to policymakers seeking ways to offer new legal migration opportunities on a relatively short timeline. But these initiatives can require significant upfront investments and be expensive, given the relatively modest number of people whose movement they facilitate; this raises questions about whether these projects constitute the best use of government resources, especially when they involve subsidizing recruitment operations for private employers. The sustainability of such projects hinges on identifying sectors where demand for workers is growing and employers are struggling to connect with qualified workers—and where there is a viable route for employers to assume associated operating costs.

There are also important steps that can be taken to maximize the impact of mobility projects. The first step is tracking the outcomes of early cooperation and using these insights to inform decisions about scale. Monitoring and evaluation should be seen as a collaborative exercise, in which partners decide together what constitutes success and share results and analyses. Even if a mobility pilot project is not

renewed or expanded, careful assessment of its work can offer insights on more structural issues plaguing labor migration pathways, such as:

- ▶ **Improving the accessibility of immigration and immigrant integration procedures.** Monitoring and evaluation could highlight potential accommodations to help workers with a job offer access visas, ways to speed up processing times to make immigration procedures more predictable for employers and workers, or training or tailored support options to help workers navigate the process for getting their qualifications recognized in their destination country.
- ▶ **Better matching employers and workers.** Project evaluations could, for example, identify different options to connect destination-country employers with prospective employees in partner countries (such as online portals, job fairs, or selection committees), share ideas for how to showcase workers' skills to destination-country employers, and collect information on how destination- and origin-country training systems compare in different sectors and occupations.
- ▶ **Building capacity for fair and ethical recruitment.** For example, evaluations could offer lessons on how best to provide technical assistance to public employment services on recruiting and selecting workers (and how to adapt this assistance to different contexts), or best practices for working with private recruitment agencies and other intermediaries in ways that protect migrant workers' rights.

A second important step is creating and communicating a clear vision for scale. Achieving scale in this context could take several forms, such as increasing the number of people able to access mobility or

migration opportunities, expanding the scope of mobility schemes to cover more sectors and occupations or to include new countries or regions, or improving the speed and efficiency of recruitment and immigration processes. A key component of efforts to scale up a project should be early and ongoing consultations with partner countries to make sure the initiative serves their interests, as well as those of the destination country, and that plans to scale up worker mobility do not trigger concerns about potential brain drain.

One open question is whether scale is best reached by extending or expanding a particular project, or by applying its lessons to immigration or other policies (such as development or labor) more broadly. Creating permanent pathways for migrants from specific countries (e.g., through dedicated channels or quotas) may not be possible within a destination country's immigration laws, which can deter origin countries' participation in these initiatives to begin with, undermine plans to extend or scale them up, or raise concerns about equity and adding further complexity to immigration systems. Where this is the case, governments could instead consider ways to apply lessons from pilot projects to help tackle barriers to mobility more widely, including in the areas described above. Not only would this allow governments to reap more benefits from pilot projects, but it might also encourage more innovation and experimentation within established policy areas and when designing future pilots. Insights on barriers to mobility and possible solutions can also help set a long-term agenda for international cooperation that includes more systemic reforms at the national, bilateral, or regional levels to foster mobility.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

Legal migration pathways and bilateral or multilateral cooperation to facilitate access to international

work and training opportunities will remain high on the policy agenda for 2024 and beyond. In 2023, the new IOM director-general announced that legal pathways would be a priority for her five-year term, while the World Bank unveiled plans to support ten new Global Skills Partnerships for work or training in several sectors. Yet, the journey toward achieving economies of scale in migration partnerships is both promising and complex. The experiences of the diverse array of mobility projects undertaken to date offer valuable insights into the potential benefits and challenges that lie ahead.

First, these initiatives have highlighted the need to carefully calibrate expectations. The knowledge base for such projects has increased over the years, providing evidence to help set realistic expectations. It will be particularly crucial to maintain a clear-eyed perspective regarding the possible scale and scope of these endeavors. Experience shows that a mobility project with a relatively modest initial cohort and a two- or three-year timeframe is unlikely to easily shift gears to facilitate the movement of hundreds or thousands of participants in subsequent years. In addition, delays in various initiatives' launch or expansion, influenced by myriad factors, underscore the importance of thorough preparation and realistic timelines and goals to help avoid tensions with partners in both origin and destination countries.

A second, related lesson is the need for a longer-term vision for pilot projects. To avoid "pilot fatigue" among partners and ensure that insights gathered can have an impact beyond a pilot's short run, it is useful for all parties involved to have a shared vision of what constitutes success, and whether and how an extension could be considered. And if a pilot is not extended, efforts should be made to ensure lessons from that project can be leveraged to support other mobility projects or broader policy conversations around legal migration pathways and creating effective migration systems.

The need to design partnerships in a way that is both flexible and durable raises another set of critical considerations. Since both the availability of labor in countries of origin and the demand for it in countries of destination are likely to change over time, cooperation on migration pathways should be flexible in the specific occupations targeted but firm in how partners work together. In that sense, pilots can be useful opportunities to build cooperation structures and procedures for elements that are common among mobility projects (such as processes for comparing countries' educational curricula or defining methodologies to identify labor shortages). Such structures may be built both within and between institutions in sending and receiving countries. Having clarity on these procedural questions is a precondition for sustainable mobility partnerships, and a tangible goal pilot projects can work toward.

Stronger, ongoing private-sector engagement also merits attention going forward. This will require a more sophisticated approach to engagement and a better understanding of the various barriers employers encounter at different stages of a mobility project. For instance, experience points to the need for a clearer understanding of the nature of the job vacancies a project aims to address—whether short term or of a more recurrent, structural nature. Consultations with industry groups or employer federations can be useful for this purpose. Additional factors (such as processing times, bureaucratic requirements, and companies' ability to dedicate resources to welcoming and helping migrant workers settle in and integrate) should also be taken into account when assessing the potential for employer participation in different stages of a project. Seeking early and direct input from the private sector is also a crucial means of discerning how migration pathways can be made more accessible to employers striving to fill genuine labor shortages. The insights gathered from a structured, stepwise analysis of barriers can help decisionmakers determine which sectors and

occupations to target, as well as to delineate the profile of employers best suited for an initiative.

Expanding partnerships beyond the usual partner countries (for European initiatives, often those in North Africa) presents an opportunity to diversify and strengthen legal migration pathways. However, doing so necessitates a sustained commitment to capacity building. Investments may be needed in a range of critical areas, including the development of robust migration management capabilities, the establishment of effective mechanisms for gathering and analyzing labor market data, the expansion of public employment services, and the regulation of private recruitment practices. Moreover, facilitating the exchange of information on education and training systems is often needed to ease the assessment of qualifications and mapping of equivalencies. Rather than tying such investments to a single mobility project with a limited project cycle, placing them under the umbrella of longer-term, multidimensional cooperation can help to ensure more systematic, durable capacity increases in partner countries.

A final lesson from employment- and skills-based mobility projects to date is their incredible value as a laboratory in which destination- and origin-country policymakers can test and refine approaches to labor migration at a time of demographic change, labor shortages, or high unemployment. In fact, this is one of the main advantages of government-sponsored mobility projects compared to private recruitment efforts. To fully realize these projects' potential to generate new knowledge, greater attention should be paid to improving the sharing of evidence and best practices, such as through a dedicated platform or repository for case studies and research findings, and regular convenings or workshops. Fostering a culture of open dialogue and collaboration will not only enhance the effectiveness of current initiatives but also lay the groundwork for more impactful future endeavors.

Endnotes

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- 8 Information gathered during a mid-term review conducted by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) for the THAMM-Enabel project in February–June 2023, which included interviews with 56 key stakeholders in Belgium, Morocco, and Tunisia.
- 9 The certificate is called the Safety, Health, and Environment Checklist for Contractors and is required in various branches of the Belgian industry where workers perform high-risk activities or work in high-risk environments, including mechanical engineering, metal, insulation, and transport.
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