

# The Promise of Skills Partnerships for Effective Labor Mobility

## Policy Note

by Limon B. Rodriguez\*

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### Abstract

Against the backdrop of demographic forces and common skill shortages, labor mobility schemes have been created to benefit various stakeholders, such as migrant workers, firms, and sending and receiving countries. For example, the Global Skill Partnerships (GSP), the European Union (EU) Talent Partnerships, and the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Skills Mobility Partnerships seek to equip workers with skills in shortage and absorb them in source and destination labor markets. Evidence suggests labor mobility schemes generate benefits, including financial remittances, improved human capital, and social networks as well as meeting skill requirements of domestic and foreign employers more broadly, while managing the risk of brain drain. Development of regulatory and legal frameworks with social protection measures and of institutional capacity (e.g., labor market intermediation, oversight of private recruitment agencies, training provision) as well as financial sustainability are central to designing these schemes. Improved employer engagement, social integration, welfare protection, skill recognition, and close partnership between stakeholders, such as governments and the private sector, will be key to operating them at scale and delivering on their benefits more fully.

## 1. Introduction

In response to ageing population in several higher-income countries and young workforce in source countries as well as to common skill shortages in both sets of countries, labor mobility schemes have been developed. They can generate benefits on various levels. Not only do they equip workers with skills through training, they also channel them to employment thereby helping raise their incomes. They also benefit sending and receiving countries as trainees are absorbed by either labor market, not to mention the possible reduction in youth unemployment in the former as well as the latter's investments in the former's education and training systems, and alignment with the latter's development assistance goals. Labor mobility schemes span various sectors and skill levels, and conduct training for employment in domestic and foreign labor markets, which generates financial cost savings<sup>1</sup> if not economies of scale. They are distinct from previous

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\* Department of International Economics at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC, United States of America. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this policy note are entirely those of the author. They do not necessarily represent the views of the World Bank and its affiliated organizations, or those of the Executive Directors of the World Bank or the governments they represent. The author is grateful to Pablo Acosta, Luc Christiaensen, Veronica Gutierrez, Jeremy Lebow, and Céline Ferré for comments and suggestions on earlier drafts. He may be contacted at [lrodri55@jhu.edu](mailto:lrodri55@jhu.edu).

<sup>1</sup> On economic migration, for instance, conducting the training in source countries is more efficient than in destination countries.

migration models that focus on meeting skills needs in the destination and from guest worker programs that tend to operate in a limited set of sectors (e.g., agriculture).

The Global Skill Partnerships (GSPs), for instance, introduce “home” and “away” tracks whereby workers are equipped with skills in shortage and absorbed by labor markets in sending and receiving countries, respectively. In GSPs, destination countries typically fund the training in source countries. While similar schemes share common features with GSPs, notably, seeking to fill skill shortages in sending and receiving countries, some nuances between them exist (table 1). For example, the European Union (EU) Talent Partnerships include student mobility, whereas the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) Skills Mobility Partnerships develop capacity of various stakeholders in designing labor mobility projects (Labor Mobility Experts 2023; Di Salvo 2022; Hooper 2021; Marin 2021; Martinaud and Mejias 2021; IOM 2020).

**Table 1 – Similarities and differences between various labor mobility schemes**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>EU Talent Partnerships</b>	<b>German Agency for International Cooperation’s (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit or GIZ) Triple Win programme</b>	<b>IOM’s Skills Mobility Partnerships</b>	<b>Talent Beyond Boundaries</b>
Focus	Mobility schemes for workers and students; investments in education and training systems in source countries; and capacity development in labor market assessments	Training in source countries; and skill recognition	Development of capacity to design labor mobility projects	Skill matching and language training for the forcibly displaced
Sources of financing	Mainly EU	Destination government; employers; and non-profit	Mainly by destination governments with co-investments from firms in destination countries and to a lesser extent, trainees	Destination governments; international organizations; and philanthropic organizations
Whose skill needs	Source and destination countries	Mainly destination countries	Source and destination countries	Destination countries
Skill level targeted	Various	Tends to be medium- to high-skilled	Various	Tends to be medium- to high-skilled

Duration	Varies (e.g., multi-month, multi-year)	Multi-year	From 6 months to ~4 years	Multi-year (e.g., 2-3 years)
Further support	Return and reintegration assistance (e.g., job search, soft skill training, career and startup counselling)	Integration (e.g., personalized advice)	Job search in source countries	Airport pickup, transitional housing, and orientation
Involvement of different stakeholders	Firms, governments in source and destination countries, education and training providers in source countries	Firms, governments in source and destination countries, education and training providers in source countries	Firms, governments in source and destination countries, trade unions, international organizations, and civil society organizations	Firms, destination governments, and international organizations

Note: Not exhaustive

Sources: European Commission (EC) 2023b, 2021; Labor Mobility Experts 2023; Talent Beyond Boundaries 2023a; Talent Beyond Boundaries 2023c; Di Salvo 2022; Hooper 2021; Luciano and Schimpf 2021; Marin 2021; Martinaud and Mejias 2021; IOM 2020

## 2. Building the foundation through sound regulatory and legal frameworks, development of institutional capacity, and financial sustainability

**Anchoring labor mobility schemes on regulatory and legal frameworks promotes durability.** These frameworks could help ensure continuity of the schemes amid leadership changes in government for example. The Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortages through Innovative Labour Migration’s (PALIM)—which trained unemployed Moroccan non-information and communications technology (ICT) graduates in ICT and soft skills for domestic and Belgian labor markets—is based on the framework between GIZ, International Labour Organization (ILO), and IOM, which seeks to enhance protection of migrant workers. PALIM is also based on a migration agreement between Morocco and Belgium. The agreement, however, needs to be revisited to institutionalize among others social protection of migrant workers (e.g., insurance, improved access to services, active labor market programs) and grievance mechanisms in case of employer compliance issues (Government of Morocco 2022c; ILO 2019).<sup>2</sup> The recent bilateral migration agreement between Morocco and Portugal provides some examples of good practices, including presence of a representative from the source country in the destination to monitor labor market developments in the latter and formation of a committee that meets regularly to review the provisions and implementation (Rodriguez 2023). Some schemes, however, rely on general labor migration laws and regulations instead of dedicated frameworks,<sup>3</sup> potentially resulting in red tape, lack of visa flexibility, and high costs to recruit third-country nationals.

<sup>2</sup> While social integration may be a salient issue in guest worker programs and labor mobility schemes that involve lower-skilled workers, it may not necessarily be so for those that require higher skill levels.

<sup>3</sup> Other schemes are (planned to be) embedded in free trade agreements.

**Improved institutional capacity would ensure effective labor market intermediation, oversight of private recruitment agencies, training provision, or diaspora mobilization.**

Where the public sector plays a labor market intermediation role, the World Bank's pilot project to train and deploy 100 Moroccan workers in Germany in the tourism sector was considered successful partly because several German employers recruited Moroccan labor and it improved the institutional capacity of Morocco's public employment service (PES), the National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Skills (ANAPEC) (Luthria 2022). During the pilot, ANAPEC a) advertised job openings on the government agency's website; b) reviewed about 5,000 curricula vitae (CVs) and shared job-ready candidate profiles with employers; c) spoke to employer associations about job demands, salary, and benefits; d) organized employer visits; and e) sat in job interviews (Rodriguez 2023). By participating in job interviews, for instance, ANAPEC learned from the interaction between employers and interviewees (e.g., use of German language, eye contact) and provided feedback (e.g., German language and cultural training) to trainers (Luthria 2022).

If private actors play the role of labor market intermediaries, such as in the case of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, development of public oversight capacity is necessary to ensure they operate ethically (e.g., curbing illegal recruitment and excessive salary deduction) (Luthria 2022). The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), which was merged with other government agencies into the newly created Department of Migrant Workers, provides an example of a public body with capacity to regulate recruitment by private labor market intermediaries (Ang and Tiongson 2023). Some of the key functions of POEA include: a) issuance of licenses to private recruitment agencies; b) accreditation of foreign employers; c) conduct of pre-employment orientation and anti-illegal recruitment seminars; d) arbitration of complaints against recruitment agencies and employers; and e) provision of legal assistance to victims of illegal recruitment (POEA 2021).

Where public bodies engage in training provision in source countries, their capacity needs to be enhanced, such as through training the trainers, harmonizing their standards with their counterparts in the destination, and upgrading equipment and infrastructure. In other contexts, private actors conduct the training. They should be accredited by governments ideally in sending and receiving countries, have a positive reputation in the market, or both to enable skill recognition and signaling. Either way, training providers and firms need to improve coordination such that the skills that the former equip the workers with respond to the latter's needs. The capacity of stakeholders in source countries to mobilize diasporas in the destination can also be developed, as in the case of the EU Talent Partnerships (EC 2023b).

**Co-investments, including income-share agreements, would promote financial sustainability.** Some labor mobility schemes are solely or mainly funded by destination governments, but that may not be sustainable unless they plan on funding them in perpetuity. Co-investments are successfully being adopted as an alternative. In IOM's training and skill circulation project with North Africa, Y-Med, for instance, aside from funding from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, destination employers and interns shouldered the traineeship stipends and incidental expenses (e.g., local transport, meals outside working hours), respectively (IOM 2023). Although there is scope to increase co-investments, Y-Med and APTC's adoption of the funding model may indicate its role in promoting financial sustainability (IOM

2023; APTC 2020). The maritime industry provides another example of co-investments: Magsaysay Group, a large supplier of sea manpower in Asia, provides facilities and equipment, while employers in destination countries fund the specialized training (Rodriguez 2022). Table 2 illustrates a possible distribution of financial costs and benefits for a given cost category of a labor mobility scheme thereby providing some ideas on how co-investments can be shared fairly and sustainably, which may vary by context.

**Table 2 – Possible distribution of financial costs and benefits by cost category**

<b>Cost category</b>	<b>Who may bear the financial costs</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Who may benefit</b>
Labor market assessments	Destination governments	Identification of mutual skill shortages	Firms in source and destination countries
Development of partnerships domestically and abroad	Source and destination governments	Definition of skill profile; and alignment of education and training standards	Firms in source and destination countries; and education and training providers in source countries
Capacity development of public labor market intermediaries or oversight of private recruitment agencies	Destination governments; multilateral development banks; and international organizations	Match between skill supply and demand (capacity development of public labor market intermediaries); and protection of worker welfare (oversight of private recruitment agencies)	Workers, and firms in source and destination countries (capacity development of public labor market intermediaries); and workers (oversight of private recruitment agencies)
Capacity development of education and training providers or provision of training	Government, and education and training providers in destination countries	Match between skill supply and demand; and improved education and training systems	Workers, and education and training systems in source countries (capacity development of education and training providers); and workers, and firms in source and destination countries (provision of training)
Job recruitment	Firms in source and destination countries; and public labor market intermediaries or private recruitment agencies	Job placement	Workers, and firms in source and destination countries
Relocation	Destination governments but in some contexts, workers, and firms in destination countries	International labor mobility	Workers, and firms in destination countries
Skill recognition	Typically firms in destination countries	Match between skill supply and demand	Workers, and firms in destination countries
Salary	Firms in source and destination countries	Higher incomes	Workers

Integration (e.g., language training, mentoring)	National and sub-national governments, firms, and civil society organizations in destination countries	Social cohesion and acceptability	Workers, and destination countries more broadly
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Note: Not exhaustive

Income-share agreements would also promote financial sustainability. For example, upon completion of their studies in Belgium, France, or Germany and subsequent employment, Malengo scholars from Francophone Africa, Uganda, and Ukraine contribute a share of their income to future beneficiaries for a limited period of time (Malengo 2023). Multilateral development banks (e.g., World Bank), international organizations (e.g., European Union), official development assistance<sup>4</sup> (e.g., New Zealand) have been sources of financing (Lowy Institute 2023; World Bank 2022; APTC 2017d). Incentives, such as tax deductions and dollar matching, and climate financing (e.g., Green Climate Fund, Global Compact on Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund) are potentially additional funding levers (ILO 2022).

**3. Delivering on the benefits while increasing social acceptability and promoting skill recognition**

**Labor mobility generates benefits through financial remittances, return migration, and further human capital investments.** A World Bank study found that over a six-month period, the average seasonal worker in Australia remits about A\$2,200 and transfers A\$6,650 worth of savings to their home countries at the end of a cycle (World Bank 2018). Remittances are used in source countries for education, entrepreneurship, food and clothing expenses, and water access among others. Labor mobility does not only generate benefits through remittances but also through return migration and further investments in human capital development. For example, those who work in Australia also return with improved human and financial capital, social networks, and ideas; and human capital investments could increase from higher expected return to skills (Kapur 2021; Kapur 2014). In fact, after working abroad, some graduates returned and founded their own business, whereas others became skill trainers themselves (APTC 2017a; APTC 2017b; APTC 2017c; APTC 2017e).

**Certain labor mobility schemes were primarily designed to manage the risk of brain drain.** PALIM is skewed toward domestic employment as of yet. In particular, despite lack of labor mobility to Belgium at the height of COVID-19, 41% of the trainees were employed in Morocco as of March 2021 (Flamand 2021). The absorption of trainees in domestic labor markets is more pronounced in the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) as part of the government of Australia’s development assistance to its neighborhood in the Pacific. APTC facilitates delivery of courses in the region, including Australian qualifications, for various sectors. While APTC’s graduate employment rate was 84%, foreign placement was 3% in 2019 (APTC 2020).

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<sup>4</sup> Coordination needs to be improved such that an existing labor mobility scheme that works should be supported by donors (e.g., some would develop institutional capacity for labor market intermediation or oversight of private recruitment agencies while others would improve technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems and access to social protection) to promote synergies and amplify impact (e.g., benefits of education and training to workers and firms) instead of funding disparate schemes.

Nevertheless, PALIM and APTC put in place a multifaceted strategy to manage the risk of brain drain (box 1).

### **Box 1 – PALIM and APTC’s multi-faceted strategy to manage the risk of brain drain**

First, PALIM and APTC seek a net skill gain by building a stock of workers for “home” and “away” tracks thereby increasing the supply of domestic skills. Second, partnerships with domestic industry associations (e.g., General Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises (Confédération Générale des Entreprises or CGEM) and Moroccan Federation of Information Technology, Telecommunications and Offshoring (Federation Marocaine des Technologies de l’Information des Telecommunications et de l’Offshoring or APEBI) in Morocco; Fiji Hotel Tourism Association, Fiji Construction Industry Council, and Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry in the Pacific) were used to reassure them that domestic employers, in addition to employers in the destination, would be able to hire trainees. Third, in PALIM, adjusting the training eligibility criterion from unemployed ICT to unemployed non-ICT graduates could further lower the risk of brain drain because the skill profile of the former is highly sought after both in the Moroccan and Belgian labor markets. Fourth, a narrative around demand for skills and reducing unemployment was articulated to manage public opinion in Morocco. The strategy seems to work: Public opinion is not antagonistic toward the project thus far.

Sources: Rodriguez 2023; Government of Belgium 2022; Government of Morocco 2022c; APTC 2020

**While there are schemes that are relatively successful in placing workers abroad, the share of “away” track has room to grow.** Since GIZ’s Triple Win programme in the nursing sector was launched in 2013, over 4,700 nurses from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Philippines, and Tunisia were placed in Germany (Luciano and Schimpf 2021). Seeking to fill skill shortages in Lithuania’s ICT sector, the Digital Explorers project is successful in placing Nigerian ICT specialists in paid employment or traineeships with Lithuanian ICT companies. In fact, 30 out of an estimated 65 trainees<sup>5</sup> were hired in Lithuania and reintegration support was provided to those who returned to Nigeria (Migration Partnership Facility 2022; Hooper 2021; Center for Global Development (CGD) 2020). The project is expanding to include ICT companies in Estonia and Latvia (Digital Explorers 2023). Some schemes, however, have scope to increase foreign placement. For example, IOM’s Mobility of African Talents through Capacity Building and Hiring (MATCH) supported the recruitment of 8 talents from Nigeria and Senegal for 118 job openings in Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands (IOM 2023).

**Feedback from domestic and foreign employers suggests trainings met their skill requirements more broadly.** 96% of employers reported that they are likely to hire candidates through Talent Beyond Boundaries again (Talent Beyond Boundaries 2023b). Similarly, 91% of surveyed firms in the Pacific who hired APTC graduates agreed that the training had a positive impact on technical development of their employees. Anecdotal evidence from graduates and labor market intermediaries suggested positive feedback and strong demand for APTC graduates from foreign employers in Australia and New Zealand (APTC 2017b; APTC 2017e). As an additional example, interviews with employers and a large industry association in Morocco showed that training met their skill requirements in general—though there are key areas for improvement, including soft skills (Rodriguez 2022).

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<sup>5</sup> 50 and ~15 from first and second stages, respectively (Hooper 2021; CGD 2020).

**Labor mobility schemes apply to various skill levels with important implications for skill recognition.** Y-Med, for instance, connected interns from Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia to Italian employers from various sectors, such as built environment, engineering, ICT, telecommunications, architecture, tourism, agri-food, and pharmaceutical (IOM 2023). To better meet skill needs of source and destination employers, skill recognition—albeit challenging—and harmonization of education and training standards are in order. In GIZ’s Triple Win programme in the nursing sector, workers underwent a process of recognition of qualifications within 12 months (Luciano and Schimpf 2021). The Youth Employability and Skills (YES) project between Germany and Kosovo developed a skill qualification standard for mutual recognition (CGD 2021). Relatedly, the creation of a dedicated entity for assessment of qualifications would enhance systems for recognition of prior training (e.g., Colombia, Denmark) (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2023). As an additional example, in the shipping industry, the United Nations International Maritime Organization (IMO) audits and accredits training centers globally and the certificates that these centers issue are mutually recognized (Ho 2022).

**Digital job-matching platforms complement trainings that seek to ensure skills developed among workers meet employer demands.** Digital job-matching platforms help connect skill supply and demand. Over 5,000 employers and partners, for instance, have access to the EU Talent Pool Pilot (EC 2023a). A review of digital job-matching platforms found that some areas for improvement include hosting additional services (e.g., massive online open courses, including in financial and digital literacy, marketplace for accredited lodging and transportation providers, information on exchange rates and remittance fees, and healthcare) and latching their use onto trainings to increase usage.

**Improved data collection and further studies, including on effects on destination labor markets, could provide stronger evidence about benefits, which in turn could increase social acceptability from local stakeholders in the destination.** Improved data collection, including during and after COVID-19, could provide additional evidence base on the benefits of labor mobility schemes. A World Bank study on Malaysia found that 741 and 671 jobs are generated in services (e.g., hospitality and tourism), and agriculture and mining, respectively for every additional 1,000 foreign workers who join these sectors (Del Carpio et al. 2013). Adapting studies of this kind to labor mobility schemes could help muster wider support from the local populace and other stakeholders in the destination.



#### 4. Overcoming challenges, notably, scaling, such as through improved employer engagement and partnership with governments in training delivery

**Moving labor mobility schemes from pilot to scale builds a stock of workers that will help fill skill shortages. It also makes financial sense. But it entails close collaboration with government agencies.** Operating labor mobility schemes at scale has been a major challenge, but it is necessary to help fill skill shortages in sending and receiving countries. In response, the EU has asked for scale-up plans from pilots—which need to build a learning agenda toward this direction—, and scalable models have been developed. In fact, implementation of a scalable project by a non-profit, Labor Mobility Partnerships (LaMP), is set to begin (Rodriguez 2023). From a microeconomic perspective, scale builds on incurred sunk costs and potentially improved institutional capacity as well as exhibits diminishing marginal costs given relatively high financial cost per trainee during pilots. Scale—through expansion and improvement in regular migration channels—along with robust enforcement would also reduce irregular migration,<sup>6</sup> although that may not be a goal of these schemes (Rodriguez 2023; Barslund, Di Salvo, and Ludolph 2019; Clemens et al. 2018). Government agencies in source countries, such as Ministry of Higher Education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) authorities, have an important role to play in scaling education and training for labor mobility through their role as regulators and in some contexts as service providers themselves (Rodriguez 2023).

#### **To operate at scale, engagement with employers in the destination needs to be enhanced.**

A study of labor mobility schemes in Australia and Europe showed engagement with employers in the destination can be improved, including through better understanding their expectations on the skill profile (e.g., Java developer), sitting in job interviews, and providing corresponding feedback to trainers as well as through reaching out to a wider set of employers by working with industry associations, participating in job fairs, and providing employers detailed information on worker skills to improve match (Rodriguez 2023).

**Promoting social integration and protecting welfare of migrant workers are also key.** Social integration is expected to become more prominent in labor mobility schemes, especially at scale. Language and digital literacy trainings, counselling and mentoring (e.g., Austria), civic integration (e.g., public libraries), and diaspora engagement among others promote social integration (OECD 2023). Language training, for instance, enables access to services and improved communication and interaction with employers and local communities in the destination (OECD 2023). In fact, inclusion of German language training was highly recommended for the YES project between Germany and Kosovo (CGD 2021). Local governments have played a role in promoting social integration, such as through language training, housing, and partnerships with diaspora groups (OECD 2023).

Some receiving country governments (e.g., Australia) have guaranteed minimum wages, improved employer portability, and allocated welfare funding for seasonal workers. Certain sending countries (e.g., Tuvalu) have strengthened consular services and pre-departure training. However, more work needs to be done to promote the welfare of migrant workers (ILO 2021; Fornale and

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<sup>6</sup> Reduction in irregular migration is also contingent on the level of skills as lower-skilled workers tend to engage in the activity.

Kagan 2017). For example, migrant workers can be better protected from abuses, including through improved institutional capacity to regulate private actors where they play the role of labor market intermediaries—to ensure they operate ethically, development of international labor standards-based employment contracts, and creating opportunities for permanent residency particularly for higher-skilled workers and those who received significant training investments (Farbotko 2020; Fornale and Kagan 2017). Recently, IOM spearheaded the development of a human rights-based labor mobility framework in the Pacific (ILO and IOM 2022).

**Various schemes face context-specific challenges that require tailored solutions.**

Engagement of employers as module co-creators, co-trainers, and feedback providers is recommended to help ensure training relevance in PALIM although that has financial cost implications for firms (Rodriguez 2023). To reduce high financial cost per trainee (A\$21,182), APTC seeks to increase the share of local training delivery and support staff in sending countries—which could also promote ownership (Australia DFAT 2021). Meanwhile, THAMM requires applicants to hold diplomas closer to the educational requirements of employers to improve the latter’s participation (Government of Morocco 2022a; Government of Morocco 2022b). The point is that challenges may vary by scheme and sharing and adapting good practices can feed into development of effective solutions.

## 5. Conclusion

Evidence suggests labor mobility schemes can benefit migrant workers and their families and local communities in sending countries, including through financial remittances and return migration, as well as source and destination countries themselves whose skill shortages will be filled by trained workers. Designing labor mobility schemes as a temporary or long-term strategy will be contingent on key factors, including sector, skill level, and training investments. Developing them as a long-term strategy may entail provisions for permanent contracts, employer<sup>7</sup> and visa portability, permanent residency, family reunification, and inclusion in social protection and tax systems.

While some schemes have managed the risk of brain drain, more work needs to be done to allay fears of effects on destination labor markets, which requires improved data collection and further studies among others. More evidence is also needed on how trainings can better meet employer skill needs and on skill recognition, co-investments, and good practices in scaling.

Development of regulatory and legal frameworks with social protection measures and of institutional capacity (e.g., labor market intermediation, oversight of private recruitment agencies, training provision) as well as financial sustainability are fundamental to designing labor mobility schemes. Improved employer engagement, social integration, welfare protection, skill recognition, and close partnership between stakeholders, such as governments and the private sector, will be key to operating them at scale and delivering on their benefits more fully.

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<sup>7</sup> Which is also salient in seasonal worker programs.

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