



**United Nations General Assembly**  
**2013 High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development**

**Roundtable 4 Background Paper:**  
***International and regional labour mobility and its impact on development***

**Introduction**

Labour mobility is an integral component of globalisation. Of the 232 million international migrants worldwide in 2013, around half are estimated to be economically active. Economic and demographic differentials are key drivers of labour mobility. In many developing countries, the increase in the labour force is expected to outpace job creation, ensuring a steady supply of migrant workers. In more developed countries, a shrinking labour force coupled with an increase in educational qualifications of the native population is expected to continue to drive the demand for labour migrants. A rights-based approach is essential to harness the benefits labour migration for countries of origin and destination as well as for migrant workers and their family members.

**1. Governance of labour mobility**

With much migration taking place between pairs of countries and within major regions, labour migration is often governed through bilateral agreements and through regional mechanisms. Despite the recent increase in migration between regions, there is no global mechanism to govern labour migration. Managing the future demand and supply of migrant labour at the bilateral, regional and global level will represent a significant policy challenge in the decades to come.

Many countries consider bilateral agreements an effective means for regulating the recruitment, employment and return of foreign workers. They allow for state involvement, can be tailored towards the specific needs in bilateral migration streams, and allow for the protection of migrant workers. At the same time, these agreements have been criticised as they do not always meet minimum standards for protecting migrant workers and lack effective oversight.

In response to the weaknesses identified in existing bilateral agreements, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has identified 24 recommendations to improve these mechanisms. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have developed a "matrix of good practice", while these three organizations jointly prepared a "Compendium of Good Practice Policy Elements in Bilateral Temporary Labour Agreements".

Free movement of labour is a core objective of many regional economic integration mechanisms. In practice, the free movement of workers at the regional level is often hampered by practical constraints. To address the challenges in implementing free movement of labour provisions in the European Union, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) prepared a set of recommendations, which include improving the portability of pensions and the recognition of professional qualifications; eliminating double taxation of cross-border pensions;

and strengthening job-matching across borders. These recommendations could contribute to enhancing the development impact of migration.

## **2. The impact of labour mobility on development**

Through migration, workers increase their incomes, improve their standards of living, and enlarge the opportunities for themselves and for their family members. Remittances sent home lift individuals and families out of poverty, facilitate access to health and education, and promote women's empowerment. Remittances also have positive effects in communities, especially when matching grants are provided. At the national level, remittances improve the balance of payments in recipient countries.

In destination countries, labour migrants contribute to innovation, create jobs and meet the demands of labour-scarce sectors of the economy. Transnational communities generate trade links and stimulate investment in countries of origin.

Labour migration may also create challenges when small developing countries lose their most talented citizens. In extreme circumstances, the emigration of skilled workers may challenge the implementation of national development goals, notably in the field of health and education.

## **3. Facilitating labour mobility and promoting its development impacts**

### *a. Regular and safe labour mobility*

There is a growing consensus that migration should be regular and safe in order to fully reap its beneficial effects. Measures to achieve this include, inter alia, making migration part of labour market assessments, regulating migrant admissions, improving the selection and matching of migrants with labour market demands, better informing migrants and intermediaries about the migration process, reducing irregular migration and combating human trafficking. Well informed migrants and well managed labour migration improves the outcomes for all concerned.

Policies and programmes that increase channels for regular labour mobility, address mismatches between labour market supply and demand, as well as enforce labour laws and protections can enhance the contribution of labour migration for development.

More effective matching of jobs with skills could help avoid "brain waste" and ensure better conditions of work, higher wages, and thus enhance the contribution of labour migration to development. Improving the recognition of foreign qualifications and diplomas might also be beneficial.

Short-term, temporary or circular labour mobility schemes should respect the principle of non-discrimination and equality of treatment and opportunity, meet labour needs that are genuinely temporary rather than long-term or structural, and include specific provisions to protect the rights of temporary migrant workers.

Other measures that can facilitate regular and safe labour mobility include providing an option for re-entry through multi-entry visa and access to dual citizenship, ensuring the portability of pensions and social security benefits, imposing financial security bonds on migrant workers or their employers, introducing mandatory savings schemes, and enforcing labour and immigration laws.

Cooperation and policy coherence, at all levels including with employers' and workers' organizations, are essential for developing sound labour mobility programmes and schemes. In addition to cooperation between immigration

and labour departments, agencies and departments responsible for development, education, and social services should also be involved in implementing such programmes.

*b. Rights of migrant workers*

Despite the existing normative and legal framework, many labour migrants do not enjoy the rights they are entitled to. Categories of particular concern are low-skilled migrants, domestic workers, victims of human trafficking and young migrants. A rights-based approach to labour migration is also integral to achieving the development potential of labour mobility.

In countries of destination, migrants who are denied their basic rights, such as equal pay, unfairly compete with local workers. Moreover, their contribution to development is strained as their remittances will be lower. Enhancing the protection of the rights of migrant workers, including lower-skilled workers in temporary migration programmes, is an important way to reduce the negative impacts of migration. Concrete measures include the provision of reliable and accurate information at the time of departure; reducing abuses in recruitment and in employment at destination; and ensuring equality of treatment with respect to wages and working conditions.

Migrant domestic workers, many of whom are women, are often unprotected by labour laws. Promoting the ratification of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) would be an important step to address the vulnerability of such workers.

*c. Costs of labour migration*

Much of the development impact of labour migration is eroded by excessive costs and fees. Ensuring that the upfront costs associated with recruitment are paid by employers would significantly increase the development impacts of migration by encouraging greater labour mobility and sending of remittances. Other measures could include eliminating unscrupulous intermediaries, increasing market competition and a ratings or certification system for recruitment agencies. Reducing the costs of migration, including the transfer costs of remittances, could be a concrete objective for the post-2015 United Nations Development Agenda.

*d. Strengthening the evidence base*

The evidence base on the impact of labour migration fails to capture the increasing complexity and interdependence of labour markets at the bilateral, regional and global levels. Improving data and research on labour mobility, including through inclusion of questions relating to migration in national censuses, household and labour force surveys could be an important step. Better information should also be collected and analysed on the economic and social impact of migration on countries of origin and destination, as well as on migrant workers and their families.

**Questions for consideration during Round Table 4**

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What approaches are most effective in facilitating labour mobility, including its impacts for development, while protecting migrant rights?</li><li>2. What are the main obstacles for the implementation of labour mobility in regional economic cooperation mechanisms and how can such obstacles be overcome?</li><li>3. What concrete measures or mechanisms can the High-level Dialogue recommend to improve the governance and development impacts of labour mobility?</li></ol> |
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