



# MAKING MIGRATION WORK: AN ANALYSIS OF SKILLS-BASED MOBILITY SCHEMES FOR MEDITERRANEAN YOUTH



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# MAKING MIGRATION WORK: AN ANALYSIS OF SKILLS-BASED MOBILITY SCHEMES FOR MEDITERRANEAN YOUTH

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**his white paper was commissioned by IOM Italy to the Agency For Peacebuilding and was produced in the framework of the Y-med project, implemented by the International Organization for Migration and funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Launched in 2017, the project promotes skills-based mobility schemes that offer young migrants from North African countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Libya) the opportunity to carry out internships within Italian companies. Through this scheme, the project strives to enhance the professional prospects of migrant workers in Italy and support post-internship job placement in participants' respective countries of origin. The demographic shifts underway in the European context, labour market shortages and rapidly changing markets that demand for new skill sets – including as a result of the European Union (EU) twin green and digital transitions – call for actions and policies that support a flexible circulation of foreign labour into the EU market. In recent years, the European Union has indeed been increasingly calling on labour migration schemes and processes as a key policy tool to address shortages within its labour market, placing the establishment of structured Talent Partnerships on top of its labour migration agenda. At the same time, the development and socioeconomic needs of sending countries could benefit from brain gain through skills development and circulation. Indeed, to be effective and sustainable in the long term, labour migration policies and actions need to consider and cater to the developmental impacts they may have on labour-sending countries while striving for schemes that are mutually



beneficial to all parties involved. The objective of this particular white paper is to assess, analyse and compare a selection of existing projects and distil lessons as well as recommendations to further facilitate youth mobility for learning and work purposes, including through skills-based circular migration. The comparative analysis undertaken in this paper points to lacunas in existing programming, including limited scalability and ownership by local entities to effectively sustain schemes beyond funding and programme support. An improved model to skills-based circularity would better link internship schemes with employment prospects and strengthen public–private interstate cooperation through stronger multisided and multi-stakeholder partnerships on education, training and employment.

Albeit much broader in scope, this white paper and the findings presented therein complement the research conducted under the Y-med evaluation which was undertaken between January and June 2023 and whose objective was to provide an external and independent review of the Y-med project for IOM Italy.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The Evaluation of the Y-med project was undertaken by the Agency for Peacebuilding and covers the whole period of project implementation from November 2017 to December 2022 and all the countries where activities took place. The final report is available here: [Evaluation of the Y-med Project](#).



## LIST OF ACRONYMS

<b>ANPAL</b>	National Agency on Active Labour Market Policies ( <i>Agenzia Nazionale Politiche Attive Lavoro</i> )
<b>BLMAs</b>	Bilateral Labour Migration Agreements
<b>CEPS</b>	Centre for European Policy Studies
<b>CoD</b>	Country of Destination
<b>CoO</b>	Country of Origin
<b>Enabel</b>	Belgian Development Agency ( <i>Agence belge de développement</i> )
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>GCM</b>	Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
<b>GIZ</b>	German Development Cooperation Agency ( <i>Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit</i> )
<b>HOMERe</b>	High Opportunity for Mediterranean Executive Recruitment
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communications Technology
<b>IFAD</b>	International Fund for Agricultural Development
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>ITCILO</b>	International Training Centre
<b>MENTOR</b>	Mediterranean Network for Training Orientation to Regular Migration





<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>OFII</b>	French Office of Immigration and Integration ( <i>Office Français de l'Immigration et de l'Intégration</i> )
<b>PALIM</b>	Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortage Through Innovative Labour Migration Models
<b>PDO</b>	Pre-Departure Orientation
<b>SMPs</b>	Skills Mobility Partnerships
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>TCNs</b>	Third-country Nationals
<b>THAMM</b>	Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa





## 1. INTRODUCTION

The following white paper seeks to formulate recommendations to build improved skills-based mobility schemes through on the basis of a comparative analysis conducted of recent or ongoing schemes between North Africa and Europe. After briefly laying out the methodology underlying this research and describing the policy and regulatory context on labour migration in the European Union and in Italy, the paper zooms into different features of each of the interventions under review, identifying good practices as well as observed lacunas in their design and implementation. The paper then analyses the potential interlinkages between skills-based migration schemes and development, and highlights the key obstacles that might hinder the realization of successful schemes that benefit all. In that vein, the paper looks at opportunities and recommendations to fully reap the potential benefits of skills-based schemes not only for destination countries hosting migrant workers, but also for origin countries and migrant workers themselves. On that basis, this white paper proposes an improved framework for skills-based mobility schemes for Mediterranean youth that is in line with EU-level developments on Talent Partnerships as well as with IOM's *Skills Mobility Partnerships* model for well-managed and mutually beneficial labour migration processes.<sup>2</sup>

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2 The analysis, recommendations and improved model presented in this paper leave out aspects linked to fair and ethical recruitment and migrant workers' protection although it recognizes the importance of foreseeing ethical recruitment of workers and conditions to uphold their labour and human rights throughout the migration cycle.





## 2. METHODOLOGY

**T**he research undertaken in the framework of this white paper relies both on primary and secondary data sources. The primary data sources emanate from 10 interviews conducted with labour migration experts and practitioners,<sup>3</sup> while the secondary sources include Y-med evaluation and findings as well as literature on circular migration related primarily to the countries involved in the Y-med project, namely Italy, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. The methodological approach adopted under this research is comparative, theory based and participatory. Indeed, the paper draws on the analysis of eight different skills-based mobility schemes, contrasting and comparing various aspects of their design and implementation – albeit not exhaustively. The comparative analysis which centres the paper draws from the projects' key documents, information publicly available and interviews with the Y-med project management team. Considering that some of the projects under review were still ongoing at the time of writing, the analysis focuses more on the interventions' logic than on their actual results. Interventions included in the comparative analysis were selected on the basis of similarities in features with Y-med, including:

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3 The following stakeholders were interviewed by the Agency for Peacebuilding from February to March 2023: CEPS, College of Europe, Enabel, European University Institute, European Training Foundation, Municipality of Milan, OFII, University of Turin, IOM (country offices in Italy and Morocco, and Regional Office for Middle East and North Africa in Cairo).

(a) their involvement of EU and North African countries (Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia); (b) their focus on upskilling young job seekers; (c) the inclusion of an internship or labour mobility component; as well as (d) provisions for post-placement job seeking assistance for participants upon return to their country of origin. *Torno subito*, one of the eight projects included in the study, deviates from the above criteria but has been nevertheless included in the analysis for the sake of its innovative demand-driven design, which requires beneficiaries to autonomously identify private entities for training courses or internships without intermediation.

The participatory quality of the research was achieved by integrating the different perspectives and insights gathered from interviewed IOM staff and stakeholders, ensuring that the findings both address stakeholders' priority interests while reflecting their experience and expertise in the area of skills-based migration.



### 3. KEY CONCEPTS

**T**he concept of circular migration is broad and covers a wide array of schemes, often also being confused with temporary and return migration.<sup>4</sup> Although there is no universal definition of circular migration in the literature, IOM defines it as “a form of migration in which people repeatedly move back and forth between two or more countries”<sup>5</sup> while temporary migration is defined as “migration for a specific motivation and purpose with the intention to return to the country of origin or habitual residence after a limited period or to undertake an onward movement”.<sup>6</sup> Other authors or institutions highlight that circular and temporary migration both share a temporary nature. Yet, circular migration implies a migrant’s continuous engagement in both origin and destination countries for different reasons, from educational purposes to work opportunities while temporary migration is limited to one cycle of mobility.

Another factor distinguishing different types of non-permanent migration relates to the length of stay in the country of destination: if the length of stay is shorter than three months, it is generally considered a visit, even if repeated several times. The literature also makes a regulatory distinction

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4 See for example: European Migration Network, 2011.

5 IOM, 2019.

6 Ibid.



between circular and temporary migration schemes whereby in the former case, migrants are allowed to re-enter the destination country after their return to their country of origin, contingent upon certain conditions including length of stay and the nature of their work and residence permits. From this angle, circular migration schemes offer a greater degree of flexibility as compared to strictly temporary schemes.<sup>7</sup> It is also worthwhile noting that in some cases, migration schemes that are initially intended as temporary can transform into circular schemes in cases where economic opportunities re-emerge or the temporary migration schemes result in the establishment of ties between the businesses/private sector in the countries involved that would allow for circularity between branches of the same company. Other external factors linked to migrant workers' personal choice to return and re-enter a country following a first successful placement or the desired retention by employers of foreign workforce can also determine whether an originally intended temporary movement becomes circular or even, in some cases, permanent. According to the European Migration Network, "there is often a very thin line between the policies and practices of temporary and circular migration, and they share many similar characteristics. ... Indeed, all forms of circular migration are (or rather start as) temporary migration because they involve the migrant spending temporary periods in more than one location. However, some forms of circular migration can be more "permanent" than others, for example, when, in the case of the EU, a Member State allows migrants, participating in repetitive temporary stays, to accumulate residency which can ultimately lead to a permanent residence status".<sup>8</sup> For medium- and high-skilled migration, workers in high-demand occupation have leverage and often face multiple choices as to their country of employment. In such cases, the period during which migrants move back and forth between their country of origin and one or more destination countries is more

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7 Triandafyllidou, 2010.

8 European Migration Network, 2011.

complex, due to the greater margin of choice available to workers in high demand. In that case, their circularity can involve two or more countries and might very much depend on both the attractiveness of a particular market at a given time (career development opportunities, salary, integration prospects and portability of social rights, workers' rights and so on) as well as the level of complexity and bureaucracy involved in the admissions and migration procedures into a given country.

While the migration of workers involved in seasonal employment, including agricultural workers and professionals within the tourism and hospitality sector, is also defined as circular given the back and forth movement between their origin country and a given destination country, this paper excludes this very particular type of circular migration and focuses principally on non-seasonal skills-based mobility schemes that target medium and highly skilled migration to Europe, particularly in white collar professions. For the sake of this paper, circular migration is understood as the temporary migration of workers from their country of origin for the purpose of pursuing an internship, a traineeship and/or an employment opportunity within a foreign company – in this case, in Europe – and their return to that country, with a repeated back and forth movement. Workers partaking in skills-based circular migration schemes in the context of this paper do so with the intention of returning to their country of origin following the completion of a mobility period abroad (for an internship, a traineeship or an employment contract) aimed at building their skills, with potential prospects to remigrate. For the sake of simplicity, this type of movement will be referred to as simply “skills-based mobility” throughout this paper, understood as a form of learning mobility.<sup>9</sup>

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9 The European Platform on Learning Mobility defines learning mobility as “mobility of young people (...) undertaken freely and voluntarily for a specific period of time, consciously organised for educational purposes, to impact on the local community or to acquire new competences (knowledge, skills, attitudes or values).” For more information: [European Platform on Learning Mobility - Youth Partnership](#).



## **4. CONTEXTUALIZING LABOUR MIGRATION AND SKILLS-BASED MOBILITY SCHEMES IN POLICY AND PRACTICE**

**T**he following section provides the practical, policy and regulatory context within which labour migration and skills-based mobility schemes inscribe themselves today. After describing the global context on labour migration and international mobility for the purposes of training and work, and the relevant global frameworks (SDGs, GCM), the section zooms into the European context and EU policies and regulations that govern labour migration and learning mobility of trainees and workers to the European Union, covering the EU labour migration acquis and its legislative and policy plans to attract more skills to the European Union. The section ends on a description of the Italian system to help better frame the context in which the Y-med skills-based mobility scheme was implemented, targeting young migrants wishing to gain experience in Italian companies.

### **4.1 LABOUR AND SKILLS-BASED MOBILITY IN GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS**

#### **Labour migration as a key component of the 2030 Agenda**

Crossing international borders to work has become one of the key motivations behind global migration, whether driven by economic inequalities, seeking employability and/or employment opportunities, or a combination



thereof. The rising impact of economic, political and environmental crises worldwide as well as changing demographics, with ageing populations in some parts of the world (such as Europe) and a “youth budge” in others (such as Africa) are leading to global imbalances in the demand and supply of labour, which have in turn contributed to rising labour migration. The 2021 ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers, indicate that international migrant workers constitute 5 per cent of the global workforce making them an integral part of the global economy and key contributors to economic productivity worldwide.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the significance of migration on the world stage, it is only in the past decades that migration has been recognized and understood as an inherent aspect of social change, a key component of governance and a driver of socioeconomic transformation in international policy. The inclusion of migration in the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) (2030 Agenda) and its SDGs was a major stepping stone in this direction, wherein the essential contribution of migration to development was clearly recognized. Indeed, the SDGs’ central reference to migration is made in Target 10.7 “To facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people”, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies (integral to Goal 10 “To reduce inequality within and among countries”). Of more direct relevance to this paper, Target 8.8 “To protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments ... including to migrant workers” (under SDG 8 to promote “Decent work and economic growth”), explicitly acknowledges labour mobility and migrant workers’ protection as an important accelerator to the achievement of sustainable development.

When managed well, labour migration can not only benefit the migrant workers themselves and their host communities and employers, but also their communities and countries of origin. The potential developmental gains of labour migration, including upskilling of origin communities and

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10 ILO, 2021.

transfer of knowledge and skills in key sectors of origin economies, can only be appropriately reaped when migration policies and programmes are informed by evidence and sufficiently linked to national and/or regional employment and development policies. Although migration should not be considered as a panacea for shifting demographics or skills shortages, the circulation of skills could certainly contribute to global markets and to improving demographic trends, as well as to economic growth and development in origin countries.<sup>11</sup> However, this can only materialize if such schemes are designed with developmental considerations at their centre. The skills based circular mobility schemes partaking in this study will be analysed under, inter alia, the lens of the positive impacts that labour migration programmes could potentially have on the migration-development nexus, and the concept of reciprocity.

### Labour Migration in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

The increasing importance of migration in the global policy stage has also led to the creation of the [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#) in 2018, which was adopted by 164 countries. The GCM encourages states to improve their governance of migration and to strengthen the contribution of migrants and migration to sustainable development. In the latter respect, the GCM is framed in a way consistent with Target 10.7 of the 2030 Agenda in which Member States commit to cooperate internationally to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration. More specifically, the GCM is designed to provide a policy framework that supports international cooperation on the governance of international migration, including labour migration, and give States the flexibility to pursue

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11 European Commission (2023), "Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions on Skills and Talent Mobility". Available [here](#).

implementation based on their own migration realities and capacities. On labour migration more specifically, the GCM encourages its members to improve workplace productivity and deliver decent work outcomes for migrant workers. It supports members in readjusting migration policies to effectively include labour market aspects that involve laws, policies, institutions and practices across borders. GCM's Objective 5 calls on Member States to enhance the availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration – including labour mobility – while Objective 18 invites them to invest in skills development and facilitate the mutual recognition of skills, qualifications and competences. While a bit broader, GCM Objective 23 also recognizes the importance of cross-border cooperation and international partnerships to ensure safe and mutually beneficial labour mobility. In the context of this paper, these objectives serve as a guiding framework through which skills-based mobility schemes are analysed and assessed, and based on which a more holistic and improved model is proposed.

## 4.2 THE CONTINENTAL CONTEXT – EUROPEAN UNION DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT AND MARKET TRANSFORMATIONS

### Demographic shifts

Europe is an ageing continent with a total working population size that would shrink in the absence of positive net migration. In fact, according to Eurostat population projections, without net migration the working-age population would shrink by 9 per cent by 2030 and by 28 per cent by 2060 compared to 2015 population levels. The working-age population is expected to decline even with net migration into the European Union, but at slower rates: of 4 per cent by 2030 and 13 per cent by 2060.<sup>12</sup> According to Eurostat 2023 data, the EU vacancy rate was at 3 per cent in the third quarter of 2023 with varying percentages across the bloc, including 2.9 per cent for Italy, 4.7 per cent for Belgium and 2.4 per cent

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<sup>12</sup> Eurostat, 2018. Available [here](#).



for France (the destination countries involved in the schemes under review). This demographic trend will continue creating severe skills and labour shortages in several sector areas which, if not countered, will be detrimental to the EU labour markets and productivity growth forecasts in the European Union, thereby negatively affecting the region's economy in the long run. This further poses challenges to the sustainability of social security systems in participation-based welfare states with the varying social implications that come with it. Today already, labour markets across the European Union experience shortages in key industries, including in the ICT, health-care and hospitality sectors.<sup>13</sup>

### European Union labour market restructuration

In addition to such demographic trends, accumulated economic and public health crises coupled with the green and digital transitions that are underway in the European Union have led to a market restructuration and shifts in the skills on demand. On the one hand, key sectors relying on manual labour such as manufacturing as well as service-intensive industries (such as hospitality) are expected to become heavily automated and therefore, less reliant on human labour. Already today, machines and technology are replacing jobs like cashiering and waitressing – vacancies that are overwhelmingly represented by migrant workforce. On the other hand, the twin transition will also generate the need for smart and/or green skills on the continent as Europe moves towards decarbonizing, adopting green practices and digitizing key sectors of its economy. These market shifts will not only require actions and policies to support the reabsorption of workers at risk of losing their jobs (often in sectors highly represented by migrant workers) potentially through upskilling and reallocation within

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13 Eurostat 2023 indicators available [here](#).

the European Union market; but will also call for the need to attract fresh foreign skills that fulfil the evolving needs of the labour market.<sup>14</sup>

In light of the urgency to attract new talent and the growing competitiveness on the international labour market stage, EU Member States have an important imperative to improve the effectiveness of their labour migration systems in view of filling shortages. Highly skilled migrant workers with ample choice to engage in a variety of international markets will opt for speedy, flexible, transparent and low-burden immigration systems. As for companies in European labour markets, they can be disincentivized to engage foreign talents in the face of complex procedures and heavy bureaucratic requirements.<sup>15</sup> To generate more interest towards the bloc and render the continent more attractive to foreign workers, a host of policies and regulatory revisions have taken place in the past few years to make the European Union more attractive to foreign workers and facilitate their migration to Europe. The following subsection delves deeper into the EU acquis on labour migration and plans to strengthen its existing framework to attract talent more effectively to the continent.

### 4.3 EUROPEAN UNION LABOUR MIGRATION POLICY AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

#### Policy framework

Sourcing labour force from abroad in the framework of labour mobility schemes is in fact increasingly being resorted as a policy instrument in addressing EU labour shortages while also supporting the twin transition. EU Member States are adopting a “whole-of-government” approach to migration and increasingly partner with a range of stakeholders – including public–private partnerships – to address labour shortages and the development, security and human rights dimensions of migration simultaneously. The European Union

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14 Fakhry, 2022.

15 European Commission, 2023. Available [here](#).

has devised and revised policy and regulatory frameworks to attract migrant workforce that respond to skills shortages and facilitate their admission and integration in the region. Funding support released by the European Union in view of piloting such mobility schemes and the setup of the Migration Partnership Facility under the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility<sup>16</sup> developed in 2005, spurred the implementation of such tools as a viable solution to labour shortages. In that framework, the migration-development nexus<sup>17</sup> and several approaches to circular migration which deserve particular attention have started to re-emerge.

The EU New Pact on Migration and Asylum, launched by the European Commission in September 2020,<sup>18</sup> aims to put in place a common framework for asylum and migration management at the EU level with integrated policymaking. It reaffirms the importance of structured partnerships around labour migration to address EU skills needs in light of its growing shortages and increasing global competitiveness in the “race for talent”. Indeed, and of relevance to the context at hand, the proposal includes extensive sections on international partnerships and attracting skills and talent to the European Union in the face of highly competitive international labour markets. The Pact proposes to attract skills and talent to the European Union by establishing Talent Partnerships with third countries, creating a EU Talent Pool to better match skills and strengthening the EU legal and policy frameworks in the area of labour migration. The Pact also prioritizes engagement with African countries as well as the EU Neighbourhood, the Western Balkans – although it also notes the intention of expanding to other regions. These Talent Partnerships intend to place a greater focus on migrant workers’ skills development, an essential component which the Pact seeks to integrate into the very fabric of labour mobility schemes to the European Union.

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16 European Commission, 2011.

17 Council of the European Union, 2005.

18 European Commission, 2020.

In parallel to establishing Talent Partnerships, the Pact also proposes to strengthen the EU legal framework on legal migration. It proposes to do so by either revising or better enforcing the implementation of a series of existing directives relevant to labour migration and skills mobility (see below). The Skills and Talent Package<sup>19</sup> published as a follow up to the Pact further defined the EU-wide labour migration framework on labour migration, proposing key changes for more efficient and more attractive immigration systems. Of note, the “EU Youth Mobility Scheme” is expected to encourage skilled young people from third countries “to come to the EU to reside, travel and work for a limited period of time”.<sup>20</sup> This could help enhance the scope of youth mobility programmes by complementing national initiatives on labour mobility. As proposed by the Commission, exploring the feasibility of facilitating intra-EU mobility for the participants in such a scheme (for example, by lifting the obligations to apply for a new visa), could help reduce the administrative burden for migrants, employers and public administrations, while increasing the attractiveness of the European Union as an employment destination. Moreover, the European Commission released a communication on a series of new measures on skills and talent, in November 2023, seeking to address labour shortages by attracting skills and talent from non-EU Member States. The measures focus on three areas: (a) the legislative proposal of the EU Talent Pool; (b) a Commission recommendation on the recognition of qualifications of third-country nationals; and (c) a proposal for a Council recommendation on a learning mobility framework “Europe on the move”. As highlighted in the communication, increasing the EU’s attractiveness is perceived to be key to the future health of the EU labour market, making learning and skills-based mobility a key policy goal.<sup>21</sup>

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19 European Commission, 2022a.

20 Ibid.

21 European Commission, 2023.

## Regulatory framework

The European Union legal framework on labour migration is articulated around a series of directives that broadly govern the regulatory modalities under which the schemes assessed in this paper take place. A selection of key directives are illustrated in the box below (Box 1):<sup>22</sup>

### BOX 1: EUROPEAN UNION LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON LABOUR MIGRATION

- **The EU blue card directive:** sets out the entry and residence conditions for highly qualified non-EU nationals wishing to work in a highly qualified job in a European Union country (other than Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom) and for their families.
- **Intra-corporate transferees directive:** sets out the conditions of entry and residence of TCNs in the framework of intra-corporate transfers.
- **Students and researchers directive:** sets the conditions of entry and residence of TCNs for the purposes of research, studies, training, voluntary service, pupil exchange schemes or educational projects and au pairing.
- **Single permit directive:** proposes a single application procedure for a single permit for third-country nationals to reside and work in the territory of a Member State and on a common set of rights for third-country workers legally residing in a Member State.
- **Long-term residents directive:** sets out the conditions under which TCNs can obtain long-term resident status, which grants them a set of rights on a par with EU nationals.

In March 2019, the European Commission published a fitness check of EU legislation on legal migration.<sup>23</sup> This fitness check assesses the existing EU legislation in light of current and future challenges, with a view to identifying issues, gaps, inconsistencies and ways of simplifying and streamlining the current EU framework to help improve the management of legal migration flows. From a general perspective, the fitness check confirmed that the provisions set out in the directives still reflect the needs identified in the region at the time of analysis, although some discrepancies have emerged over time. The key issues identified include: (a) complex and

22 We exclude here the [Employers' Sanction Directive](#) and the [Seasonal Workers Directive](#) as they are less relevant to the topic at hand in this paper.

23 European Commission, 2019.

inefficient application procedures and unclear rights which in some cases prolong the procedures and decrease the EU attractiveness for migrant workers; (b) certain categories of migrants are not covered by scope of the directive or any other EU legal instrument; (c) there are differing rules on admission conditions for low- and medium-skilled workers; (d) workers are not sufficiently protected from exploitation; and (e) a large margin of discretion is given to the Member States, allowing for diverging rules, which in turn weakens harmonization of the rules at the EU level. Overall, the fitness check concluded that while the identified gaps in EU policies are mostly covered under national rules, they result in an overall fragmented system, which also affects the coherence and the effectiveness of the legal framework. This of course does not only affect the quality of labour migration schemes in terms of process, effectiveness and protection guarantees, but can also affect the direction mid- and highly skilled worker take in terms of their migration pathways – potentially opting for faster and more efficient systems beyond the European continent.

While the Pact acknowledges that labour migration policy represents a national competence, it also highlights the need for an EU-wide framework to effectively regulate labour migration and attract highly skilled foreigners to the block as a whole. More specifically, it calls on the European Parliament and Council to finalize the reform of the EU Blue Card Directive which would propose more inclusive admission conditions, improved rights, swift and flexible procedures, improved possibilities for intra-EU labour mobility, and harmony between national and EU systems. It proposes to review the Directive on long-term residents to promote and facilitate the intra-EU mobility of workers; as well as to undertake a review of the Single Permit Directive to simplify the admission procedures for all third-country workers – all of which should attract more skilled workers to the EU market.

### European Union recast of the Blue Card Directive

On 7 October 2021, the European Council adopted the Revised EU Blue Card Directive with the intention to streamline and harmonize the current EU Blue Card infrastructure throughout the region. The new conditions set therein attempt to address some of the key shortcomings identified

in the fitness check by further standardizing the conditions of entry and residence for highly skilled candidates across the board, expanding the eligibility criteria and access to labour markets, and facilitate intra-EU mobility for principal permit holder and their dependents. The revised Directive entered into force on 17 November 2021. EU Member States are expected to transpose it into their national legislation by 17 November 2023. The box below (Box 2) illustrates the key changes introduced by the EU Blue Card Directive Recast.<sup>24</sup>

### BOX 2: KEY CHANGES INTRODUCED BY THE EU BLUE CARD DIRECTIVE RECAST

- **More flexible threshold salary requirements:** to qualify for an EU Blue Card, the salary threshold is reduced to between 1 and 1.6 times the average gross annual salary, making it more accessible to potential foreign employees. The minimum duration for a contract of employment is also reduced from one year to six months allowing for temporary assignments.
- **Easier qualifications and skills equivalency:** new rules proposed to facilitate the recognition of professional skills for occupations in the ICT sector. Applicants with professional experience equivalent to a higher education qualification in some specific sectors are also eligible to apply — thereby alleviating degree verification requirements for professionals in that sector.
- **More flexibility to change position or employers:** during the first year, EU Blue Card holders are only required to complete a new labour market test if they wish to change position or employer. After this period, EU Blue Card holders may be subject to an obligation to notify a change in their situation to the relevant national authorities.
- **Expanded eligibility to highly skilled beneficiaries of international protection:** beneficiaries of international protection will be eligible to apply for an EU Blue Card, thereby expanding the pool of talent to which this Directive is applicable.
- **Eligibility to family reunification:** to attract and retain highly skilled workers from outside the European Union, family members of EU Blue Card holders are now able to accompany them and access the European labour market.
- **Enabled intra-EU mobility:** EU Blue Card holders and their family members will also be able to move to a second Member State based on simplified mobility rules after one year of employment in the first Member State. Periods of time spent working in different Member States will also be taken into account, facilitating easier access to the EU long-term resident status.

<sup>24</sup> European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021.

## Single Permit Directive

The main objectives of the Single Permit Directive are to establish a single application procedure for a combined work and residence permit and guarantee a common set of rights for eligible third-country nationals, based on equal treatment with nationals of the Member State that grants the single permit. The EU proposal that was adopted on 27 April 2022,<sup>25</sup> following plans postulated in the Pact, aims to streamline the single permit application procedure to make it more effective.

Currently, the overall duration of application procedures has shown to deter employers from international recruitment as well as foreign workers from engaging in the EU labour market.<sup>26</sup> Reducing this duration is expected to help increase the EU attractiveness and thereby better address labour shortages in key economic sectors. The proposal also includes new requirements to strengthen the safeguards and equal treatment of third-country nationals as compared to EU citizens and improve their protection from labour exploitation by allowing workers to change employers within the period of validity of the permit. Furthermore, the proposal includes new obligations for Member States to oversee inspections, monitoring mechanisms and sanctions against employers infringing national provisions.

## Long-Term Residents Directive

In March 2023, [final compromises on the Long-Term Residents Directive Recast](#) were proposed by the Rapporteur<sup>27</sup> on the Long-Term Residents Directive Recast. The purpose of the Directive is to create a harmonized

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25 European Commission, 2022b.

26 European Commission, 2023.

27 Rapporteur: Damian Boeselager, European Parliament, Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE). See [REPORT](#) on the proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the status of third-country nationals who are long-term residents (recast) (COM(2022)0650 – C9-0162/2022 – 2022/0134(COD)) available [here](#).

EU long-term resident status and set out rules on the procedures and rights associated with this status. It aims at ensuring equal treatment of third-country nationals, fostering their integration and social inclusion, and enhancing their right to intra-EU mobility. Of direct relevance to this paper, the rules set out in this directive also aim to increase the Union's attractiveness to third-country skills and talents.

The amendments proposed by the Commission to the Long-term Residents Directive to facilitate the return of TCNs to their country of origin for longer periods – extending it from the current 12 months to 24 months, without losing their rights to long-term residence, have the potential to encourage circular mobility, while improving the longer term prospects for migrants and employers in both countries.<sup>28</sup> Similar arrangements, allowing for back and forth movement between the country of origin and the country of destination, while providing better prospects for long-term work and residence rights in the latter, could also be considered at Member State level in order to render circular migration more sustainable. The proposal to reduce the total time frame of residence in the European Union from five to three years also offers migrant workers with lower thresholds and higher prospects to obtain residency which could facilitate circular mobility between their country of origin and EU destination country with more ease. The Rapporteur also proposes to reduce the number of continuous residency period from two to one year, further facilitating the cumulation of three total years as a condition to apply for residency. In terms of assessing the applicants' resources as part of a set of criteria to obtain residency, conditions set in the proposed recast have been laxer and take account of disability, pregnancy and other impediments making it easier for applicants to prove stable, regular and adequate resources.<sup>29</sup>

These legislative changes combined could not only contribute to harmonize the labour migration system at the European Union and national levels but also play into a stronger, more flexible and more attractive immigration system.

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28 European Commission, 2022c.

29 European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, 2023.

## 4.4 THE LOCAL CONTEXT IN ITALY

### Demographic and labour market context

The last few years have seen a steady decline in the Italian population down to a historical low in January 2023, with the total dropping to just under 59 million people, including 5 million people with foreign citizenship (that is, 8% of the population). Nevertheless, as of January 2022, the percentage of people “not in education, employment or training” (NEETs) between the ages of 15–29 is still among the highest in Europe standing at 23.10 per cent despite an increase of labour force participation which stood at 66.2 per cent in March 2023.<sup>30</sup>

Overall, the main sectors of the Italian economy include services, manufacturing, construction and agriculture. The latest forecasts from the Excelsior Unioncamere/ANPAL information system for the period 2023–2027 show a need for employment of around 3.8 million people, particularly in trade and tourism, public and private services, the public sector, health care, training and culture, finance and other key industries. National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) investments will generate around 70 per cent of new jobs in four main sectors including construction and infrastructure (21%), tourism and trade (18%), advanced services (16%) and education and culture (13%).<sup>31</sup> At the regional level, Lombardy will have the largest share of employment demand, followed by Lazio, Veneto and Emilia Romagna. These figures clearly forecast the need for new and varied skills across different levels and within different sectors of employment, potentially also implying the need for labour migration as a possible tool to address forecasted skills’ needs in Italy. There is momentum, therefore, to analyse the effectiveness of existing policies and schemes, and espouse an improved model for labour migration to Italy and Europe more broadly.

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30 EURES, 2023.

31 Ibid.



## The Italian immigration schemes and processes for mid- to highly skilled graduates and workers

In Italy, immigration policies fall under the competence of the Ministry of Interior and work permits, eligibility criteria and procedural requirements are harmonized across the country. The authorities responsible for immigration procedures in Italy are the Ministry of Interior through their local immigration offices, known as “Single Desks for Immigration” (Sportello Unico Immigrazione/Prefettura) and the police offices (Ufficio Immigrazione/Questura); Ministry of Labour – through the local labour office (*Ispettorato Territoriale del Lavoro*); Ministry of Foreign Affairs – through the Italian embassies and consulates. The “Decreto Flussi”<sup>32</sup> (or “Flows Decree”) establishes the maximum quota of entries of non-EU citizens for reasons of work – including of highly skilled workers. Nevertheless, procedural steps processing times and document requirements may vary between destination regions and cities depending on the policies of the local police stations engaged in the immigration system. The immigration system in Italy offers several permit types for migrant workers depending on their skills profile and the nature of activities to be carried out in Italy. Intra-corporate transferees and a more general programme for highly skilled workers via the EU Blue Card are available to highly skilled workers.

Mostly relevant to the Y-med project itself, Italy Ministry of Labour and Social Policies together with the Ministry of Interior, also established (through the regulation contained in the Ministerial Decree of 25 March 1998, n. 286) a system of quotas to allow the entry into Italy of third-country nationals for training and internship purposes. In that context, third-country national interns who intend to complete a training course started in the country of origin and obtain professional experience in a host organization in Italy, can enter with a study visa. However, limitations are placed on the types of roles the interns can fulfil and the number of hours they can work (limited to 20 hours

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32 For more information, please refer to: [Procedure flussi](#) | Ministero dell'Interno.

a week for a 12-months internship, or 40 hours for an internship lasting no longer than 6 months). Although third-country nationals under this scheme are not paid a salary, they are entitled to a “participation allowance”, the value of which is established by regional regulations, in addition to coverage of food and accommodation costs paid by the host. The duration of such internship can range from a minimum of 3 to a maximum of 12 months, including any extensions, in line with regional legislative provisions.<sup>33</sup> Through that same law, the Italian Government recently simplified the administrative procedures so as to allow smooth conversion of residence permits of TCN interns into work permits allowing them to pursue employment following completion of their internship.

The number of TCNs who can enter Italy under this scheme is determined within the limits of the three-year quota established by the decree of the Minister of Labour and Social Policies in agreement with the Minister of Interior and the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. For the three-year period of 2020–2022 and 2023–2025,<sup>34</sup> the decree established a quota of 7,500 visas for internships and 7,500 for trainings bringing it to a total of 15,000 placements.

The regions and autonomous provinces are responsible for the implementation and management of internships within their territories, and most have issued their own regional or provincial regulations on the basis of the national overall framework. This allows on the one hand to ensure an overall homogenous approach while also generating sufficient flexibility to reflect territorial realities on the ground. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation is responsible for issuing the intern with an entry visa for study/internship through the competent Italian diplomatic–consular representations abroad while the Ministry of the Interior is the institutional body responsible for issuing the residence

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33 Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali and ANPAL, 2022.

34 Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2023.

permit for internships once the intern has entered the national territory. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policies carries out the task of monitoring the data relating to admissions for internships, for the purposes of determining the three-year quota.

In the framework of Y-med more specifically, 78 migrants benefited from this scheme. Despite a quota of 15,000 over the last two periods only a total of 3,219 positions were covered for the previous decree period,<sup>35</sup> pointing to the need for a more effective approach to labour migration in Italy. The analysis of existing schemes in Italy and beyond offers a first step in better understanding the shortcomings of the current approach and provides insights into ways schemes can better capitalize on the channels available to migrant workers.

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35 These data are reported in the decree of the Italian Ministry of Employment and Social Policies dated 28 June 2023 which set the quotas for the entry of foreign citizens for the participation in vocational training and internships, for the years 2023–2025. The decree is available in Italian at this [link](#).



## 5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SELECT SKILLS-BASED MOBILITY SCHEMES

**T**his section compares seven skills-based mobility schemes analogous to Y-med, identifying key similarities and differences in approaches, partnerships and activities, and provides an overview of development cooperation action in the area of labour migration under these schemes. After a brief description of the projects selected for this comparative analysis, the paper dives deeper into the interventions' objectives, strategies, structure and partnerships in view of assessing strengths and shortcomings to distil lessons learned and recommendations for a stronger framework of skills-based mobility programming.

### 5.1 PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

The white paper focuses on the following initiatives:

- **Y-med:** This project is implemented in Italy since 2017 by IOM Missions in Italy, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. Following the first phase of the project which facilitated the internship of young Moroccans in Italian companies based in Morocco, the second and third phases, as well as the next edition foreseen for 2024, provide young students and graduates from North African countries with the opportunity to



develop their skills and carry out internships in Italy. Upon completion of their internship and their return to their countries of origin, the project supports interns with job placement training and assistance to improve their chances of securing employment. To date, the Y-med project has involved a total of 78 interns from four countries (Morocco, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt) and 44 Italian companies based in Morocco and in two Italian regions (Veneto and Lazio). To ensure the effective implementation of the project, IOM has worked in close collaboration with public and private partners active in the fields of employment, professional training and education. The project is part of the IOM Coordination Office for the Mediterranean's broader action to strengthen the linkages between migration and development; through the development and transfer of young people's professional skills across Mediterranean countries as well as their job placement, the intervention intends to ultimately promote their agency in sustainable development processes.<sup>36</sup>

- **Mediterranean Network for Training Orientation to Regular Migration (MENTOR):** This project was coordinated by the municipality of Milan from June 2017 to October 2018 and implemented by a consortium of public and private stakeholders in the framework of the Migration Partnership Facility implemented by International Centre for Migration and Policy Development. This project facilitated the internship of 19 young graduates from Morocco and Tunisia in the Italian cities of Milan and Turin for a period of three months. Interns were selected on the basis of their skills profile and their professional and entrepreneurial projects. Following their return to their countries of origin, the project provided interns with mentoring and coaching support to implement their professional or entrepreneurial projects, thereby sustaining their integration into local labour markets.<sup>37</sup> A second phase of the project

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36 For more information, please refer to: [Migrazioni e settore privato](#).

37 For more information, please refer to: [MENTOR MEDITERRANEAN NETWORK FOR TRAINING ORIENTATION TO REGULAR MIGRATION](#).

started in 2021, which aims to provide 50 young Moroccan and Tunisian nationals with six-month internship opportunities in the provinces of Milan, Monza-Brianza and Turin.<sup>38</sup> As of October 2023, all selected interns have arrived in Italy to carry out their internship schemes.

- **Enhancing Tunisian youth's employability in Tunisia through vocational apprenticeships and professional internships in Belgium and Tunisia:** The project was implemented over a 22-months period in 2018–2019 by IOM Tunisia and Belgium, with the support of the Belgian and Tunisian governments and in coordination with various partners. The project was presented as a Belgian–Tunisian skills mobility partnership, providing 31 Tunisian students and university graduates with the opportunity to carry out a six-month internship in Belgium and to benefit from job seeking support upon their return to Tunisia. The majority of participants under this project found employment either in Tunisia or in Belgium upon completion of the project. As a result of the project, a Belgian company established a sister company in Tunisia providing employment opportunities to Tunisian nationals.<sup>39</sup>
- **Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortage Through Innovative Labour Migration Models (PALIM):** This project was implemented by Enabel, in cooperation with public and private actors in Morocco and Belgium from March 2019 to April 2021 for a period of 26 months. The project delivered training in ICT, soft skills development and pre-departure info sessions on work and life in Belgium to 120 young Moroccan graduates, with the view of placing them in the Flemish and Moroccan labour markets, thereby addressing the labour needs in both countries. It was designed to test the Global Skills Partnership model with dual training tracks: trainees could choose between the “home” track and be plugged back into the

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38 For more information, please refer to: [Mentor2](#).

39 Di Salvo and Mallè Ndoye, 2020.

local labour market or the “away” track and decide to migrate legally and safely to Belgium, specifically to the Flanders region. PALIM, therefore, was aimed at developing skilled human capital in both the origin and destination countries, based on skills’ needs identified in participating labour markets. As the international mobility phase of the project could not be implemented due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, two matching platforms for Belgian and Moroccan employers were developed instead, in view of facilitating the job placement of trained talents in ICT companies in Belgium and Morocco.<sup>40</sup>

- **High Opportunity for Mediterranean Executive Recruitment (HOMERe):** This project was coordinated by Western Brittany University (Université de Bretagne Occidentale – UBO) and was carried out from May 2019 to December 2020. It provided six-month internships for students and recent graduates from Morocco and Tunisia at French companies operating in the two North African countries. The project aims at improving the employability of interns and their placement in the local branches of participating companies, upon return to their countries. It aimed at facilitating cooperation between France and Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt to boost legal temporary migration of talented youth through an innovative internship programme. The project sought to build on the HOMERe network’s past activities by strengthening institutional governance structures and expanding its three-phase mobility schemes for interns. By implementing 50 short-term mobility internships with companies involved in transnational activities in the Mediterranean area, the project contributed to the development of technical competences that would facilitate the participants’ integration into their home labour market. At the end of the project, almost half found a first employment, either in the enterprise where they conducted their internship or in another.<sup>41</sup>

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40 Migration Partnership Facility, 2021a.

41 Migration Partnership Facility, 2021b.

- **Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Mobility in North Africa (THAMM):** THAMM is a regional programme which supports partner institutions in North Africa to draft and implement policies and mechanisms for safe, orderly and regular migration, as well as fostering cooperation and regional exchange between relevant stakeholders in North Africa. Planned over 36 months, it covers three countries: Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia and is inclusive of and open to other North Africa countries for subregional activities. The project seeks to improve the governance of labour migration and the protection of migrant workers in the region by supporting the development and implementation of coherent and comprehensive policy frameworks guided by relevant human rights and labour standards and based on reliable data and evidence. It addresses both the South–North and the South–South dimensions of labour migration and mobility through regional dialogue and cooperation. The programme has also developed three pilot mobility schemes, which are currently being implemented by GIZ, Enabel and OFII.<sup>42</sup> Launched in 2019, THAMM–GIZ implements migration pathways for young Egyptians, Moroccans and Tunisians to for work and access vocational training in Germany. The THAMM–Enabel project started in 2020 as a continuation of the PALIM project. It trains mid-level to high-level talents from Morocco and Tunisia to work in sectors which are in demand, in both the countries of origin and Belgium. Trainees will then receive assistance to find jobs in their countries or Belgium. The THAMM–OFII project started in 2022 and aims at increasing circular occupational mobility between Tunisia and France, focusing on job seekers registered at the Tunisian National Agency for Employment and Self-Employment (ANETI). To do so, the project plans to make use of seasonal contracts and “young professional” contracts, which provide for the temporary employment of foreign

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42 It must be noted that there was also an ILO-IOM led THAMM project covering these regions. This, however, did not include a mobility scheme, thus it was not included in the analysis. More information can be found [here](#).

workers in France. Since THAMM–GIZ does not foresee any support for circular migration or skill development in the countries of origin, only THAMM–Enabel and THAMM–OFII are included in the analysis.

- **Torno subito:** This project has been implemented by the Italian region of Lazio since 2014. It offers learning and on-the-job opportunities to young students and graduates (aged between 18 and 35) residing in the regional territory and regardless of their nationality). The project is structured around two phases. During the first phase, the project funds training courses or internships in another Italian region or EU country; in the second phase, it covers the expenses and allowance related to the completion of internships at private companies or organizations based in the Lazio region. The project is therefore designed to allow beneficiaries to acquire competences during a first stage and then to make use of them in the subsequent phase in their region of residence.<sup>43</sup>

## 5.2 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INTERVENTIONS UNDER REVIEW

All the interventions compared share common objectives but offer a different set of activities towards such objectives. Activities proposed across projects range from technical/job-specific, soft skills and on-the-job training, to job seeking assistance following their return to their home countries. Technical training courses, training courses on soft skills and job placement assistance are present in most of the projects under review. All projects are also rooted in multi-stakeholder partnerships of public and private stakeholders in the origin and destination countries. The interventions also all strive to bring together public and private actors to enable a sustainable collaboration on skills-based mobility schemes, beyond

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<sup>43</sup> Lazio Europa, 2022.

the financial and organizational support of a specific project. The following subsections provide more detail on the similarities and differences among the projects under review, looking at project objectives to develop skills and contribute to country of origin development, activities, as well as stakeholders and partnerships.

## Objectives

The examined interventions intend to fulfil two key objectives:

- Develop the skills and improve the employability of young university and vocational training graduates from North Africa;
- Enhance the development impact of labour migration in sending countries.

The most recent data from the World Bank and the International Labour Organization Statistics (ILOSTAT) indicate that unemployment rates among the labour force with an advanced education (tertiary education including higher and vocational education) – are significantly high with 25 per cent in Morocco (2021), 29 per cent in Tunisia (2017) and 15 per cent for Egypt (2021).<sup>44</sup> This is explained by the increased number of young, highly educated people in North Africa,<sup>45</sup> on the one hand, and slower pace of job creation, on the other. In light of this, the examined interventions mainly target students or recent graduates from higher and vocational education institutions. Only the THAMM–OFII project is designed to target young people who already pursue an active working life, in order to allow them to gain professional experience in France for a period of up to 18 months (through the Young Professional Contract). To counterbalance these structural gaps, the interventions under review strive to support

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44 World Bank, 2023.

45 Samans and Zahidi, 2017.



appropriate skills matching between young graduates and workers in the origin country and available vacancies in the host countries, as well as upskilling to meet requirements expected from participating companies. Indeed, as Y-med's external evaluation highlighted, graduate beneficiaries sometimes lacked the appropriate skills required by employers including mismatched soft skills as well as technical experience, which hindered migrants' integration into their hosting company.<sup>46</sup> The skills gaps identified under these projects were nevertheless tackled through training modules, work experience and on-the-job training.

### The development impact of skills-based mobility schemes

All projects under review emphasize the intention of designing skills-based mobility schemes that are truly beneficial to both the countries of origin and destination. In that respect, all projects have designed a mobility component that is: (a) temporary in nature; and (b) includes post-return placement and/or assistance in the countries of origin; or, in the case of the PALIM and THAMM–Enabel (c) the provision of job-specific training in the countries of origin and assistance for integration into the labour markets of the countries of origin (home track) or of Belgium (away track). A shared concern among all interventions is to ensure that the development impact of the skills-based mobility schemes on the countries of origin involved materializes through the transfer of skills that would lead to increased employability and reduced unemployment rates locally.

To take it one step further, the interventions also seek to generate increased business relations between origin and destination countries that could potentially lead to either better trade relations and/or the establishment of sister branches of participating companies in the origin countries – both of which would lead to job creation. Indeed, and besides the interest in

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46 Agency for Peacebuilding, 2023.

increasing cultural diversity and acquiring a skilled workforce with diverse language skills (Arabic, French and English), companies participating in these projects often have subsidiaries and local branches or are willing to explore business opportunities in the countries of origin. One particular example includes the HOMERe project, which supports internships in French companies involved in transnational activities in the Mediterranean area, namely multinational businesses based in France but also operating in Morocco and Tunisia. A positive outcome of the Belgium–Tunisia partnership implemented by IOM Belgium led to the establishment of a Belgian companies' sister branch in Tunisia which eventually employed young Tunisians that had benefited from an internship in Belgium through the project.

Some of the projects under review have also sought to integrate technical training components that target both national and local public institutions to strengthen their capacity to drive labour migration forward with strengthened links to development mind. Under the THAMM programme, for example, representatives from the Ministry of Labour in various countries as well as from national agencies for employment, professional and technical training were trained on key labour mobility aspects, ranging from IOM's SMP model, fair and ethical recruitment practices, to skills anticipation processes, labour market assessments and pre-departure orientation practices. In Morocco more particularly, a specific training module on international labour migration was developed for the National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Skills (ANAPEC) counsellors. A total of 100 counsellors were trained under the programme to provide guidance and training to professionals interested in engaging in skills-based mobility schemes abroad. Such training practices do not only help build the technical capacity of public bodies to better understand labour mobility policies and practices, but they also generate more ownership and buy-in over skills-based mobility schemes' success to public institutions, thereby also contributing to the sustainability of future schemes. Training aspects linked to SMPs, skills anticipation and labour market assessments – all of which feed into a developmental-centric approach to labour migration – could also help

enhance the developmental impact of future programming if integrated appropriately in their design and implementation.

Despite efforts across all projects to appropriately match skills and upskill in case of misalignment (as seen above), not all interventions (except for PALIM and THAMM–Enabel) foresee a skills development component dedicated to structured interventions aimed at the enhancement of skills and training institutions in communities of origin. Such interventions could not only help to: (a) prevent potential skills mismatches; and (b) provide opportunities for comparability and portability of skills across borders, supporting harmonization efforts and ensuring the recognition of skills and qualifications; but could also help to: (c) boost human capital for the benefit of countries of both origin and destination while (d) promoting the employability of origin communities as a positive development outcome of labour migration.

### Project activities

The interventions offer participants a different set of activities including pre-departure orientation, technical/job-specific, soft skills and on-the-job training as well as post-return job seeking assistance. Differences lie mainly in the emphasis that projects place on such activities or phases of the labour mobility programme. During the pre-departure phase, almost all the projects foresee learning moments to prepare young people for their work and life abroad, be it temporary or permanent (in the case of PALIM and THAMM–Enabel). In most cases, PDO sessions are also held with the aim of providing practical, logistic and administrative information about life in the destination country. The Y-med project, for instance, provides selected interns with dedicated PDO covering topics such as life in Italy, key tips for daily life as well as useful soft skills for both their personal and professional lives. Italian language courses are also provided and aim to equip interns with the necessary EU recognized language certifications to

apply for their visa. Most projects also integrate technical and/or soft skills development into the pre-departure activities.

### Matching candidates to available vacancies

The identification of companies in the origin and destination countries and their matching with suitable candidates for internship or job positions is a crucial part of the labour migration process. Weighing up companies' requirements and candidates' professional abilities and ambitions is a lengthy process that requires a case-by-case assessment. Contrarily to other projects under review, *Torno subito* innovatively assigns this task to its young beneficiaries, with the aim of optimizing and streamlining the matching process. In fact, participants in the project autonomously contact companies (or education institutions in the case of training courses) and engage in the identification process without the intermediation and support of project staff or partners. Although this modality leaves more agency to beneficiaries in making their own professional choices, its application to third-country nationals would present certain difficulties. In fact, ensuring that young TCNs' rights are protected and enforced may prove difficult, as well as ensure that ethical recruitment practices and decent work conditions are guaranteed. Additional challenges faced by TCNs include language barriers which make it difficult for participants in the countries of origin to find internships or job vacancies without any support via the project, particularly in the Italian context where vacancies are predominantly published in Italian.

### Technical training courses

Job-specific training in the countries of origin is foreseen only in the framework of projects supporting long-term (THAMM–OFII) or undetermined working periods abroad for a minority of trainees (PALIM, THAMM–Enabel). In these cases, the intent is to develop specific skills

and competences which are demanded by the labour markets of both the origin and destination countries. In the case of the PALIM project, training in ICT was delivered to young, unemployed university graduates. As for the THAMM–OFII project, (started in January 2022) vocational training in plastic processing was organized in Tunisia, under the leadership of French and Tunisian private stakeholders.<sup>47</sup> This initiative aims to train and recruit technicians, who will be able to work in this specific sector both in France and in Tunisia.

### Training courses on soft skills

The development of soft skills, to improve the employability of young participants and their integration in the workplace, is another key component of effective skills-based mobility schemes. Most projects under review foresee sessions dedicated to topics such as time management, interpersonal communication, workplace culture and teamwork. This element is very important within the framework of the Y-med project; the project developed and delivered PDO sessions to enhance soft skills on different themes, including intercultural communication and conflict management, to prepare interns not only for their on-the-job training but also for daily life issues in Italy. The importance of these skills is exemplified in particular by the experience of the Belgian–Tunisian project, which organized specific sessions upon request of Belgian hosting companies.

### Monitoring the quality of placements

The regular, transparent and unbiased monitoring of internship/job placements targeting both the employer and employee side is key in

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47 Polyvia, a French industrial organization that represents polymer converters and the Tunisian Association of polymer converters, created in 2020 by the French-Tunisian Chamber of Commerce.

ensuring the overall success and sustainability of any skills-based mobility scheme. By integrating such processes in the very design of a scheme, practitioners can help detect misalignments and challenges early on in the placement and thereby create opportunities to rectify any potential issues that can arise and optimize a working relationship. This can help increase satisfaction levels both from the employer and the employees' side, which would in turn lead to higher chances of employment or retention (either in another branch or in future remigration) of a given migrant intern/worker as well as their own willingness to continue their work experience abroad and/or remigrate in the future. While the majority of projects under review fail to foresee an internship/employment monitoring process to assess the experience(s) of employers and employees under the scheme, both Y-med and MENTOR projects have built in a monitoring component through promoting agencies. Such agencies are not only in charge of onboarding interns and activating the internships, but they are also responsible for monitoring placements and preparing final internship reports to the relevant regions. Y-med further bolsters this process through the implementation of a comprehensive monitoring framework which has helped to guide the collection of data from all parties with a stake in the placement relationship including interns, companies, managers, IOM staff in partner countries as well as the promoting agencies themselves. Under this framework, data is collected regularly throughout the placement phase using both quantitative and qualitative tools. Such approaches not only help optimize the experiences of employers and interns/workers but they also help feed into stronger programme design and evidence-based policymaking on labour migration.

### Post-return job placement assistance in the origin country

Post-return job placement support for reintegration in the country of origin job market is a key element for skills-based mobility schemes. All interventions under review heavily rely on their partners, particularly private

sector partners, to provide this type of support. In most cases, these partners are either: (a) entities in the countries of origin who participated in the selection of interns (as was the case in the Belgian–Tunisian project and, in some instances under Y-med); or (b) hosting companies in the destination countries with subsidiaries in the countries of origin, who are interested in recruiting participants upon their return (HOMERe project). Some projects stand out more than others in the type and level of support they provide to project beneficiaries in finding employment post-return. As part of the Y-med project, for instance, IOM facilitated interns' participation to job fairs, organized events with companies interested in recruitment, disseminated interns' CVs with their network of private sector actors and provided tailored technical training customized to the needs and requests of interns. Another example is provided by the MENTOR project, where interns received two-months post-internship mentoring during the implementation of post-return professional or entrepreneurial projects. The mentoring was realized in Morocco and Tunisia by coaches who provided individual assistance to interns and helped interns identify additional training needs or funding (for those with an entrepreneurial project) and professional opportunities. Moreover, the Belgian–Tunisian project provided additional funding to cover accommodation costs incurred by interns during probation periods in recruiting companies and provided financial support to purchase equipment needed to start their entrepreneurial activities.

### Stakeholders and partnerships

All interventions under analysis involve multi-stakeholder partnerships that bring together public and private stakeholders in origin and destination countries. A diverse array of actors ranging from public employment services, local authorities, companies, employers' associations to chambers of commerce, foreign investment agencies and universities participate in different phases of the projects, from the assessment of labour market

needs to the selection of candidates for mobility schemes and job placement processes themselves. In the case of Y-med for example, IOM staff in countries of origin and destination coordinate with their respective governmental counterparts and institutional stakeholders such as Ministries of Labour to obtain labour market data needed to identify the right sectors and skills to be targeted by the scheme. While all interventions encourage a degree of coordination and collaboration between involved actors, more structured frameworks were also created in some of the projects. In the context of the MENTOR project, for example, local cooperation committees were established to convene public and private stakeholders (municipalities, public employment agencies, employers' associations) in Italy, Morocco and Tunisia to: (a) identify target internship sectors; (b) match candidates with vacancies in hosting companies; (c) monitor internships' progress; and (d) support returned interns in their job search, specifically in the continuation of their professional or entrepreneurial projects.

Cooperation among these actors is deemed crucial not only to enable the effective implementation of mobility schemes, but most importantly, to ensure their potential for scale and long-term sustainability. Information exchange between employment agencies in the origin and destination countries may, for example, lead to a better matching of labour supply and demand across countries. Similarly, the collaboration between private enterprises on the one hand, and universities and vocational centres on the other, may help to better identify and respond to skills needs in both countries of origin and destination. The ultimate ambition of such partnerships is indeed to foster nurturing relationships that lead to more coherent, effective and self-sustained management of labour migration pathways. The peer-to-peer exchange activities organized under MENTOR to foster cooperation between the employment services in EU and North African countries or to provide for the capacity-building of public employment services in the countries of origin (PALIM and THAMM), are welcome and have helped enhance the effectiveness of intermediation



services needed for international job placement. In the framework of THAMM, multi-stakeholder, multisided and multi-agency coordination mechanisms were established among implementing agency and with national counterparts to ensure effective and joint coordination, planning and cross-fertilization throughout the implementation of the programme.

While all the projects engage with a variety of public and private stakeholders, not all have established a holistic horizontal and vertical coordination mechanism gathering key entities at all levels of governance and across borders to help shape, frame and support the design and implementation of the scheme throughout the mobility process. The establishment of such coordination bodies could significantly help improve the outcomes of said schemes and ensure not only that migrant workers and employers maximize their experience under the schemes, but also that development considerations for countries and communities of origin are duly integrated therein.

The table below (Table 1) summarizes the main features of the projects described.



**Table 1. Comparative matrix of select skills-based mobility scheme**

	Y-med	MENTOR	BE-TUN SMP	PALIM	HOMERe	THAMM-OFII	THAMM-Enabel	Torno subito
<b>EU destination country</b>	Italy	Italy	Belgium	Belgium	France	France	Belgium	Italy (out of the Lazio region) or EU countries
<b>Country of origin</b>	Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia	Morocco and Tunisia	Tunisia	Morocco	Morocco and Tunisia	Tunisia	Morocco and Tunisia	Italy (resident of Lazio region)
<b>Implementation period</b>	2018–2022	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2021	2019–2020	2022–2025	2020–2023	2014–ongoing
<b>Sector</b>	Business administration, engineering, architecture, hosting and catering	Engineering, architecture, catering	ICT, engineering, baking, video editing	ICT	ICT, engineering, business administration, marketing, textile industry, logistics	Hospitality, plastic industries	n/a	n/a
<b>Beneficiary profile</b>	University and vocational graduates	University and vocational graduates	Students and university graduates	Unemployed university graduates	University students and graduates	Vocational graduates	Mid-level to high-level talents	University students and university and vocational graduates
<b>Mobility purpose</b>	Internship	Internship	Internship	Work	Internship	Work	Work	Training course or Internship

	Y-med	MENTOR	BE-TUN SMP	PALIM	HOMERe	THAMM-OFII	THAMM-Enabel	Torno subito
Length of mobility period abroad	6 months	3 months	6 months	Undetermined/permanent	Up to 6 months	Up to 18 months	Undetermined/permanent	3 months for internships and 6 months for training courses
Pre-departure training topics	Soft skills, pre-departure orientation and Italian language	Pre-departure orientation and Italian language	Soft skills (in Belgium, following an explicit request from hosting companies)	Technical and soft skills and English language	n/a	Technical skills	Technical and soft skills	n/a
Support upon return to the country of origin	Job placement support	Support to returnees' professional and entrepreneurial projects	Tailored job placement support	n/a (the return of workers who migrate to Belgium is not foreseen nor supported)	Job placement support	Job placement support	n/a (the return of workers who migrate to Belgium is not foreseen nor supported)	n/a

Source: Developed by the authors.



## **6. CHALLENGES TO SUSTAIN AND EXPAND SKILLS-BASED MOBILITY SCHEMES**

**T**he following section summarizes the key challenges to sustain and expand skills-based mobility schemes that have emerged from the collective experiences of the initiatives under review and insights from experts interviewed for the purpose of this paper. The key challenges discussed below can be categorized into those that are specific to highly skilled migration, risks of brain drain, limited scope, size and sustainability, the disproportionate focus on experience over employment as well as a lack of rights-based approach within programmes.

### **6.1 CHALLENGES SPECIFIC TO SUSTAINING SKILLS-BASED MOBILITY SCHEMES**

While there have been several partnerships to encourage low-skilled circular labour migration particularly in the agriculture, hospitality and construction sectors (through seasonal migration schemes), a limited number of small-scale projects and schemes like Y-med have focused on the mobility of skilled workers, some targeting youth. Experts from the literature have indicated that the circular migration of skilled interns and workers (such as engineers and Information and Technology experts) mostly takes place spontaneously and autonomously, mainly because they have more leverage and agency in accessing employment abroad, and



more ease in obtaining work and residence permits in their destination country of interest.<sup>48</sup>

As suggested during the stakeholders' interviews, individual will and interests are paramount to the success of a skills-based mobility schemes and should be accommodated within a reasonable margin. For instance, the Y-med evaluation findings have shown that around 60 per cent of the interns participating in the programme were interested in finding a job in Europe from the outset. At the same time, some of the employers in Italy were keen to retain migrants (and were able to do so effectively), while other companies were interested in forming or augmenting links with businesses in the countries of origin and considered that these transnational interns/workers could act as facilitators to that end.

## 6.2 MANAGING RISKS OF BRAIN DRAIN

In addition, while destination countries have an interest in retaining highly skilled workers, origin countries are less keen to facilitate their emigration in the first place particularly in cases where their skill set is in undersupply locally. According to an OECD study,<sup>49</sup> the movement of a significant number of skilled migrants from low- and middle-income countries to the OECD countries results in brain drain in the origin countries if such talents are undersupplied in source countries.<sup>50</sup> In the longer term, schemes that are designed with circularity in mind but transform into permanent migration could disincentivize sending countries from engaging, which will ultimately be counterproductive to labour migration overall. For all the reasons illustrated

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48 See for example: Di Salvo, 2022.

49 OECD, 2018.

50 A positive example of preventing brain drain can be found in the health sector, where WHO has adopted in 2010 a Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel (available [here](#)).

above, any skills-based mobility scheme targeting skilled workers should tailor specific measures that incentivize back-and-forth mobility (such as fiscal incentives) and guarantee a circularity of skills, knowledge and capital back into the sending country.

For such circularity to occur, the first condition is for the interns to return and find a relevant job in their country of origin ideally, commensurate with their skills and expectations, with the option of re-entering the destination country in the future. To this end, post-internship job placement interventions and assistance are key. In fact, the post-internship job placement phase of any circular mobility scheme should include tailored learning opportunities, equipping the beneficiaries with a professional prospect, networking opportunities and providing other incentives to effectively prevent brain drain. Moreover, embedding skills-transfer mechanisms into the job-placement phase could be another means to ensure that skills are beneficial to all societies.

### 6.3 LENGTH OF INTERNSHIPS AND SCALE OF SCHEMES

Another important issue that emerged especially during the interviews with experts, concerned the length of the internships foreseen within the interventions under review. The average period of placements across projects (around six months), which is often due to the limited project timeframe within which they are developed and implemented, has often shown to hinder the quality and success of the employment placement both from the employers' and employees/interns' perspective. Indeed, the short duration of schemes under review has shown to limit the migrant workers' ability to appropriately integrate in the workplace and host society more broadly, which can negatively affect their overall experience and desire to remigrate in the future. Furthermore, medium- or high-skilled migrants often need a longer period of intensive language and vocational training to enable them to successfully obtain employment in their chosen profession in another country after the completion of their internship.

From the employer's perspective, the short duration of the internship and limitations on employers to recruit the interns for a longer period of time or offer them an employment opportunity thereafter, has shown to lower their interest in participating under such schemes. From a human capital investment stance, it also makes little sense for employers to invest their time and resources in training interns that have to leave within a short period of time or for whom there are no possible prospects of employment within their company, thereby disincentivizing employers to engage at all.

While for schemes like Y-med it is difficult to envisage extending the period of internships due to limitations foreseen by legislation,<sup>51</sup> an alternative would be to incentivize active return periods whereby interns gain experience in their country of origin before remigrating. Such alternatives are nevertheless only available in cases where hosting companies already have a local branch in the intern's country of origin or if the company has a trade agent or a local expert in the country to facilitate the back-and-forth transfers.

Another issue that emerged during the interviews is that the small scale of these projects does not allow to fruitfully reap the potential benefits that such circular migration schemes can generate for the promotion of regular migration pathways. While these schemes are not designed to curb irregular migration, and while there is very limited evidence on the causality link between increased labour migration pathways and reduced irregular migration,<sup>52</sup> large-scale skills-based mobility schemes (involving a significantly higher number of interns) could provide a relevant alternative for youth interested in work opportunities abroad. These schemes, however, should be complemented by additional enforcement measures and incentives to be effective.

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51 Interns are allowed to work up to a maximum of 1,040 hours per year (source: Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali and ANPAL, 2022).

52 Clemens and Gough, 2018.

#### 6.4 EXPERIENCE OVER EMPLOYABILITY

While the facilitation of internships abroad constitutes a key step allowing beneficiaries to experience international mobility and contributes to their career development, this time abroad remains limited in terms of wider contribution to boost sustainable development. In the interviews conducted as part of this research, experts highlighted that Y-med could be more closely conceived of as a sophisticated educational or training programme given the emphasis on skills development of the internships. In that context, experts proposed to build in components that increase the relations between employment agencies and support job matching to further bolster the circularity dimension of the schemes and to strengthen the “employment component” beyond skills enhancement. Longer monitoring periods post-internships and the possible continuation or repeated episodes of labour and learning mobility after the internship period and return to the country of origin were also suggested.

#### 6.5 LACK OF CLARITY/MINIMUM GUARANTEES ON MIGRANT WORKERS' RIGHTS

Last but not least, workers' rights and especially the portability of social benefits have often emerged as a central issue in discussions had during interviews. In fact, all projects could benefit from addressing in a more consistent and systematic way migrants' rights and duties, including those linked to admission and return, the ability to change employers and other protection safeguards, and the access to and portability of their social security benefits. To be truly successful and effective, any skills-based mobility scheme should indeed strive to empower and inform migrant workers in view of supporting their protection against any form of labour exploitation and equip them with the necessary knowledge to report violations and seek for remedy, therefore the availability and accessibility of grievance and redress mechanisms is fundamental.



## **7. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND FEATURES TO IMPROVE SKILLS-BASED MOBILITY SCHEMES**

**T**here have been significant legislative improvements at the EU level and national regulations on admissions and entry of workers, and several types of schemes and labour migration channels are available to enhance skills-based mobility. Nevertheless for such efforts to be truly effective and sustainable in the long term, key considerations should be streamlined into their very design and implementation. The following section proposes first structural recommendations to labour migration practitioners for well-managed, holistic and sustainable skills-based mobility policies and practices. It then zooms into features that are key for the practical implementation of skills-based mobility schemes along the migration cycle.

### **7.1 STRUCTURAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MORE HOLISTIC, EFFECTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE SKILLS-BASED MOBILITY SCHEMES**

The box below (Box 3) summarizes the structural recommendations for more holistic, effective and sustainable circular migration schemes.



**BOX 3: SUMMARY OF STRUCTURAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Harmonize schemes at regional levels and ensure the financial sustainability and scalability of schemes beyond project set-up, moving towards structured and institutionalized partnerships on skills-based mobility.
- Rely on sound evidence on labour market dynamics, mitigate the risks of brain drain by building in thorough labour market assessments in all participating countries, investing in skills development, recognition and portability.
- Adopt a multi-stakeholder and multisided approach to labour and skills mobility involving private and public partners, as well as local, national and regional bodies to ensure a holistic design and implementation of partnerships and schemes thereunder.
- Target all skill levels and ensure appropriate matching of skills, and investment in upskilling or reskilling components where appropriate to align skills.
- Schemes should be rights-based and protect migrant workers against all forms of exploitation throughout the labour migration cycle — from recruitment throughout employment and return — and support their inclusion in society.
- Involve partner countries in the very design and implementation of schemes to guarantee a triple win for all parties involved and fully harness the positive development outcomes that labour migration schemes can have on countries of origin, including through the development of BLMAs.
- Contribute to establishing optimal conditions conducive to structural partnerships on labour migration to help scale and self-sustain schemes.

**7.1.1 Scaling skills-based mobility schemes beyond the project set up**

There is a need to ensure greater coherence and overall coordination on partnerships to facilitate skills-based mobility; provide opportunities to capitalize on economies of scale, optimizing cost-effectiveness; and leverage possible synergies and cross-regional exchange between partners. The proposed EU Talent Partnerships seek to strengthen cooperation with third countries while addressing such needs. To ensure the sustainability and scalability of schemes beyond project set-ups, it is also important to consider effective financial models of skills-based mobility schemes that rely on cost-sharing between parties involved. This could be achieved, for

example: (a) by promoting Employers' Pay Principle<sup>53</sup> at recruitment stages; (b) finding viable ways to institutionalize programmes and anchor them in public policies and funding priorities; while also (c) generating buy-in from employers by better illustrating the business case in hiring foreign talent.

### 7.1.2 Rely on sound evidence

To be truly market responsive, skills-based mobility schemes should target migrant workers at all skills levels and appropriately match skills needs in the participating labour markets with available supply through careful labour assessment surveys. Indeed, thorough labour-market assessments in both source and destination countries are key in anticipating and forecasting needs while mitigating risks of skills mismatches and underemployment. Beyond skills demand and supply, partner countries could take into consideration existing cooperation frameworks in areas other than migration, established business, trade, educational and/or institutional networks with partner countries, migration histories, the volume of diaspora communities in receiving states, as well as linguistic links.

### 7.1.3 Adopting a multi-stakeholder and multisided partnership approach

Developing a comprehensive approach to skills and mobility across countries requires the adoption of a multi-stakeholder and multisided partnership

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53 The Employer Pays Principle is considered international best practice, and is endorsed and promoted by the Leadership Group for Responsible Recruitment as well as an increasing number of business associations and governments. As the name suggests, under this model the worker does not pay any fees or related costs for their recruitment and deployment – rather those costs are covered by the employer (e.g. the receiving company). The Employers' Pay Principle is advanced by IRIS, the IOM's flagship initiative to promote ethical recruitment globally. More information on IRIS can be found at [IRIS Ethical Recruitment](#).

approach. Indeed, skills-based mobility schemes cover cross-cutting issues and often address varying policy objectives and priorities. Bringing in a diverse set of actors in the very design and implementation of labour mobility programmes may help balance different priorities and ensure schemes are reflective of different realities across sectors. Labour migration policies and practices should follow a whole-of-government approach that brings together regional, national and local level policy – and should be designed and implemented in collaboration with the private sector; including employers, with social partners, public employment agencies and sector associations in participating countries. Multi-stakeholder and multisided engagement helps ensure that all relevant priorities are integrated and that schemes serve the interests of countries of origin, destination, migrants themselves as well as employers and businesses that engage in skills-based mobility schemes. This in turn can help ensure that schemes are coherent with national and local level development priorities. The involvement of public bodies at all levels of governance ensures better horizontal and vertical coordination as well as coherent policies and practices at regional, national and local levels. To effectively manage multi-stakeholder cooperation, communication and coordination, the establishment of governance structures for strategic and multilevel engagement are encouraged. The creation of local cooperation committees in the framework of the MENTOR project provides a positive first step in that direction, albeit its scope can be significantly broadened to include multilevel cooperation. It would also be beneficial to work more closely with the research divisions and internationalization departments of employers' associations, industrialists' federations, as well as academic and training institutions to support seamless transitions between internship-oriented schemes and employment-led schemes.

Finally, for skills-based mobility schemes to attain meaningful and sustainable outcomes a wide range of stakeholders, institutions and networks, need to be involved from the very outset of the partnership design as objectives are determined and defined. Indeed, to help build a common understanding and trust and to manage diverging interests, coordination and collaboration systems can facilitate multi-stakeholder engagement at

various stages of the mobility scheme design and implementation – from labour assessments, skills matching, upskilling and labour market matching, inclusion policies, to supporting issuance of permits and the return and reintegration of participants.

#### 7.1.4 Adopting a rights-based approach to skills-based mobility

Programmes should also build in rights-based approaches to protect migrant workers and interns against all forms of exploitation throughout the migration cycle – from recruitment throughout employment/internship and return. It is essential that skills-based mobility schemes engage both private and public entities to guarantee ethical recruitment and fair work conditions and anticipate, mitigate and address any risks of labour exploitation. To further harness the benefits of skills-based mobility such programming should also link to broader social inclusion policies, including education, health and housing to guarantee the integration and well-being of migrant workers in destination labour markets even in cases of non-permanent migration. Workers and interns will better capitalize on their professional experience if their overall inclusion and well-being in their host country is facilitated. Considerations around the portability of their social rights and benefits are also key for a rights-based approach and for sustaining circularity.

#### 7.1.5 Harnessing the development potential of skills-based migration

According to a study by IFAD, migrants spend on average 85 per cent of their earnings in their host countries, thereby not only addressing skills and labour shortages in host economies, but also contributing directly through paying taxes and consumption of goods and services locally.<sup>54</sup>

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54 IFAD, 2017.

It has also been shown that skills mobility can increase productivity through the diversity of skills and ideas migrants bring and by fostering skill complementarity and specialization, and that skills-based migration may encourage the upgrading of national workers' skills and beneficiaries' upskilling and increased competitiveness.

But to be truly mutually beneficial, skills-based mobility schemes should also fully harness the positive development outcomes for countries of origin. There are more targeted measures to ensure that mobility schemes can be fashioned towards catalysing development outcomes for origin countries and truly generate a triple win for all parties involved. By meaningfully engaging third countries in their design and implementation, skills-based mobility schemes can benefit countries and communities of origin in terms of skills and knowledge transfer but also economically, through reducing remittance transfer costs. Skills-based mobility can also create network externalities, such as trade links and capital flows between the destination and origin countries or promote the transfer of knowledge, either directly through brain circulation or indirectly through networks. "Brain circulation" can take place by deepening and sustaining business relations through regular visits, the formation and strengthening of networks and links, as well as knowledge and technology transfer and the sharing of ideas. Overall, skills based mobility schemes should consider the ways in which brain circulation can be encouraged or facilitated, taking into consideration how such effects can be sustained in the long term. Binational chambers of commerce (for example, Italian chambers of commerce in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya) which assist their members in developing business contacts in foreign countries, as well as foreign investment agencies (such as the Foreign Investment Promotion Agency–Tunisia) which promote foreign investment in the countries of origin, may offer valuable support in this regard.

In line with IOM's Skills Mobility Partnerships approach and in view of strengthening the centrality of such benefits to origin countries, skills-based mobility schemes should also consider building in a skills development component targeting origin Technical and Vocational Education and Training institutions and communities. Not only would such initiatives support local

communities with further skills development opportunities and empower them to become agents for development through their active and effective participation in the country's socio-economic growth, but they would also contribute in generating long-term skills pools that could contribute to national development or engage in international labour markets.

For such positive consequences to emerge, favourable conditions need to be created and structural agreements should be in place between participating states to drive them forward. Formalizing state cooperation, for example, through the establishment of BLMAs can ensure that skills-based mobility schemes are sustainable and generate a triple win to origin and destination communities, as well as migrant workers, interns and family. Different types of BLMAs have different formats, focus and levels of flexibility, depending on the context and characteristics of labour market situation in the parties entering the agreement. In 2018, IOM and ILO conducted a BLMA stocktaking study,<sup>55</sup> carried out two corridor assessments and developed a tool for BLMAs elaboration, implementation, monitoring and evaluation for these specific corridors.<sup>56</sup> A broader Guidance on BLMAs<sup>57</sup> was developed in 2022 offering a useful starting point for governmental bodies to engage with their partners and set in motion structured partnerships that guarantee well-managed and mutually beneficial schemes that move beyond project-based settings.

### 7.1.6 Streamlining national legislative and policy frameworks

Circular migration schemes are rolled out against varied legal and policy contexts that regulate the admissions, entry and return of third-country nationals. The frameworks that are in place in the countries of destination

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55 ILO and IOM, 2019.

56 ILO et al., 2020.

57 United Nations Network on Migration, 2022.

and origin influence the design and implementation of such schemes, as well as the forms that continued circular labour mobility can take following completion of a first international internship or work experience.

The diversity of legal and policy frameworks presents a particular challenge in the EU context: key aspects related to the admission of third-country nationals for work-related purposes (quotas, sector priorities, skills levels) remain under Member State competence, while the EU acquis on legal labour migration remains fragmented and limited, particularly with regard to low- and medium- skilled workers.<sup>58</sup> Circular labour migration schemes oriented towards both work and internship purposes, including those analysed in this paper, need to operate alongside the unique legal standards and administrative procedures of destination country, particularly when it comes to admission and social rights to which third-country nationals are entitled. The amendments proposed in the Pact and espoused in the earlier section of this paper are welcome and will contribute to enhancing the existing regional framework to facilitate the admission, entry and return of third-country nationals participating in such schemes – including those linked to improved conditions in the Blue Card Directive Recast, plans for simplified Single Permit Directive processes and extended return periods under the Long-Term Permit Directives.

Nevertheless, better streamlining national legal and administrative procedures within particular national contexts is key to creating conditions that are conducive to circularity. Adapting legal and policy frameworks to automatically link international internship programmes to continued or repeated episodes of labour migration could facilitate the back-and-forth movement on migrant interns, trainees and/or workers. Streamlining legal processes and simplifying administrative procedures by allowing for the automatic or facilitated convertibility of permit types (for instance, from training to work purposes) would help incentivize both the employers

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58 Muraille, 2022.

and the migrants interested in sustaining the mobility process in the post-internship phase. This would also allow for a higher degree of flexibility and would better account for employers and migrants' needs and interests. The Italian Government for instance recently simplified the procedure for converting residence permits for TCNs' internships into work permits through Law 50 of 5 May 2023. The recently published law removed the provision that made the conversion of such permits conditional on the availability of a quota under the annual decree regulating migration flows for work permits ("Decreto Flussi"). Residence permits for interns can now be converted at any time of the year and without numerical limitation into work permits, making mobility schemes such as Y-med even more interesting for Italian companies willing to recruit talents from abroad.

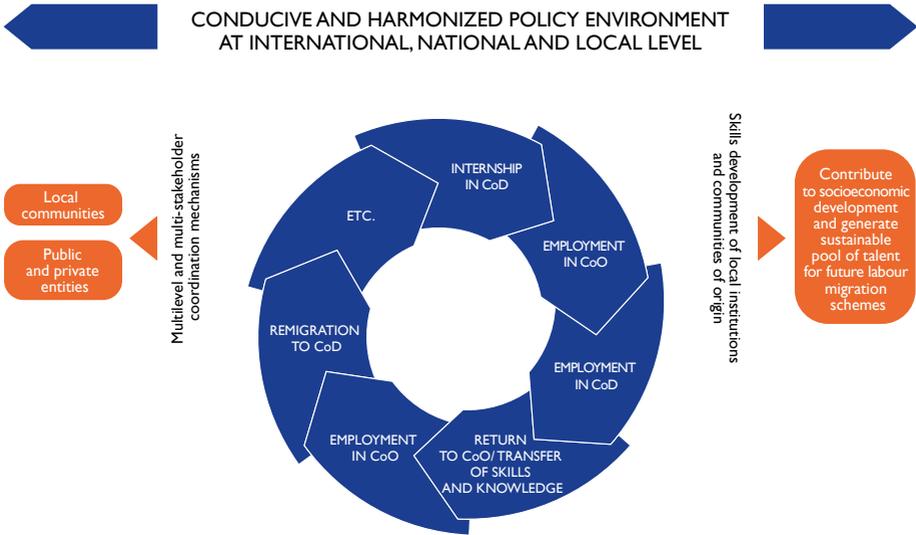
## 7.2 KEY FEATURES TO IMPROVE SKILLS-BASED MOBILITY SCHEMES

Against the backdrop of the structural recommendations illustrated above, this subsection proposes key features and elements to strengthen the practical implementation of skills-based mobility schemes promoting circularity. It focuses on describing key elements to include across the different stages of the mobility cycle and is organized around the following phases: identification of and engagement with stakeholders (local institutions, private sector), strengthening pre-departure and skills alignment, facilitating early integration post-arrival, monitoring employment/internship phase, facilitating return and reintegration<sup>59</sup> and remigration. This type of circularity could involve accumulated periods of migration and return, as illustrated in the circular chart below (Chart 1).

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<sup>59</sup> Aspects linked to recruitment and labour exploitation have been left out of the analysis and recommendations. The reintegration aspect is limited to professional reintegration and leaves out aspects linked to psychosocial reintegration.

**Chart 1. Strengthened collaboration for skills-based mobility**



Source: Developed by the authors.

### 7.2.1 Conducive policy environment

Skills-based mobility schemes are rolled out against varied legal and policy contexts that regulate admission, entry and return. The frameworks that are in place in the countries of destination and origin influence the design and implementation of such schemes, as well as the forms that mobility can take following completion of a first international internship or work experience.

Skills-based mobility schemes oriented towards both work and internship purposes, including those analysed in this paper, operate alongside within the legal frameworks and administrative procedures of a given destination country, particularly when it comes to admission and social rights to which migrants are entitled.

Streamlining national legal and administrative procedures within particular national contexts is key to creating conditions that are conducive to rights based, effective skills-based migration. Adapting legal and policy frameworks to and simplifying administrative procedures by allowing for the automatic or facilitated convertibility of permit types (for instance, from training to work purposes) would help incentivize both the employers and the migrants interested in sustaining the mobility process in the post-internship phase. This would also allow for a higher degree of flexibility and would better account for employers and migrants' needs and interests. The Italian Government for instance recently simplified the procedure for converting residence permits for TCNs' internships into work permits through Law 50 of 5 May 2023. The recently published law removed the provision that made the conversion of such permits conditional on the availability of a quota under the annual decree regulating migration flows for work permits ("Decreto Flussi"). Residence permits for interns can now be converted at any time of the year and without numerical limitation into work permits, making mobility schemes such as Y-med even more interesting for Italian companies willing to recruit talents from abroad.

### 7.2.2 Engagement with companies

Targeting and engaging the right companies from the outset will to a large extent determine the success of a particular skills-based mobility scheme. The experiences analysed in this paper have highlighted the importance of prioritizing companies that either have a transnational presence with branches established in the country of origin and destination, or which have at least an interest in expanding its operations in the source country at hand. After completing their internship in the destination branch of a particular company, migrants can act as transnational points of contact or take the role of trade agents, local experts or other similar figure in the origin country. This would facilitate interns' employment in the post-internship phase, incentivize return and feed into future transnational business operations. A continued

connection with and possible employment by their former host companies can also foster circular mobility dynamics, involving past interns during the later stages of their career and enhancing sustainability. Indeed, targeting this type of company would facilitate the employment of interns/migrant workers post return in their origin countries and leave an open door for potential remigration to work within the same company – thereby facilitating circularity. The HOMERe project provides an illustration of this as it aims to secure interns' placement in the local branches of participating companies upon their return to their countries.

For companies that fall beyond this category and which might have less of an inherent incentive to hire foreigners, modalities of engagement should focus on a strong business case for engaging in such schemes. The Y-med evaluation suggests that hosting international interns brings potential benefits to businesses in terms of establishing business relations with North African companies and was also seen by employers as contributing to the “social responsibility” and “social impact” objectives of their company strategy, which have shown to add value for Italian companies. The diversity and intercultural elements that foreign talents bring can also stimulate more creative thinking and potentially raise local standards of work through healthy competition.

To be successful, any skills-based mobility scheme needs to carefully plan its engagement strategy with companies from the very outset and build in business-friendly communication and outreach strategies that clearly highlight the business case for hiring foreign talent.

### 7.2.3 Strengthening pre-departure and skills alignment

Prior to prospective workers or students' departure to their destination country, skills-based mobility schemes should foresee appropriate orientation and training programmes. These should target migrant workers and recruiting companies in order to manage expectations and ensure the

success of placement. On the side of migrant workers, IOM experience under the Y-med project and the Belgium–Tunisia Skills Partnership programme have shown that pre-employment training programmes and pre-departure orientation are key in appropriately preparing migrants for employment in EU labour markets and life in their host country. Such programmes do not just include intercultural training and orientation on the country of destination context, but also the development of certain skills required by employers as well as soft skills training. Indeed, the mismatches observed in the context of the Belgium–Tunisia partnerships were often linked to soft skills including time management and a different understanding of workplace hierarchy. To mitigate such risks and better prepare migrant workers, it is key that schemes build into their programmes in-depth pre-departure and pre-employment trainings designed in close collaboration with employers themselves. Establishing contact between prospective interns and a colleague within the company pre-migration through a buddy mechanism can also help set in motion the workplace integration process before the placement has even begun.

On the employers' side, it is also important to build employers' capacity on interculturality and diversity management in the workplace to promote the inclusion and integration of migrant employees and counter possible risks of discrimination in the workplace. This would not only contribute to creating a safe environment for foreign talent to experience their placement abroad, but can also help drive corporate diversity and inclusion agendas forward. The Y-med project for instance provides hosting companies in Italy with cultural diversity information sessions prior to interns' arrival, with the aim of raising awareness among staff (and future supervisors) on cultural diversity and intercultural competences as assets and growth opportunities for their businesses. On the administrative side, it is key to cooperate closely with governmental authorities in charge of immigration processes in destination countries in advance of migrant workers' departure to account for length of procedures and avoid delays in the mobility itself.

### 7.2.4 Facilitating early integration

Mobility schemes should consider early on integration aspects linked to workers' pre-departure orientation, but also accommodation, access to services such as health care and building social networks upon arrival. The Belgium–Tunisia experience has highlighted difficulties in securing the right accommodation for migrants. This was caused by a variety of reasons including the fact that landlords were reluctant to sign contracts with migrants or to engage in short-term letting; migrants were not sufficiently involved in the process and deposit payments were too expensive for migrants to pay in advance. Stronger partnerships with employers (to secure deposit advances), with placement companies (to help identify the right accommodation options) and the involvement of diaspora and other relevant stakeholders can contribute to ensure that migrant workers are supported in the early stages of their experience in the destination community in a timely manner for the duration of their employment/internship. In addition to housing support, schemes should also consider other dimensions including the obtention of work permits, municipality registration and obtention of appropriate health insurance for migrants. This will require strong and early on engagement with the appropriate national and local authorities in destination countries, even prior to departure. In the Y-med project these aspects are ensured by the appointed promoting agencies, which are responsible for ensuring a smooth arrival and settling in of interns. Promoting agencies provide appropriate accommodation, support interns in fulfilling administrative requirements upon arrival (for instance, obtaining social security numbers, activating SIM cards, opening bank accounts) and provide additional Italian language training. This kind of support is key to facilitate interns' integration in the new environment.

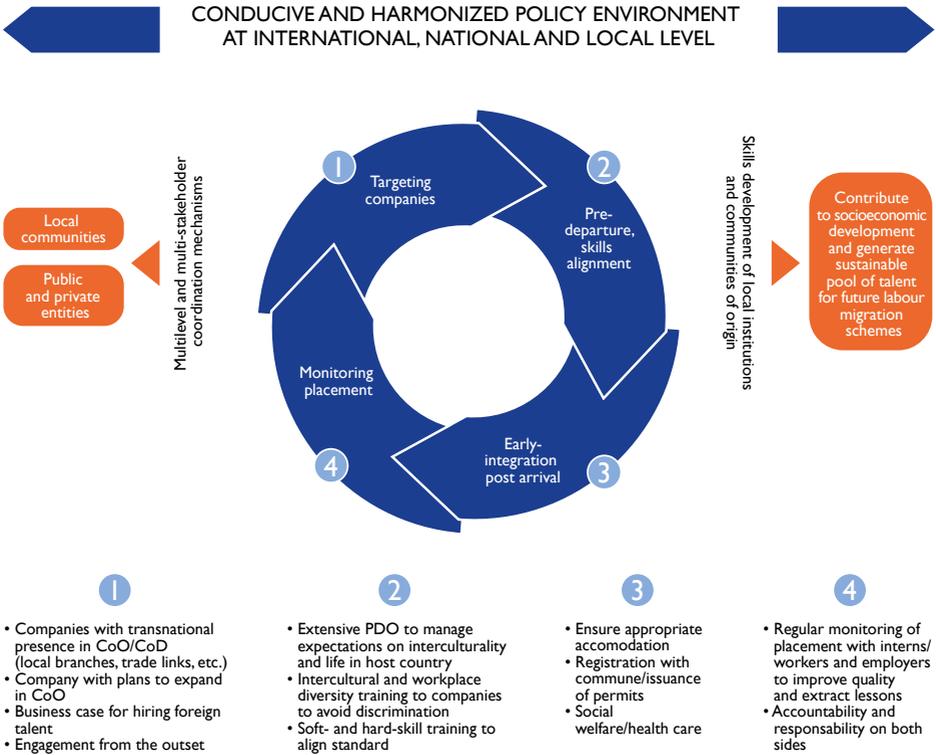
### 7.2.5 Monitoring employment/internship relations

From the outset of their placement, interns and hosting companies should agree on a learning and skills development plan, and set specific objectives and assignments for the duration of the placement. This will not only help manage professional expectations on both sides, but can contribute to ensuring accountability on both from the employer and intern/employee in terms of the roles assigned and responsibilities upheld.

Building on the Y-med good practice described earlier, schemes should also regularly monitor the quality of assignments as well as the satisfaction and employment-fit experience by migrant workers and employers (for example, through interviews and/or surveys). This type of monitoring should help assess not only the satisfaction of employers but also look monitor the inclusion and integration process of interns and migrant workers in the workplace, and their overall well-being. Continuous monitoring can help improve the quality of the employment experience, both for migrant workers and their employers and extract lessons for participants themselves, and for the improvement of skills-based mobility schemes. This can in turn also feed into strengthened recruitment processes and pre-departure preparation, eventually leading to stronger schemes overall. In addition to monitoring placements during the employment or internship stage, it is also key that schemes foresee continuous learning, training and/or skills development opportunities for interns or migrant workers, especially to increase their chances of finding employment upon return to their origin countries in case of temporary employment schemes. In the longer term, optimizing the chances of a successful matching for both parties will not only increase employers' desire to continue participating in such schemes, but would also encourage interns to pursue future employment in the company, thereby securing prospects for circularity and scheme sustainability that relies on a pool of interested employers and foreign talent.

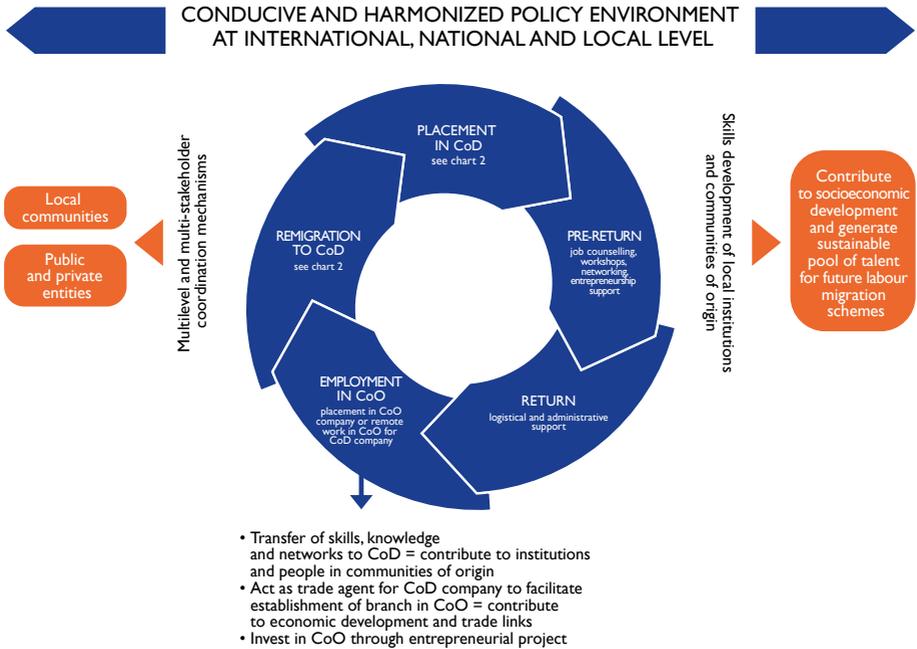
The charts below (Chart 2 and 3) summarize the above-mentioned information.

**Chart 2. An improved model of circularity – pre-migration to placement**



Source: Developed by the authors.

### Chart 3. An improved model of circularity–return, reintegration and remigration



Source: Developed by the authors.



## 8. CONCLUSIONS

**A**nanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities pertaining to skills-based mobility schemes can contribute to improving future projects and programming so that they become more scalable, replicable and sustainable beyond the limitations of project structures. Programmes that strive for circularity, as in the case of Y-med, should tailor specific measures to incentivize not just the return of participants post internship, but also continued mobility and the circularity of skills thereafter. Moreover, key considerations for practitioners include the need to ensure that strong employment support is secured to increase prospects of quality employment both in the countries of destination, as well as in the countries of origin. Likewise, such skills-based mobility schemes should be grounded in structures that facilitate their contribution to development efforts, which could become strong incentives for young graduates and countries alike to participate. From the employers' side, a strategic approach to company engagement from the outset, including the targeting of transnational companies with presence in both countries of destination and origin can facilitate circularity as successful interns can gain experience across branches spanning different contexts. Finally, ensuring successful placements – which feed into the success of the scheme and likelihood of circularity – would require appropriate skills matching, strong pre-departure orientation and training targeting both employers (on diversity, interculturality) and interns/employees (work place culture, soft skills, technical skills alignment) as well as quality monitoring throughout the mobility scheme.



The paper also emphasizes the need for a rights-based approach as well as to place development considerations at the heart of the design and implementation of schemes, through multisided and multi-stakeholder partnerships, to ensure that schemes reap mutual benefits for all parties involved, including migrants themselves and their country and communities of origin. Beyond the increased employability of returning migrants and the transfer of their skills, knowledge and networks to the country of origin – both of which support brain circulation and brain gain –, targeted efforts need to be directed to support the establishment of transnational business and trade links between participating countries; as well as efforts to support skills development in countries of origin – both at the structural level (working in close partnership with education and training institutions) and at the community level. The latter would not only support the skills enhancement of local communities but could also contribute to enhancing skills pools for the development of countries of origin and for international labour markets. To mitigate risks of brain drain, participating countries need to engage in thorough labour assessments on both ends of the spectrum to adequately identify the sectors and types of skills that can be targeted by a given scheme, thereby ensuring that programmes only facilitate skills-based mobility that will be mutually beneficial for the labour markets in question. Moreover, strong collaboration between employment agencies and other relevant labour entities, needs to be fostered to ensure efficient matching of skills, and most importantly, that the schemes are truly rights-based and beneficiaries are protected against abuse and exploitation.

From a regulatory perspective, better coordination and streamlining of the legal and policy framework(s) could also allow for better replicability – and hence scalability – of skills-based mobility schemes. Streamlining legal processes and simplifying administrative procedures, as well as considering allowing for the convertibility of permit types (from training to work purposes) would help incentivize both the employers and the migrants interested in sustaining the mobility process in the post-internship phase. Similarly, the facilitated expedition of short-term visas, following

successful participation in a skills-based mobility scheme could promote the continuation of circular mobility and transnational business relations.

Finally, the establishment of multilevel, multisided and multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms/ platforms convening public and private entities is paramount to ensure a truly mutually reflective, well-organized, coordinated and holistic response to the needs and concerns of all parties involved in skills-based mobility schemes. Regular communication and collaboration between stakeholders can also generate the necessary buy-in at institutional level to drive circular skills-based migration forward beyond small-scale projects.

Our hope is that the initial reflections and analysis presented in this paper helps guide such efforts forward in the future.





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