

# Session 1: High-Level Panel on Expanding Regular Migration Pathways and Reducing Irregular Migration

## Background note

### Introduction

The first session will offer space for discussion of progress made in the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), especially around Objective 5: Enhance availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration. The session also features a broad scope of regular migration pathways and their interactions across the GCM objectives including: 2. Minimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin, 4. Ensure that all migrants have proof of legal identity and adequate documentation of the GCM, 7. Address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration, 11. Manage borders in an integrated, secure and coordinated manner; 12. Strengthen certainty and predictability in migration procedures for appropriate screening, assessment and referral; 18. Invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications and competences; and 21. Cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration among others.

The outcome document of the 2020 Regional Review in the Arab region<sup>1</sup> recommended that States and stakeholders : i) further increase the availability and flexibility of regular migration pathways for men, women and children by adopting a variety of measures, including bilateral agreements, transparent entry procedures, and predeparture programmes to guide migrants before leaving their country of origin, along the migration journeys while on the move in countries of transit, and after arriving in their country of destination; ii) Accelerate the enactment of national and regional migration policies and bridge the gap between policy development and implementation; and iii) Strengthen national and regional action to address the negative drivers and structural factors that compel men, women, children and youth to leave their communities and countries and resort to unsafe and irregular migration.

Against the backdrop of evolving migration patterns, Arab states have experienced dynamic shifts in recent years. There has been an increase in migration along traditional routes, with significant flows of migrants engaged in labour migration. At the same time, emerging challenges have arisen due to irregular crossings, with migrants taking perilous and dangerous routes. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, along with Jordan and Lebanon, are primary destinations for migrant workers from the region and beyond, particularly those originating from the Asia-Pacific and, increasingly, Africa. Meanwhile, North African countries experience significant mixed migration movements, serving not only as destinations, but also as origin and transit points for migrants heading to Europe. While much migration occurs through regular pathways and has the potential to benefit both countries of origin and destination if governed in a rights-based manner, high levels of unemployment, lack of labour market analysis and a mismatch between labour supply and demand as well as poor job quality in the Arab States lead many to perceive migration as the only means of securing a decent living situation. The ongoing impacts of climate change are also likely to increase pressures to move as a way of adapting to negative environmental effects. Given the perceived absence of viable alternative pathways, people are willing to risk irregular migration, either through countries of the region to Europe or with the aim of reaching GCC

<sup>1</sup> [https://migrationnetwork.un.org/system/files/docs/gcm-regionalreview-outcomedocument-en-final\\_clean\\_01mar22.pdf](https://migrationnetwork.un.org/system/files/docs/gcm-regionalreview-outcomedocument-en-final_clean_01mar22.pdf)

countries. This exposes them to risks of exploitation, abuse, trafficking in persons, forced labour, or even death. These trends underscore the urgent need for rights-based, regular migration pathways.

This background note provides examples of progress and challenges in national, regional, sub-regional and intraregional collaboration towards the implementation of the GCM by the Arab States. Findings presented draw from inputs from the Regional UN Network on Migration and its Stakeholder Advisory Group, thematic consultations with stakeholders, Champion countries' meetings, GCM talks and other practices and information available on the Migration Network Hub.

## Overview of progress

Addressing irregular migration requires mitigating various factors including poverty, unemployment, and gender inequalities to ensure migration is a choice. Several Arab nations have aligned their national development plans with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Agenda 2030. For example, UAE Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, and Qatar's National Vision 2030 focus on economic diversification and sustainability. Similarly, Jordan's 2025 Economic Growth Plan, Egypt's Sustainable Development Strategy (Egypt Vision 2030), Morocco's National Strategy for Sustainable Development, and Tunisia's Five-Year Development Plans (2023-2025), among others, all address social inclusivity, poverty alleviation, inequality reduction, and environmental preservation in line with the SDGs.

In addition to these development strategies, it is essential to recognize the critical role of return, reintegration, and complementary pathways, such as the Family Assistance Program (FAP) in reducing irregular migration by providing structured and supportive avenues for migrants. Effective return and reintegration programs ensure that returning migrants are adequately supported in their home countries, helping them reintegrate into the local economy and society. This support can include vocational training, financial assistance, and psychosocial support, reducing the likelihood of re-migration due to economic necessity. These pathways promote the protection and well-being of migrants by ensuring that they can migrate safely and legally, maintaining family unity and stability. In the context of reducing irregular migration, these pathways provide viable alternatives for migrants, ensuring they do not resort to unsafe and illegal means to reach their destinations. By offering comprehensive support and legal options, these pathways contribute to a more humane and orderly migration process, aligning with the goals of the GCM.

Regular pathways include policies, legislative frameworks, and mechanisms that enable safe, orderly, and regular mobility. The GCM provides a framework to expand and diversify the options and pathways for regular migration, facilitating labour mobility and decent work, reflecting labour market realities, optimizing educational opportunities, upholding family rights, and supporting vulnerable migrants. These pathways can range from skills-based labour mobility to alternative routes for vulnerable migrants.

Rights-based bilateral labour migration agreements and skills mobility partnerships are crucial for facilitating regular migration and protecting migrant workers' rights. Experience shows that to protect migrant workers' rights and ensure decent working conditions, bilateral agreements must set precise objectives aligned with international standards and be complemented by additional measures. These agreements should comprehensively cover the entire labour migration process, from admission criteria and recruitment procedures to skills recognition, social protection, integration, return, and reintegration. They can also foster cooperation and dialogue between countries, promoting the human rights and welfare of migrant workers. For

example, the GCC countries and Jordan have signed several Bilateral Labor Agreements and Memorandums of Understanding with Asian countries with large numbers of migrant workers. These agreements often address recruitment and immigration processes, set standard employment contracts, require employers to pay salaries into bank accounts, and outline procedures for legal recourse. Moreover, Morocco's bilateral labour agreement with Spain allows women to work seasonally in agriculture and return home with improved skills and financial situations. Another example is Tunisia's agreement with France, which includes a partnership to employ over 6,000 workers. Tunisia also has agreements with Portugal and Germany to protect migrant workers' rights and social security. Egypt has Bilateral Labor Agreements with 20 countries, including 17 Arab countries, and has established labour representative offices in countries with significant migrant populations, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Italy, to provide additional support.

While bilateral agreements offer immense benefits, issues like transparency, alignment with international labour standards, and accountability gaps can leave migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation. Language barriers, qualification recognition difficulties, and labour market mismatches are additional obstacles that migrant workers face. Additionally, issues like brain-drain, socio-economic development, and cost-sharing present significant challenges. Some countries of origin may face the risk of losing their skilled and qualified workers to countries of destination, which can have negative effects on their human capital and development prospects. To protect migrant workers effectively, bilateral agreements must be negotiated transparently and inclusively between origin and destination countries as equal partners. They should comply with international labour standards, and be monitored by joint committees. Gender and child-sensitive approaches are needed to adequately address the specific needs and challenges of women migrant workers and their families, who often face additional barriers and vulnerabilities in terms of access to the labour market, protection, integration, and return. Engaging private sector stakeholders and workers' organizations, such as employers and recruiting agencies, as well as trade unions and other organizations representing migrant workers, in designing, implementing, and monitoring these agreements is crucial to address the specific needs and challenges of migrant workers, especially women, and ensure they meet labour market demands.

Skills-based labour pathways can enhance human capital in countries of origin and close the skills gap between countries by facilitating the movement of skilled workers where they are most needed, while also providing opportunities for local workers to develop their abilities. Skills Mobility Partnerships promote the development of in-demand skills for all workers - linking origin and destination countries and supporting mutual development through the transfer of knowledge, skills, innovation, and technology. For instance, the region has a great potential to leverage migration as a climate adaptation strategy by building on the existing skills mobility partnerships and bilateral labour agreements with the countries of destination. Exploring skills mobility partnerships in the green job sectors has a great potential to benefit the green transition both in the countries of origin and destination. Indeed, the green transition is projected to create 30 million jobs in the renewable energy sector alone globally while many large economies are likely to face labour shortage to fill the demand. Labour migration can indeed help meet such labour market gaps in the destination countries. However, it is equally important to ensure that this does not lead to the deprivation of countries of origin with key human resources needed for their own just transition in line with the spirit of the just transition workstream of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This was one of the key topics of the GCM Talk organized in October 2023 by the UN Regional Network on Climate Change, the GCM and the Paris Agreement. [https://migrationnetwork.un.org/system/files/docs/GCM%20Talks\\_Report\\_20NOV\\_FINAL.pdf](https://migrationnetwork.un.org/system/files/docs/GCM%20Talks_Report_20NOV_FINAL.pdf)

Amidst these complex dynamics, diaspora communities emerge as crucial allies in addressing challenges related to regular migration pathways and labour markets. As strategic enablers, they act as robust bridges between societies, enhancing connections, fostering partnerships, and mobilizing resources to support migrant communities. Diasporas play critical roles across all migration phases—from offering guidance and inspiration during pre-migration, to assisting with integration during the admission phase. By connecting with migrant communities, promoting informed decision-making, and ensuring diverse representation, diasporas counter xenophobia and champion the development and expansion of regular migration pathways, actively contributing to their host countries and advancing inclusive migration policies.

## Guiding questions

- Have regular pathways for admission, including through bilateral, regional and multilateral labour mobility agreements, been effective to better respond to business and labour market needs?
- What are the examples of effective bilateral, regional and multilateral multi-stakeholder collaboration and initiatives that have enhanced the skills development and recognition, protection and inclusion of migrant workers?
- What are the examples of effective bilateral, regional and multilateral multi-stakeholder collaboration and initiatives that have contributed to the reduction of irregular migration?
- Which enabling conditions particularly improved protections for migrant workers? (e.g., smart work visa/permit systems, fair recruitment, ensuring decent work, including labour and social protections, and laws and programs benefiting women migrant workers and domestic workers, as well as opportunities for skills portability, etc.)
- What are the obstacles, challenges and best practices related to identification, visa processing aimed at facilitating the establishment of additional regular pathways?
- In the face of increasing impacts of climate change in the region, how can skills mobility partnerships and bilateral labour agreements contribute to accelerating the green transition in both countries of destination and origin?
- How could the countries of origin leverage the green job opportunities created in the just transition processes of the destination countries as possible adaptation options for the individuals affected by climate change while preventing the deprivation of key human resources needed for their own just transition? -
- How can diaspora communities leverage their unique talents and positionality to collaboratively address challenges in regular migration pathways and labor markets, optimizing their impact and effectiveness?