



Summary: ‘Tapping displaced talent: Policy options for EU complementary pathways’

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Tapping displaced talent: Policy Options for EU complementary pathways

Executive Summary

- This policy brief **outlines the policy options** regarding the implementation of complementary labour pathways for refugees resettling in the European Union. (See the EU-funded and ICMPD-implemented project “[Making refugee talent visible and accessible to EU labour markets – tapping into the potential of skills-based complementary pathways.](#)”)
- Both desk research and stakeholder interviews were used to develop this brief.
- Complementary pathways offer a **triple win**: humanitarian, economic, and pragmatic benefits.
- Canada, Australia, and the UK have all launched and expanded complementary pathways in the last five years. In the EU, complementary pathways are gaining more traction.
- **Key obstacles** to overcome in the EU to expand refugee labour mobility: policy silos, coordination among multiple actors, lack of political will to bring in more refugees, overstretched integration capacities, housing shortages and tensions related to supporting refugees that are already in the country. Other obstacles concern language barriers and skills and credentials recognition.
- Increasing labour shortages in Europe, [especially in software, health care, construction, and engineering](#), create **motivation** to tap into refugees’ talent.
- Identified **policy options** focus on either: (1) boosting displaced talent’s access to mainstream labour migration channels, or (2) launching targeting initiatives for displaced talent.
- Complementary pathways can change the narratives about refugees as persons in need to people who can be active contributors in their host societies.

Background

- Complementary pathways to protection do not have a single definition. They are meant to complement other refugee resettlement tools, and include migration through work, study, and family reunification avenues.
- Complementary pathways can be a “game changer”, and their potential in Europe is just beginning to be realised.
- This policy brief outlines policy options regarding the implementation of complementary labour pathways in Europe.
- The brief uses both desk research, as well as interviews with relevant stakeholders. Stakeholders are from five EU Member States in particular: Austria, Czechia, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

A Triple Win: The case for complementary labour pathways

- There are humanitarian, economic, and pragmatic arguments to support pursuing complementary pathways in the EU,
- *Humanitarian*: complementary pathways allow refugees to use their skills to build sustainable lives in new countries.
- *Economic*: complementary pathways provide new sources of labour.

- *Pragmatic:* complementary pathways reduce pressure on hosting countries while also demonstrating support and solidarity for refugees.

Current Complementary Labour Pathways

- Canada, Australia, and the UK have all launched and expanded complementary pathways in the last five years.
- In the EU, complementary pathways are gaining more traction and were identified as a priority in the 2023 Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund calls for proposal.
- Early iterations of complementary pathways targeting specific professions such as scholars, writers and artists, and facilitated short term placements. More recent pilot programs, such as Talent Beyond Borders, have focused on job matching to provide long-term migration solutions.
- The 2021 crisis in Afghanistan and 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine have acted as impetuses for exploring complementary pathways further.

Challenges to Expanding Refugee Labour Mobility in Europe

- Challenges to implementing complementary pathways are similar to others experienced by migrants, including: language barriers, inadequate recognition of foreign credentials, discrimination, and labour exploitation.
- Other identified challenges include:
 - Humanitarian protections may become less prioritized than economic pathways, and shift focus away from migrants already facing challenges integrating into the EU labour market.
 - Arrival of new refugees into markets with a shortage of affordable housing may exacerbate tensions.
 - The public opinion and political will in many EU Member States does not currently support increased refugee arrivals.
 - Increased refugee arrival in the EU since the start of the Russian-Ukraine conflict has stretched integration capacities.
 - There is currently no institution taking the lead on complementary pathways. Implementing a specialized unit to address complementary pathways would send a strong signal moving forward.
 - High levels of investment are needed.
 - There may be a mismatch between the locations in the EU to which people want to migrate, and where the relevant labour skills are required.

Opportunities for Expanding Labour Mobility in Europe

- *Widespread labour shortage:* Labour shortages across the EU are expected to increase and immigration is a key tool to recruit workers.
- *Strong employer motivation:* Employers play a key role in the development of complementary pathways. It allows employers to both meet labour needs, but also to fulfil their social responsibility commitments.
- *European Year of Skills:* 2023 is the ‘European Year of Skills’. This emphasizes the EU’s need for migration to maintain economic growth.

- *A precedent of flexibility to meet labour shortages:* The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of migrant workers in fulfilling basic services in EU Member States. Some countries eased travel restrictions during the pandemic to ensure adequate supply of migrant workers. Moreover, some countries have prior experience with fast tracking the integration of newcomers. For example, Sweden was a pioneer in fast tracking labour market integration in 2015 to fill shortages of social workers, teachers, and health care workers.
- *Existing labour migration schemes:* Most existing schemes focus on highly skilled workers. However, existing schemes can be built upon to facilitate a broader range of refugee talent recruitment.
- *Lessons from existing complementary labour pathways:* In Belgium, Ireland, and Portugal, pilots are underway. Existing and upcoming pilots can provide lessons to apply to the EU context.

Policy Options

- The brief divides policy options into two categories: (1) options that make current labour pathways more accessible to refugees generally, and (2) options that represent targeted initiatives for displaced talent in certain sectors or geographic locations (p.11).

1. Boosting Displaced Talent's Access to Mainstream Labour Migration Channels

- These policy options allow relevant actors to proceed with existing labour migration channels without waiting for policy changes. Options include:
 - More pilot programs can be launched in EU Member states to show proof of concept to stakeholders and build momentum and current complementary pathways in other countries including the ones with a sponsorship component can be used as a model;
 - Humanitarian considerations can be incorporated into points-based immigration systems for instance by awarding a certain number of points to persons in need of protection; and
 - Assistance can be provided to help potential migrants and European employers to navigate the current EU Blue Card and labour migration schemes by helping with CV and interview preparation. This would be particularly helpful for small and medium sized organizations without a dedicated immigration staff member.
- There are also policy options to make better use of existing pathways, that were not originally designed for displaced persons:
 - More flexibility can be created for refugees regarding requirements like salary thresholds and labour market tests, and European Qualification Passport for Refugees can be used for refugees abroad;
 - Job matching can be facilitated (for instance through [Talent Catalog](#) and expanding [EU Talent Pool](#)), including by creating more awareness of opportunities through networks while refugees are in countries of first asylum; and
 - National actors can be supported in internationalizing their efforts. For instance, organizations that are already experienced in refugees' labour market integration can expand their work internationally and add the element of mobility.
 - Stakeholders can work with one-stop-shops in Member States where key information and services for newcomers are co-located to help with bureaucracy and settlement support. Existing actors (e.g. [Brno Expat Centre](#)) that are part of broader talent attraction efforts can be partners for complementary pathways stakeholders.

2. Launching Targeted Initiatives for Displaced Talent

- Germany’s Western Balkans Regulation can be used as inspiration for a pathway that allows refugees from specific countries if they demonstrate that they have a job offer.
 - Sector-based labour pathways for sectors in high demand for refugees with a secured job offer can be launched as well.
- Refugee labour mobility can be incorporated into EU partnership programs. For example, programs should reserve a certain number of places in labour mobility programs for refugees.
- Community sponsorship models can be adopted for complementary pathways (e.g. [Canada’s Hospitality Industry Welcomes Refugee Employment-Linked Sponsorships Project](#)). In Europe, as community sponsorship programs expand, connections with employers can be built in to program design to create labour mobility pathways for refugees.
- Covid-19 and Ukraine-related labour fast tracks can be expanded to target particular sectors and in-demand occupations for refugees that are abroad.
- In order to enhance opportunities for a wider group of displaced people, approaches to incorporate training and partnerships with the private sector could include:
 - Upskilling before and after arrival in host countries. For example, refugees could come to host countries through apprenticeship pathways while attending language training to transition to full-time employment;
 - Supporting the private sector’s expansion of recruitment and training of refugees such as job search support and language training. Existing activities can be expanded to be used for international recruitment and training refugees.