

Making Labour Migration Pathways Work for Displaced People

Lessons from Latin America

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Executive Summary

Few regions illustrate the complexity of contemporary migration as vividly as Latin America and the Caribbean. With 48 million people from the region living outside their country of birth in 2024 and migration occurring in many directions at once, the region defies simple categorisation: the same country is often sending workers abroad, receiving people displaced from neighbouring states, serving as a transit point for migrants heading further north or south, and working to reintegrate returnees or internally displaced people. Behind these movements lies a web of intersecting pressures, including insecurity and violence, economic fragility, environmental stress, and the search for better lives and job opportunities. Together, these dynamics produce a very diverse population on the move—some voluntarily and others with no real choice but to flee.

Faced with this complexity, governments across the region have experimented with a variety of tools to manage large-scale migration and displacement in a pragmatic way. These have ranged from regularisation programmes and integration initiatives to—more recently—refugee labour pathways and referral networks connecting displaced individuals to opportunities elsewhere.

At the same time, driven by growing recognition of the role labour migration can play in both tackling worker shortages and supporting development at home, more governments in Latin America and the Caribbean have begun pursuing structured approaches to managing this kind of movement. Colombia, Ecuador, and several Central American countries are among those that have made tangible progress. Meanwhile, the *Regional Strategy on Labour Migration and Human Mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean 2023–2030*, developed by the International Labour Organisation and 37 countries from the region, reflects a broader consensus that enhanced labour mobility governance is a collective priority—especially given declining fertility rates across the region.

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But for many people already on the move, these advances have yet to have a tangible impact. Refugees and others in need of protection have rarely been considered in the design of labour mobility schemes, whether within Latin America and the Caribbean or elsewhere. For many, a lack of required documents or formal work histories, difficulties with

credential recognition, limited financial resources, and limited awareness of regular mobility pathways can result in systematic exclusion from opportunities that economic migrants can, in principle, access. A handful of targeted initiatives have emerged to create opportunities for this group—including under the EU-funded Skills, Talent, and Empowerment through Pathways (STEP) project, which has sought to facilitate the movement of refugees and other displaced people, including from Latin America, to Italy, Ireland, and Spain for work. To date, the number of beneficiaries of these initiatives has been limited.

As refugee resettlement and other humanitarian protection pathways narrow, the importance of ensuring that qualified displaced individuals can, with certain adaptations, access existing labour mobility systems has grown. And for European countries that are facing worker shortages and often recruit—or want to recruit—from Latin America and the Caribbean, doing so has multiple benefits: helping to meet labour needs while also easing pressure on countries hosting large displaced populations and contributing to the protection of displaced individuals.

Drawing on evidence from Latin America and the Caribbean, this policy brief examines what it takes to make labour migration systems genuinely inclusive of displaced workers—and what steps both departure and destination countries would need to take to reach that goal. In particular, attention is needed to:

- ▶ **Improving worker outreach and placement:** Many displaced workers are unaware of labour mobility opportunities or struggle to navigate complex application processes. Departure countries should ensure that public employment services and protection and development actors disseminate information on available pathways and eligibility conditions and provide practical predeparture support to help workers make informed decisions

and avoid exploitation. Complementing this, destination countries should invest in employer engagement, providing clear guidance on international recruitment and facilitating connections with candidates through job fairs and other means.

- ▶ **Removing travel constraints:** For many displaced people, the barrier to labour migration is not a lack of skills but rather an inability to produce the required paperwork for visa and employment processes. Departure countries can take a more active role in facilitating access to travel documents for displaced people—especially if they hold a confirmed job or training offer abroad. Destination countries, meanwhile, can support entry by recognising temporary protection status and other nonstandard forms of documentation as sufficient proof of residence and identity for mobility purposes, training consular staff to assess cases accordingly, and introducing expedited visa processing tracks for applicants with confirmed offers.
- ▶ **Building more accessible credential recognition and skills development systems:** Displaced workers frequently lack the original education transcripts required for formal credential recognition, and even when they do have these documents, recognition processes tend to be lengthy, complex, and costly. Both departure and destination countries can help bridge this gap by investing in alternative assessment systems that recognise demonstrated competence rather than relying solely on paper credentials or qualifications. Departure countries could also facilitate access to training programmes that build new, portable certifications. And destination countries can address the burden of upfront credential recognition by designing

admission pathways that link access to work to the completion of specific training, either before departure or upon arrival. Financing mechanisms that avoid placing costs solely on workers are essential too.

- ▶ **Setting up coordination architecture:** Inter-institutional platforms and interoperable data systems can help actors involved in labour mobility—including government authorities, employers, and civil society—in both departure and destination countries align around shared objectives, identify skills needs, track progress, and address bottlenecks that prevent refugee workers from accessing labour migration opportunities. Furthermore, sustained coordination between departure and destination countries can help identify and match available workers with mobility opportunities, and surface and address obstacles efficiently.
- ▶ **Making partnerships work:** The sustainability of labour mobility corridors depends in large part on whether departure countries see them as serving their own development objectives, not just the needs of destination-country economies. To this end, destination countries should consider providing both financial and technical support to strengthen key systems in their partner countries—such as training systems, public employment services, and consular and visa processing capacity—so that benefits extend to the broader workforce and that destination countries’ concerns about brain drain are addressed.

Latin America and the Caribbean’s approach to displacement, strong institutional base, and growing political engagement in labour migration position the region as a compelling testing ground for integrating labour mobility into displacement re-

sponses—and as a source of lessons for other world regions. Realising this potential, however, requires sustained commitment from both departure and destination countries to tackle remaining gaps and ensure qualified displaced workers are not excluded from labour migration opportunities.

1 Introduction

On a single day in Bogotá, Colombia’s migration authorities might be attending to a Venezuelan family applying for protection, a Haitian man who was deported from Chile and is making his way north, and an Ecuadorian professional arriving with a job offer from a local firm. At the same time, a Colombian family displaced by climate change is registering for an assistance programme, a Colombian woman is boarding a flight to Spain for a seasonal work opportunity, and a young man deported from the United States is seeking to re-establish himself.

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Similar scenes play out, in different forms, across the entire region. Latin America and the Caribbean is a region defined by movement, with countries functioning simultaneously as places of origin, transit, destination, and return—making mixed migration not the exception but the norm. As a result, most countries host highly diverse populations, including internally displaced people, returnees, economic migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees both with and without recognised status.

These complex and evolving migration dynamics have prompted national governments to test a

range of innovative policy responses. On one hand, the scale, variety, and length of displacement have driven the creation of large regularisation programmes, refugee labour market integration measures, and efforts to connect displaced populations to regular migration pathways elsewhere. On the other hand, labour market needs and opportunities inside and outside the region have led governments to invest in robust labour migration systems for their own nationals—including through enhanced bilateral labour agreements, employer vetting and oversight, skills portability initiatives, and worker support structures. This second set of initiatives has, however, often not been designed with the inclusion of displaced populations in mind.

Globally, refugee protection pathways are narrowing, resettlement quotas are shrinking, and eligibility criteria are becoming more restrictive.¹ At the same time, development funding that once underpinned the socioeconomic integration of refugees in Latin America and the Caribbean is drying up. In this context, ensuring that forcibly displaced people in the region can access labour migration opportunities emerges as a critical strategy, one that can unlock durable solutions for refugees and other displaced groups, ease pressure on host countries, and help destination countries meet persistent labour shortages.

With policy attention in many destination countries—especially those in Europe—increasingly focused on redesigning migration systems to attract needed talent and boost skilled migrants' contributions to their economies, the moment is ripe to make these systems more accessible to a broader group of skilled individuals on the move. A key part of this is ensuring that a person's displacement does not become a barrier to accessing safety and economic opportunities elsewhere.

This policy brief examines Latin America and the Caribbean as a case study for how labour migration systems can be designed to enhance protection op-

portunities. Drawing on analysis of labour mobility and displacement response initiatives across the region, it identifies gaps and promising practices that offer lessons for policymakers and practitioners in Europe and elsewhere. In doing so, it aims to inform ongoing policy debates about the investments and institutional capacities required in both departure and destination countries to ensure labour migration systems are inclusive, mutually beneficial, and sustainable for migrant and refugee workers, host communities, and destination economies.

2 A Region in Motion: Migration and Displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean

The number of Latin American and Caribbean people on the move has reached historic levels, with 48 million people living outside their country of birth in 2024.² Yet migration from and within the region is far from new. For decades, multiple, often-overlapping factors have shaped a complex landscape characterised by mixed migration. Violence, human rights violations, political instability, economic hardship, and environmental shocks have all contributed to large-scale internal and international displacement.

While the exodus from Venezuela—totalling 7.9 million people by 2025—remains the region's most visible and largest displacement crisis in recent history,³ forced displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean extends well beyond a single country. In recent years, many Haitians have fled political turmoil, arriving in countries such as Chile and Brazil; Nicaraguans have sought protection from gang violence, most notably in Costa Rica; and Cubans facing deteriorating conditions at home have moved to Mexico, Brazil, and Uruguay.⁴ Estimates by the Unit-

ed Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicate that, by the end of 2025, there were 13.3 million forcibly displaced people living outside their country of origin in the Americas, including 1.4 million recognised refugees.⁵

Migration within and from Latin America and the Caribbean has also been driven by the search for better lives and economic prospects and the desire to reunify with family abroad. For many years, Argentinians, Brazilians, Colombians, Ecuadorians, Guatemalans, and Peruvians—among many others—have left their countries in search of work elsewhere. Many stay within the region,⁶ facilitated by regional mobility frameworks such as those of the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), the Andean Community, and the Pacific Alliance, as well as bilateral labour mobility agreements and work programmes (for instance, between Mexico and Guatemala or Costa Rica and Panama).⁷ Others move beyond the region, typically to North America, where long-standing temporary migration programmes such as the United States’ H-2 visa scheme and Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program have facilitated large-scale circular labour migration, underpinned by bilateral agreements (for instance, between Honduras and Canada or El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala with the United States).⁸ Europe has also emerged as a growing destination, with the number of migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean more than quadrupling since the 1990s.⁹ Bilateral labour agreements—such as those Spain has with Colombia, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras—have provided a solid legal foundation for this movement, while a new generation of recruitment initiatives and mobility programmes (including those run by Spain, Germany, and Italy) is strengthening labour mobility corridors across the Atlantic.¹⁰

This mixed migration has been the focus of significant attention from governments and civil society, who aim to both address displacement and better manage the emigration and admission of workers.

Displacement responses and emerging labour mobility opportunities

Latin American and Caribbean responses to displacement and other acute migration pressures have taken various forms and evolved over time. For example, as displacement from Venezuela has continued, many countries have shifted from viewing this as a short-term humanitarian emergency requiring a quick, pragmatic response to treating it as a situation requiring a longer-term strategy. This approach has led to the introduction of policy tools to advance integration, including through regularisation. Colombia, for instance, introduced the Temporary Statute of Protection for Venezuelans, granting more than 1 million eligible individuals legal stay and access to services for up to ten years. Ecuador has also implemented targeted regularisation efforts, granting close to 96,000 Venezuelans an Exceptional Temporary Residence Visa (VIRTE) between 2022 and 2024, enabling access to work and basic services.¹¹ And Brazil has granted *prima facie* refugee recognition to Venezuelans arriving at the border, drawing on the Cartagena Declaration.¹² In some cases, complementary efforts have also been made to integrate refugees and other displaced people into local labour markets, including through mechanisms to validate their skills and professional qualifications and to connect them with local employers. These investments—largely reliant on international development funding—have helped a portion of the region’s displaced population, mainly Venezuelans, access jobs in their host country.

At the same time, governments across the region have significantly invested in building up policy frameworks and infrastructure to support safe, well-managed labour migration. This has included strengthening public employment services to better connect workers with opportunities abroad, developing predeparture orientation programmes to prepare migrants for life and work in destination coun-

tries, and establishing post-arrival follow-up mechanisms to monitor worker welfare and address abuse. Investments in skills development and recognition—including efforts to consolidate national training services, align training with destination-country labour market needs, and enable the cross-border validation of qualifications—have also aimed to improve worker employability and the transferability of their skills abroad.¹³ Yet these systems remain largely geared towards a country's nationals, leaving out many people on the move who could also benefit from these services and pathways.

Together, the region's emphasis on the integration of displaced people and investments in labour mobility systems create an as-yet-untapped opportunity. These various policies offer a strong foundation to better connect displaced people, alongside other workers, with existing migration pathways and work opportunities abroad. Doing so could make labour mobility a more deliberate, complementary component of the region's response to displacement.

Against a backdrop of shifting migration policies in key destinations such as the United States, increasing return movements, declining remittances, and reduced development financing,¹⁴ Latin American and Caribbean governments have even more reason to expand access—with the right safeguards in place—to labour mobility pathways for refugees and other displaced people. Doing so can reduce pressure on national systems and local communities hosting large displaced populations, while providing displaced people with access to safety and new opportunities.

3 The Region's Evolving Approach to Refugee Labour Pathways

Latin American and Caribbean responses to displacement have made important strides in providing

displaced individuals with some level of protection and enhanced access to integration opportunities. But despite these advances, significant gaps remain;¹⁵ many displaced people have limited opportunities to transition from temporary to permanent status and to fully apply their skills and build stable livelihoods.

Recognising these gaps—while also trying to enhance international responsibility-sharing and increase pathways to protection—governments, civil society, and international organisations such as UNHCR, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and International Labour Organisation (ILO) have experimented with complementary protection pathways linked to employment abroad for refugees and other displaced people. These efforts have, in some cases, built on existing resettlement infrastructure, while in others they have leveraged mainstream labour migration systems or broader referral mechanisms.

A. *Connecting displaced individuals with opportunities abroad*

Some initiatives have aimed to connect a larger number of displaced people to opportunities in other safe countries via the existing infrastructure of refugee resettlement programmes, introducing skills-based elements into a system traditionally focused on vulnerability and protection needs. For instance, Uruguay's former resettlement programme (prior to 2020) focused on selecting and placing Central American refugees in rural Uruguayan communities where there was demand for agricultural workers.¹⁶ In Spain, the Resettlement Plus programme, launched in 2023, focused on identifying displaced Nicaraguans in Costa Rica who had experience in the field of renewable energies and resettling them in Spain to work in solar farms.¹⁷ More recently, UNHCR has engaged with countries in the region (Argenti-

na, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, and Trinidad and Tobago) to discuss connecting displaced individuals with labour opportunities in these countries, supported by Talent Lift and Talent Beyond Boundaries. And in Italy, as part of the Skills, Talent, and Empowerment through Pathways (STEP) project, the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy and Caritas Italy have worked to match displaced people arriving through humanitarian corridors—specifically those with needed skills and ready to work—with employers.

Other efforts have worked more directly through labour migration systems, supporting refugees' access to existing work or training visas. For example, the STEP project has facilitated the recruitment of displaced individuals residing in Colombia and Ecuador to work in sectors facing shortages in Italy, including working as airport operators and health-care assistants. An additional STEP pilot is expected to expand this approach to Spain.¹⁸ Similarly, the Labour Mobility Partnerships (LaMP) is developing a pathway to connect Venezuelans in Colombia with specific employment opportunities in Spain.¹⁹

Additional initiatives have focused on creating and testing referral mechanisms to connect eligible individuals with mobility pathways, as a way to better manage mixed migration. The Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) established in 2023 in Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Ecuador functioned as online screening mechanisms for displaced people and others seeking regular pathways to third countries. Launched at the initiative of the Biden administration and operated with support from host countries, UNHCR, and IOM, the SMOs allowed people of multiple nationalities to apply for a range of pathways—including refugee resettlement, humanitarian parole, family reunification, and temporary work permits—primarily to the United States but also to Canada and Spain.²⁰ While the eligibility criteria varied by country and evolved over time, SMO assistance was generally limited to specific nationalities (Cubans, Haitians, Venezuelans, Nicaraguans, and

others depending on location) who had arrived in the host country prior to a set date and held, or were in the process of obtaining, regular status.

B. Persistent gaps and constraints

Despite efforts to expand employment-linked protection pathways, most initiatives tested to date have been small in scale and hard to sustain.²¹ Spain's Resettlement Plus programme welcomed 110 Nicaraguans between 2023 and 2024 before being halted due to integration challenges and lack of employer engagement.²² And the SMOs, while demonstrating significant demand—with nearly 200,000 registrations, 21,000 approvals, and around 9,000 admissions to the United States within a year—mainly supported access to refugee resettlement and other humanitarian pathways rather than employment, and they were shut down in 2025 following the change in U.S. administration and withdrawal of funding.²³

Across these initiatives, common bottlenecks relate to the resource-intensive nature of providing bespoke support, which is often needed to help displaced people address their lack of legal status in the country of departure, limited access to valid travel documents, burdensome skills recognition procedures, and limited proof of formal work experience.²⁴ These constraints have been further compounded by the lack of employer engagement in many cases—as seen in the Resettlement Plus programme in Spain—as well as by displaced candidates' lack of financial means to cover upfront migration costs such as those linked to documentation, tests, and training, with limited alternative financing mechanisms available to cover them.

Many of these barriers, and the need for tailored support, reflect the absence of more systematic arrangements and flexibilities within labour migration processes that would make them accessible to qualified displaced people. In Italy, for instance, the

mobility pathway for Venezuelans living in Colombia or Ecuador relies on a fragmented patchwork of decrees, memoranda of understanding (MOUs), and other arrangements to help applicants overcome bottlenecks. While these mechanisms have been crucial in testing the model, the lack of consistent, systematised procedures makes the pathway difficult for displaced individuals to navigate independently, and the absence of clear timelines makes employer engagement challenging.²⁵

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Despite the hurdles, past and ongoing initiatives have played a key role in establishing proof of concept for labour mobility pathways for refugees and building the knowledge base and partnerships needed to operate them. Scaling up these approaches, though, will require more systemic reforms to ensure labour migration systems are accessible and inclusive of displaced individuals, lessening the need for ad hoc or highly tailored support.²⁶

4 Key Elements of Leveraging Labour Mobility as Part of Displacement Response

With asylum systems and resettlement opportunities in traditional destination countries tightening, other immigration pathways to the United States contracting, and reduced development financing threaten-

ing to erode integration prospects, Latin American and Caribbean countries are having to rethink some aspects of their responses to displacement. One underutilised strategy is expanding displaced people's access to non-humanitarian pathways and, in particular, labour mobility pathways—both in the region and beyond.

Countries across Latin America and the Caribbean are advancing efforts to strengthen their labour migration systems. Colombia's International Labour Mobility Action Plan, the ILO's *Regional Strategy on Labour Migration and Human Mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean 2023–2030*,²⁷ new partnerships pursued by countries such as Ecuador and Guatemala, and a new Global Skill Partnership that Spain has entered into with Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Ecuador all point to growing opportunities to expand safe and structured labour mobility pathways. With the right adaptations, these opportunities could also benefit displaced populations.²⁸

Lessons from the handful of pilot refugee mobility programmes tested in Latin America and the Caribbean to date, combined with the region's extensive experience supporting the integration of migrants and managing the labour migration of nationals, highlight opportunities to better leverage labour migration to expand protection. These include actions focused on improving awareness and navigation of opportunities; ensuring visa processes do not exclude displaced workers; making credential recognition accessible or providing viable alternatives; and strengthening coordination to support a well-functioning mobility ecosystem.

A. Pathway information and placement support

Unlike economic migrants, displaced people are often disconnected from the channels through which labour mobility opportunities circulate. As a result,

even where legal pathways and employment opportunities exist, they may be unaware of them or exposed to misinformation. Experience from existing corridors and integration initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean shows that reaching this population requires deliberate outreach, trusted intermediaries, and dedicated support to guide applicants through complex processes. Across the region, diverse outreach and referral mechanisms are already in place, many of which could be adapted to more explicitly include displaced people.

In many cases, help desks, one-stop shops, referral networks, and similar initiatives have proven useful at bridging this gap. In Brazil, the Operation Welcome programme ensures that Venezuelans who arrive at the border and are willing to relocate within Brazil for work are briefed and matched with relevant work opportunities, based on a skills assessment.²⁹ The now-discontinued SMOs as well as IOM referral networks and visa application centres operating in multiple countries have also served to inform people of pathways aligned with their skills and circumstances, sometimes connecting them to these opportunities and accompanying them through administrative procedures. In Mexico, multi-service centres established along key migration routes bring together public and private services—including COMAR, the national refugee agency—to provide information, documentation support, and referrals for people on the move.³⁰ And an initiative called México te Emplea (Mexico Employs You), which ran from 2020 to 2023, brought together employers and humanitarian actors to register, match, and place migrants and displaced individuals in jobs, a model that could be adapted to connect displaced workers with opportunities abroad as the SMOs did.³¹

In this regard, public employment services across Latin America and the Caribbean also hold significant potential. Beyond their traditional role in domestic labour markets—including mapping skills

needs and advertising vacancies—several have expanded to support international placements.³² In Colombia, the Public Employment Service provides information on work opportunities and supports worker registration, profile development, pre-selection, and training. It also hosts a network of service providers in their territory, including 17 transnational employment agencies that link Colombian workers to jobs abroad. Lessons from these operations have informed the publication of Colombia's first Transnational Mobility Guide, a tool to inform the work of these transnational agencies and ensure safe and effective international placements.³³ Similarly, in Mexico, the National Employment Service has facilitated international placements for Mexican workers in sectors such as agriculture in the United States and Spain—an approach that could be expanded to other groups of workers and destinations.

Recognising the role public employment services can play in connecting not only nationals but also migrants and refugees with employment opportunities, IOM's Proyecto Lazos focused on enhancing these agencies' capacity to support information-sharing and placement for displaced individuals in the region, among other things.³⁴ These and other efforts provide a promising foundation, but further work is needed—for example, explicit mandates, incentives, and capacity-building—to strengthen how public employment services support displaced people in connecting with job opportunities abroad.

Digital tools, including some using artificial intelligence, can offer a complementary, lower-touch means of support. For instance, the Mixed Migration Centre recently launched SAMI, a chatbot offering migrants in Colombia information on legal pathways, rights, services, and integration processes.³⁵ Tools such as SAMI could be further configured to specifically support displaced populations, systematising access to information on available opportunities, application processes, and where to turn for guidance and support in specific destinations.

Dedicated labour migration online portals can serve a similar function—centralising information on foreign labour markets and offering step-by-step guides to help people navigate application processes independently.³⁶

Destination countries too can play an important role in the dissemination of information, ensuring mobility opportunities are visible and accessible to displaced people. Germany’s Make it in Germany platform and ProRecognition initiative offer an interesting model, consolidating information on recruitment, immigration, and skills recognition processes in one place for both employers and prospective workers.³⁷ Beyond online visibility, destination-country actors can also play a more active role: Spanish private companies, for example, have often directly organised job fairs in Latin American and Caribbean countries. For displaced workers to benefit from either approach, however, these information channels need to reach them; working with local civil-society actors and trusted humanitarian intermediaries can help.

Finally, private intermediaries—including multinational staffing firms such as Adecco, Randstad, and Manpower—play a role in facilitating labour mobility for economic migrants in many places, but their operations generally do not reach displaced populations. This may reflect the cost structures associated with their services, which many displaced individuals simply cannot afford. Nevertheless, raising awareness with and engaging trusted international recruiters to encourage them to include displaced people in their outreach and matching efforts—while exploring financing models to help refugees to afford these services—could expand the range of available pathways, provided their recruitment activities are subject to robust regulation to ensure safety.

B. *Visa and mobility pathway accessibility*

Within Latin America and the Caribbean, existing mobility frameworks and labour provisions have significantly facilitated intra-regional movement and enabled countries to draw on migrants and displaced individuals to meet workforce needs. Systems such as Costa Rica’s Migratory Labor Traceability System (SITLAM) and Mexico’s Border Worker Visitor Card, for example, have also supported the regularisation of temporary migrants working in agriculture.³⁸ In parallel, large-scale regularisation processes and protection mechanisms (especially for Venezuelans) have played an important role in facilitating labour market integration and access to regular status.³⁹

Despite these efforts, a significant share of displaced people in the region lacks formal status (see Box 1)—excluded by documentary requirements, unaffordable costs, narrow eligibility windows, or schemes that exist on paper but carry little weight in practice. In Colombia, for instance, 32 per cent of Venezuelans remain irregular despite the availability of temporary protection status, partly because recent arrivals are ineligible for permits under the Temporary Statute of Protection for Venezuelans; in Peru, many employers do not accept the Temporary Residence Permit as proof someone is eligible to work; and in Ecuador, the VIRTE regularisation scheme excluded those unable to meet documentary or legal entry requirements and has since expired.⁴⁰

Without regular status and valid documents, displaced individuals are locked out of labour migration systems because they are unable to access placement, referral, and training services such as those offered by public employment services, national training institutes, or other providers (e.g., formerly the SMOs). They are also effectively excluded from existing visa systems and admission

procedures as these typically require travel documents, proof of identity, and proof of legal status in the country of departure too.⁴¹ Even when displaced people meet the conditions for admission to another country, destination countries' limited consular representation in key departure countries, low staff awareness of alternative valid documents, and lengthy appointment and processing times constrain access—often driving individuals determined to migrate to use irregular routes or smuggling networks instead and discouraging potential employers from engaging.

Greater flexibility, especially from destination countries, in documentation and other requirements—without compromising on security—could significantly expand visa access for displaced workers. This could include accepting alternative forms of proof to meet intent-to-return requirements (i.e., requirements that applicants prove they will return to their prior country of residence when a visa expires, which can be difficult for displaced individuals), or adapting proof-of-residence criteria to recognise temporary or tolerated statuses in the country of departure as meeting this threshold. It could also involve accepting alternative travel and identity documentation that are more accessible to displaced people (such as expired passports, Convention Travel Documents, and documents issued by the UNHCR) or issuing temporary travel documents (e.g., *laissez-passer*) for individuals unable to obtain passports. Some destination countries have already introduced such forms of flexibility as part of refugee labour pathways: for example, Australia, Canada, and Ireland may accept expired passports or other government-issued identity documents in place of valid travel documents, while Italy has issued *laissez-passer* in certain cases.⁴²

The availability of consular services in the country where displaced people live can also directly shape the feasibility and design of refugee labour pathways. In the case of the pathway being developed

by LaMP to facilitate movement to Spain, Venezuelan candidates in Colombia are being prioritised over those in Ecuador primarily due to the absence of a functioning Venezuelan consulate in Ecuador, which programme organisers perceived as a practical barrier to ensuring beneficiaries can access required documentation and complete processing requirements.⁴³ Accessible, well-resourced consular services by destination countries—equipped to recognise and assess alternative documents commonly held by displaced populations—are also critical for effective and timely pathway operations. However, where destination countries lack sufficient consular capacity, other partnerships can sometimes help fill the gap. For example, IOM's visa assistance programming operates Canada Visa Application Centres across the region. With operations in Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, and Uruguay, these centres help applicants navigate regular migration routes through integrated case management, appointment scheduling, document verification, biometric enrolment, and predeparture orientation.⁴⁴

Finally, experience has shown that facilitated access to labour migration pathways must be accompanied by robust protections in destination countries to prevent displaced individuals from being exploited or, if they lose their job or status, from being returned to their origin countries where they could face persecution or other harms (known as *refoulement*). Evidence from temporary labour migration programmes from Central America to the United States and Canada, for instance, documents how weak legal protections can leave workers vulnerable to wage theft, unsafe conditions, and threats of deportation if they raise complaints.⁴⁵ Safeguards against *refoulement* are especially crucial for displaced individuals traveling without recognised refugee status. These measures can include ensuring displaced persons can re-enter their country of departure after their destination-country visa ends (such as through specific agreements) or work per-

mits that allow workers a grace period to find new employment if they have lost a job, without losing status. Some arrangements such as Australia's updated policies and the Irish Critical Skills Employment Permit extend the grace period to around 180–190 days, while Canada's Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot for refugees goes further by granting permanent residence upon arrival, offering a more secure basis for long-term protection.⁴⁶ Still, making sure displaced individuals have the option to return to the country where they were living prior to working abroad and to regain protected status there could unlock access to temporary mobility programmes for many displaced people, as this has been a key ask from destination countries.

Weak legal protections can leave workers vulnerable to wage theft, unsafe conditions, and threats of deportation if they raise complaints.

Alongside these design features, the introduction of monitoring systems, accessible complaint mechanisms, and oversight by trusted intermediaries—including civil-society organisations and diaspora networks—are essential, particularly for workers with limited literacy or language skills at destination. Countries such as El Salvador and Guatemala offer instructive models as both have developed structured accompaniment systems for nationals working abroad, including dedicated WhatsApp-based communication channels that provide real-time information and support to workers overseas—a low-cost, high-reach mechanism that could be extended to displaced people departing from various host countries. Similarly, labour attachés or dedicated focal points in destination countries, such as those maintained by Mexico to support nationals abroad, could help monitor working conditions and serve as a first point of contact for displaced workers in distress.⁴⁷

BOX 1 **Refugee recognition in Latin America and the Caribbean and its impact on labour mobility**

In contrast to some other regions experiencing large-scale displacement, formal refugee status in Latin America and the Caribbean is the exception rather than the rule, with only about 12 per cent of the forcibly displaced population holding formal refugee status.* This reality reflects a number of factors. Asylum systems across the region are often overstretched and slow, and in some countries, refugee status has historically come with formal or practical barriers to labour market access. These constraints alongside a preference to maintain mobility—including the ability to return temporarily to countries of origin to visit family—have discouraged many from pursuing or completing asylum claims. Large-scale regularisation schemes have offered an alternative route to regular stay and employment authorisation for specific groups, but in doing so, have also drawn people away from formal refugee procedures.

Although this limited use of formal refugee status is not inherently problematic, it can create three specific challenges for displaced people seeking to access labour migration systems. First, while recognised refugees have access to alternative documentation—such as a UNHCR certificate or a refugee travel document—when standard identity or travel documents are unavailable, those without this status often do not and may be excluded from migration pathways if departure or destination countries make no provisions for this group. Second, without recognised status, facilitated family reunification procedures designed for recognised refugees at destination may be unavailable or harder to invoke. Third, and most critically, people travelling without formal refugee status may be exposed to greater risk of refoulement if destination countries lack adequate safeguards or do not recognise these individuals' protection needs.

* The percentage represents 1.4 million recognised refugees out of a total of 11.8 million people in need of international protection in the Americas, as reported by UNHCR. Sources: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder, 'Refugees in the Americas (2025)', accessed 2 April 2026; María Belén Zanzuchi, Kate Hooper, and Abigail Goldfarb, *Building Refugee-Inclusive Labor Mobility Pathways: A Visa Evaluation Framework* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2026).

C. *Support with credential recognition, skills development, and related costs*

Credential recognition and skills development are also stubborn barriers to labour mobility for displaced people. Most credential recognition systems assume applicants have original documentation—degree certificates and transcripts—or can get access to them via institutions in their country of origin. Yet many displaced people are forced to flee without the paperwork these systems require and have limited means of retrieving it. The problem is compounded by the fragmentation of credential recognition systems; each country has its own procedures, and professional standards are not equivalent across borders. For example, a nurse trained in Chile may be qualified to perform tasks that fall outside the scope of practice for the same role in Ecuador or Germany. Such mismatches make direct comparison of credentials burdensome and lengthy even when workers have the needed documents.

Where these barriers prove insurmountable, they can derail labour mobility pathways. A proposed pilot for health-care workers from Suriname to Belgium, for instance, was halted in part for this reason: curriculum differences were so significant that requalification would have taken longer than workers could afford without earning a salary.⁴⁸ In Spain, limited flexibility around documentation requirements and credential recognition—including the lack of options for recognising training workers have completed in another country and limited use of alternative assessments—has led actors designing pathways to explore alternative routes. For instance, the LaMP pilot labour pathway has turned to study visas as a workaround, enabling candidates to pursue training at destination, albeit with restrictions on how many hours participants can work while doing that training and no access to family reunification.⁴⁹

Mexico's National Employment Service may conduct structured skills profiling if displaced workers lack the education records for standard credential recognition.

A few national-level initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean have succeeded in building systems that adapt credential recognition to the conditions of displaced workers by shifting the focus from required documents to demonstrated competence. For example, Mexico's National Employment Service may conduct structured skills profiling if displaced workers lack the education records for standard credential recognition, which makes it possible to place workers in jobs based on what they can do rather than what they can prove on paper.⁵⁰ Brazil's Operation Welcome takes a similar approach. These initiatives offer an alternative model that other destination countries could adopt, even if only suitable for certain professions. In Spain, meanwhile, procedures exist to recognise professional competences through work experience or training, but these are designed primarily for residents.⁵¹ Extending such mechanisms to workers abroad would be a relatively low-cost adaptation with significant potential to expand access to a larger talent pool, including qualified displaced workers who may lack formal credentials but can demonstrate practical skills.

At the regional level, a more structured effort is underway to facilitate skills portability for migrants and displaced workers in Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2025, ILO, IOM, and CINTERFOR (the Inter-American Centre for Knowledge Development in Vocational Training) launched the Skills Passport initiative. Rather than advancing skills recognition by mapping course-by-course equivalencies between national education systems, the Skills Passport aims to operate through a network of trusted training institutions and utilise standardised descriptors of the skills and tasks associated with specific occupations

across pilot countries.⁵² By enabling partial recognition and identifying targeted training needs, the system can support both intra-regional mobility and act as a stepping stone for pathways to other destinations as well.

Some European countries, incentivised by pressing labour shortages, are beginning to test more flexible models that could, with the right adaptations and institutional support, open new doors for displaced individuals. Germany's visa for technical and vocational training, for instance, allows third-country nationals to bypass credential recognition by completing training directly in Germany, though financial requirements and documentation thresholds would need to be adjusted to make the visa accessible to displaced applicants. Italy's extra quota pathway (Cutro Decree) goes even further by allowing third-country nationals, including refugees, who complete approved vocational and language training in their country of departure to arrive with recognised qualifications and move into employment more quickly, without further in-country credential recognition.⁵³

Front-loaded models offer a meaningful alternative for workers who would otherwise struggle to have their credentials recognised, but they also place new demands on countries of departure, which must have the institutional infrastructure to deliver the required training. National training institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean thus represent a critical entry point for scaling labour mobility pathways. For example, Colombia's National Training Service (SENA) operates with a nationwide network of offices offering targeted training aligned with labour market needs, including for international mobility. Furthermore, regional networks such as CINTERFOR provide an established platform for skills development, standard-setting, and cross-country coordination, with established links to Spain and Portugal. Leveraging this infrastructure through partnerships with destination countries can facilitate alignment of training with those countries' labour market needs while

avoiding the costs and inefficiencies of building new systems. Such investments would also make cooperation on refugee labour pathways more attractive to departure countries by delivering tangible benefits (i.e., stronger training systems) for those who stay.

For labour mobility to European countries beyond Spain and Portugal, language skills are another constraint, particularly in systems that require high levels of proficiency as part of visa applications.⁵⁴ While some initiatives have sought to address this by embedding language training into predeparture preparations—including Germany-supported initiatives such as Hand in Hand for International Talents in Brazil and the Colombian Specialized Workers for Germany (TEAM) project in Colombia—access to high-quality but affordable training remains limited, especially for technical language and for languages less widely spoken around the world such as German and Dutch. Addressing these gaps could involve recognising digital learning and remote testing (including via widely used tools such as the app Duolingo) and expanding training opportunities, either by facilitating the deployment of language instructors to countries of departure through partnerships with universities and training providers or by offering intensive language training during a structured adaptation period after workers arrive in a destination country.

Finally, the question of who pays for skills development remains a critical one. Some models have sought to address this: for example, German employers hiring workers in Colombia or Guatemala through the TEAM project have provided a stipend to candidates so they can focus on skills and language development to qualify for these pathways.⁵⁵ Most employers resist the idea of paying for training before employment, however, which can leave workers (displaced or otherwise) exposed to unrecoverable costs and insurmountable debt if they are not in the end able to move and earn money abroad. Innovative financing models are slowly

emerging to fill the gap in the region: LaMP is exploring income-sharing agreements with repayment structured as a share of future income (solving the issue of debt-bondage, as people only repay training costs once earnings are above a threshold and there is no liability if earnings fall short).⁵⁶ Talent Beyond Boundaries and Pathways International in Italy are exploring loan-based approaches, and the Global Skill Partnership between Spain and Colombia is exploring the possibility of a payment-by-results scheme to facilitate movement. Finally, the Inter-American Development Bank is working on developing sustainable financing plans for Honduran and Guatemalan workers seeking to move to Spain, with ambitions to scale regionally.⁵⁷ However, further work on these issues is needed to reduce the financial burden on displaced workers and ensure equitable access to financing for labour mobility.

D. Multistakeholder coordination and employer engagement

The implementation of refugee labour mobility programmes typically involves a fragmented ecosystem of actors across both departure and destination countries, including multiple government agencies, employment services, training institutions, employers, consulates, and civil-society organisations. These actors often operate in silos, with limited alignment of priorities, sharing of information, or coordination both within and between countries. Strengthening coordination across the labour migration ecosystem is therefore essential, not only to streamline administrative steps (e.g., issuance of passports and medical certificates) but also to build institutional synergies and ensure a shared vision for labour mobility governance that takes accessibility for displaced individuals into consideration. This includes coordination to identify and align skills supply and demand as well as the qualifications and situations of target populations in order to design and invest in relevant training.

Evidence from existing programmes suggests that closing this gap requires deliberate investments in the creation of coordination infrastructure. At the national level, this includes interoperable systems that enable information-sharing across relevant ministries (labour, foreign affairs, interior, and education), alongside structured inter-agency platforms that bring together technical and policy actors. At the bilateral level, structured mechanisms are needed to exchange information on skills demand, identify bottlenecks (including around training), align priorities, and support joint problem-solving. The TEAM project stands out as an example of good practice, having set up a coordination mechanism linking employment services, ministries, and training institutions in Colombia and Germany. This has enabled continuous communication and coordinated implementation across the mobility corridor.⁵⁸ Costa Rica's SITLAM offers another good example, having established bilateral technical committees with origin countries that bring together labour, migration, and foreign affairs authorities. This arrangement has helped improve coordination, accelerate procedures, and strengthen implementation. It has also highlighted that such platforms are most effective when matched with sufficient administrative capacity on both sides, allowing them to operate at similar speeds and helping to prevent tensions.⁵⁹

Another set of actors whose involvement and effective coordination is essential to refugee labour mobility pathways is employers in destination countries. Evidence shows that supply-side investments alone—such as building pools of pre-selected candidates—are insufficient to generate job placements without also actively building employer buy-in.⁶⁰ And encouraging employers to consider hiring displaced workers can be particularly complex, as misconceptions about integration challenges may affect engagement, leading many initiatives to rely on a combination of economic and humanitarian framing to incentivise participation. Further evidence is needed on what approaches are most effective,

when, and why. Ample research does, however, show that employer participation is highly sensitive to predictable procedures and clear timelines, making visa processing capacity a critical enabling factor.⁶¹ In Italy, for instance, the refugee labour mobility initiative has achieved relatively strong employer interest but procedural bottlenecks have in some cases limited participation by small and medium-sized enterprises, which need greater certainty around timelines for worker recruitment and arrival.

Ample research does, however, show that employer participation is highly sensitive to predictable procedures and clear timelines, making visa processing capacity a critical enabling factor.

A further constraint lies in the scope of employer-engagement strategies by Latin American and Caribbean countries, which are typically designed to promote the hiring of their own nationals by employers abroad rather than recruitment of displaced people. As a result, refugees are largely invisible in these established outreach channels. Addressing this gap will require deliberate host-country effort to include displaced workers, as well as a more proactive approach by destination-country stakeholders (e.g., public employment services) to promote and match displaced talent with employment opportunities, complementing existing civil-society-led engagement efforts. Targeted interventions can help shape employer perceptions and reduce informational barriers. Initiatives such as Companies with Refugees and the Inclusive Company Seal in Ecuador as well as UNHCR's Local Integration Programme in Mexico have incentivised engagement by increasing the visibility of refugee talent, promoting inclusive hiring practices, facilitating the exchange of good practices, and addressing misconceptions through tailored outreach and guidance to employers.⁶²

5 Conclusions and Recommendations for Designing Inclusive Labour Migration Pathways

As labour and skills shortages intensify across Europe, displacement continues in Latin America and the Caribbean and funding for integration initiatives narrows. In this context, ensuring that labour migration systems are inclusive of displaced populations emerges as a key—yet underutilised—policy tool. Such pathways hold the potential to simultaneously address labour market needs at destination, expand the protection space, and advance responsibility-sharing beyond those countries hosting large numbers of displaced people.

Latin America and the Caribbean's pragmatic approach to managing large-scale displacement and mixed migration—largely focused on facilitating access to temporary status, work, and other integration opportunities—combined with extensive investments in labour migration systems provide a strong foundation to build on. Existing labour migration programmes in the region offer valuable evidence on what works, where gaps persist, and how existing mobility systems can be adapted to include displaced populations. Realising this potential, however, will require sustained and coordinated action from both host and destination countries.

For departure countries in the region, the priorities should be:

- **Ensuring displaced individuals are included in national skill-mapping and outreach initiatives.** This includes skills profiling exercises, labour market databases, and matching/referral systems,

and campaigns disseminating clear information on national and international labour opportunities and predeparture support (such as employer verification, contract review, and other steps needed for informed decision-making). To accomplish this, governments should encourage public agencies, including public employment services and national training institutions, to engage with displaced people through targeted outreach, guidance, and other resources and to build capacity to vet employers both inside the country of residence and abroad, with the circumstances of displaced workers in mind.

- ▶ **Enhancing access to labour migration pathways while ensuring continuity of status.** Host-country governments should streamline and, where possible, expedite procedures for individuals with confirmed job or training offers abroad to reduce administrative barriers that limit access to mainstream visa pathways. Where such pathways do not lead to permanent residency in the destination country, or where safeguards are limited, ensuring that displaced individuals' status in the host country remains active and that they can return when their time abroad ends can also help expand access to work opportunities, particularly in the context of temporary labour mobility.
- ▶ **Strengthening access to skills development opportunities and recognition of prior learning and experience.** Such measures can help ensure displaced individuals' skills are formally validated, visible to employers, and transferable across labour markets. Investing in these systems also hold benefits for a country's nationals seeking opportunities abroad.

- ▶ **Reinforcing interministerial coordination.** This can be done through shared frameworks, interoperable data systems, and communication platforms to better align migration, employment, and protection stakeholders, and improve and accelerate support for displaced and other individuals seeking to access labour mobility opportunities.
- ▶ **Identifying gaps in national training, placement, and recognition systems.** Doing so can help determine where international support—including financing and technical assistance—would be most effectively spent to strengthen national systems and benefit both host and destination countries.

For destination countries in Europe and beyond, investments should focus on:

- ▶ **Creating incentives for sustained engagement of departure countries.** This requires targeting investments—such as financing or technical support for host-country training systems, public employment services, and labour market infrastructure—so that mobility pathways benefit both displaced workers and nationals, whether they move or remain. Investments in consular capacity can further this goal by making application timelines faster and more predictable for all applicants.
- ▶ **Ensuring visa and admission frameworks are accessible to displaced populations.** This involves reviewing and adapting requirements that disproportionately exclude displaced applicants—particularly around documentation, return intentions, and credential recognition—and introducing more flexible approaches, such as skills-based assessments or training-to-employment pathways linked to visas (as in Italy). It also

requires embedding adequate safeguards against refoulement within these systems and ensuring consular officers are able to assess alternative forms of documentation commonly held by displaced individuals. A visa evaluation framework recently published by the Migration Policy Institute Europe as part of the STEP project aims to help governments and other stakeholders identify these barriers and potential solutions.⁶³

- ▶ **Engaging employers and reinforcing workers protection.** Employer engagement can take the form of raising awareness of international recruitment opportunities, addressing misconceptions and concerns employers may have about hiring displaced candidates, and providing clear guidance on fair and transparent recruitment practices. It can also involve facilitating direct connections between employers and candidates through online platforms, job fairs, and employer support networks. Equally important is providing targeted support to employers and workers before and after departure—not only related to the recruitment process but also workplace integration topics such as culture, expectations, and rights. Adequate safeguards and monitoring should be in place to ensure the integrity of the system.

- ▶ **Reducing financial barriers to participation.** By supporting financing mechanisms—such as cost-sharing models or fee waivers—destination countries can lower upfront costs that can put international work opportunities out of reach for many displaced workers. This is especially important where employer support is insufficient to cover these costs.
- ▶ **Building structured coordination platforms.** Bringing together relevant ministerial authorities, employers, training providers, and civil-society actors is key to facilitate the successful implementation of inclusive labour mobility pathways. Adding to this, structures facilitating direct engagement between destination-country and host-country authorities can help identify and align skills development opportunities.

As protection opportunities narrow worldwide and displacement continues to grow, this moment calls for expanding the displacement response toolkit. Latin American and Caribbean experiences offer instructive lessons. Chief among them: labour migration can be a powerful tool for protection and responsibility-sharing but requires sustained investment in the systems that make displaced populations ‘mobility-ready’, including legal status, documentation, skills recognition, and employment services.

Labour migration can be a powerful tool for protection and responsibility-sharing but requires sustained investment in the systems that make displaced populations ‘mobility-ready’.

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