

Last update: 5 March 2024

Labour mobility schemes for displaced people (including refugees) can provide an additional and complementary way to safely enter or stay in another country, through regularised access to employment.

What are labour mobility schemes?

Labour mobility schemes can enable displaced people to safely [enter or remain](#) in another country because they are legally authorised to take up employment there. In this way, a refugee is able to access a temporary or durable solution to their displacement by using an ordinary migration process, which, depending on the circumstances, may offer greater opportunities for self-reliance and effective protection than remaining in their own country or in the country where they first sought asylum. A labour mobility scheme may also provide a migration pathway for the applicant's immediate family members.

In order to take into account the [circumstances](#) of displacement, labour mobility schemes may permit [adjustments](#) to the normal documentary requirements or [costs](#) of the application process or the terms of entry and stay. This is because displaced people may have [difficulty](#) accessing evidence of their qualifications or proof of work experience, or have [limited](#) access to their savings. Schemes may also involve non-government organisations to help refugees connect with prospective employers abroad.

Labour mobility schemes are a type of 'complementary pathway' to protection because they can provide an additional way for displaced people to safely cross international borders, 'complementing' national asylum procedures and programs for third-country [resettlement](#). In 2018, as part of the [Global Compact on Refugees](#), the world's governments agreed on the importance of expanding complementary pathways and exploring ways to support refugee labour mobility. The expansion of safe, orderly and regular migration pathways for people in situations of vulnerability is also an objective of the [Global Compact for Migration](#), adopted by 152 countries in 2018.

Examples of labour mobility schemes:

Canada

Canada's Economic Mobility Pathways Project (EMPP) was created in 2018 to test whether skilled refugees could access existing economic immigration pathways to that country, and to identify and resolve immigration barriers. In administering the EMPP, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada partnered with UNHCR, five Canadian provinces and territories, and not-for-profit labour mobility organisations [Talent Beyond Boundaries](#) (TBB) and [RefugePoint](#). Under the EMPP, employers recruit talented people from within displaced populations working with TBB and RefugePoint, and civil society and government partners then facilitate visa applications. All candidates are required to meet the standard requirements of Canada's visa programs, but some

financial and administrative barriers are overcome through creative alternatives, such as the use of expired passports to prove identity if valid passports cannot be obtained.

The EMPP has [provided](#) successful candidates with access to permanent residency and a pathway to citizenship. In June 2020, Canada [announced](#) an extension of the EMPP pilot, with [500 places](#) over two years for refugee principal applicants plus their immediate family members. In 2023, Canada announced [two new immigration streams](#) under the EMPP. Refugees who secure a full-time job offer can migrate to Canada through the EMPP Federal Skills Job Offer Stream. Those without a full-time job offer, but whose skills match employers' needs, can apply through the EMPP Federal Skills Without a Job Offer Stream. A [further expansion](#) of the EMPP was announced in February 2024, providing durable solutions to at least 200 refugees from Tanzania and Mexico.

Australia

A labour mobility scheme for displaced people has recently been piloted in Australia, using the existing Temporary Skills Shortage Visa and Special Humanitarian Program. Beginning in 2018, and with the support of Australia's Department of Home Affairs, partner organisations [Talent Beyond Boundaries](#) and [Refugee Talent](#) have [worked](#) with a diverse range of employers, such as Accenture, Iress, John Holland, Harvey Beef and Maurice Blackburn, to recruit skilled workers. These refugees have taken up a variety of roles across Australia, including as mechanical and software engineers, butchers, and lawyers.

In July 2021 the Australian government launched the [Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot](#) (SRLAP) through which 100 primary applicants could secure employment in Australia and relocate with their family members. The SRLAP was [negotiated](#) between the Department of Home Affairs and Talent Beyond Boundaries, an organisation which facilitates matches between displaced job-seekers overseas and employers in Australia.

In 2022, the [Pacific Australia Labour Mobility](#) (PALM) scheme came into effect, merging the previously existing Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) and Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS). PALM enables employers to hire people from nine Pacific island nations and Timor Leste for semi-skilled, low-skilled and unskilled agricultural positions in rural and regional Australia.

What are the benefits and challenges of labour mobility schemes?

When designed in a way that [safeguards](#) people's protection needs, labour mobility schemes can have distinct benefits for refugees, the communities that host them, and the system of international refugee protection as a whole.

For people who have been displaced, work rights and employment in another country can [provide](#) greater agency and control over their own destiny. UNHCR has [noted](#) that regularised access to employment in another country can help provide refugees with the opportunity to capitalise on their skills and potential, and improve their own (and their family's) long-term integration prospects and standard of living. Such schemes can also benefit those who stay behind by easing pressure within countries that are hosting large numbers of displaced people, and because often refugees send [remittances](#) back to family members.

For countries that receive refugees, and for **employers**, labour mobility schemes can help to address labour or skills shortages and other economic or demographic needs. In turn, UNHCR [notes](#) that schemes may also 'build public support for refugees' within these countries 'by demonstrating the positive contribution that refugees can bring to receiving

societies'. By highlighting refugees' potential, skills and agency, labour mobility schemes can encourage employers to consider refugees in their recruitment efforts.

UNHCR has [encouraged](#) receiving countries and other stakeholders to make it easier for refugees to access labour mobility schemes by removing practical, legal and administrative obstacles. As Canada's EMPP [showed](#), potential applicants may simply not know about their migration options. Another key challenge is that highly skilled people who are displaced may not be 'visible' to potential employers. To address this challenge, Talent Beyond Boundaries created a 'Talent Catalog', a database featuring the skills profiles of more than 20,000 displaced people in Jordan and Lebanon across 200 occupations. The Talent Catalog helps to [communicate](#) the talents of prospective employees to employers in destination countries.

Other challenges include ensuring that refugees participating in a labour mobility scheme enjoy appropriate protection at work, and to this end the International Labour Organization has set out guiding principles that are [informed](#) by international human rights law and international labour standards.

Dr Claire Higgins (Senior Research Fellow, Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law)

with Marina Brizar (Director, UK Office, Talent Beyond Boundaries)