حـــوار أبوظبـــي بين الـدول الآسيويـــة
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Abu Dhabi Dialogue among the Asian
Labour-Sending and Receiving Countries

The Promise of Global Skill Partnerships and the Need to Invest in Skills and International Worker Mobility Systems

WORLD BANK GROUP

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Executive Summary

This note presents Global Skill Partnerships (GSPs) as a practical and equitable response to diverging demographic trends and persistent global skill shortages. Rapid labor force growth in low- and lower-middle-income countries coincides with shrinking working-age populations in high- and upper-middle-income countries. These mismatches are also evident among Abu Dhabi Dialogue member countries: traditional origin countries face large labor surpluses by 2050, on the scale of 45 million in Pakistan and 15-25 million in countries such as Indonesia, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, while several destinations, including Gulf Cooperation Council members, face rising demand for foreign workers. This creates scope for "demographic arbitrage" in which younger populations supply workers to aging economies. However, this opportunity is constrained by large education and skills gaps. The challenge is to address these skill gaps and to connect labor supply and demand through safe, legal, and demand-driven mobility. The note emphasizes three policy priorities:

1. **Strengthen managed international worker mobility systems** to expand legal and predictable pathways.
2. **Invest in education and skills training in origin countries** to unlock development gains and reduce brain drain and brain waste.
3. **Leverage international partnerships** to mobilize financing, technology, and expertise for high-quality training institutions.

Evidence shows that well-managed international worker mobility generates large income gains for migrants and long-term benefits for origin countries through remittances, human capital accumulation, trade, investment, and return migration. These gains depend on system design, including pre-departure information, skills recognition, integration support, and effective bilateral labor agreements. Targeted human capital investment aligned with global demand can mitigate brain drain and generate brain gain, as shown by experiences in India's IT sector and nursing in the Philippines. Yet many LICs and LMICs face underfunded and low-quality training systems, requiring reforms focused on quality, relevance, and skills recognition.

GSPs integrate skills training and managed mobility through bilateral or multilateral agreements in which destination countries help finance training in origin countries to meet both domestic ("home track") and international ("away track") demand. Origin countries attract financing for skills training and increase access to global work opportunities, while destination countries receive access to ready pools of workers for critical sectors.

Various existing GSPs demonstrate feasibility but remain mostly small-scale pilots. Scaling GSPs requires strong private sector engagement, timely skills recognition, appropriate visa pathways, sustainable financing, integration with existing institutions, and monitoring and evaluation. Multilateral development banks are well positioned to support GSPs through convening power, labor and skills program expertise, interim financing, and data and analytics. The World Bank is already supporting GSP pilots and embedding them in lending operations across multiple regions. GSPs offer a structured model to link worker mobility, skills investment, and international cooperation. When embedded in existing institutions and implemented as an integrated system, they can expand opportunities for workers, address labor shortages, and support development outcomes in both origin and destination countries.

This note sets out the case for Global Skill Partnerships (GSPs) as a practical and equitable response to today's diverging demographic trends and persistent global skill shortages. Demographic pressures in higher-income countries and large youth cohorts in lower-income countries present both risks and opportunities, and the real challenge lies in creating systems that connect labor supply with labor demand in ways that are mutually beneficial. To address this challenge, the note advances three "big ideas" that form a coherent agenda to reshape worker mobility into a mutually beneficial engine for global development:

(1) **Strengthen managed international worker mobility systems** that expand safe and legal opportunities.

(2) **Invest in education and skills training in origin countries** to unlock development gains of international worker mobility while mitigating brain drain.

(3) **Leverage international partnerships** to attract foreign investment, technology, and expertise in building high-quality local training institutions.

GSPs bring these three big ideas together by linking managed worker mobility with targeted skills investment, coordinated through international partnerships that ensure benefits for both origin and destination countries. The note is structured as follows: First, it first sets out the global demographic context and education gaps. Second, it elaborates on each of the three big ideas. Finally, it highlights the role of multilateral development banks in supporting countries to pilot, scale, and sustain GSPs.

A New Demographic Reality and the Urgent Need to Invest in Skills and International Worker Mobility Systems

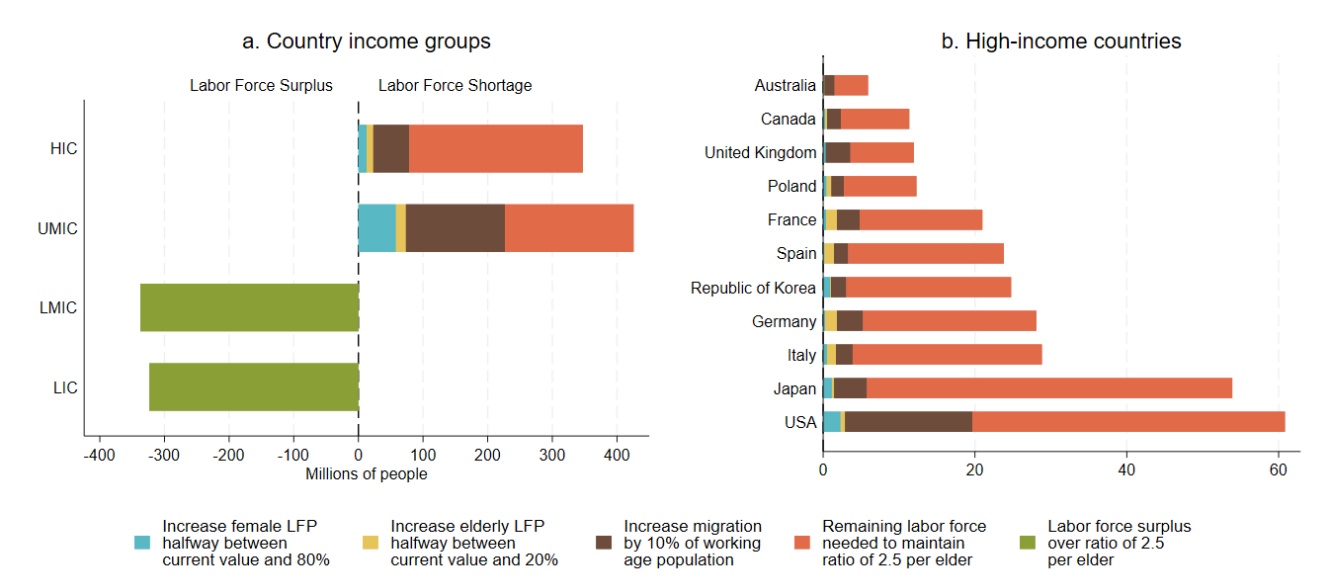
The world is at a demographic inflection point. In low-income countries (LICs) and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs), young populations are expanding rapidly, with millions of youths entering the labor market each year. While this demographic dynamism could become an engine of growth, it is occurring in contexts where economic expansion is often too slow to absorb the influx of new workers, and in which education and training systems are underfunded and misaligned with labor market needs.

At the same time, high-income countries (HICs) and many upper-middle-income countries (UMICs) are experiencing severe demographic contraction. Fertility rates in countries such as Japan (1.3), Italy (1.25), and Korea (0.75) have fallen well below replacement levels, and their working-age populations are shrinking. The policy debate has long acknowledged these trends, but the scale of projected labor shortfalls has now become staggering. Even ambitious efforts to increase female and elderly labor force participation will be insufficient.

Failing to address these demographic challenges could have serious economic, fiscal, and social consequences. In less developed countries, millions of young people could face persistent unemployment or underemployment, stalling economic growth, reducing productivity, and fueling social frustration or unrest. In more developed countries, the absence of new labor sources could lead to declining productivity, mounting fiscal stress on social protection systems, and growing gaps in essential care, infrastructure, and public services (Pritchett 2024). Across countries, these dynamics risk exacerbating inequality, straining social cohesion, and increasing irregular or distress-driven migration.

Figure 1 presents the labor force participants needed to maintain a ratio of 2.5 per person age 65 and above by 2050. This is approximately the current ratio observed in many HICs such as the United States and the United Kingdom, which many economists argue is already too low. The figure shows that HICs and UMICs are expected to face labor shortages in the hundreds of millions by 2050, with country-level shortages on the scale of 50-60 million in Japan and the United States, and between 20-30 million for many European countries including France, Spain, Germany, and Italy. Aggregating across countries, there is expected to be a labor force shortage of 350 million people in HICs and over 400 million in UMICs, over half of which is in China. Significant increases in female and elderly participation rates – two policies frequently cited by experts as solutions to the aging dilemma – meet only a small share of needs. On the other hand, adding migrant workers equivalent to 10% of the working-age population can have a notably larger impact. Despite rising political opposition to migration in many countries, the economic imperative of filling worker shortages ensures foreign worker demand will increase.

Figure 1: The labor force needed to maintain an inverse dependency ratio of 2.5 in HICs and UMICs in 2050 cannot be met by expanding participation rates of women and elderly

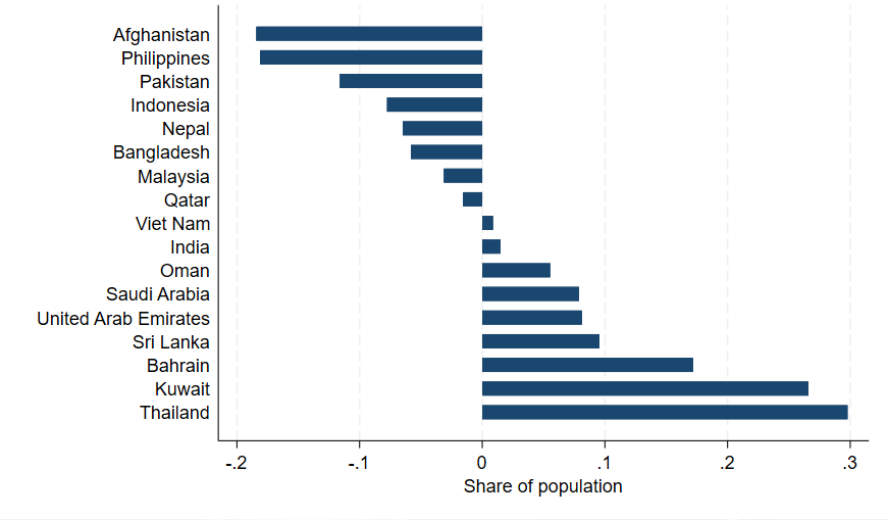


Note: The figure shows the number of labor force participants over age 25 (millions) needed to maintain a ratio of 2.5 per person age 65 and above by 2050, assuming UN "no migration" medium variant population projections and constant labor force participation rates. See Acosta et al. (2025) for details.

On the other hand, Figure 1 shows that LICs and LMICs have sufficiently large labor forces to avoid these pressures, with hundreds of millions of labor force participants projected above what is needed to maintain these dependency ratios going into 2050. This mismatch between labor surplus and labor demand opens the door to a powerful form of "demographic arbitrage", whereby younger populations in LICs, LMICs, and some UIMICs supply needed workers to aging economies through international worker mobility. From a global perspective, this is both efficient and equitable: it offers employment opportunities to workers in poorer countries while helping wealthier countries maintain economic vitality.

Figure 2 shows that similar trends can be observed within members countries of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD). On the one hand, traditional origin countries such as Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh will have large labor force "surpluses" on the scale of 15 to 25 million each by 2050 (or 46 million in the case of Pakistan). Figure 2 shows that these numbers represent 5-20% of the population across countries. Other South and Southeast Asian countries, however, are moving towards projected shortages by 2050, including India, Sir Lanka, Vietnam, and Thailand. The largest shortage as a share of the population is expected in Thailand, which will face demand for an additional 20 million people representing 30% of the population. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, meanwhile, will largely face increased demand for workers including over 300,000 in Bahrain and Oman, over 1 million in the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, and almost 3.5 million in Saudi Arabia, ranging from 5-25% of the national population. For GCC countries, these projections underestimate true needs for migrant workers, because this population projection assumes migration is frozen after 2024, and many GCC countries have large migrant populations on temporary visas who will need to be replaced.

Figure 2: The labor force needed to maintain an inverse dependency ratio of 2.5 in member countries of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue as a share of the national population



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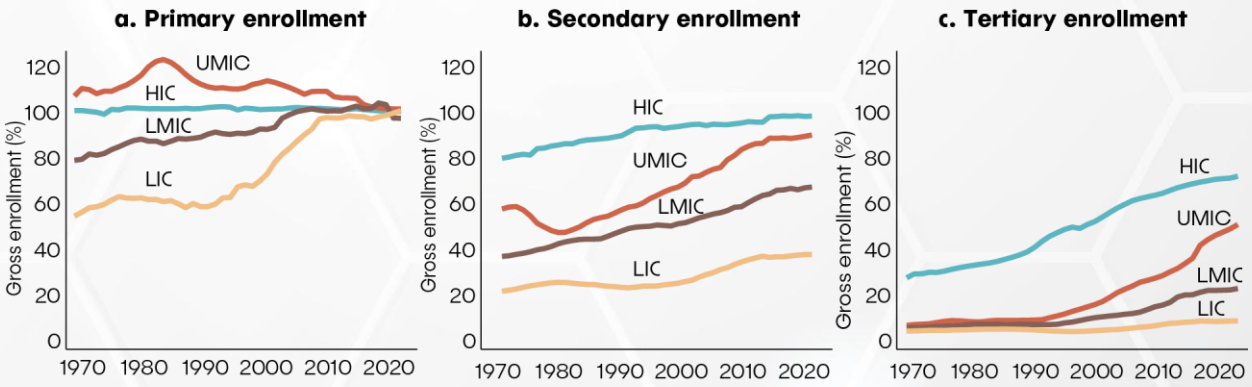
Crucially, the opportunity for "demographic arbitrage" is not guaranteed. Without effective systems for both skills training and managed worker mobility, the global labor market mismatch will persist, and risks of undocumented migration and "brain drain" – in which a lack of qualified candidates result in labor shortages in the origin country – will increase.

The challenge is not merely one of numbers, but of skills. While LICs and LMICs have large potential labor surpluses, many prospective migrants lack the education, credentials, and professional experience needed to fill shortages in destination countries. As the World Bank's 2023 *World Development Report* emphasized, the effectiveness of migration, and the magnitude of its gains, depend heavily on the match between migrants' human capital and labor market needs abroad. Without targeted investment in skills development, migration from low-income countries is more likely to be distress-driven and irregular, leading to undocumented migration, underemployment, or "brain waste," in which skilled individuals are unable to work in jobs that match their qualifications.

Figure 3 illustrates the depth of the education gap. While countries of all income levels have reached universal primary enrollment, secondary and tertiary enrollment rates remain far lower in LICs and LMICs compared to HICs and UMICs. In particular, tertiary enrollment and vocational training are highly correlated with the types of technical and professional skills in demand in aging economies, such as those in health care, engineering, and technology. Without significantly improved access to high-quality, relevant training, potential migrants will be locked out of formal worker mobility opportunities. At the same time, origin countries will struggle to provide the workforce needed for their own development goals, deepening inequality and social frustration.

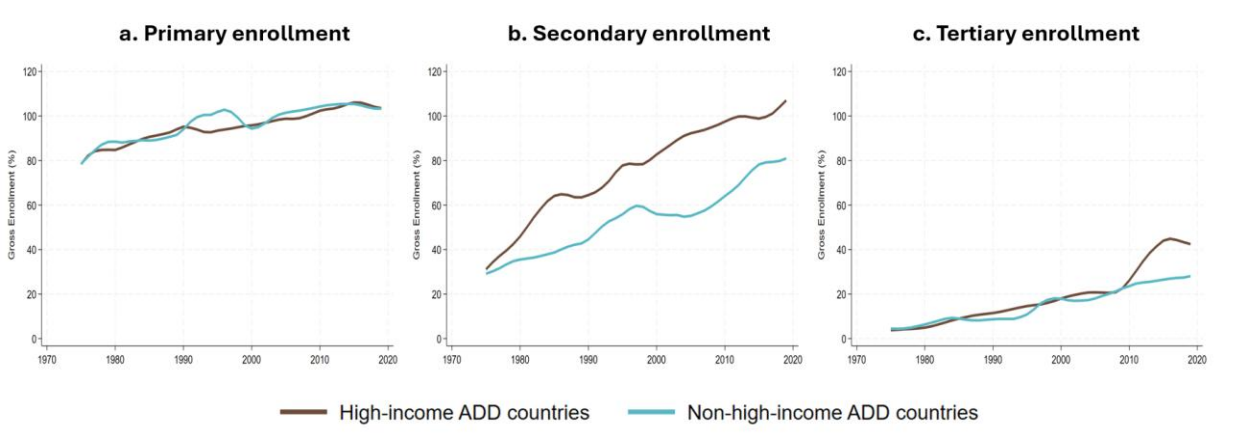
Figure 3: Secondary and tertiary enrollment is diverging across country income groups



Source: Original compilation based on World Development Indicators DataBank.

Figure 4 illustrates a similar pattern among HIC and non-HIC ADD member countries. All member countries have achieved universal primary enrollment. However, since 1970, secondary enrollment has gradually improved faster in HIC ADD countries than in non-HIC ADD countries, while a recent surge in tertiary enrollment in HIC ADD countries was not experienced in non-HIC ADD countries. These education enrollment gaps, when considered alongside gaps in education quality and vocational training systems, highlight that investments in education and skills training are critical for a mutually beneficial "demographic arbitrage" among ADD countries.

Figure 4: Secondary and tertiary enrollment is diverging across high-income and non-high-income member countries of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD)



Source: Original compilation based on World Development Indicators DataBank.

Finally, these demographic and educational imbalances reveal the limits of historical migration patterns. In the post-World War II era, most labor migration involved movement from middle-income to high-income countries. Today, however, many of those traditional origin countries, such as Mexico, Türkiye, and India, are themselves aging, and in some cases beginning to experience labor shortages. As a result, the next generation of international migrants will increasingly come from lower-income countries that currently lack the institutional capacity and financial resources to prepare workers for success in the global labor market.

The policy imperative is therefore twofold: build robust, coordinated systems for training and managed international worker mobility, and ensure those systems are inclusive, scalable, and development oriented. Failing to act risks triggering a cycle of brain drain, irregular migration, and exclusion. But with the right investments and partnerships, worker mobility can be transformed into a lever for inclusive development, benefiting both origin and destination countries.

The Importance of Managed International Worker Mobility Systems

Extensive and rigorous evidence shows that international worker mobility offers profound benefits to migrant workers and their origin countries, especially when worker mobility occurs through regularized, well-managed channels.

An extensive body of research documents the short- and long-term benefits of migration for migrant households and communities, in particular through increased income and human capital accumulation (World Bank 2023). Clemens (2011) and Gibson & McKenzie (2014) document that even small increases in the number of migrants from lower-income countries to higher-income countries can generate income gains far exceeding those from typical aid or development interventions. In another example, Mobarak et al. (2023) show that enabling temporary worker mobility from Bangladesh to Malaysia more than doubled household income. Khanna et al. (2022) and Dinkelman & Mariotti (2016) demonstrate how remittance flows generate long-term benefits for origin communities, increasing household investment in child health and education, making households more resilient to shocks, and boosting long-term income growth.

In addition to remittances, skilled migrant diasporas benefit origin countries through knowledge transfers and foreign direct investment (Javorcik et al. 2011, Burchardi et al. 2019). Diaspora networks abroad can stimulate trade, as seen, for example, in the case of American exports to Vietnam from states with larger Vietnamese populations (Parsons & Vézina 2018). Finally, when migrants return, they bring savings, industry expertise, and global networks which can increase productivity. For example, Yugoslavian migrants returning from Germany boosted exports in the sectors in which they had worked abroad (Bahar et al. 2024). As another example, Ghanaian returnee entrepreneurs were found to increase exports among food processing SMEs through their international networks, knowledge of foreign technologies, and ability to meet global quality and market standards (Ayakwah et al. 2020). Collectively, these benefits help to counter any negative consequences of brain drain on human capital and productivity in the origin country, especially in the long-term (Batista et al. 2025).

However, these benefits are contingent on the design of worker mobility systems, which include all the policies and institutions the regulate and support international worker mobility. Shrestha & Yang (2019) find that providing accurate pre-departure information to Filipino migrant workers reduced the risk of exploitation and improved employment outcomes. Similarly, Foged et al. (2024) and Batista et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of integration policies such as language training, skill recognition, job matching, and information provision to prevent brain waste and increase the economic gains from migration. Legal work rights alone are often not enough to overcome the barriers that push migrants into occupations below their level of qualification, such as lack of networks, discrimination, or barriers to skills recognition, as demonstrated by the case of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia (Lebow 2024).

Worker mobility coordination through bilateral labor agreements (BLAs) also plays a role. Adhikari et al. (2024) show that globally these agreements have led to sustained increases in worker mobility, but only when supported by strong administrative capacity in both origin and destination countries. The Filipino migration institutions, including the recently formed Department of Migrant Workers (which absorbed the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration), are a standout example. Building on decades of experience, they form and implement BLAs while offering job search assistance, skills upgrading, pre-departure training, legal aid, consular services abroad, and reintegration services (Ang & Tiongson 2023).

When worker mobility systems are designed with protections, transparency, and predictability, they not only help fill labor shortages abroad but also generate long-term gains at home.

Skills Investment to Mitigate Brain Drain and Waste and Unlock Growth

Global evidence indicates that investment in human capital, when they equip people with skills aligned to global demand, can enhance the development benefits of international worker mobility while reducing the risk of brain drain.

While migration generates large wage gains for workers across all education levels, the returns are typically highest for the better educated. Studies show that more educated migrants, when their skills and credentials are properly recognized, typically earn multiples of what they would at home, reflecting access to higher-productivity firms (Gibson & McKenzie 2012; Clemens et al. 2019). As discussed, these gains from high-skilled migration often pass back to origin countries in the form of skills transfer, remittances, investment, and return migration, creating long-term development gains which counteract the short-term consequences of brain drain (Batista et al., 2025, World Bank 2023). Countries with more skilled workers can better reap these gains with fewer concerns about brain drain.

Further evidence comes from two settings where high-quality and targeted skills training unlocked a positive cycle of migration and development. The first example is India's information technology (IT) boom in the 1990s. Khanna & Morales (2025) document how, after a spike in U.S. skilled visa quotas, Indian engineering degree enrollments surged. While some graduates left, the majority remained and helped establish a thriving domestic tech industry. Of those who migrated, many formed partnerships and invested back home, while some eventually returned, further developing India's IT sector and stimulating offshoring of U.S. production to India. Similar stories can be found in the development of IT industries in Taiwan and China (Kenney et al. 2013).

Another example comes from nursing in the Philippines. Abarcar & Theoharides (2024) show that expansions in U.S. visa availability increased enrollments in nursing degrees. As a result, for every nurse granted a visa abroad, nine others were licensed to work domestically. These examples illustrate how skilled migration can increase incentives for education and lead to "brain gain" in the origin, if supported by training systems with adequate scale and quality.

However, more evidence is needed to precisely document the benefits of improved education and training for migration outcomes.

A major challenge is that many LICs and LMICs still face structural constraints: underfunded training institutions, poor-quality instruction, outdated curricula, and limited private sector linkages. Investment must go beyond expanding enrollment to improving outcomes and employability. This includes building strong technical and vocational training systems and ensuring they are aligned with international standards.

To ensure rapid integration and minimize brain waste, preparation for formal recognition of qualifications should start in the origin. When possible, skill recognition can also occur in the origin. For example, the Skill Verification Program administers assessments and issues certificates in countries including Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka for employment in Saudi Arabia (ESCAP 2024). Brazil, India, Nepal, and South Africa have also recently made efforts to provide recognition of prior learning to workers in various sectors; these can provide a useful blueprint to increase the participation of informal sector workers (World Bank, UNESCO, and ILO 2023).

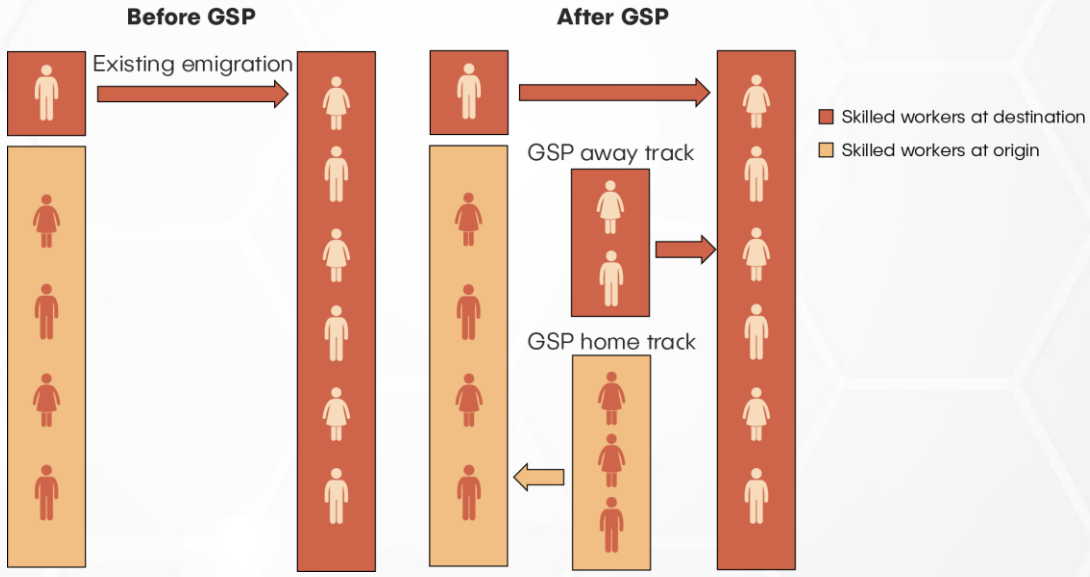
Evidence from successful vocational training reforms shows that improved technical training and funding can greatly improve capacity, quality, and equity. The experiences of countries such as Bangladesh, Brazil, El Salvador, Mongolia, and Mozambique show that vocational training can become more effective with improved curriculum design, program delivery, and IT-based training, so long as it is supported by increased financial resources, quality assurance, and regulatory reforms that hold providers accountable. Even within countries and sectors, institutional quality can vary widely across training providers. For instance, graduates of formal short-term training courses in Bangladesh experienced very different employment rates six months after graduation, depending on their field of study and the training provider (World Bank, UNESCO, and ILO 2023).

These examples highlight that, when education systems are built to prepare workers for both local and global labor markets, countries enhance their domestic development and reap the benefits of international worker mobility with fewer concerns around brain drain.

Global Skill Partnerships: Co-Investment and Coordination in Skill Training and Regularized International Worker Mobility

The Global Skill Partnership (GSP) model represents a promising mechanism to align worker mobility policy with development objectives (Clemens 2015, Acosta et al. 2025). GSPs are bilateral or multilateral agreements in which destination countries finance and support training in origin countries, preparing candidates for both domestic employment ("home track") and international mobility ("away track"). Figure 5 illustrates how this dual-track design expands the overall skilled worker pool, thereby mitigating brain drain concerns.

Figure 5: GSPs increase human capital and skills in both origin and destination countries



Source: Acosta et al. (2025)

GSPs have three defining features:

1. **Training addresses skill shortages in both economies with proper skills recognition.** Training programs should be jointly designed to target occupations that are in short supply across countries – such as in healthcare, construction, and technology – and should result in credentials that are valid and recognized in both labor markets. This often requires harmonizing curricula and certification standards and ensuring that both "home track" (those who remain in the origin country) and "away track" (those who migrate) participants receive the same core technical education, supplemented by destination-specific requirements like language training or licensing preparation.

2. **Financing training and international worker mobility costs is a joint responsibility of origin and destination countries.** In particular, firms and governments in destination countries are best placed to finance the variable and fixed costs of training, certification, and intermediation, given their greater fiscal capacity and the economic returns from employing skilled workers. Financing can come from national governments, employers, or public-private partnerships, and is often more cost-effective when training is delivered in the origin country, where expenses are typically lower.
3. **International worker mobility must occur through legal pathways and appropriate visa categories, and this process must be predictable and timely.** Legal worker mobility channels ensure workers can travel and work safely, with access to social protections and recourse against exploitation. Timely visa issuance and employment authorization are essential to reduce uncertainty, allow employers to plan, and avoid the risk of trained workers being stranded or underemployed – issues that could otherwise undermine trust in the GSP model. Legal pathways also reduce the risk of political backlash, social exclusion, and exploitation.

Although the GSP model is still emerging, several existing programs provide valuable insights into what works and what challenges remain (Acosta et al. 2025). These examples span different regions, sectors, and partnership models.

One of the most established programs is the **Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC)**. Launched in 2007, APTC partners with nine Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste to deliver vocational training in high-demand fields such as construction, hospitality, engineering, and health care. While the vast majority of APTC graduates remain in their home countries, since 2019, around 8% have migrated to work in Australia.

Another initiative, the **PALIM project** (*Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortages through Innovative Labour Migration*), linked Belgium and Morocco to train information and communication technology (ICT) professionals. Although COVID-19 disrupted planned migration, the project successfully trained 120 candidates, with a portion still intending to migrate.

A more recent example is **Germany's GSP in nursing with the Philippines**. This program began in 2019 and trained cohorts of Filipino nurses who are certified and licensed for employment in Germany. The first batch migrated in 2023, with further expansions planned, including potential replication in Kerala (India), Uzbekistan, and other countries. Importantly, this program is fully financed by the private sector, illustrating how employer demand can drive sustainable GSP financing when institutions and pathways are aligned. The **German PAM project in Vietnam** is another undertaking involving a two-year certification in metal processing in line with both Vietnamese and German occupational standards (An et al. 2023).

India's Suryamitra program provides an example of a domestic training program which supported international worker mobility (Huckstep and Dempster 2024). Since 2015, the program has trained 80,000 workers in solar photovoltaic (PV) installation. Because less than a third of trainees found employment in India's solar sector in 2022, the German Solar Association and the Indian Skill Council for Green Jobs agreed to send around 2,000 program trainees to Germany between 2024 and 2026 (Tyagi et al. 2022).

Beyond government-led programs, several **private sector-led initiatives** reflect core GSP principles. For example, the **West African Football Academy (WAFA)** in Ghana has trained over 1,000 youth, with around 20% transferring to international professional clubs. Similarly, **Heimerer College** in Kosovo trains nurses and allied health professionals for both domestic employment and migration to Germany, with strong engagement from diaspora investors.

The **Magsaysay Maritime Academy** in the Philippines and Indonesia is another standout, training seafarers to meet global demand in the shipping and cruise industries. Around 5,000 of its graduates now work abroad, supported by direct investment from international employers, while another 1,000 work domestically (Acosta et al. 2025). Historical examples also demonstrate the importance of foreign private investment in domestic training systems – in 1970s Singapore, the government partnered with India's Tata Group and other foreign companies to develop local training institutions, laying the foundation for the country's renowned polytechnic university system (Kuruvilla et al., 2002).

These cases show that GSPs are both economically rational and politically feasible. They benefit a wide range of actors in both sending and receiving countries while delivering tangible development outcomes.

Implementing and Scaling Global Skill Partnerships

A major challenge is that most GSPs have remained small-scale pilots. Designing and scaling GSPs require meticulous attention to a wide range of interrelated dimensions, with thoughtful integration of training systems, international worker mobility governance, stakeholder coordination, and sustainable financing structures. In addition to well-designed programs, scaling requires a set of enabling conditions including strong governance capacity, interministerial coordination, international worker mobility management, and legal and regulatory frameworks. Future success will depend on the ability to build scalable, inclusive, and institutionally embedded systems from the outset. This section outlines six key criteria for scalability:

First, training programs must be designed with private sector engagement to meet the needs of both domestic and international employers. GSPs are particularly well-suited to mid-level skill areas such as health care, construction, and the green economy, where demand is high, the pool of potential trainees is large, and training requirements are reasonable. If demanded by employers, training also should incorporate nontechnical foundational skills such as language skills, digital literacy, and socioemotional skills. Importantly, private sector actors should remain involved throughout the entire process of training design and implementation to ensure that skills match employer needs. For example, in the PALIM project, industry associations and firms from both countries were involved in program design, but destination employers were not always informed of subsequent program changes (Rodriguez 2023). This led to concerns about graduates' employability in Belgium, highlighting the importance and challenges of maintaining foreign employer involvement over the full project cycle.

Second, skill recognition and certification systems must be adequate and timely. Without them, skilled workers risk underemployment, informal work, or delayed work, leading to brain waste. GSPs should therefore embed skills recognition mechanisms and licensing pathways from the outset, which may at times involve mutual recognition agreements or joint certification processes. This approach ensures that migrant workers can legally and effectively practice their professions upon arrival, while also supporting formalization and quality standards in origin-country training institutions. A cautionary tale comes from the *Youth, Employment, and Skills* (YES) GSP between Germany and Kosovo in construction, which was impeded due to the low harmonization of German and Kosovar qualification standards (CGD 2021).

Third, legal international mobility pathways must be appropriate and predictable. Safe and productive international worker mobility requires visas and employment authorizations that match the skills being trained, provide sufficient duration and portability, and provide access to social protection and safe working conditions. Otherwise, there is a risk that graduates are unable to obtain visas or will face delays in processing, which can make involvement risky for destination employers. For example, graduates from YES faced excessively high wage requirements for visas and bureaucratic delays, while APTC graduates for many years faced a lack of available visas in the most common sectors of study (CGD 2021, Chand et al. 2021).

Fourth, a sustainable financing model must share costs fairly among actors in both origin and destination. Training, labor intermediation, and mobility all entail costs, including curriculum development, trainer recruitment, student selection, visa and relocation expenses, and post-arrival support. Costs can be divided according to how much each actor benefits – for example, the destination and origin may most directly support the away and home track, while the origin supports the home track. GSPs are designed to leverage the financing, technology, and expertise of firms and governments in destination countries, who stand to gain significantly from the arrival of qualified workers and should shoulder most of the recurring costs. Development partners can play a catalytic role by funding initial fixed costs, especially in the pilot phase, but long-term sustainability will depend on private sector engagement. Costs per trainee often decline with scale, increasing financial viability over time (Acosta et al. 2025).

Fifth, GSPs should be embedded in existing training and employment systems and programs. This means working with national training institutions, public employment services, and private employers from both countries. GSPs can take advantage of existing training systems, including their infrastructure, industry relationships, and recruitment and job placement systems. At the same time, GSPs have the potential to improve the quality and capacity of existing systems. An example comes from APTC – in its first decade, it mostly operated through APTC campuses within partner training institutions to deliver Australian-accredited courses. However, APTC gradually deepened local engagement and become more embedded in local training institutions, which was seen to increase scalability, cost-effectiveness, and development impact (APTC 2022).

Finally, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems are needed to track outcomes, learn from mistakes, and build the evidence base for scale. M&E can help identify design flaws, course-correct in real time, and build trust among stakeholders, particularly investors and political leaders who may be skeptical of new international worker mobility programs. In APTC, the Graduate Tracer Survey was a key tool for documenting worker and employer satisfaction and tracking employment outcomes. This information helped APTC evolve and improve over time. In addition to increasing delivery through local training institutions, APTC managed to increase migration opportunities for graduates by stepping up engagement with the Australian private sector and better aligning training with legal pathways (Chand et al. 2021).

The role of multilateral development banks in GSP development

Multilateral development banks (MDBs) like the World Bank are uniquely positioned to catalyze the growth of GSPs by leveraging their financial infrastructure, convening power, and policy expertise to design and scale equitable, demand-driven programs between origin and destination countries. With their longstanding mandate to support developing nations, MDBs can ensure GSPs maximize benefits for countries of origin while strengthening labor, skills, and international worker mobility systems.

MDBs can offer comprehensive support GSPs through five distinct institutional strengths:

- **Convening Power and Stakeholder Coordination:** The multilateral mandate and global networks of MDBs enable them to bring together diverse stakeholders including government agencies, employers, industry associations, training providers, employment service providers, and development actors. Regional development banks can leverage localized partnerships while the World Bank integrates regional efforts and facilitates cross-regional dialogues.
- **Experience building education and training capacity:** MDBs possess substantial experience in developing training systems in LICs and MICs that can be leveraged for GSPs. The World Bank currently operates over 80 training and labor intermediation projects globally, covering education-to-work transitions, skills training, occupational standards, and vocational guidance. These domestically-focused operations could be expanded to target overseas placements while strengthening training quality for non-migrants.
- **Ability to mobilize financing:** MDBs can provide crucial interim financing to establish proof of concepts that engage private sector participation. Before private actors assume predominant costs, MDBs can finance initial capacity building and support phaseout processes. This approach is exemplified by the World Bank's *Accessing Overseas Employment Opportunities for Moroccan Youth Project* to support bilateral worker mobility between Morocco and Germany. This project helped Morocco's National Agency for Promotion of Employment and Skills (ANAPEC) develop the capacity for international labor market intermediation, which it now implements independently.

- **Knowledge Generation and Data Analytics:** MDBs are well-positioned to collect, analyze, and forecast data on skill shortages in both origin and destination countries, to identify optimal sectors and contexts for GSP development. The World Bank's 2023 World Development Report on migration exemplifies this research capacity, while partnerships like the Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement with UNHCR demonstrate collaborative knowledge-sharing capabilities.

These capacities are reflected in ongoing and previous MDB initiatives to support win-win international worker mobility. For example, the World Bank has managed the Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) for over a decade, while the Inter-American Development Bank has created a dedicated unit for economic migrants and refugees, which underscores institutional commitment to migration-centered development solutions. Building on previous experiences supporting improved international worker mobility in every region, the World Bank is currently supporting GSPs through technical assistance and embedding pilots into existing lending operations between Italy and Tunisia; Spain and Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Ecuador; and Canada and Kenya.

Conclusion

GSPs offer a structured way to address demographic imbalances and skill shortages by linking international worker mobility systems with training investments and international collaboration. While still limited in scale, early experiences show that such models can expand opportunities for workers, fill critical labor gaps abroad, and strengthen training systems at home. The success of GSPs, however, hinges on three foundational principles:

First, **managed international worker mobility** systems are essential to connect supply and demand effectively. Migrants need access to legal pathways with transparent information, support services, and fair recruitment. Integration policies such as language training, skill recognition, and job matching are needed to prevent brain waste and ensure employers have access to certified, job-ready workers.

Second, **investing in human capital** is critical. For origin countries to maximize their benefit from growing global labor demand, they must align training systems with international skill needs. GSPs are a tool to facilitate this alignment by attracting investment and increasing coordination with international governments, employers, and training providers.

Third, **international partnerships** are needed to increase cooperation not just on worker mobility, but also on skills training. Unilateral programs cannot solve the challenges of worker mobility alone, because origin and destination countries must coordinate on policies and programs to ensure they are successful, mutually beneficial, and scalable.

A key takeaway is that the three elements operate as an integrated system. Managed international worker mobility reliably and effectively connects supply and demand across borders. Human capital investment ensures that training systems prepare workers for both domestic and international labor markets. Cross-country collaboration aligns financing, standards, and accountability while increasing coordination on policies and program design. When combined, these elements transform skilled worker mobility from a fragmented process into an operational model with shared benefits. The examples presented demonstrate that GSPs are unlikely to succeed if any one of these elements is missing.

Another key takeaway is that the next generation of GSPs must be embedded into existing institutions, including those for international worker mobility and skills development. GSPs can help to strengthen these national systems, and they in turn depend on them in order to be successful and scalable. Only then can GSPs deliver inclusive and lasting development outcomes. They will not solve every migration challenge, but they offer one of the clearest, most practical models for how migration can contribute to development in both sending and receiving countries.

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