

A full-page background image of a rainy New York City street. Tall brick buildings line the street, and the wet pavement reflects the red taillights of cars and the white headlights of a bus. Pedestrians with umbrellas are crossing the street. A blue semi-transparent banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the text 'NHSMUN' and 'National High School Model United Nations'.

NHSMUN

National High School Model United Nations

Table of Contents

A Note on the NHSMUN Difference.....	3
Position Paper Requirements.....	4
Committee History.....	5

Topic A: Strengthening Assisted Voluntary Return.....

Introduction.....	7
History and Description of the Issue.....	7
Current Status.....	16
Bloc Analysis.....	21
Committee Mission.....	23

Topic B: Expanding Legal Pathways for Migrant Workers

24	
Introduction.....	25
History and Description of the Issue.....	25
Current Status.....	32
Bloc Analysis.....	38
Committee Mission.....	40
Research and Preparation Questions.....	42
Important Documents.....	43

A Note on the NHSMUN Difference

Esteemed Faculty and Delegates,

Welcome to NHSMUN 2027! We are Armen Bagdassarian and Sabeeh Mirza, and we are elated to serve as this year's Secretaries-General. Thank you for choosing to attend NHSMUN, the world's largest and most diverse high school Model United Nations conference. As a space for collaboration, consensus, and compromise, NHSMUN strives to transform today's brightest thinkers, speakers, and collaborators into tomorrow's leaders. We believe that an emphasis on education through simulation is paramount to the Model UN experience.

Realism and Accuracy: Although a perfect simulation of the UN is never possible, we believe that one of the core educational responsibilities of MUN conferences is to educate students about how the UN System works. We strive to invite real UN, NGO, and field experts into each committee through our committee speakers program. Moreover, we arrange meetings between students and the actual UN Permanent Mission of the country they are representing. These exclusive resources are only available due to IMUNA's formal association with the United Nations Department of Global Communications and consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. No other conference goes so far to deeply immerse students into the UN System.

Educational Emphasis: At the heart of NHSMUN lies education and compromise. Part of what makes NHSMUN special is its diverse delegate base. As such, when NHSMUN distributes awards, we strongly de-emphasize their importance in comparison to the educational value of Model UN. In particular, our daises look for and promote constructive leadership and diplomacy that strive toward consensus, as real ambassadors do in the United Nations.

Research and a Dedicated Staff: Our staffers care deeply about delegates' experiences and what they take away from their time at NHSMUN. Our Directors spend over six months preparing Background Guides, in addition to Update Briefs written to reflect the rapidly changing nature of the topics to be discussed. Our staffers are trained rigorously to provide the best conference experience possible. Our daises provide thoughtful comments on submitted position papers. Our staff aims to tailor the committee experience to delegates' reflections and research, but also to facilitate an environment where all delegates' thoughts can be heard.

Empowering Participation: The UN relies on the voices of all of its member states to create resolutions. This is our philosophy at NHSMUN too. Our Rules of Procedure and our staff focus on making every voice in the committee heard, regardless of country assignment or skill level. Additionally, unlike many other conferences, we also emphasize delegate participation after the conference. Delegates spend countless hours researching topics critical to the UN and broader international sphere.

Delegates, it is our sincerest hope that your time at NHSMUN will be thought-provoking and stimulating. NHSMUN is an incredible time to learn, grow, and embrace new opportunities. We look forward to seeing you work both as students and global citizens at the conference.

Best,

Armen Bagdassarian
Secretary-General

Sabeeh Mirza
Secretary-General

Position Paper Requirements

Delegate research and preparation is a critical element of attending NHSMUN and enjoying the debate experience. We have provided this Background Guide to introduce the topics that will be discussed in your committee. We encourage and expect each of you to critically explore the selected topics and be able to identify and analyze their intricacies upon arrival to the conference.

The task of preparing for the conference can be challenging. To assist delegates, we have updated our [Beginner Delegate Guide](#) and [Advanced Delegate Guide](#). These guides contain more detailed instructions on how to prepare a position paper and excellent sources that delegates can use for research. Use these resources to your advantage. They can help transform a sometimes overwhelming task into what it should be: an engaging, interesting, and rewarding experience.

To accurately represent a country, delegates must be able to articulate its policies. Accordingly, NHSMUN requires each delegation (the one or two delegates representing a country in a committee) to write a position paper for each topic on the committee's agenda. More information about how to write and format position papers can be found in the [Research Guide](#). To summarize, position papers should be structured into three sections.

I: Topic Background – This section should describe the history of the topic as it would be described by the delegate's country. Delegates do not need to give an exhaustive account of the topic, but rather focus on the details that are most important to the delegation's policy and proposed solutions.

II: Country Policy – This section should discuss the delegation's policy regarding the topic. Each paper should state the policy in plain terms and include the relevant statements, statistics, and research that support the effectiveness of the policy. Comparisons with other global issues are also appropriate here.

III. Proposed Solutions – This section should detail the delegation's proposed solutions to address the topic. Descriptions of each solution should be thorough. Each idea should clearly connect to the specific problem it aims to solve and identify potential obstacles to implementation and how they can be avoided. The solution should be a natural extension of the country's policy.

Each topic's position paper should be **no more than 10 pages long** double-spaced with standard margins and 12 point font size. This is a maximum; **3–5 pages per topic is often a suitable length**. The paper must be written from the perspective of your assigned country and should articulate the policies you will espouse at the conference.

Each delegation is responsible for submitting position papers on or before **February 26, 2027**. If a delegate wishes to receive detailed feedback from the committee's dais, their position paper must be submitted on or before **February 5, 2027**. The papers received by this earlier deadline will be reviewed by the committee dais and returned before February 26. Instructions on how to submit position papers will be shared directly with faculty advisors.

Submission instructions for position papers will be sent to faculty advisers via email. If delegations are unable to submit their position papers on time, please contact us at nhsmun@imuna.org.

Delegations that do not submit position papers will be ineligible for awards.

Committee History

IOM emerged from the tumultuous aftermath of World War II, a conflict that displaced an unprecedented 11 million people across Europe. The scale of this displacement, coupled with the urgent need for resettlement, prompted the establishment of the Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for the Movement of Migrants from Europe (PICMME) in 1951.¹ The IOM's primary mission was to assist European governments in identifying resettlement countries for these displaced individuals, providing them with a lifeline to new beginnings. During the 1950s, the IOM arranged transportation for nearly a million migrants, offering a critical solution to the urgent humanitarian crisis.

Over the years, the IOM has expanded its goal, evolving into a leading international agency that works closely with governments and civil society to address migration issues comprehensively.² IOM is a blend of operational expertise and policy influence, and unlike many UN agencies, the IOM is not a specialized body. Instead, it bridges the gap between humanitarian assistance and sustainable development. Its convening power, extensive field presence, and reputation for efficiency make it a vital player in the global migration landscape.³ The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is a global organization with 175 member states and 171 offices, with a budget of USD three billion. It serves global migrants and has over 19,500 staff. Its affiliation with the UN enhances its visibility, allowing it to work more effectively with other UN agencies and advocate for policies promoting safe migration. The IOM became a “related organization” of the UN in 2016.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has collaborated with civil society organizations (CSOs) to address migration issues globally, regionally, nationally, and locally. Its Displacement Tracking Matrix has tracked over 31 million displaced persons in 2021, providing early warning and support. IOM has also established community-based protection mechanisms in Syria, ensuring IDPs access to essential services and protection from harm.⁴

IOM and its engagement with civil society is guided by three major documents: the IOM Constitution, the 2007 IOM Strategy Document, and the 2010 IOM Strategy Review.⁵ The International Organization for Migration (IOM) documents outline its mission, vision, values, and strategic priorities, providing a framework for its policies and decision-making. Its decentralized structure allows it to respond to specific regional and local contexts, with offices in Berlin, Tokyo, Washington, Nur-Sultan, Canberra, and Beijing focusing on regional migration challenges.⁶ All decisions in committees and subsidiary bodies must be made by a simple majority vote, referring to members present and voting.⁷ The IOM's decision-making process, based on a simple majority vote, can be efficient but may not be universally supported, potentially affecting implementation and the organization's reputation. The IOM must carefully weigh the pros and cons of different decision-making methods.

1 Socialhistory.org. “Preliminary Programme | ESSHC,” 2014. <https://esshc.socialhistory.org/conference/programme/2014?day=14&time=28&session=573&rnd=2515>.

2 International Organization for Migration. “IOM History,” 2021. <https://www.iom.int/iom-history>.

3 Ebrary. “IOM and Its Member States - the International Organization for Migration: Challenges, Commitments, Complexities,” 2019. https://ebrary.net/284590/sociology/member_states.

4 United Nations, (n.d.). International Organization for Migration (IOM) - UN system SDG implementation, United Nations, <https://sdgs.un.org/un-system-sdg-implementation/international-organization-migration-iom-49542>.

5 International Organization for Migration. (n.d.). Guiding documents. <https://www.iom.int/guiding-documents>

6 International Organization for Migration. (n.d.). Country offices. <https://www.iom.int/country-offices>

7 International Organization for Migration. (n.d.). IOM constitution. <https://www.iom.int/iom-constitution>.

TOPIC A

Strengthening Assisted Voluntary Return

IOM | NHSMUN 2027



Photo Credit: Bundesministerium für Europa, Integration und Äusseres

Introduction

In recent years, global migration has reached record levels.¹ There are over 300 million international migrants across the world.² While some migrants may choose to move to new countries, many causes of migration are involuntary. Conflict, persecution, economic hardships, climate change, and other crises can all drive individuals to leave their homes. Many migrants settle in new countries permanently. Others return to their country of origin, though this is not always by choice. Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programs have become an important tool for migrants who willingly choose to return to their home countries.³ These programs support safe, voluntary, and dignified returns, helping migrants rebuild their lives and reintegrate after returning to their home countries.

In recent years, the need for AVRR programs has grown. Conflicts in Afghanistan, Sudan, Ukraine, and other regions have displaced nearly 50 million people.⁴ At the same time, many host countries have begun to restrict or limit migration as the number of those seeking entry has increased. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other migration agencies face financial constraints, even as demand for assistance grows.⁵ These challenges have made it difficult for migrants to access return and reintegration support. This especially affects countries with limited resources.

Strong AVRR programs can benefit migrants and governments when return is genuinely voluntary and safe. For migrants who choose to go home, these programs can provide travel assistance and help them rebuild their lives. For host governments, they offer an organized way to assist people who wish to return and coordinate with countries of origin. For countries of origin, reintegration support can help returning citizens find housing, work, and services. Return can reduce some costs for host countries, but it can also place new demands on countries of origin, so funding and long-term support matter for such programs.

AVRR programs have the potential to strengthen international cooperation and support safe, voluntary, and lasting returns. Although AVRR

has gained importance in modern migration management, issues with implementation remain. Governments debate how AVRR can be balanced with migrant rights and broader migration goals, and questions remain regarding informed consent, funding, and support for vulnerable groups.⁶ It is difficult to measure how well these programs support refugees or whether that support lasts.⁷ Dividing responsibility among countries of origin, transit, and receipt further requires greater cooperation from the global community. Ultimately, AVRR programs are complex and nuanced, though they hold importance and benefits for the millions of migrants across the globe.

History and Description of the Issue

DEVELOPING INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS FOR ASSISTED VOLUNTARY RETURN

During the twentieth century, war, economic change, and the end of colonial rule led many people to move across borders.⁸ Governments responded by developing new immigration restrictions and systems for managing migration, while international cooperation on refugee

protection also grew. Migrants continued to face discrimination and uncertainty in host countries. By the late twentieth century, migration had become more varied and often more permanent, challenging the earlier assumption that migrants would eventually return home.⁹

In 1979, the German government introduced one of the first organized approaches to voluntary return through the Reintegration and Emigration Programme for Asylum-Seekers in Germany (REAG).¹⁰ The program offered money and logistical support to help asylum seekers return home. West Germany had originally recruited foreign workers to fill labor shortages, but its demand for labor declined as the economy slowed and unemployment rose. In the early 1980s, Germany and other host countries in Western Europe introduced separate “Return Acts and Bonuses” aimed specifically at Turkish guest workers.¹¹ Under specific conditions, Turkish immigrants in Germany could receive up to 10,000 German Marks, roughly equal to 3 to 5 months of an average worker’s gross salary, if they agreed to return home with their families. These incentives drove a sharp, temporary rise in return migration. About 310,000 people returned from Germany between 1983 and 1985.¹² Today, REAG is run by Germany’s Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) together with IOM offices in migrants’ countries of origin.¹³ It covers travel costs and offers some financial support to help returnees get settled again. More than half a million people had used REAG/GARP by 2017.¹⁴

Since 1979, the IOM has led the global AVRR effort, supporting over 1.6 million migrants.¹⁵ AVRR is based on the principle of protecting migrant rights through voluntary return and informed consent.¹⁶ Informed consent means migrants holding full awareness and understanding of what AVRR would entail, including risks and cost. IOM provides a range of services to support migrants through this transition.¹⁷ Once back in their home country, migrants often receive post-arrival assistance as well. The IOM further provides social, economic, and humanitarian assistance.¹⁸

Economic assistance includes job training, education, employment support, and small grants to start a business. Social assistance includes family planning, community integration, and counseling. Humanitarian assistance includes temporary housing, healthcare, food, and other basic needs. This assistance depends on migrants’ consent and can be used in both origin and host countries.

The IOM has also worked to integrate AVRR into global frameworks, including the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM), adopted in 2018.¹⁹ The GCM sets out 23 objectives to guide governments on migration policy. For example, objective 21 calls for stronger cooperation agreements and frameworks around return and reintegration. Objective 21 calls on states to uphold due process, assess individual cases, protect children, monitor returns, and facilitate voluntary return based on informed consent. Fair legal processing ensures that authorities respect migrants’ rights and that any return happens in a safe and dignified manner. National monitoring mechanisms oversee the actors involved in the return process to ensure it is carried out properly. Child migrant protection gives children and families extra care and support when they return to their home country.²⁰

AVRR is strongly supported by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).²¹ It supports Target 10.2 (empowering the social, economic, and political inclusion of all) and 10.7 (facilitating orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration) by helping returnees complete a voluntary return and reintegrate afterward. It also promotes cooperation at the local, regional, and national levels. This connects to Objective 21 of the GCM, which, alongside international human rights law, calls for safe and dignified returns.²² Reintegration further helps uphold migrant rights by supporting returnees after they return, helping them fully rejoin their community and country.²³

Regions vary widely in their AVRR efforts because of differences in laws, political priorities, and government capacity. These differences

shape how much service and reach the AVRR programs have. European AVRR programs are generally the most developed; the IOM works closely with over 45 projects in 27 European countries.²⁴ Examples include national programs like REAG in Germany and RV Productivo in Spain, and joint programs with the IOM like Cyprus's AVRR. While early programs focused mainly on transit assistance, governments have since shifted toward return assistance, documentation, and monitoring to prevent irregular migration.²⁵ Irregular migration is when migrants enter or stay in a country without legal documentation or government approval. This is the opposite of regular migration, where a migrant enters a country while following the local rules and procedures.²⁶

Despite this expansion, oversight of European AVRR programs remains weak. Few programs publish detailed or regularly updated monitoring reports. IOM Finland, IOM Sweden, and Belgium's Fedasil are among the small number with recent internal reporting, but even these have not been consistent over time.²⁷ Frontex's EU Reintegration Programme provides support after return, including help with housing, healthcare, education, and employment. Frontex reports on return operations and has described plans to monitor the quality of reintegration services. However, these measures do not show whether returnees are safe and financially stable years later. Publicly available information on those longer-term outcomes remains limited.²⁸ Independent research on returnees' experiences is also limited, since scholars face restricted data access and ethical barriers to contacting people

after they return. As a result, it is difficult to know how well most AVRR programs actually serve the people who use them.

Migration policies in North America focus on returning migrants to their home countries, both voluntarily and not. A large number of North American migrants, specifically in the United States and Canada, are from Latin America. As a result, attempts to control migration have yielded an influx of migrants returning to Latin America. This has left the region managing a growing flow of returnees and need for AVRR programs for migrants choosing to return voluntarily.²⁹

While transit back to these countries is a priority, reintegration and support once migrants return are harder to access. As a result, governments and international bodies are focusing on local support systems. Mexico gives one example of this approach. With the IOM's cooperation, it provides documentation services and family reunification efforts to help individuals and families return. In 2019, IOM data listed Mexico among the top ten host and transit countries for assisted voluntary return worldwide. That year, Mexico supported 2,244 migrants through AVRR, a 334 percent increase from the year before.³⁰ Even so, the number receiving AVRR assistance is small, compared with the total number of migrants returning to the region. AVRR supports people who freely choose to return; others may be deported or feel pressured to leave.

The number of people returning to Latin America, compared with the limited reach of AVRR programs, shows why governments need to strengthen support after migrants arrive home.

Most countries only release basic departure numbers, which say little about whether returnees' rights were protected during the process.

The IOM has since emphasized practical AVRR programs that support local reintegration.³¹ Programs that partner with NGOs, include local community collaboration, and adjust assistance to vulnerable groups tend to be the most effective.

As these programs expanded, governments and organizations had to clarify what made a return truly voluntary. IOM's AVRR guidance emphasizes that migrants should understand their options and freely agree to return.³² Separately, existing legal protections require governments to assess whether returning a person would expose them to serious harm. These principles help distinguish assisted voluntary return from deportation, in which the government requires a person to leave.³³ The purpose of AVRR programs is to support migrants' choices without influencing their decisions.

ESTABLISHING LEGAL STANDARDS FOR VOLUNTARY RETURN

In a voluntary return, migrants decide to go back to their home country instead of being deported by the government of the host country. This idea is closely linked to informed consent. Migrants should understand their rights, their legal options,

and the support available to them before making their decision. These principles are important parts of AVRR programs because they help protect migrant rights and personal choice.

Informed consent goes beyond a migrant agreeing to return.³⁴ They must have accurate information about the entire process, from their legal options to the return assistance. They should also be able to make the decision without pressure due to time constraints or coercion. Such standards allow migrants to understand the results of their decision. In practice, human rights groups have questioned whether assisted return is truly voluntary when migrants have few safe alternatives. In Libya, a 2022 UN human rights report found that abusive detention conditions sometimes pressured migrants to accept assisted return, even when returning home was not what they wanted.³⁵

Deportation can happen if a migrant entered without permission, does not have the right documents, or was denied a visa or asylum claim.³⁶ It can also happen after a migrant has used up all other legal options to stay. Some countries also deport migrants who need public financial help, commit serious crimes, or are seen as a security risk.³⁷ Some courts try to avoid



Libyan refugees

Credit: Gerhard Holub

deportations that would split families apart or leave them without support, but the decision to leave is often made by the government, not the migrant. AVRR is different. It requires migrants to choose to return on their own, with full and clear information about their options.

AVRR also provides services that deportation does not. Migrants may receive counseling, travel assistance, and reintegration support. These services give migrants more control in the return process while respecting their dignity.³⁸ AVRR is often described by governments as a more humane way to manage migration, though this framing is debated.

AVRR programs must operate within existing legal safeguards.³⁹ These are intended to protect migrants from being returned to situations where they may face serious harm. One of the most important safeguards is the principle of non-refoulement. Refoulement is the forced return of a migrant to a country where they would face danger to their life, freedom, or safety.⁴⁰ Non-refoulement is the international legal principle that prohibits this, first established in the 1951 Refugee Convention.⁴¹ Thus, governments and bodies like the IOM must consider conditions in a migrant's home country before returning them.⁴² These safeguards help ensure that migration policies align with international legal obligations and reduce the risk of migrants being sent back to dangerous conditions.

Another major safeguard is due process. Due process is the proper set of procedures a government must follow during a legal action. Immigration proceedings and deportation are both legal actions, since they are governed by law and carried out by government authorities. In the context of migration, migrants must be fully informed of their rights and options. Due process also protects migrants from refoulement by giving them legal ways to challenge a return.⁴³ One example is the individual risk assessment, an in-depth evaluation of a migrant's situation and the risks they would face upon return, carried out before they are sent back. The procedures

available to challenge a return vary by country, but migrants must have access to applicable protections against refoulement.⁴⁴ Putting these legal procedures in place strengthens both informed consent and due process protections for migrants.

Despite these safeguards, figuring out if a return is truly voluntary is a challenge.⁴⁵ Reports from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Europe, and Australia describe cases in which refugees and other people protected against refoulement were pressured to return, even when their departures were described as “voluntary.”⁴⁶ An unsuccessful asylum claim can leave a person facing removal, making access to fair procedures and an individual assessment of risks upon return especially important.⁴⁷ Factors like prolonged detention, deportation threats, strict citizenship laws, or serious risk to daily life further compel migrants to go back home. A return cannot be considered genuinely voluntary if a migrant agrees to leave only because coercion has left them no realistic alternative. If that pressure forces someone to return to a place where they face serious harm, legal experts may describe it as “constructive refoulement.”⁴⁸ Informed consent requires a meaningful choice, not simply a signed agreement to return.

The debate around constructive refoulement became more urgent as governments expanded return programs and migration enforcement. Migrants are often pressured to sign documents or waive their legal rights without fully understanding what they are agreeing to. For example, in 2013, U.S. immigration authorities pressured migrants to sign “voluntary return” forms that sent them back to their country before they received a legal hearing, and without being told the full consequences of that decision.⁴⁹ Although labeled as a local voluntary return program, it was used to coerce migrants into leaving.

This practice was successfully challenged in the lawsuit *Lopez-Venegas v. Johnson*, in which the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

argued against these unjust measures.⁵⁰ The case ended in a 2014 settlement requiring immigration officers in Southern California to explain migrants' options and the consequences of leaving, provide access to legal assistance, and stop pressuring people to sign voluntary-departure forms.⁵¹ Some people who had already been returned to Mexico were also given a way to seek return to the United States and pursue their cases. This case demonstrated constructive refoulement where migrants may at first appear to choose to return, but are in fact placed in situations that leave them no real choice.

Legal standards have helped make AVRR distinct from deportation and other forms of forced return. Informed consent, voluntary return, and non-refoulement are now key parts of many return programs. These safeguards aim to protect migrants while allowing governments to manage migration humanely.

EXPANDING REINTEGRATION WITHIN RETURN ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Early AVR (Assisted Voluntary Return without reintegration) programs focused on simply helping migrants return to their home countries. Countries saw it as a final step in the migration process. However, governments and organizations like the IOM soon realized transportation alone was not enough.⁵² Many returnees faced unemployment, poverty, and healthcare issues when returning home. Returnees also found it hard to reconnect with their families and communities. Migrants also often need reintegration support to achieve long-term stability in their home countries.⁵³ Objective 21 of the GCM, adopted in 2018, established a focus on reintegration.⁵⁴ More specifically, it encourages countries to support safe and stable reintegration efforts for returning migrants. Reintegration is now considered a core component of AVRR, rather than an afterthought.

When migrants return to their home country, they often encounter the situations that contributed

to their original exit.⁵⁵ A lack of counseling and psychological services for trauma and depression can harm migrants, as well as a lack of awareness regarding support systems. Many return with large debts from travel costs, recruitment fees, or payments to smugglers who helped them cross borders. Some also face criticism for adopting new customs or practices while living abroad.⁵⁶ A 2026 IOM survey of Afghan returnees found that many face ongoing challenges after return. 55 percent of people had not taken part in any community activities or decisions since arriving.⁵⁷ 57 percent lacked adequate housing, mostly due to cost.⁵⁸ These findings show how reintegration support can fall short before returnees are actually settled.

Additionally, many migrants who struggle after returning may choose to migrate again through irregular migration channels. This creates a difficult cycle, where migrants cannot get basic needs met at home or abroad, yet continue to migrate anyway.⁵⁹ These findings encouraged governments and international organizations to emphasize long-term reintegration.

AVRR has recently expanded to include many new services. These include employment, counseling, therapy, vocational training, temporary shelter, healthcare, and small business investment. Other programs focus on counseling and family reunification to help migrants adjust socially and emotionally after their return.⁶⁰ Because every migrant's circumstances differ, reintegration assistance is often adjusted to individual needs, rather than following one standardized approach. For example, Brazil gives returnees individual reintegration plans based on their specific situation. A migrant who was a farmer may receive agricultural tools and training, while one with business experience may receive small loans and employment support.⁶¹ Each plan is tailored to the individual.

Malta offers a useful example of how AVRR can work at a smaller scale. Since 2009, IOM has run a series of AVRR projects in Malta, known as RESTART, in cooperation with the Maltese

government.⁶² The program is jointly funded by the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and Malta's Ministry for Home Affairs. With RESTART, over 350 people have been assisted to return from Malta, mostly back to countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.⁶³ The program pays special attention to vulnerable applicants, including people with health-related needs and unaccompanied migrant children. The returnees can choose between a cash grant of up to EUR 2,000 or a combined package worth up to EUR 4,000, which includes a small pre-departure allowance and support for things like starting a small business, vocational training, or medical care.⁶⁴ In practice, this has helped returnees open small businesses ranging from grocery stores and carpentry workshops to vegetable farms and taxi services, showing how support can be tailored to each person's situation.

Laos has also worked with IOM to help Lao migrants returning from Thailand reintegrate into the Lao economy. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) programs formally certify migrants in essential skills, allowing them to seek employment in Laos. Female returnees were given small loans and training to run farms or access markets.⁶⁵ These efforts aim to protect

returning migrants and help them find work in Laos.

Governments have also recognized that proper reintegration benefits migration management as a whole. Research from the European Parliament indicates that migrants who secure employment and build social connections are less likely to pursue irregular migration again.⁶⁶ Reintegration can remain difficult after a migrant arrives home. Returnees may need help finding work, accessing services, and rebuilding ties with their communities. The support available depends in part on local conditions and the capacity of institutions in their country of origin. Short-term assistance alone may not address these longer-term needs.⁶⁷

Successful reintegration also depends on cooperation from local governments. Local governments, community organizations, employers, schools, healthcare providers, and leaders all help returnees rebuild their lives. The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) has found that migrants are more likely to succeed when they receive support from their local community.⁶⁸ Communities can support returnees by creating jobs, improving public services, strengthening local facilities, and

Migrant center built by the Italian Government and IOM

Credit: NigerTZai



encouraging cooperation between returnees and local residents.⁶⁹ IOM programs also bring returnees and local residents together through shared services, like training and community projects.⁷⁰ These efforts benefit both migrants and the communities receiving them. They create stronger, longer-lasting reintegration outcomes while reducing tension between the two groups.⁷¹ Strengthening economic and social opportunities after return has therefore become an important strategy for reducing repeated irregular migration while promoting more stable communities.

PROTECTING VULNERABLE GROUPS DURING THE RETURN PROCESS

As AVRR programs grew, governments realized that not all migrants experience return and reintegration in the same way. Personal circumstances such as gender, age, race, health, and disability can all influence how a migrant is treated. This has created a need for specialized protections, aimed at ensuring safe returns while respecting each migrant's individual circumstances. For example, women returning to areas affected by ongoing conflict may face serious risks of gender-based violence, including

sexual violence and forced marriage.⁷²

Age can also impact a migrant's return process. Standard adult-focused AVRR programs do not always account for children's specific needs.⁷³ Before a child returns, trained personnel can assess whether return is safe and in that child's best interests. This includes considering the child's views, family situation, safety, and access to care. Some cases require a more formal best interests determination.⁷⁴ For unaccompanied or separated children, family tracing and an assessment of the proposed caregiver are essential; finding a relative does not, by itself, establish that returning to that person is safe. If suitable care cannot be arranged, return may not be appropriate.

When return is appropriate, reintegration support may need to cover schooling, healthcare, psychosocial care, and the needs of the child's family or caregiver.⁷⁵ Girls may face particular risks of sexual exploitation or barriers to education and healthcare, which should be assessed in their individual circumstances.⁷⁶ Child migrants may also be exposed to abuse during the journey home or after arrival, which can cause lasting physical and mental health needs. Adolescents may also need age-appropriate



Migrant women protesting

Credit: Angelitagualla

education or skills training and support as they move toward adulthood.⁷⁷

Migrants with certain health conditions may also be more vulnerable.⁷⁸ A 2023 study of refugees in Italy found that 23.8 percent had a disability, higher than the 15 percent found in the general population.⁷⁹ This risk for asylum seekers can carry over as a problem for returnees, since AVRR forms often fail to screen for these conditions, leaving migrants with disabilities invisible in support systems.

Mental health is also a particular concern. A global review found that about 31 percent of refugees and asylum seekers experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and a similar share experience depression, both far higher than general population rates.⁸⁰ Substance use is also a risk. A 2021 study found that 61.3 percent of Nigerian migrant returnees had used drugs during their journey, most often due to frustration or trauma.⁸¹ Many kept using even after returning home, since reintegration support focused only on job training and did not address drug use or mental health. Reintegration efforts must include strong measures for migrant health and mental wellbeing, so that returnees receive the support they need to rebuild their lives after returning home.

Migrants who identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ community have also reported mistreatment and specific concerns within AVRR processes.⁸² Refoulement is a major risk for returning LGBTIQ+ migrants, since same-sex relationships remain illegal in some countries. LGBTIQ+ migrants may face arrest, violence,

or discrimination after returning home, and may be denied jobs, housing, healthcare, and other reintegration services because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Discrimination within countries of asylum can also limit LGBTIQ+ folks' access to protection and essential services.⁸³

Some AVRR programs provide specialized assistance for migrants who face additional risks. Survivors of gender-based violence may need medical care, mental health and psychosocial support, and referrals to organizations that can help them remain safe. Survivors of trafficking may need safe accommodation, healthcare, legal assistance, and an assessment of whether returning would expose them to traffickers or retaliation.⁸⁴ The availability of these services varies, so return planning must consider whether appropriate protection and care can actually be accessed in the destination community.⁸⁵ For LGBTIQ+ migrants, an individual assessment must also consider risks linked to their sexual orientation or gender identity. If a person faces persecution upon return, reintegration assistance cannot make that return safe; the risk calls for a protection response rather than an AVRR referral.⁸⁶

Protecting vulnerable groups has become a central feature of modern AVRR programs. Considering factors such as age, gender, disability, and sexual orientation helps governments and agencies provide the right kind of support to each migrant. Even so, protections for vulnerable groups remain uneven across countries.

Personalized solutions that address migrants' diverse needs are essential to making reintegration services effective.

Current Status

CASE STUDY: VENEZUELA

Instability in Venezuela has grown significantly since 2013, when Nicolás Maduro was elected President.⁸⁷ Under his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan government had already been described as corrupt, economically inefficient, and politically tense.⁸⁸ Thus, the conditions Maduro took the office in were already strained. In 2014, the global price of oil began to drop from over USD 100 per barrel to under USD 30 per barrel by 2015. Venezuela is a “petrostate,” meaning it depends on oil for nearly all of its economic revenue and international influence. This drop in oil prices, coupled with an already fragile economy, triggered an economic depression. Local towns and citizens experienced food and medicine shortages, and extremely high prices caused by rapid inflation.⁸⁹

In 2017 and 2018, prices continued to increase. Political tensions peaked again with the 2018 presidential election, which has been widely characterized as fraudulent. Maduro was accused of manipulating vote counts and disqualifying opponents to stay in office. UN human rights investigators documented restrictions on civic freedoms and persecution of political opponents under Maduro’s government. In January 2026, a U.S. military operation captured Maduro. Venezuela’s vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, subsequently became acting president. The implications of this transition for political rights and the safety of potential returnees remain uncertain.⁹⁰

Because of hyperinflation, political instability, and loss of freedoms, millions of Venezuelans sought to leave the country. Since 2015, over eight million Venezuelan citizens have migrated abroad.⁹¹ Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and other Latin American countries have received large numbers of Venezuelan migrants. The Venezuelan displacement crisis is regionally concentrated, placing particular pressure on

Latin American host and origin countries.⁹² Venezuelans have different legal statuses in the countries where they settle. Some have received refugee recognition or temporary protection, while others remain without regular status. According to the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela’s 2024 regional needs analysis, nearly 68 percent of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean had obtained regular migration status or refugee recognition, while about 2.2 million remained in an irregular situation.⁹³ These differences affect their access to work, services, and protection and make a single approach to return assistance difficult to apply.⁹⁴

Even after Maduro’s removal, concerns remain about corruption, economic instability, and quality of life in Venezuela.⁹⁵ While conditions have improved, every migrant weighs different priorities and factors before deciding whether to return. Venezuelan migrants abroad face a number of difficult conditions that can make returning to Venezuela preferable. Many migrants have expressed challenges with gaining legal status in a host country. They have also experienced unemployment, high housing costs, discrimination, limited job opportunities, and family separation.⁹⁶

Maduro’s removal is widely seen as a major turning point for the country, though its long-term effects remain uncertain.⁹⁷ Many migrants fled Venezuela out of fear of persecution from his government rule. According to an UNHCR survey, about a third of displaced Venezuelans living in Latin America who fled have expressed interest in returning home.⁹⁸ This raises an important consideration for the future of AVRR programs. Even when conditions have improved, migrants do not have an immediate cause to return to their home countries. Additionally, there is no guarantee for Venezuelans that they would have jobs, homes, or a better quality of life. For some, returning to family or familiar environments is preferable. But for others, the life that they have built elsewhere is preferable. Even after Maduro’s

removal, a return to Venezuela is not an obvious choice. Venezuelan sociologist Tomás Paez told the Los Angeles Times that surveys over the years found only about 20 percent of Venezuelan migrants said they would return permanently; interviewees cited concerns about safety, employment, and leaving behind lives they had built abroad.⁹⁹

While AVRR is not consistently requested, it is also not evenly applied. A 2023 study found that only 33 percent of Venezuelans that pursued AVRR intended to stay permanently in Venezuela.¹⁰⁰ This highlights an important point: AVRR is not always successful long-term and reintegration is a critical part of AVRR. Political improvement in a country of origin can increase the likelihood of voluntary return, but it does not automatically make return desirable or sustainable for everyone.¹⁰¹

Venezuela demonstrates the difficulty of creating uniform criteria for when AVRR is appropriate. Both a country's conditions and each migrant's individual situation matter. AVRR programs cannot predict either a migrant's willingness to return or the sustainability of that return. Therefore, a successful AVRR framework has to preserve individualized decision-making while

placing significant weight on reintegration.

FUNDING GAPS AND REINTEGRATION CAPACITY IN PROGRAMS

In recent years, demand for AVRR has grown.¹⁰² Since 2025, Latin American countries have seen the highest rates of return migration, driven largely by stricter migration policies adopted by host countries such as the US. The IOM has increased its efforts to help migrants return and rebuild their lives in the region, resuming regional AVRR programs in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama. Since 2025, over 1.2 million migrants have returned to Latin America. The 2026 Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) involves 152 partner organizations, but needs an additional USD 763 million to adequately support AVRR programs in the region.¹⁰³ Investments at this scale are needed to make lasting improvements to how returnees are supported.

Similarly, Africa has also seen rising demand for AVRR programs.¹⁰⁴ IOM assisted approximately 81,100 migrants with voluntary return worldwide in 2024; 70 percent either departed from or returned to countries in Africa. Libya, Niger,

Venezuelans migrating to Ecuador

Credit: UNICEF Ecuador



Algeria, and Tunisia were the four leading countries from which migrants departed with IOM assistance. The EU has invested in return and reintegration assistance in Africa through the IOM-implemented Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration Programme for Sub-Saharan Africa (MPRR-SSA). The EU committed EUR 330 million to the program, which had assisted 23,589 voluntary returns from sub-Saharan countries and provided reintegration support to 36,636 migrants as of May 2024.¹⁰⁵ These figures show the scale of EU support, while also raising questions about how return and reintegration assistance can be sustained over time.

Funding has not kept pace with demand.¹⁰⁶ For example, the IOM budget fell from USD four billion to USD 2.89 billion in 2026. The US typically contributes about 40 percent of all IOM funding, but under new government policies and decisions, 80 percent of the programs that the US usually funded were cancelled. AVRR programs in Colombia and the Democratic Republic of Congo have already experienced these budget cuts first-hand through a lack of resources. Over 7,000 staff members have lost their jobs. Funding for cash assistance, shelter, and other reintegration efforts has slowed down.¹⁰⁷

The IOM is working to continue AVRR programs despite reduced funding.¹⁰⁸ It has set up low-cost regional offices and shifted staff toward high-risk regions, including the Horn of Africa, Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia.¹⁰⁹ In Europe, the IOM and EU have taken a joint approach.¹¹⁰ Frontex's EU Reintegration Programme provides reintegration assistance for eligible returnees.

IOM also operates return and reintegration programs through separate arrangements with governments and other partners. Micro-budgets are another approach. In India, Latvia, and Slovakia, the IOM provides AVRR services funded by the national government budgets. Although such efforts help continue AVRR programs, the IOM still needs more funding and investment.¹¹¹

Funding gaps have led to unequal AVRR efforts across countries.¹¹² The main difference is seen between origin and host countries. The EU focuses heavily on the return side of AVRR.¹¹³ Its reintegration program is well-funded to help migrants return to their countries. However, it treats the return itself as success rather than long-term reintegration, providing only up to 12 months of reintegration support.¹¹⁴ This leaves most of the actual cost of reintegration falling on countries of origin. In The Gambia, for example, returnees often come home to a fragile economy, and once EU cash stipends end, many cannot find work and fall back into the same economic conditions that drove them to migrate in the first place.¹¹⁵

Another challenge is gathering the data needed to measure whether AVRR programs actually succeed. Tracking success should mean monitoring economic, social, and mental health outcomes together. In practice, economic reintegration is comparatively well-funded and well-tracked, while the social and mental effects of return remain under-researched. For instance, more than one-third of returnees to Kosovo report depression, and most Afghan returnees report at least one mental health issue.¹¹⁶ Most AVRR metrics only track basic data, like the

The IOM has seen a 30 percent reduction in its donor funding for 2026.

number of people returned, rather than long-term stability.

Closing this gap will likely require dedicated funding for multi-year tracking, not just better intentions. Measuring success is also difficult because conditions vary so much by country. Local capacities and market conditions differ heavily from one country of origin to the next, which makes standardized metrics hard to apply. Still, the IOM has made some progress. Tools like the Reintegration Sustainability Index (RSI) track economic, social, and psychosocial factors together, and have proven useful in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Senegal.¹¹⁷ Newer research also incorporates direct feedback from returnees rather than relying only on program statistics. Still, without long-term funding and cooperation, AVRR programs cannot provide lasting solutions for returning migrants, or even reliably know what is and is not working.

BALANCING MIGRATION ENFORCEMENT AND MIGRANT RIGHTS

In recent years, governments have made return policies a larger part of their migration plans.¹¹⁸ These policies can include both voluntary return programs and deportation. The United States, for example, has placed particular emphasis on deportation.¹¹⁹ The IOM does not directly help governments carry out deportations, but at the request of the US, it has worked to expand AVRR programs that help irregular migrants leave voluntarily before they are deported. Japan takes a zero-tolerance approach. Asylum seekers who are denied after three applications are immediately deported.¹²⁰

Many governments want to invest in AVRR services rather than use deportation. With IOM support, Brazil launched the “This is Brazil” program to improve reintegration services across the country.¹²¹ Mongolia has taken a similar approach, working with the IOM to build AVRR policies into its Migration Governance Indicators (MGIs). It gives returnees training, small business

grants, and access to social services on a stronger legal basis.¹²²

Voluntary return programs have become closely tied to national immigration policies.¹²³ They are often offered to migrants before they face detention or deportation.¹²⁴ Governments frame it as a more humane approach that ensures migrant rights while also reducing irregular migration. Assisted returns could also be more cost-effective. A 2011 Migration Policy Institute report estimated that noncoercive returns cost roughly one-tenth as much per person as forced removals in its Swedish and UK examples.¹²⁵ Assisted returns generally also avoided costs associated with detention, escorts, and chartered flights, although the estimate did not capture all reintegration expenses. Voluntary returns also tend to avoid the public backlash and legal resistance that forced removals often face.¹²⁶

However, humanitarian organizations stress that AVRR should remain separate from forced removal policies.¹²⁷ Migrants might choose to request voluntary departure because they fear prolonged detention or forced removal. Sometimes, the offer of a safe return and cash aid is more attractive than the poor conditions of detention centers. In a 2025 investigation of three Florida immigration detention facilities, Human Rights Watch documented overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and inadequate access to medical care.¹²⁸ Also in 2025, 28 percent of completed US immigration removal cases involving detained people ended in voluntary departure; the monthly share reached 38 percent in December.¹²⁹ In such cases, the conditions people face in detention raise questions about whether a request to leave reflects a meaningful choice.

Libya's Voluntary Humanitarian Return also has the same issue.¹³⁰ Many migrants in Libya came from neighboring countries such as Sudan, Niger, Egypt, and Chad. Some traveled there seeking work or safety, while others hoped to continue toward Europe.¹³¹ Migrants held in Libyan detention centers face severe overcrowding,

food shortages, and violence. UN human rights investigators have found that abusive detention conditions can pressure some migrants to accept assisted return as a way out.¹³² These conditions raise serious questions about whether every decision to return is genuinely voluntary. The question of genuine consent is especially difficult when a migrant requests return while detained. Delegates must consider how a program can assess each person's choice independently and ensure that assistance is never used to make detention conditions acceptable.

Tanzania is another case of particular concern. The Nyarugusu Refugee Camp was set up by the UNHCR and Tanzania in 1996 to hold Congolese migrants fleeing the Congo War.¹³³ However, the 2015 political crisis in Burundi led to 90,000 Burundian migrants entering the camp as well. In November 2025, Tanzania, Burundi, and the UNHCR signed an agreement to return about 3,000 Burundians each week, described as voluntary and fully respectful of their rights. Since December 2025, 85 percent of all shelters in the camp have been demolished. The Burundi sections of the camp have received fewer rations, and the schools and hospitals have closed. By January 2026,

nearly 199,000 Burundians had returned from Tanzania since the repatriation program began in 2017.¹³⁴ Many of these returnees, however, say they did not actually want to return and cited ongoing security concerns and poor economic conditions in Burundi. They left Tanzania simply because conditions in the camp itself had become unbearable. This is a clear example of constructive refoulement. Reduced services and restricted movement in a refugee camp can pressure people into a return they would not otherwise choose.

AVRR has also shaped a new set of priorities for governments.¹³⁵ One is externalization, a policy approach where a country shifts migration enforcement onto transit or origin countries instead of handling it directly. This has become increasingly common for the EU, which has worked with countries like Turkey, Libya, and Tunisia to intercept migrants at sea, hold them, process their asylum claims, and return them home.¹³⁶ Some of these measures prevent migrants from reaching EU borders at all. This allows the EU to reduce the number of irregular migrants entering its territory without formally removing them itself. The United States has also used third-country deportations. The Migration



Migrant enforcement in Europe

Credit: Mstyslav Chernov

Policy Institute reports that Jamaican nationals were sent to Eswatini and Vietnamese nationals to South Sudan, rather than to their countries of nationality.¹³⁷

Externalization and AVRR are different policies, but they can intersect when migrants in a transit country are offered assisted return after being prevented from reaching a destination country. This raises questions about whether those migrants have meaningful alternatives and who is responsible for protecting their rights.¹³⁸ However, it also raises real risks for migrants, who can face torture or detention in these third-party countries, especially where supervision is weak. It also threatens the right to leave a country, a right guaranteed to migrants under international law. These arrangements can also lead to chain refoulement, where a migrant is passed from one country to another, each with weaker protections than the last, increasing their risk of harm at every step.¹³⁹ As return policies and AVRR programs continue to expand, finding the right balance between migration enforcement and migrant rights will remain one of the biggest challenges these programs face.

Bloc Analysis

POINTS OF DIVISION

Generally, member states of the IOM agree that migrants should be able to return safely and voluntarily. However, they disagree on how AVRR programs should be designed and implemented. The main debate is not about voluntary return itself, but about how governments should balance managing migration with protecting migrant rights. States also disagree on how responsibility for migrants, especially financial and logistical responsibility, should be divided among countries of origin, transit, and destination.

The first point of division is the level of protection migrants should get after returning.¹⁴⁰ Some

countries believe that AVRR programs should focus on core principles. These include the aspects of it being voluntary, based on informed consent, non-refoulement, and providing long-term support.¹⁴¹ Other countries argue for a balanced approach.¹⁴² They raise practical concerns like funding, government capacity, and the challenge of managing large flows of migrants. Still, others focus primarily on migration control, aiming to reduce irregular migration through stronger border controls and more efficient return systems.¹⁴³

Another point of division is how AVRR programs should be funded and implemented.¹⁴⁴ Some countries have well-developed reintegration programs.¹⁴⁵ They focus on global standards and giving migrants the best long-term reintegration support. In some cases, these countries run programs without any IOM support. Other countries have limited resources.¹⁴⁶ They focus on international funding and improving capacity. These countries often partner with the IOM to support their AVRR programs. Meanwhile, some countries face heavy irregular migration. They seek strong return policies, externalization, and close support from transit countries.¹⁴⁷ These different priorities shape how countries approach AVRR.

BLOC 1 - COUNTRIES SEEKING STRONG MIGRANT RIGHTS PROTECTION

Countries in this bloc place their main focus on protecting migrant rights in the return process. They believe that AVRR programs should be fully voluntary. Migrants should have informed consent and protection from refoulement. In these countries, a successful return is not just sending migrants back to their origin countries. It also means helping them build stable lives once they arrive.¹⁴⁸

These countries actively work to expand reintegration efforts for returning migrants, investing in long-term services such as housing, healthcare, education, and counseling. Many

also support monitoring reintegration outcomes on an economic, social, and mental health basis, allowing them to track how successful their efforts actually are.¹⁴⁹

Countries in this bloc usually have high levels of funding and provide substantial aid to international bodies, supporting the IOM, UNHCR, and other organizations that run AVRR programs.¹⁵⁰ They generally favor increased funding and stronger oversight to protect migrants and ensure they are not pressured into choosing to return. They may call for independent counseling, individual risk assessments, and monitoring to ensure that detention or pressure to leave does not turn an assisted return into a coerced one.

Countries like Germany, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Portugal, Canada, and the Netherlands are likely to align with this bloc. Germany's longstanding REAG/GARP program provides assistance for voluntary departures, illustrating how a destination country can fund organized returns.¹⁵¹ Norway and Belgium work closely with the IOM to provide returnees with services and support.¹⁵² Canada has also put a lot of effort into protecting migrant rights.¹⁵³ These countries support resettlement policies and fund agencies hosting AVRR programs, arguing that this creates a more stable migration system in the long term.

BLOC 2 - COUNTRIES SEEKING BALANCED RETURN POLICIES

Countries in this bloc seek to balance migration management with protecting migrant rights. This bloc is made up of all types of countries, including origin, transit, and host countries.¹⁵⁴ They support voluntary choice, informed consent, and reintegration. But they may lack funding, government capacity, or public services to fully deliver on them. They tend to focus on practical solutions that improve reintegration while also managing migration flows.

These countries usually focus on strengthening their local reintegration capacity, expanding

services such as jobs, education, housing, and healthcare for returnees. They believe that stronger local institutions help migrants reintegrate and reduce irregular migration over time. To achieve this, this bloc relies heavily on international cooperation, working closely with the IOM, UNHCR, and other organizations to secure funding, assistance, and reintegration support. Beyond expanding legal safeguards, they call for greater international investment and stronger partnerships to improve local reintegration systems overall.

Countries like Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Mongolia, Ghana, Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Jordan are likely to align with this bloc. For example, Ghana and Nigeria work closely with the IOM and the EU to support migrants and to manage migration flows.¹⁵⁵ They often use the funding and assistance to improve local reintegration services.

BLOC 3 - COUNTRIES SEEKING STRONG MIGRATION MANAGEMENT

Countries in this bloc focus on reducing irregular migration and enforcing stronger migration management. They believe in greater control over borders and migration. While they recognize migrant rights, they give greater value to national security and efficient returns. They may support AVRR as one part of a broader return policy that also includes immigration enforcement and deportation.¹⁵⁶

These countries focus on expanding return policies and improving migration enforcement. They support stronger border controls, return agreements or deportation, and cooperation with transit countries. Many also support externalization. Some support agreements under which other countries intercept migrants, process claims, or receive deportees. They believe these measures help reduce irregular migration, ease pressure on national asylum systems, and improve the efficiency of return procedures. While they may work with the IOM to expand

voluntary return programs, they also maintain strong immigration enforcement. They generally support policies that increase return rates and improve border security. However, they are less likely to support expanding legal safeguards if they believe these measures delay or reduce returns.

Countries like the United States, Italy, Greece, Austria, Pakistan, Iran, Libya, and Tunisia are likely to align with this bloc. Italy and Greece support the EU's strong return policies, and Libya and Tunisia have worked with the EU to reduce irregular migration in the Mediterranean.¹⁵⁷ Pakistan and Iran have recently increased the return of Afghan migrants through stricter migration policies.¹⁵⁸ These countries argue that effective migration management helps reduce irregular migration while maintaining orderly and secure migration systems.

Committee Mission

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is the leading United Nations (UN) agency for migration. Since 1951, the IOM has worked with governments to promote safe, orderly, and humane migration. It focuses on benefiting both migrants and society. The IOM has several governing bodies and subcommittees within its committee. While the entire council meets once a year, its standing committees and working groups meet more irregularly to address pressing or urgent issues. Unlike treaty bodies, the IOM cannot require states to adopt migration policies or enforce international law. Rather, it supports governments with assistance, expertise, research, and policy guidance. Additionally, the IOM has its own projects and programs that it can execute, as well as funds that are managed and overseen by its finance committee. Through partnerships with member states, other UN agencies, and local communities, the IOM's goal is to help migrants in every country. It responds to migration issues while protecting the rights and dignity of migrants.¹⁵⁹

The IOM's Strategic Plan for 2024-2028 has three main goals.¹⁶⁰ First, it aims to save lives and protect people through more aid during migration crises. Second, it seeks long-term solutions for displaced migrants through reintegration and support. Third, it promotes regular migration pathways so that migration is safe, legal, and respects human rights. Across all its work, the IOM calls for cooperation with governments, other global agencies, and local communities to make migration safer and humane.

The IOM should build on these principles by promoting voluntary return programs that respect informed consent and protect migrant rights. Effective AVRR should prioritize long-term reintegration, ensuring that returnees have access to the support they need to rebuild their lives. International cooperation between countries and relevant organizations is essential to developing effective and sustainable approaches to return and reintegration. These efforts should balance migration management with safety, dignity, and human rights. Above all, the IOM should promote practical and innovative approaches that strengthen international cooperation on migration and improve AVRR programs both now and in the future.

TOPIC B

IOM | NHSMUN 2027

Expanding Legal Pathways for Migrant Workers



Photo Credit: Matt Ming

Introduction

Currently, over 304 million people internationally are migrants and about 168 million are migrant workers. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) protects and supports migrant workers globally by working with governments, employers, and international partners to create policies that help legal labor migration. The IOM also focuses on protecting migrant workers' rights and well-being. This is done by preventing trafficking and assisting migrants throughout every stage of the migration cycle.¹⁶¹

Migratory workers are those that leave their home country to work a job in a “host” country. Migrant workers benefit the agriculture, construction, healthcare, manufacturing, domestic work, and technology sectors, among others. Additionally, migration helps address labor shortages while supporting a host countries' economic growth. Migrant workers contribute to roughly 10 percent of the production of goods and services globally, while accounting for less than 5 percent of the total global workforce.¹⁶² In 2022, an estimated 167.7 million international migrants participated in the labor force of their destination countries, accounting for 4.7 percent of the global labor force.¹⁶³

Some migrant workers leave their home countries to find better jobs or escape conflict. Yet, many migrant workers face challenges throughout the migration process. Some experience unfair pay, unsafe working conditions, discrimination, or exploitation.¹⁶⁴ Some pathways to migratory work are dangerous and exploitative. Others are inaccessible, limited, or extremely complicated. Expanding legal migration pathways, while important, has challenges. Governments face pressure from their citizens to limit immigration due to concerns about migrant workers' impacts on employment, security, and the economy. Differences in labor laws, visa requirements, and qualifications between countries also complicate international labor laws.¹⁶⁵

Expanding legal pathways for migrant workers also includes providing work visas, education opportunities, and family reunification programs

that allow migrants to work abroad. Countries must create policies that make migration safer, fairer, and more effective for migrants. By strengthening legal migration pathways through international cooperation, the IOM can help create a more sustainable global migration system that benefits all.

History and Description of the Issue

THE EVOLUTION OF LABOR MIGRATION

Migrant work has heavily evolved over the centuries. Before the late 19th century, passports and visas were not common.¹⁶⁶ National immigration law was not clearly established by most states. Rather, local authorities and empires were in control of their borders, deciding who was allowed to enter.¹⁶⁷ This also meant that those in power controlled the flow of laborers. Migration varied greatly region by region.¹⁶⁸ For example, the Ottoman Empire actively encouraged migration, allowing migrants to settle on underpopulated land. The Empire viewed this as a way to strengthen their agriculture and the broader economy.¹⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the Russian Empire maintained strict control on movement, creating an internal passport system, and drawing lines between its regions.¹⁷⁰

In the 19th century, the industrial era increased labor demand so the need for migrant workers

increased.¹⁷¹ However, to increase security during World War I (WWI), some countries began to use passport systems and implement migration restrictions.¹⁷² These security restrictions continued after the war, as countries began to create more visa requirements, immigration limits, and broader border control.¹⁷³

World War II (WWII) also shaped the modern labor migration structure.¹⁷⁴ Europe was largely impacted by WWII. Much of its infrastructure was destroyed and high death counts in working-age populations left most countries after the war needing workers in factories, mining, and railroad construction.¹⁷⁵ In the post-WWII period, two forms of migration occurred simultaneously: humanitarian migration by displaced people and refugees seeking safety, and economic migration by people seeking work.¹⁷⁶ Humanitarian migration included those that were displaced from the war, and refugees seeking resettlement, while economic migration were those who were seeking jobs.¹⁷⁷

Instead of opening borders and allowing unrestricted immigration, governments created temporary labor migration systems. Migrants were hired for work that lacked laborers due to the impact of WWII, such as building infrastructure or working on farms. Then, they would return to their home country following completion of the work.¹⁷⁸ Many of these migrant workers came from home countries that lacked stable opportunities for financial growth. Thus, while many wanted permanent immigration, this system allowed migrants to make money and have a steady job.¹⁷⁹

One example of a temporary labor migration can be seen with West Germany's "Gastarbeiter," or "guest worker," program. This program saw agreements with countries like Italy, Spain, Greece, and Yugoslavia.¹⁸⁰ Countries agreed to send workers because unemployment rates were rising, and they could not offer wages higher than West Germany. Thus, it was more economically beneficial to send their workers to West Germany since the workers would earn more money

and then send part of their earnings to their families in their home countries. This allowed these workers to add to their local economy more than they would have before.¹⁸¹ West Germany's "Gastarbeiter" is just one example of a bilateral agreement, an agreement between two countries. Bilateral agreements are the foundation for many modern temporary work visa programs in which one country supplies migrant workers and the other gives them jobs for a set time.¹⁸²

While labor migration systems have evolved since the post-WWII era, the basic structure remains largely unchanged. Most countries regulate labor migration through temporary work visas, employer-sponsored permits, seasonal work programs, and bilateral labor agreements. Rather than allowing unrestricted migration, governments generally limit the number of workers who may enter, determining which jobs are eligible for foreign labor.¹⁸³ Governments also establish specific conditions for employment, like eligibility requirements. While these systems are key to address labor shortages and maintain control over immigration, they also limit legal pathways for migrant workers.¹⁸⁴

Today, migrant workers face many challenges. Countries limit the amount of visas they allow and there are often long processing times for applicants. Strict entry requirements like these mean that despite the growing need for workers in many countries, labor demands still go unfilled.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, modern programs for temporary work often use private recruitment agencies instead of direct government programs. These agencies often charge large recruitment fees, leaving workers in debt before they have even arrived in the host country.¹⁸⁶ Programs also often tie a worker to a specific employer. While this simplifies recruitment, unequal power dynamics can lead employers to taking advantage of migrant workers. They may steal wages, take away passports or visas, and allow unsafe working conditions.¹⁸⁷ Finally, limited legal pathways turn some migrants to "irregular migration." Irregular migration is when a migrant

crosses a border without following the legal rules and procedure. Irregular migration increases the risk of exploitation, human trafficking, and labor abuse for migrant workers. However, some migrant workers are so desperate for stable work they do it anyway.¹⁸⁸

MODERN LEGAL MIGRATION PATHWAYS

Every country has different labor, political, and immigration goals and varying experiences with labor shortages, border security, economic growth, and migrant protections.¹⁸⁹ As a result, governments have pursued different pathways to legal migration, instead of following one unified model. Modern legal pathways for migrant work vary a lot, ranging from government-run programs and employer-sponsored visas to occupation-specific systems and bilateral labor agreements between countries.¹⁹⁰

Temporary work visa programs are the most common pathway for migrant workers, usually to address labor shortages. These vary across countries but allow short-term work authorization.¹⁹¹ These visas allow migrants to work in a country for a time. Their employment is limited to specific occupations or employers.

These visas allow governments to support domestic industries without allowing a large number of migrants to permanently immigrate, allowing governments to have more control over immigration levels.¹⁹²

Industries like agriculture, tourism, and fishing commonly use seasonal worker programs. These programs are used during a specific season of the year. For example, Canada offers the “Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP).” This allows farms to hire migrant workers from Mexico and Caribbean countries for up to eight months during Canada’s harvesting season.¹⁹³ This program is used because Canadian citizens and permanent residents do not fill employers’ needs for farming jobs. In Canada, employers must provide free housing and health care to migrant workers. However, other countries provide fewer protections for migrant workers, leaving them with limited rights and a greater dependence on their employers for protections.¹⁹⁴

Similarly, employer-sponsored visas allow employers to recruit workers for jobs that cannot be filled by locals.¹⁹⁵ Employers must show a clear labor shortage and sponsor the necessary visas. However, a challenge with this system is that the

Gastarbeiter

Credit: Hayo von Reyher



migrant workers' legal status is dependent on the employer.¹⁹⁶ For example, an employer may use visas as a way to control workers. A well-regulated example of an employer-sponsored visa program is Singapore's "Employment Pass."¹⁹⁷ This program is an employer-sponsored pathway for foreign professionals, managers, and executives. Applicants must meet a minimum salary requirement and, unless exempt, pass a points-based assessment. Pass holders who earn at least SGD 6,000 per month may apply for eligible family members to join them. This example shows how a government can set clear eligibility rules for a skilled-worker pathway, though those rules alone do not establish how well migrant workers are protected in practice.¹⁹⁸

In contrast, Japan had an employer-sponsored visa program that caused major concerns. The Japanese Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) was marketed as a program to transfer skills to migrant workers in exchange for their support in filling labor shortages.¹⁹⁹ However, Japan passed legislation in 2024 to replace the program with a new system scheduled to take effect by June 2027. The decision followed years of criticism over long working hours, unpaid wages, high recruitment fees, confiscated passports, and restrictions on changing employers. Some workers entered Japan already in debt from recruitment fees, while the risk of losing their visa status made it difficult to leave an abusive employer or report mistreatment.²⁰⁰ This program shows how employer-sponsored visa programs can often negatively impact migration workers and put them in a bad situation.

Bilateral labor agreements are another common

legal migrant pathway.²⁰¹ These agreements occur between two governments to fill demand needs in one country when another country has workers to share. This allows the host country to get needed migrants for labor shortages. Once the laborers are paid, they often send money to their families in their home country, helping their local economy. Thus, both countries involved with these agreements benefit. Moreover, these agreements often hold greater worker protections, recruitment standards, and shared oversight of workers compared to other pathways.²⁰²

South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS) is an example of a bilateral labor agreement. It was created to combat labor shortages in manufacturing, agriculture, construction, and other manual labor industries in South Korea.²⁰³ Agreements exist today between South Korea and the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Mongolia, Pakistan, and many other countries in Asia. The origin country recruits applicants, checks qualifications, and coordinates documentation. Meanwhile, the South Korean government determines demand, sets visa limits, issues work permits, and matches workers with employers. The governments are directly involved and are able to limit employer exploitation. In other employer-based systems, migrant workers are unable to change jobs without returning to their home country and reapplying. However, the EPS allows workers to request reassignment, supporting workers rights and flexibility. While the system still faces criticism, it is widely seen as a successful legal pathway for migrant workers.²⁰⁴

The final relevant pathway for modern labor

Am employer might threaten to take away a worker's visa unless the worker does what they are told, which can lead to rights abuse, exploitation, and poor working conditions.

migration is regional free movement systems.²⁰⁵ These are agreements between countries that allow migrant workers to move across borders with little restrictions. For example, citizens of the European Union (EU) can live and work across borders, without needing a work visa.²⁰⁶ This type of system can also be seen in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). ECOWAS agreements provide for visa-free entry and set out rights of residence and establishment in other member states. In practice, the ability to settle and work still depends on how each country implements those agreements.²⁰⁷ Unlike temporary work visas or bilateral labor agreements, regional free movement systems promote long-term economic integration between countries. These programs address long-term issues rather than short-term labor shortages, allowing workers to relocate easily in response to changing labor market conditions. However, implementation is more difficult. Countries in these systems are required to coordinate labor and immigration policies, while maintaining their own domestic labor regulations.²⁰⁸ For developing countries with fewer resources, regional free movement systems may be hard to use.

Overall, there is no single pathway for migrant workers that is appropriate for every country. Labor markets, migration capacity, and political priorities differ across borders. However, temporary work visas, seasonal work programs, employer-sponsored visa programs, bilateral labor agreements, and regional free movement systems are some of the most popular migrant work pathways that are used across the world. As time goes on, governments will continue to develop migration pathways that balance economic needs, state sovereignty, and the protection of migrant workers as markets and populations shift and change.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN LEGAL PATHWAYS FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

Migration and legal pathways for migrant workers

are also influenced by international cooperation. This cooperation is needed to balance labor needs, border security, and worker protections.²⁰⁹ Without cooperation through formal agreements, there is a risk of worker mistreatment, human trafficking, irregular migration, and broader abuse. Cooperation also helps connect countries to solve domestic labor shortages, manage borders for migration, protect migrant workers in bilateral agreements, and regulate employment.²¹⁰

While the IOM works to expand legal pathways with governments, the International Labor Organization (ILO) establishes international labor standards to ensure safe and fair employment for migrant workers.²¹¹ ILO conventions are binding for member-states that ratify them. An important one is ILO Convention No. 97, adopted after WWII. It looks to guarantee equal treatment, access to courts, government oversight, and other protections for migrant workers.²¹² Convention No. 97 also encouraged governments to exchange migration information, regulate recruitment, and cooperate with each other.

ILO Convention No. 143 was adopted in 1975 to combat irregular migration, trafficking of migrant workers, and to fight against broader exploitation. While the convention was only ratified by 28 countries, it was still a necessary international action to support migrant workers' rights.²¹³ In 2016, a meeting of government, employer, and worker representatives developed the ILO's General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment. These nonbinding guidelines offer governments and other stakeholders guidance on protecting workers, including migrant workers, during recruitment.²¹⁴

In addition to the ILO and IOM, the UN General Assembly also provides governments with policy suggestions and broader global frameworks. The most comprehensive action passed has been the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). The GCM was adopted by governments in Marrakech on December 10, 2018, and endorsed by the UN General Assembly on December 19, 2018. The GCM was based

on common policies countries wanted when handling migration. This included maintaining their sovereignty over migration. Thus, the GCM was a clear step in encouraging cooperation while respecting countries' autonomy.²¹⁵ The GCM encouraged governments to expand legal migration pathways for labor. It also called for ethical skills-based recruiting of laborers. A strong example of a country following GCM reforms is Portugal, by adding GCM goals into its National Implementation Plan. This plan included 97 policy measures focused on migration and working with source countries of migrant labor to coordinate labor oversight and management, showing the importance of cooperation between countries.²¹⁶

Other international actions have also been taken beyond the ILO, IOM, and GCM. As previously mentioned, bilateral agreements exist between countries to directly meet a labor shortage with excess workers.²¹⁷ Countries may also use skills mobility partnerships (SMPs). SMPs allow workers in one country to get training for an industry that is in need of more laborers in another country.²¹⁸ For example, the Towards a Holistic Approach to Labor Migration Governance and Labor Mobility in North Africa (THAMM) program works with Moroccan workers to train them for labor shortages in Belgium and other EU countries. The program helps to prevent labor shortages by training workers before the shortages occur.²¹⁹

However, even with these helpful programs, migrant workers continue to face challenges when it comes to their qualifications. For example, professional qualifications for doctors and nurses are not often recognized in countries outside of the one in which they were granted. Known as a mutual recognition agreement, some countries have worked out agreements to recognize qualifications across borders.²²⁰ However, a lack of consistency between country policies may prevent many migrant workers from working in their fields in other countries.

Overall, international cooperation has evolved

beyond simply regulating migration. Now, cooperation is key to actively create new legal pathways for migrant workers. Organizations like the IOM and ILO provide governments with recommendations and frameworks for governance. Frameworks like the GCM encourage cooperation across borders. Bilateral agreements, skills mobility partnerships, and mutual recognition agreements, are all methods that countries can use to address labor shortages and expand pathways internationally. However, collaboration and shared agreement is necessary.

CASE STUDY: THE KAFALA SYSTEM IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The United Arab Emirates' (UAE) kafala system is an important migrant labor system.²²¹ Following the discovery of oil in the UAE in the late 1950s and 1960s, the economy rapidly shifted from one based on trade and agriculture to one based on oil. The transformation of the economy allowed the UAE to focus on the development of infrastructure, tourism, and other new industries.²²² However, the domestic workforce of the UAE was extremely limited and the growth of the economy happened quickly. To match this growth, the UAE began to rely on migrant workers from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines, Pakistan, and other Asian countries. This process was then formally adopted by the UAE and became known as the kafala system.²²³

The kafala system is an employer-sponsored legal pathway for migrant workers. Under the system, the UAE government established a legal sponsorship framework. Employers, or kafeels, can request to sponsor migrant workers for work visas and permits to reside in the country. Legal residency and work permits are directly tied to the sponsoring employer. While the framework is regulated by the government, employers are directly responsible for their workers' immigration status and overall employment. The system was adopted to combat the large labor shortages during the oil boom, but has continued to support

other fields.²²⁴

Today, the UAE hosts over eight million migrant workers, which takes up over 80 percent of the resident population in the UAE.²²⁵ The country would be unable to match the growing labor demands of its economy without the millions of migrant workers it depends on. For workers, employment under the kafala system offers wages that are significantly higher than those in their countries of origin. The money that migrant workers send to their families in their home countries is called “remittances.” These remittances have been crucial in supporting the economies of the several Asian countries the kafala system draws workers from.²²⁶ The kafala system was adopted to benefit both the UAE and countries who sent laborers. It addresses labor shortages, supports economic development, and helps migrant workers by providing employment opportunities and higher wages. Despite the economic benefits, the kafala system has faced significant criticism internationally regarding worker protections and labor rights.²²⁷

While the UAE government sponsors the legal framework of the kafala system, employers directly control their employees. Rather than directly sourcing migrant laborers, employers

use recruitment agencies to find workers.

These agencies operate in a number of source countries for the kafala system. Migrant workers pay recruitment agencies significant fees to receive work sponsorship. Under the UAE framework for the kafala system, employers are expected to bear the cost of recruitment. However, many migrant workers have been found to pay these recruitment fees, which is illegal. With recruitment occurring in source countries, regulation has been difficult for the UAE government. Recruitment fees are often equivalent to several months of work for the migrant worker, often pushing the worker into debt before their employment begins.²²⁸ This creates financial pressure to remain employed, contributing to both employer dependence and a lack of reporting of illegal practices.

Not only are migrant workers economically dependent on their employers, but legal residency is tied to the employers as well. Attempts to resist employers could lead to termination of employment. If they lose their jobs, then they will be deported and removed from the UAE. For many workers working under the kafala system, this is their only option to make money or support their families. Hence, they

Kafala system

Credit: John Owens for VOA



continue to stay in these working conditions, even if it is difficult or unsafe. Many countries of origin, where these workers come from, do not have enough jobs or wages for these migrant workers.²²⁹

Labor exploitation has also been heavily documented under the kafala system. International organizations have reported delayed and unpaid wages, excessive working hours, unsafe working conditions, and poor living conditions. While all of this is illegal, migrant workers have little ability or control over the situation. To report these concerns, migrant workers risk financial strain and instead often stay silent to try to keep their jobs.²³⁰ Furthermore, employers have reportedly taken away passports of migrant workers, preventing them from trying to escape poor working conditions. These conditions are not true of every job under the kafala system, but have been heavily documented in a number of sectors.²³¹

The ILO, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, are all international organizations that have vocally criticized the kafala system in the UAE.²³² Organizations have documented a variety of cases of exploitation of abuse from employers. They have called for UAE enforcement of labor laws and regulation of recruitment agencies. They have also called for processes within the UAE to allow workers to report violations of rights without fear of retaliation from their employers.²³³

Following criticism, the UAE instituted a number of reforms. A set of 2021 labor reforms have allowed workers to change jobs within the kafala system after their contract ends or under specific conditions. This has reduced the dependence on employers and has broken cycles of controlling contract extensions.²³⁴ After reports of wage theft, a wage protection system was created. This forced employers to start paying wages electronically through government-monitored systems, allowing the government to identify unpaid wages.²³⁵ The UAE government has also expanded mechanisms for workers to file labor

complaints and seek access to justice from employers.²³⁶ Reforms have also been created to regulate recruitment agencies, attempting to crack down on illegal recruitment fees charged to migrant workers.²³⁷ Finally, additional measures have been adopted to promote worker safety, including workplace inspections and increased labor standards.²³⁸

While the reforms have led to a marked increase in rights and safety for migrant workers, international organizations continue to report cases of employers taking passports or employer threats and abuse. Furthermore, employers have found loopholes for many regulations, including ways to trick the electronic system and still take worker wages.²³⁹ Legal pathways for migrant workers are crucial for countries like the UAE to achieve economic growth and development. However, without effective government oversight and involvement, migrant workers remain at risk of exploitation. Economic needs must continue to be balanced with rights for workers.

Current Status

GLOBAL VIEWS OF MIGRANT WORKERS

Throughout history, there has been constant demand for labor. Migrant workers fill labor shortages, balance aging populations, and help drive innovation. For countries with larger elderly populations, younger migrant workers widen the potential work force and continue to support the global economy. In addition, migrants bring new ideas, skills, and experiences to countries. Many start businesses, create jobs, and contribute to economic growth. Their different backgrounds can also help communities become more connected and diverse.³³

Chile is a relevant example of how labor migration has helped the country's economy in recent years. In Chile, labor demand in agriculture and retail attracts migrants to the country. While Latin American immigrants made up only 3.5 percent

of Chile's workers in 2017, they were responsible for 11.5 percent of the country's economic growth between 2009 and 2017.²⁴³ Despite this contribution, native Chileans have begun to challenge migration due to rising population numbers, crime, and inflation. While most of these concerns are focused on fears of illegal and undocumented migration, this can affect how migrant workers are seen and treated.²⁴⁰

Another benefit for countries encouraging migrant labor are remittances. A remittance is the money sent home by migrant workers to their families. This money helps pay for needs like food, housing, healthcare, and education. From 2000 to 2022, remittances increased by more than 650 percent as more people migrated for work, wages increased, and advances in technology made it easier and less expensive to send money home.²⁴¹ In some countries, remittances make up a large part of the receiving country's economy. In Nepal, money sent home by workers abroad helps millions of families pay for basic needs. In 2024, Nepal received about USD 11.4 billion in remittances.²⁴² This was equal to about 26 percent of the country's GDP. This country is one of the most remittance dependent.²⁴³ Another example is El Salvador.

In El Salvador, remittances provide a large source of income for many households. In 2024, El Salvador received almost USD 8.5 billion in remittances.²⁴⁴ However, while these remittances support migrant workers and families, some countries and agencies have voiced concerns over how this exchange might affect local and national economies. Some argue that these remittances boost economies, support families, and encourage trade and collaboration.²⁴⁵ Others argue that these remittances cause economies to depend on temporary income, which can cause economic shocks if something goes wrong.²⁴⁶

Malaysia's palm oil industry also relies on migrant workers. Before 2020, around 80 percent of the plantation workforce were made up of migrants. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia had to restrict the entry of migrant workers. With a labor shortage, millions of fruits and plantations rotted, which cost the Malaysian economy billions. As a result, the government tried to recruit local Malaysian workers by offering housing and water. Following the pandemic, in 2022, Malaysia began reopening its labor market and focused on trying to get migrant workers to return. As more workers arrived, the more the economy began

Migrant workers in Malaysia palm oil plantation

Credit: Cephoto, Uwe Aranas



to recover and grow.²⁴⁷ This shows how migrant workers are needed in many places around the world and can have a positive impact on other countries' economies.

Despite the growing global demand for migrant workers, opinions about their role in society vary widely. Many people view migrant workers positively because of their important contributions to society. However, migrant workers also face increasingly negative views and even violence. For example, in June 2026, a Sudanese migrant stabbed a local man in Belfast, Northern Ireland. This led to violent anti-immigration protests across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Masked rioters targeted immigrant neighborhoods, setting fires to homes and cars, leading to dozens of migrants being injured or displaced. Some politicians also called for stricter border controls while others argued that one person's crime should not be used to blame entire migrant communities.²⁴⁸ This unrest shows how easily public attitudes toward entire groups of people can be influenced, especially in today's digital age.

Another case of recent increased hostility towards migrants is the United States. The United States relies heavily on migrant labor. Currently, there are about eight million undocumented workers in the country's workforce. Yet, these workers are often targeted by political campaigns arguing they "steal" jobs from United States citizens. President Donald Trump has also created more restrictive immigration policies to limit migration.²⁴⁹ According to the Migration Policy Institute, the Trump administration took more than 500 immigration-related actions in

its first year.²⁵⁰ In 2025, about 605,000 people were deported from the United States.²⁵¹ Yet in 2026, the percentage of Americans reportedly wanting to decrease immigration dropped from 55 percent in 2024 to 29 percent.²⁵² One reason for this is that many Americans see the important role immigrants play in the workforce. Labor shortages can delay construction projects, reduce agricultural production, and create staffing shortages in hospitals and nursing homes. These shortages can lead to higher prices for consumers, slower economic growth, and disruptions to everyday services, demonstrating the importance of migrant workers' role in the United States workforce.²⁵³

Throughout history, migrant workers have been used as scapegoats for the domestic issues citizens struggle with. A scapegoat is a person or group unfairly blamed for the mistakes of someone else or a situation. Common issues migrant workers are blamed for include inflation, lack of jobs, crime, and political tensions. Some believe that the arrival of migrant workers into a country leads to more crime. In countries like Singapore, Japan, Thailand, and Malaysia, a survey showed that many people believed that immigration led to higher crime rates. However, a study by the World Bank found that migrant workers in Malaysia actually help reduce crime. The study showed that for every 100,000 additional migrant workers, crime rates fell by about 1.5 percent.²⁵⁴

Some people worry that migrants compete with local workers for jobs or place pressure on public services such as healthcare, housing, and education. Others are concerned that

More workers mean more production and income which may reduce some of the economic pressures associated with crime.

large numbers of immigrants may change local cultures or communities. Economic uncertainty and media coverage have also caused growing concern in some regions. All of these factors influence how people perceive immigration and impact how migrant workers are treated. Governments around the world debate how to balance the economic benefits of migrant labor with these rising public views.

SHIFTING MIGRATION ROUTES AND INCREASED ENFORCEMENT: A EUROPEAN UNION CASE STUDY

Global migration routes are the pathways that migrants follow when moving from their home country to another country. A route is a geographic path taken by migrants. They are rarely direct and often involve many stops. The location of these routes were historically influenced by oceans and waterways, cities, or trading ports. Today, these routes are shaped by economic opportunities, conflict, climate change, and human rights violations.²⁵⁵

Migration routes shift when conditions change. Wars, violence, and political instability can force people to leave their homes or avoid certain

transit countries. Economic reasons like poverty and better wages can shift destinations from one country to another. Climate change can also displace people and alter traditional pathways. For example, droughts, floods, or hurricanes can force people to change their routes for safety reasons. Migrants use land, sea, and air transportation along global routes. These methods of travel vary based on travel costs and whether it is through legal or illegal pathways. Recently, there has been a large increase in the number of carriers migrants use to travel. This is linked to increased restrictions at borders and for migrants. However, migrant journeys often remain dangerous, slow, and expensive.²⁵⁶

Government agreements can also encourage or discourage certain routes.²⁵⁷ Recently, the EU has created stricter migration policies, discouraging migration to the region.²⁵⁸ Known as the 2015 Migration Crisis, there was a large movement of refugees and migrants into Europe, mostly from the Middle East in 2015. An estimated 1.3 million people came to the continent to request asylum. Asylum is when protection and safety is given to people who leave their home because they fear harm or unfair treatment. Because of this, many countries' governments in the EU argued

Boats with refugees arriving to Europe

Credit: Ggia



that their immigration systems needed stronger controls.²⁵⁹

The 2015 Migration Crisis also raised public security concerns. Citizens and governments were worried about migrants increasing crime rates or taking jobs and housing. These concerns caused politicians to push for stricter border policies. These policies were influenced by stereotypes against Middle Eastern migrants. After several terrorist attacks in Europe, many believed that Middle Eastern immigrants were associated with terrorism or crime. News reports and social media strengthened these ideas by focusing on crimes involving migrants. Countries in the EU responded by promising greater control over migration. This included increasing border security by using more border guards and surveillance technology like drones and cameras.²⁶⁰

The EU adopted its Pact on Migration and Asylum in May 2024, and its rules began applying in June 2026. It looks to speed up screening and asylum procedures at borders. It also looks to use assisted and voluntary return and reintegration programs (AVRR). These programs provide assistance to help individuals return and rebuild their lives in their home countries. It strengthens the returning of individuals who do not qualify for asylum or legal status. Moreover, the proposed 2028-2034 EU budget outlines EUR 81 billion to secure borders and manage migration.²⁶¹

Today, the EU has also focused more on recruiting highly skilled workers. For example, through programs like the EU Blue Card, workers in healthcare, engineering, and technology

are recruited. By looking for specific skills, the government aims to address economic needs but control the migration of lower-skilled workers. Some EU member states use labor tests to assess what kind of skills the migrant workers have. Employers may also need to prove that they advertised job openings and reviewed applications from local candidates to show they need migrant workers. This is to ensure that labor migration does not replace the local workers.²⁶² These policies illustrate a central debate over legal labor pathways. Employers may need workers, but visa requirements, limits on eligible occupations, and recognition of foreign qualifications determine who can actually use those pathways.

Because of these restrictive policies, EU migration routes are constantly changing. For example, arrivals to Italy along the Central Mediterranean Route fell sharply between 2023 and 2025. This was because of stronger cooperation between the EU and transit countries like Libya and Tunisia, increased border enforcement, and efforts to disrupt migrant smuggling networks. In 2025, Cyprus saw a steady decline in arrivals, while Spain's Atlantic Route to the Canary Islands saw a large drop in arrivals after several years of growth. Migrants increasingly used this route when other pathways into Europe became more difficult.²⁶³ This shift shows how large the impact of EU migration policies is on migration routes.

Migration patterns often adapt to new policies, border controls, and political conditions. This forces migrants to rely more on smugglers. Migrant smuggling is the act of purposefully

A decline in arrivals along a migration route does not always mean that migration has ended.

bringing migrants illegally into a country for financial or material benefit. Migrants pay smugglers to bypass international borders. Every year, the smuggling industry generates about USD five to seven billion. Prices vary widely by distance and difficulty. Crossing a single land border may cost thousands of dollars, while transcontinental routes have fees up to USD 10,000 per person. This makes the journey more dangerous by exposing migrants to potential exploitation, trafficking, and violence by smugglers.²⁶⁴

EU migration policies show how governments can influence migration, for better or worse. Even when leaving a country due to safety reasons, migrant workers are often impacted by public perception and hate towards them. Everchanging public perception and government policies cause migration routes to constantly shift, and for more illegal ways of entering a country to appear.

ADDRESSING HUMAN SECURITY TO HELP MIGRANT WORKERS

Human security is defined by the UN as “freedom from fear, freedom from want, and a life with dignity.”²⁶⁵ Human security is connected to

migration. The need to move is often driven by human insecurity. Examples include civil conflict, poverty, or climate change. During their journey, migrants face risks of trafficking and abuse. Once migrants arrive at their destination, they require adequate rights, access to healthcare, and education. In reality, many migrants are not provided with these needs. Many face discrimination in their new countries, including in workplaces, schools, and social settings.²⁶⁶

In many countries, there are limited legal protections for migrant workers. Migration systems can make workers more vulnerable by causing them to take informal jobs where there are fewer protections. Informal work includes jobs that lack official legal protection, social security, and tax registration. These jobs employ and take advantage of migrant workers, due to a lack of oversight and low entry requirements.²⁶⁷

The UN Development Programme (UNDP) has created projects that help improve people’s lives around the world through poverty reduction, job creation initiatives, education and skills training, climate adaptation programs, food security projects, and peacebuilding efforts.²⁶⁸ The UN Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS) also partners with governments to finance programs

Inflatable boat carrying migrants

Credit: Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet



that fight climate change, poverty, and health crises. It looks to address many of the conditions that cause people to leave their homes in search of jobs as well.²⁶⁹ Finally, the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) provides funds and resources during and after disasters. It protects vulnerable communities before crises get out of hand. Established in 2006, CERF allows UN agencies to respond quickly when emergencies disrupt economies and jobs, which may cause people to migrate for work under unsafe conditions. Thus, CERF addresses the human security threats that contribute to labor migration.²⁷⁰

Somalia demonstrates helpful responses to human security threats. Since Somalia's government collapsed in 1991, over 400,000 Somalis have been displaced to other parts of the country due to armed conflict, violence, and political instability.²⁷¹ The government collapse began a long civil war between political groups and militias. For decades, there was no stable government. As a result, insecurity and weak governments followed. In more recent years, al-Shabaab, an extremist group, has controlled parts of the country. It has carried out attacks and forces people to flee their homes.²⁷² UNTFHS looks to improve human security in Somalia and has helped over 11,000 people. Through the UNTFHS, some families received land where they could safely resettle and others gained access to clean drinking water. The program also provided job training, vocational skills, and resources to help people find employment. With these initiatives, UNTFHS shows how human security programs can improve people's lives short and long term.²⁷³

Conditions in a country of origin can influence why people seek work abroad, but safe migration also depends on the recruitment process itself. Somalia further provides an example of a government attempting to regulate that process. In August 2025, Somalia approved its Regulations Governing Private Employment Agencies (PrEAs). These rules were developed with the ILO and the Better Regional Migration Management Program

(BRMM). The BRMM is aimed at improving labor migration across Africa.²⁷⁴ It negotiates bilateral agreements between countries and trains workers.²⁷⁵ The regulations for PrEAs create a legal framework for private recruitment agencies to help match migrant workers with employers. This helps Somali workers find jobs at home and abroad. It aims to protect migrant workers by requiring all agencies to follow clear standards and providing accurate information about jobs, workers' rights, and complying with government oversight.²⁷⁶ These reforms are important because many Somalis seek jobs outside their communities and in other countries.

When addressing issues for migrant workers, countries should not only look at the issues in the labor market and economy, but the broader political situation as well. By addressing human security concerns, like poverty, violence, or climate change, countries could also make the lives of migrant workers better back home. To improve human security, governments and international organizations can expand job opportunities, support regional cooperation, and provide emergency funds and resources when needed. These measures help ensure that migration occurs through safe channels while protecting the rights of migrant workers. Most importantly, they can help restore stability. Greater regional cooperation between governments can help create more consistent national policies that support both migrants and locals. It can ensure that migrants receive support regardless of where they settle.

Bloc Analysis

POINTS OF DIVISION

While most governments agree that migration regulations are needed, they disagree on who should qualify for work visas, how freely workers should be able to change jobs, and whether employment should offer a path to long-term residence. Some countries advocate strongly for

equal workplace protections and opportunities to settle permanently. Others support protections but admit workers selectively according to labor shortages. Still others rely mainly on temporary permits linked to particular employers or jobs. The blocs below describe these priorities, although a country may use more than one type of pathway.

BLOC 1: LABOR DEPENDENT AND RIGHTS-BASED COUNTRIES

In this bloc, countries support expanding legal ways for people to migrate for work. Many of these countries face labor shortages or have large aging populations. IOM notes that immigration can contribute to national income and living standards and help address labor market needs in aging societies. These potential benefits help explain why countries may expand work pathways, though each government decides which workers can enter and whether they may remain long term.²⁷⁷ They support work pathways that can lead to long-term residence, alongside protections that allow workers to report abuse and change jobs without losing their legal status.²⁷⁸ They favor safe working conditions, fair wages, access to applicable public services, and international cooperation on labor standards.⁶²

These countries may support measures to prevent trafficking, forced labor, and debt bondage throughout recruitment and employment.²⁷⁹ They may favor workplace inspections and fair recruitment rules, including oversight of recruitment agencies, clear information about job terms, and limits on fees charged to workers.²⁸⁰ Legal entry alone does not ensure safe employment; workers also need protections they can use after they arrive.

Canada, New Zealand, and Portugal are examples of countries that may support aspects of this approach. Canada's skilled worker programs include routes to permanent residence; New Zealand's Skilled Migrant Category allows eligible workers with a skilled job or job offer to

apply for a resident visa that permits them to live and work in the country indefinitely; and Portugal offers routes through which eligible migrant workers can seek longer-term residence.²⁸¹ Each country also uses temporary permits and regulates admission, so delegates should examine specific policies rather than assume identical positions.

BLOC 2: CONTROLLED MIGRATION AND MANAGED ENTRY COUNTRIES

Countries in this bloc support legal migration through work permits and visas when it meets identified labor needs. They may select applicants by occupation, qualifications, employer sponsorship, or labor market requirements.²⁸² Unlike Bloc 1, they place greater emphasis on deciding which workers can enter and under what conditions; unlike Bloc 3, they may offer both temporary and permanent skilled-worker routes. They may also weigh domestic concerns about jobs, housing, and public services when setting country admission levels.

These countries generally support fair treatment and labor protections while maintaining selective entry requirements. Governments may use skills assessments, labor market tests, employer sponsorship, and temporary work permits. The central debate for this bloc is how narrowly to set eligibility rules without leaving needed jobs unfilled or making workers overly dependent on employers. Germany illustrates this trade-off, as it has created several legal routes to recruit workers for sectors facing shortages, but requirements such as recognition of foreign qualifications can limit who can use them.²⁸³ Some routes also require a job contract or a labor market test.

Other examples of countries possibly in this bloc include Australia, the United Kingdom, Japan, and South Korea, though their policies differ considerably. Australia uses skills-based selection and offers some workers permanent residence.²⁸⁴ The United Kingdom recruits

workers in selected sectors; Japan has expanded work visa programs; and South Korea regulates entry through programs such as its Employment Permit System.²⁸⁵ These examples show different ways to select workers and control admission, rather than a shared position against permanent migration.

BLOC 3: COUNTRIES RELYING ON TEMPORARY, EMPLOYER-LINKED LABOR

Countries in this bloc admit migrant workers to meet labor needs primarily through time-limited permits for particular jobs or employers. Their main distinction is the limited opportunity many workers have to settle permanently or change jobs freely.²⁸⁶ Some temporary labor programs recruit workers for particular sectors or employers. In employer-linked visa systems, a worker may need authorization to change jobs and can risk losing legal status by leaving an employer.²⁸⁷

These restrictions can make it harder for workers to leave unsafe conditions or report unpaid wages. The risk is especially serious when leaving an employer could also mean losing legal status. However, rules differ since some permits restrict workers to an industry, while others tie them to a particular employer.²⁸⁸ The main policy question is how to protect workers whose permission to remain depends on their employment. Delegates may disagree about employer changes, recruitment fees, contract oversight, and whether temporary workers should be able to qualify for longer-term residence.

Examples include Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which rely heavily on foreign workers admitted through employment-based permits and generally offer limited routes from those jobs to citizenship.²⁸⁹ In 2025, Saudi Arabia introduced a system that classifies foreign workers into high-skill, skilled, and basic categories when issuing work permits.²⁹⁰ Saudi Arabia's new categories show that a country relying heavily on foreign labor may still select workers by skill level. For

this bloc, the key question is what freedom workers have to change employers or remain in the country after their employment ends.

Committee Mission

IOM is dedicated to ensuring that migration is safe and orderly. Expanding legal pathways for migrant workers is a key priority for the IOM, which works with governments to create safer and accessible systems for people to move across borders. IOM's role is mostly operational and advisory rather than legislative. This means IOM does not have the authority to create binding international law. Instead, it promotes global frameworks. It provides assistance, policy recommendations, and research to help states strengthen migration. The IOM also coordinates humanitarian assistance, supports migrants through protection and reintegration programs, and partners with NGOs and civil society organizations.²⁹¹

When legal opportunities for work abroad are limited, migrants may become more vulnerable to irregular migration, trafficking exploitation, and abuse. IOM supports governments in developing regular labor migration pathways that respond to labor market needs and protect migrant workers. These pathways can include temporary and seasonal labor programs, bilateral labor agreements, and skills-based migration.²⁹² However, expanding migrant labor pathways is not enough. Effective pathways must also recruit ethically, monitor employment and behaviors, and protect workers. IOM has already created several frameworks and programs to assist migrant workers, employers, and country policy, such as the Migration Governance Indicators and the International Recruitment Integrity System (IRIS).²⁹³

IOM has a responsibility to strengthen legal migration pathways, improve protections for vulnerable migrants, and enhance international cooperation to prevent migrant worker

exploitation.²⁹⁴ When working with the IOM, countries must consider regional collaboration, worker protections and pay, recruitment and travel pathways, immigration policies and borders, and legal oversight and data tracking.²⁹⁵ Through its work, IOM helps to promote economic development that benefits migrants, employers, and societies alike. IOM's goal is not to create one universal model for migrant workers. Rather, IOM member states must create and collaborate on practical recommendations that each and every country can benefit from.

Research and Preparation Questions

Your dais has prepared the following research and preparation questions as a means of providing guidance for your research process. These questions should be carefully considered, as they embody some of the main critical thought and learning objectives surrounding your topic.

TOPIC A

- 1 When does a “voluntary” return stop being truly voluntary, even if a migrant formally agrees to leave?
- 2 Should countries that benefit from migrant labor or host migrants for long periods carry more responsibility for funding reintegration after return?
- 3 If a country of origin cannot provide jobs, housing, healthcare, or safety, can return ever be considered sustainable?
- 4 How should the IOM respond when a government uses AVRR alongside detention, deportation threats, or other forms of pressure?
- 5 Can externalization and third-country return agreements ever protect migrant rights, or do they mainly shift responsibility away from host countries?
- 6 How should governments balance their right to control migration with the rights of migrants when those two goals directly conflict?

TOPIC B

- 1 What does a “fair” migration system look like from the perspective of migrant workers, employers, origin countries, and host countries? How might these perspectives differ and how can they be balanced within proposed solutions?
- 2 Does expanding legal pathways to migration provide a sustainable solution to global inequality, or does it risk causing harmful “brain drain” in lower income countries?
- 3 If a visa binds a worker to a single employer, how can host countries prevent exploitation without granting workers the absolute freedom to change jobs?
- 4 How can local communities better prepare for and support an expanded population of foreign workers, particularly in terms of housing, healthcare, and education?
- 5 Who should bear the financial cost of legal migration pathways? Should it be the responsibility of host countries, receiving countries, migrants, all, or none?

Important Documents

TOPIC A

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