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**Briefing**

# Social protection, migration and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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## Key messages

- Expanding social protection coverage of migrants is integral to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically Goals 1 and 10.
- Yet coverage for labour migrants remains low. 22% of migrants are not covered, including less than 1% migrants moving between low-income countries.
- Globally, 55% of migrants are entitled to access social protection benefits, but cannot take these benefits home, or to another country (the 'portability' of benefits).
- States should therefore ensure labour migrants are eligible for, and participate in, social protection, and that they can transfer benefits they have contributed towards.
- To be able to create, implement and enforce effective social protection for migrants, national bodies need better data and more support.

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## Migration and the Sustainable Development Goals: a briefing series

People migrate to overcome poverty, escape conflict, or cope with economic and environmental shocks. In the words of the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, migration is ‘an expression of the human aspiration for dignity, safety and a better future. It is part of the social fabric, part of our very make-up as a human family’.

Migration is one of the defining features of the 21st century and can contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For this to happen, we need a better understanding of the relationships between migration and key development issues – such as health, education, gender, labour and urbanisation. This series of briefs, commissioned by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), explores these relationships across the 2030 Agenda and the impact of migration on key development outcomes.

### 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This briefing considers the extent to which international labour migrants<sup>2</sup> are covered by social protection, and the implications this has for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda). More specifically, this brief shows that social protection coverage of international labour migrants varies considerably, and outlines how this has a bearing on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to social protection.

Social protection is the set of policies and programmes that aim to reduce poverty and vulnerability and to enhance the capacity of people to manage economic and social risks, such as unemployment, sickness, disability and old age. It includes **social assistance programmes**, which are not conditional on having previously made contributions (e.g. cash transfers to poor households) – and **social insurance programmes**<sup>3</sup>, which are conditional on past contributions (e.g. contributory old-age pensions). There is a large evidence base showing the positive impact social protection programmes can have on reducing poverty and child labour, and on improving health and education outcomes and investment in productive assets (e.g. agricultural tools) (Babajanian et al., 2014; Bastagli et al., 2016; Hagen-Zanker et al., 2011). As such, social protection is seen as a priority area for achieving the 2030 Agenda, specifically in its contribution to Goal 1 (No Poverty) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and their Targets<sup>4</sup>.

Several international agreements governing social protection systems already make reference to the eligibility

of migrants. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has long championed universal eligibility to social protection. Their 1952 Convention No. 102, which required equality of social protection treatment, has been ratified by 55 countries (ILO, 2017). More recently, they passed Recommendation No. 202, known as the *Social Protection Floor*. This sets out four basic social protection guarantees to all residents and children. Furthermore, several blocks of countries have agreed to guarantee social protection access to migrants moving within them, the best-known example being Regulation (EEC) 1408/71 for European Union (EU) migrant workers. Globally, there are also hundreds of bilateral and multilateral agreements between specific countries. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda of 2015, for example, commits UN member countries to improving ‘access to and portability of earned benefits [social insurance]’ (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA), 2015).

In spite of these agreements, both the legal and effective social protection coverage of international labour migrants remains low<sup>5</sup>. Section 2 of this briefing discusses existing agreements and their legal coverage. Section 3 explores the factors that lead to low legal coverage for migrants and exclusion from effective coverage. Section 4 links the analysis to the 2030 Agenda, showing why these issues need to be considered for governments to meet the SDGs, in particular Targets 1.3, 1.a and 10.4. Finally, Section 5 concludes and offers recommendations to improve legal and effective social protection coverage of migrants.

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1. Many thanks to Pietro Mona (SDC), Clara van Panhuys (ILO), Francesca Bastagli and Helen Dempster (ODI) who provided comments on an earlier draft. Many thanks to Evelyn Smail for managing the project, and Sean Willmott for designing the infographics.
  2. This briefing will focus on international labour migrants (or ‘migrant workers’), defined as individuals who moved from one country to another for the purpose of employment (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2011). Where the briefing refers to other types of migrants, for example internal migrants, this will be stated explicitly.
  3. These types of programmes are also sometimes called ‘social security’.
  4. SDG 3.8 on universal health coverage is also often considered a priority target for social protection, but this goal is dealt with in a separate briefing paper on health, migration and the 2030 Agenda (Tulloch et al., 2016). This briefing also does not cover the decent work aspects of social protection (SDG 5.4, SDG 8.5 and SDG 8.B).
  5. There is a distinction between *de jure*, or legal, coverage of migrants, meaning official social protection coverage of migrants under relevant agreements and mechanisms, and *de facto*, or effective, coverage, which may differ to this due to issues in ratification or implementation of these agreements, or practical access and take-up issues. As there is limited data on effective coverage, this briefing will mainly focus on legal coverage.

## 2 Legal coverage varies considerably, but tends to be low

Social protection programmes differ in two main respects: the extent to which migrants can access them in their host country, and whether their benefits can be withdrawn in another country, in other words whether they are *portable* (see Figure 1). Social assistance programmes are often funded through general national taxation (for example, maternity allowances) or through external funding such as official development assistance (ODA). These programmes are usually not portable (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2011).

Labour migrants should have legal access to a host country's social protection system if there is:

1. A bilateral or multilateral agreement enabling eligibility for, and portability of, social protection between countries.

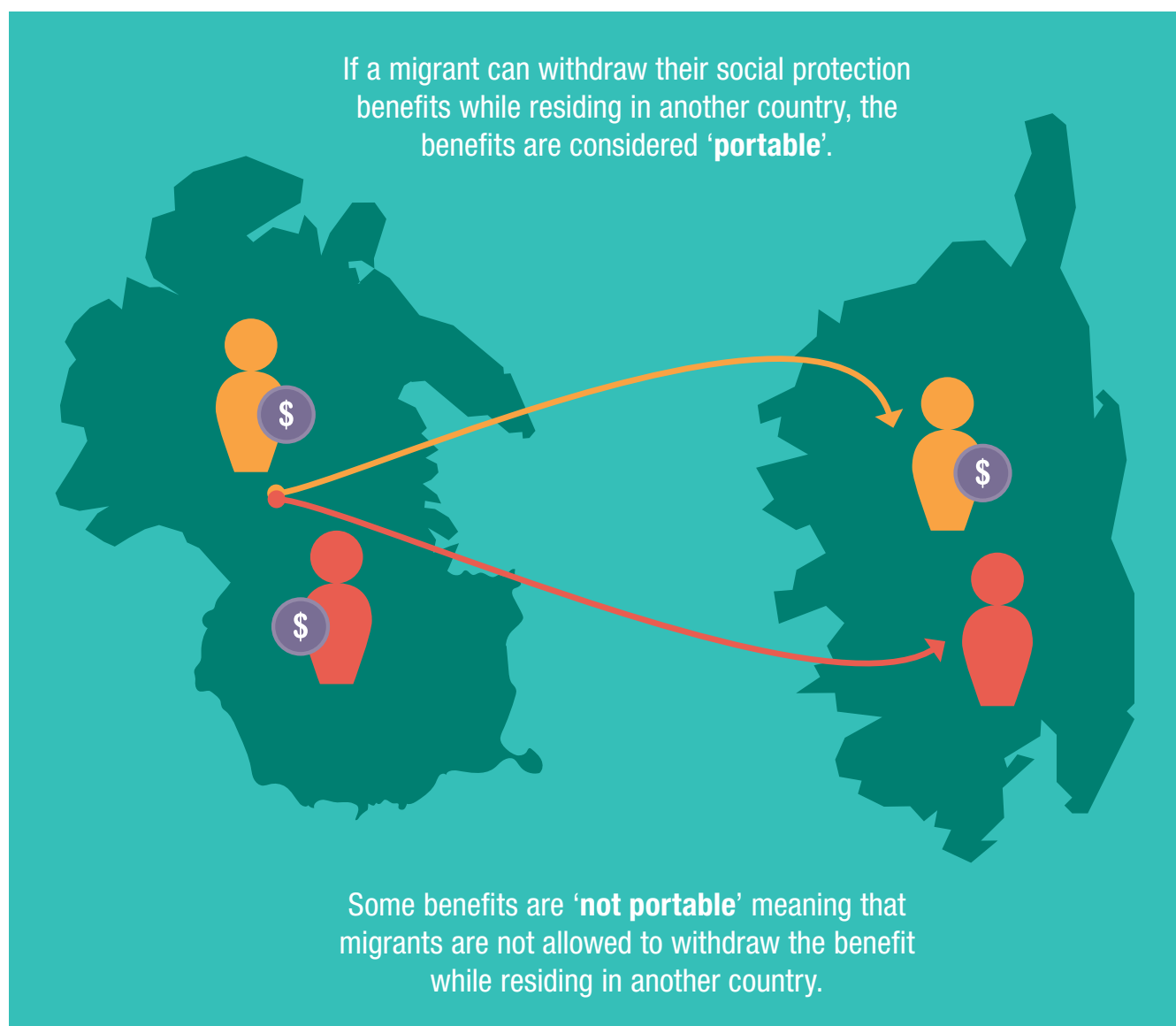
2. Unilateral programmes, provisions of equality of treatment or access to voluntary insurance in their host country.
3. More rarely, labour migrants may be covered by unilateral programmes from their origin country, such as a fund for overseas workers.

### 2.1 Frameworks for labour migrants' access to social protection

This section describes the nature of migrants' legal access to social protection, firstly considering entitlement while residing in a country and, secondly, considering portability of accumulated entitlements upon moving country.

A **bilateral portability agreement** between two countries sets out social protection entitlements to a citizen of one country who is resident in the other. Most bilateral

Figure 1: The portability of social protection benefits



agreements are between high-income countries (such as those concluded between the United States and 27 high- and upper-middle-income countries<sup>6</sup>). Bilateral agreements covering South-North migrants are sometimes designed around temporary labour migration, such as Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) (Holzmann and Pouget, 2010). Certain EU countries have agreements with Turkey and Morocco allowing labour migrants' contributions into national social insurance schemes to accumulate across countries (Holzmann, 2010). Bilateral agreements also exist between low-income countries, although these are more rare and less extensive in legal coverage. One example is that between Malawi and Zambia, which provides healthcare for temporary mine workers from Malawi through the Zambian Workers Compensation Fund (Avato et al., 2009).

**Multilateral agreements** provide a framework for coordinating portability at the regional level. For instance, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) allows social security contributions to accumulate across member states, helping labour migrants to meet state-pension contribution thresholds (Taha et al., 2015, van Ginneken et al., 2013). The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has a regional legal framework for pension portability and other entitlements for all migrants from member states (van Ginneken, 2013). The Ibero-American multilateral agreement between Spain, Portugal and 20 Latin American countries provides a pension floor for labour migrants (Taha et al., 2015). The East African Community (EAC) gives its nationals and all migrants from member states equal rights to national social security systems; however, its member states have mostly under-developed systems to begin with and migrants lose their accumulated contributions upon returning to their country of origin (ibid).

Social protection can be made accessible to migrants through **unilateral measures of destination countries**. For example, third-country nationals legally resident in the EU for five years become entitled to equal treatment with EU nationals<sup>7</sup>. Canada, Australia and New Zealand also have generous entitlements for permanent resident migrants (and temporary migrants in New Zealand). Such measures are much more rare in low-income countries. For example, labour migrants arriving in member states of the GCC or the Southern African Development Community (SADC) are not granted any right to access social protection. One exception is Barbados, where labour migrants can participate in the national social security system even if they lack a work permit (Taha et al., 2015; Morlachetti, 2015). Host countries' laws can also permit portability, for instance Australia and Malaysia refund contributions accrued as a lump sum when a migrant departs the country.

Migrants from the global South may be covered by a **unilateral programme from their origin country**. A notable example is the Philippines Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) (see Box 1). Sri Lanka has a similar voluntary, contributions-based fund for overseas workers, with the benefits paid out to family members left in Sri Lanka (Taha et al., 2015), while Mexico has a voluntary national social insurance programme for emigrants to the US (ibid.).

Finally, irregular labour migrants and those working in the informal economy tend not to be covered by national social protection systems. Asylum seekers and refugees outside high-income countries are also rarely covered, but instead may receive humanitarian support offering short-term or ad-hoc protection (e.g. Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017).

### Box 1: Migrant welfare funds

Some countries of origin such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand use migrant welfare funds to protect their labour migrants abroad. These funds are contributory schemes funded usually by employers, recruitment agencies and/or migrants, which provide a range of services to migrants while overseas. They commonly include life and medical insurance, loans and repatriation services (Ruiz and Agunias, 2008). They also provide government with funds to finance other migrant programmes such as pre-departure rights education, and can support migrants' families at home (Jones, 2015).

The OWWA is the most developed of these funds. Managed by a government agency within the Department of Labor and Employment, OWWA is funded by a mandatory membership fee of US\$25 paid prior to migration, either by the employer, recruitment agency or migrant. The fund pools these contributions to offer services to migrants including life and accident insurance, legal assistance and on-site help at embassies (Ruiz and Agunias, 2007). As of 2013, OWWA membership was over 1.6 million and had raised over US\$300 million (OWWA, 2013). These funds allow origin governments to support migrants abroad; as such they offer a potential solution to financing migrant social protection.

## 2.2 Data showing migrants' legal social protection coverage

While specific data is not available for most countries, Avato et al. (2009) have compiled a database of migrant stocks by destination and origin country, and paired

6. [https://www.ssa.gov/international/agreements\\_overview.html](https://www.ssa.gov/international/agreements_overview.html)

7. EU Directive 109/2003.

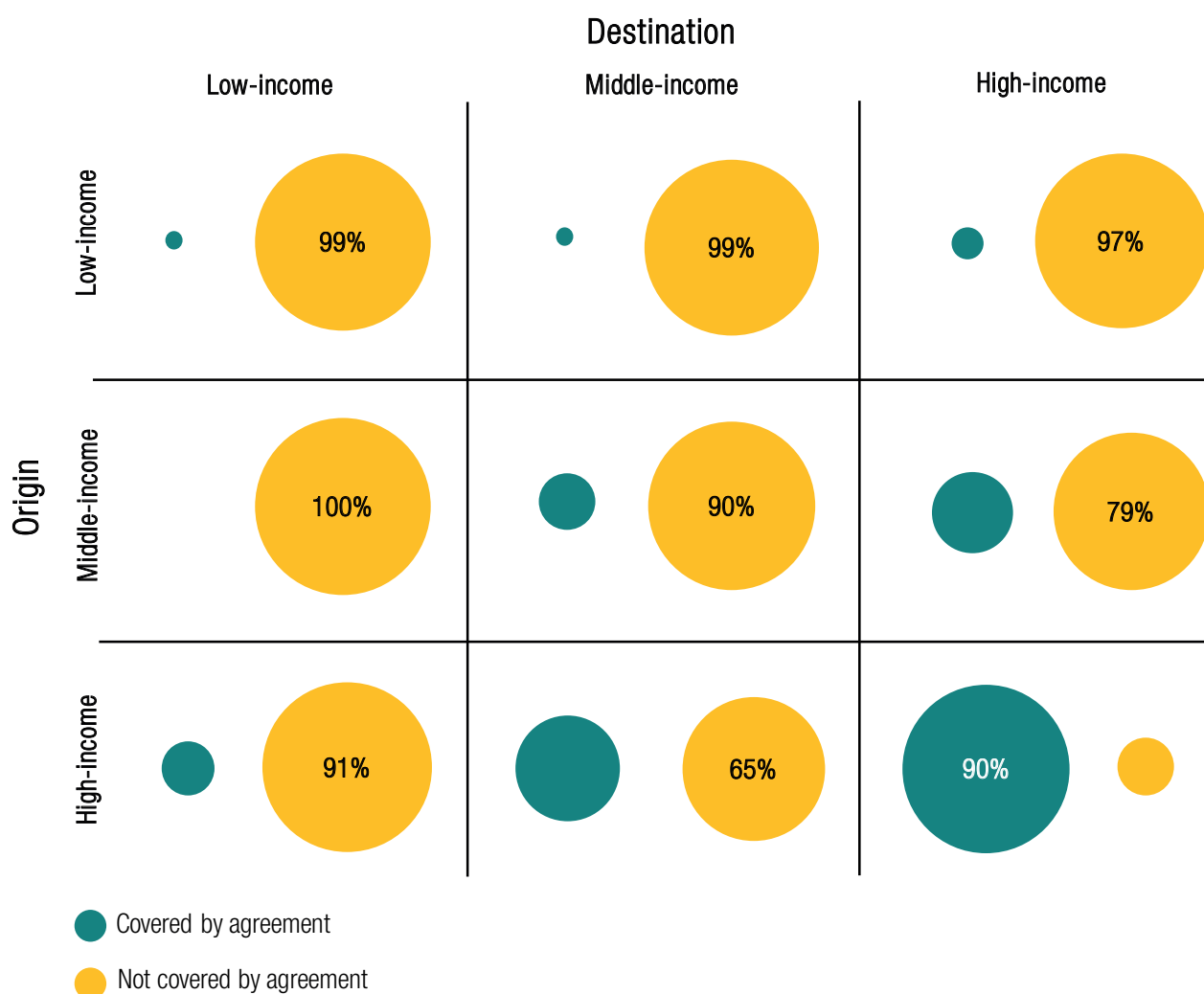
this information with whether a bilateral or multilateral portability agreement covers each migration corridor<sup>8</sup>. Most agreements concern the benefits of contributory systems such as disability, survivors' and old-age pensions. They also estimate the number of migrants who are not covered by portability agreements but are entitled to social protection access in their host country through a unilateral programme. This category could include access to non-contributory social assistance. When it comes to those who are not covered, official data sources only tend to capture those with regular status, while the stocks of undocumented migrants must be estimated<sup>9</sup>.

Migrants therefore fall into three categories:

- those that move between countries and are covered by a bilateral or multilateral agreement (23%)
- those that move between countries without an agreement but are still entitled to some social protection (55%)
- those that have no access to social protection (22%).

Firstly, around a quarter of all migrants move between countries with a **bilateral or multilateral agreement** in place, meaning that in principle some migrants are entitled to social protection and portability of benefits (Avato et al., 2009). However, as Figure 2 shows, while 90% of high-income to high-income movers fall into this category,

**Figure 2: Most migrants moving between high-income countries are legally covered by social protection, whereas coverage of migrants moving between low-income countries is low**



Source: Authors' own calculation based on data compiled by Avato et al. (2009) and hosted by the World Bank <http://go.worldbank.org/NCO9EJABP0>. The figure shows the percentage of migrants (size of 'bubble') who are legally covered by a bilateral or multilateral social protection portability agreement, split by the income classification of their origin and destination country.

8. Based on data from 2000/2001.

9. Undocumented migrants are typically excluded from social protection provision by law and are unlikely to take up any that they are entitled to for fear of exposure and the harassment or legal consequences that might ensue (Taha et al., 2015). The figures quoted here include estimates of undocumented migrants included in the data compiled by Avato et al. (2009).

less than 1% of migrants moving between low-income countries are legally covered. Overall, around 17% of those migrating from low- or middle-income countries to high-income countries are covered by a bilateral or multilateral social protection agreement. Some countries have secured bilateral agreements that result in higher coverage of their emigrants, notably Morocco (89% of emigrants), Algeria (87%) and Turkey (65%); however this is only for documented migrants, as we explore further in the next section. This is compared to a coverage rate of 0.5% among Mexico's 1.1 million emigrants, who migrate largely to the United States.

Secondly, in the absence of formal agreements, migrants **may still be entitled to some form of social protection in their host country**, although these benefits are unlikely to be portable. In fact, most migrants fall into this category (55% globally). While this situation is better than having no access at all, it is still precarious. Some within this category migrate to high-income countries where they are generally entitled to a full range of social protection, even if the benefits are not portable. The majority within this category, however, are migrating between low- and lower-middle-income countries where national social protection systems are generally weak.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the most vulnerable group are arguably the remaining 22% of migrants who **are neither legally covered by a bilateral/multilateral agreement nor entitled to social protection by host-country law**. As Holzmann et al. (2015) have noted, these migrants may have access to some short-term provisions but are denied long-term or equal access as citizens. Almost all these migrants originate in the global South and the majority move to another low- or middle-income country. However, a large share (around 42%) of those moving with no access to social protection are moving to high-income countries and this category includes large numbers of undocumented migrants.

### 3 Why are migrants not covered by social protection?

A range of factors affect legal and effective social protection coverage of labour migrants including non-eligibility, barriers to take-up and portability constraints. Further, these factors often interact with others including

gaps between policy design and implementation, practical barriers to participation, and political sensitivity.

#### 3.1 Eligibility

Labour migrants can be ineligible for social protection in two ways. First they may lose eligibility for social protection in their home country if they work in another country. Second, they can be legally ineligible for social protection in host countries. Although many countries have committed to equality of treatment between nationals and migrants<sup>11</sup>, this is not always followed in practice<sup>12</sup>. Some countries limit access by residency and/or nationality requirements (Hirose et al., 2011). For example, many countries in the Gulf only provide pensions to nationals and have no provisions for migrant workers (Avato et al., 2009). In addition, this can affect internal migrants. For instance, rural-urban migrants in China are ineligible for China's biggest social assistance programme – the Minimum Living Standards Guarantee Programme – and must meet stringent requirements to access social insurance programmes (Hopkins et al., 2016).

Some eligibility requirements mean access to social protection is cut off for certain groups of migrant workers, such as the self-employed or those earning too little (Taha et al., 2015; ISSA, 2014). For example, while Canada's SAWP gives labour migrants the same social protection status as other groups, in practice it is difficult for seasonal migrant workers to meet eligibility requirements for unemployment benefits<sup>13</sup> (Holzmann and Pouget, 2010 in Taha et al., 2015). Immigration status and formality of employment also affects access: for example, the European Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers excludes irregular migrants from its scope (Council of Europe, 2004)<sup>14</sup>. Further, informal economy employers are unlikely to extend social protection to their workers (van Ginneken, 2013). Many migrants are both undocumented and work in the informal economy, which can compound their weak legal and social position in a host country.

Migrants can also be excluded due to political sensitivities. In host countries, negative public attitudes tend to highlight concerns about migration increasing job competition, placing downward pressure on wages, and adding pressure on public services (ISSA 2014; Ford and Heath, 2014; Ford and Lowles, 2016). This

10. A more recent study by van Panhuys et al. (2017) found considerable regional variation in whether countries had laws in place granting equality of treatment to non-nationals for contributory social security and healthcare. It finds that Latin America had the highest proportion of countries granting equal legal treatment to non-nationals, although this may not reflect effective coverage.

11. A recent ILO study shows that of 120 countries, more than 70 have made provisions in the law granting equality of treatment between national and non-nationals with regards to contributory social security (Van Panhuys et al., 2017).

12. Countries make distinctions, for example, between the rights of migrants with permanent, temporary or irregular residence status. Further distinctions and restrictions of rights based on the migrant's specific citizenship and purpose of residence (e.g. work vs. family reunion) are common (Ruhs, 2009).

13. To be eligible, workers must show their employer paid employment insurance either for 600 insurable hours in the past 52 weeks or since their last claim, whichever is less. This excludes many seasonal workers, as they only work for part of the year (Holzmann and Pouget, 2010).

14. One common exception to this is emergency healthcare; in many European countries hospitals are obliged to treat individuals for free even if they are undocumented. Some countries, such as Bulgaria, provide social benefits to irregular migrants as for natives (though this tends to be the exception rather than the rule), while others do not explicitly link benefits access to regularity of employment (Council of Europe, 2004).



is linked to perceptions that migrant workers ‘take advantage’ of a country’s welfare system, even though the empirical evidence shows that this is mostly not the case (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2013).. For example, 37% of European citizens support migrants receiving benefits and services only after they have acquired citizenship of a host country (Dustmann and Frattini, 2013).. This climate can be a constraint in extending social protection to migrant workers, through a lack of political commitment from the host government.

### 3.2 Legislation implementation and enforcement

Even when there are social protection arrangements in place for labour migrants, the implementation and enforcement of these can be ineffective (van Ginneken, 2013 in Taha et al., 2015; Box 2). There is evidence that some national and multilateral social protection instruments for migrants are not properly enforced. For example, implementation of relevant Indonesian legislation is weak due to lack of coordination between central and regional government. The CARICOM agreement has been applied infrequently, which is thought to be due to design inconsistencies and lack of public awareness (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2010; Pasadilla and Abella, 2012; Fortaleza, 2010 in Holzmann and Pouget, 2010).

Administering social protection to migrants can be difficult. For example, if benefits are means-tested, it may be necessary to obtain information on the financial situation of the migrant worker’s family abroad to assess eligibility. This can be costly or even impossible to secure (ISSA, 2014). Further, documentation to process claims can require knowledge of another country’s system (ibid.), and officials in countries of origins must be aware of the detail of agreements (Holzmann, 2016)<sup>15</sup>.

Finally, employers of migrant workers do not always enforce relevant arrangements, knowingly or otherwise. For example, while documented Moroccan migrant workers can accrue portable social protection and retirement benefits in Spain, there is evidence that many of their employers do not provide migrants with relevant documentation for this (Arango and Martin, 2005 in Taha et al., 2015).

### 3.3 Barriers to take-up

Even if programmes are accessible and implemented effectively, knowledge gaps, language and financial barriers, time constraints and lack of documentation can affect migrant take-up (see Box 3 for a case study). Furthermore, time and travel costs associated with the application process may prove a deterrent. For example,

#### Box 2: Fragmented enforcement of legislation in Southern Africa

Regional efforts to harmonise cross-border social protection, while encouraging, can have a limited impact due to institutional and political factors. The 2014 Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Employment and Labour contains provisions on the coordination of social security schemes and portability of benefits, however it has not yet been ratified by member states. The effects of an earlier non-binding Code on Social Security are also limited and social protection systems across SADC remain highly fragmented and tend to exclude migrants (Olivier, 2009; Millard, 2008). The SADC’s institutional weakness and limited resources, as well as the absence of an accompanying policy framework on regional movement of labour, limit its enforcement capability (Dodson and Crush, 2015; Olivier, 2009). Therefore, migrant social protection continues to be decided at the national level in SADC, which can be problematic (Dodson and Crush, 2015).

For example, South Africa, a primary destination for SADC migrants, largely excludes migrant workers from its national social protection system (Fish, 2013; Millard, 2008; Mpedi and Nyenti 2013). Its bilateral agreements with other SADC states do not usually include social protection and where they do, for example with Mozambique, relevant mechanisms can be poorly enforced and employers’ compliance low (Mpedi and Nyenti, 2013; Olivier, 2009). This has been linked to negative anti-immigrant attitudes; 90% of respondents in a 2010 national survey felt there were too many foreigners in South Africa (Crush et al., 2013 in Dodson and Crush, 2015).

one study found that Mexican and Jamaican workers had difficulty accessing available health benefits in Canada due to lack of information on available services, language barriers, and long working hours limiting their access (McLaughlin, 2009 in Holzmann and Pouget, 2010).

Social protection can also incur more direct financial costs such as monthly contributions or ad-hoc payments, which can be a barrier for many, particularly those in low-skilled or low-wage labour (Hopkins et al., 2016). This affects labour migrants in the informal economy especially. As their work can involve low and irregular income, their capacity and willingness to contribute to social protection financing programmes can be limited, especially if they do not perceive these to meet their most important needs (Sabates-Wheeler and Waite, 2003).

15. The ILO has formalised the exchange and provision of administrative assistance through international labour standards with respect to migrants and social protection, namely the Equality of Treatment (Social Security) Convention, 1962 (No. 118), Maintenance of Social Security Rights Convention, 1982 (No. 157) and the Maintenance of Social Security Rights Recommendation, 1983 (No. 167).

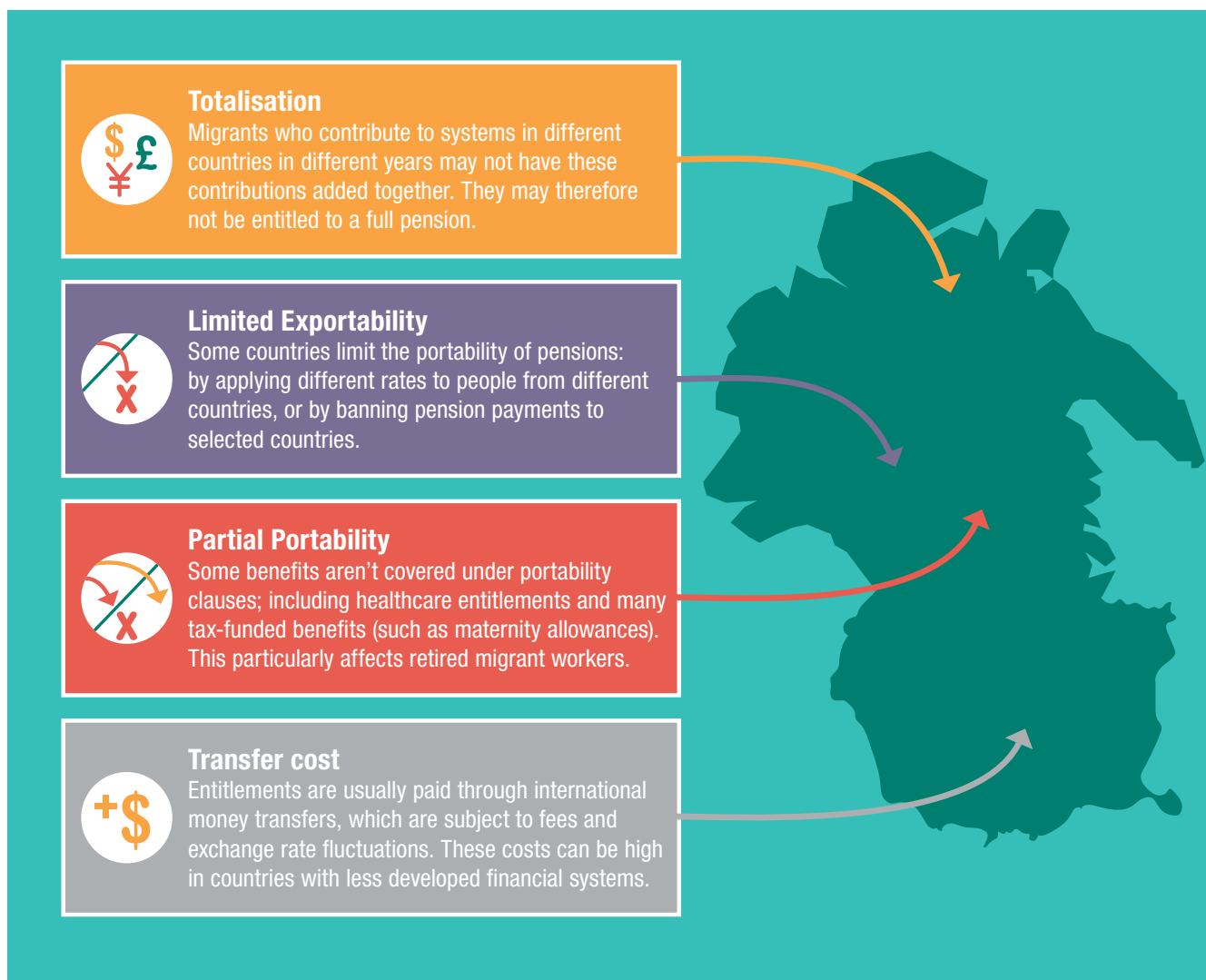
### Box 3: Bureaucratic requirements affecting take up of social protection in India

Programme registration requirements can prove an additional barrier to take-up. Such requirements may unintentionally make it harder for migrants to participate. This is the case in India where, despite legal access to the Public Distribution System (PDS), which offers access to subsidised food to poor households, internal migrants can be excluded through complicated regulations and administrative requirements (MacAuslan, 2009, 2011). Eligibility for PDS and other Indian social protection programmes is linked to residency and registration status. For example, to access PDS, residency criteria mean migrants must reapply with every move across certain boundaries. Different forms need to be filled out and attested to by government officials, and limited knowledge of local bureaucracies and weaker social networks leads to reluctance amongst migrants to apply.

## 3.4 Portability constraints

As highlighted above, the benefits received from social protection systems can be **portable**, **not portable**, or lie somewhere in between. For instance, some of the world's largest migrant-sending and -receiving countries – Bangladesh, China, Mexico, Russia – have almost no arrangements in place for social protection portability (van Panhuys et al, 2017). Some countries limit the portability of pensions by applying different rates to people from different countries, or by banning pension payments to selected countries. For example, Germany and the UK apply reduction rates to pension payments for nationals of countries with which they have no social security agreement, and the US bans pension payment to selected countries (Holzmann et al., 2005). The most common issues are summarised in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The most common portability constraints





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## 4 Relevance to the 2030 Agenda

The 2030 Agenda advocates safe and orderly migration and the expansion of legal and effective social protection coverage, though it does not explicitly link the two. However, we argue that migration affects the implementation of the three main Targets on social protection (see Table 1), as well as several other Targets and Goals, and that these cannot be met effectively if these links are not considered.

**Target 1.3** calls for the implementation of nationally appropriate social systems, measures, including floors, and for social protection systems to achieve ‘substantial coverage of poor and vulnerable groups’. Labour migrants are often a vulnerable sub-group, particularly those with irregular status or those in informal employment. In some circumstances, migrants are more likely to have physical (Tulloch et al., 2016) and mental health issues (Sabates-Wheeler and Waites, 2007). Migrants can also face discrimination in access to labour markets and housing (Lucci et al., 2016), as well as stigma or harassment. Therefore migrant workers may have a particularly salient need for social protection. Those working in dangerous working environments have a greater risk of work-related accidents or ill health and hence require sickness, disability or work-injury benefits. Often being in irregular and badly paid employment can mean migrants have a strong need for unemployment benefits. Furthermore, working in a new and foreign environment, often without family support and with weak social networks, migrants can lack information as well as informal support (ISSA, 2014). Failing to include labour migrants in conceptualising and implementing Target 1.3 will negatively affect the Target’s outcome as it will exclude one specific poor and vulnerable group; this undermines the general principle in the 2030 Agenda of ‘leaving no-one behind’.

One particularly vulnerable sub-group of labour migrants is that of domestic workers (see this series’ gender briefing for a detailed discussion (O’Neil et al., 2016)). As this group often lacks regularised status or access to social insurance through their employer, it is likely to have low effective social protection coverage – though data on this is lacking. This directly impacts **Target 5.4**, which calls for the recognition of domestic work through public services, infrastructure and social protection policies.

Many labour migrants can lose access to social protection when they move to another country or back home. This could reduce return migration and/or decrease payments of social security, as the incentives to stay in the host country and to move into the informal economy and/or into an irregular migration status may be higher. This would make it harder to monitor migration flows and implement evidence-based policy, negatively impacting **Target 10.7** on ‘safe and orderly migration’. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda also emphasises that access to and

portability of earned benefits is part of ensuring safe, orderly and regular migration (UN DESA, 2015).

If limited portability disincentivises return migration, this could deprive origin countries – many of them developing countries – of the beneficial development effects of migration. Migration can be an important contribution to economic development in origin countries, for instance through remittances, investment and knowledge exchange (see Clemens, 2011), so this could also impact the success of other SDGs, for instance **Goal 8** on sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

Labour migrants can contribute to the achievement of **Target 1.a**, which calls for ‘significant mobilization of resources’ [...] to implement programmes and policies to end poverty’, including social protection. Besides their direct social security contributions, labour migrants generate additional resources for governments to deliver social protection programmes, for instance through personal income tax and indirect taxes such as consumption taxes. Research has shown that migrants often make net fiscal contributions to host countries (Dustmann and Frattini, 2013), paying more in taxes and social insurance contributions than they take out in benefits. Likewise, a study by OECD (2013) showed that the majority of OECD countries drew a positive balance from migration in their social security systems.

However, high levels of mobility by migrant workers can make their contributions less predictable. Significant labour-market informality in many low-income economies acts as a constraint to increases in tax revenue through social security contributions. Initiatives either to formalise such sectors or to include informal-sector workers (including migrants, who are heavily represented in this group) in contributory social protection can expand the tax base (Bastagli and Hagen-Zanker, 2014). The potential resources to be gained from this are high: the United States Social Security Administration, for example, has acknowledged that mostly non-reimbursable contributions by undocumented workers represented a US\$12 billion annual net gain to the US accounts in 2010 (Goss et al., 2013)<sup>16</sup>.

At the same time, if migrants are eligible for and receive tax-funded benefits, this could lead to increased costs for host countries. If needed, additional resources can be mobilised by designing programmes that share the costs of delivering social protection to migrants. For example, social insurance programmes tend to involve contributions from workers, employers and the host state. A greater number of contributors also leads to better risk pooling and financial sustainability of the system. Country-of-origin governments can be involved, for example through Migrant Welfare Funds, which are funded through contributions by employers, recruitment agencies and/or labour migrants (see Box 1).

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16. Furthermore, expansion of social security coverage is argued to be an effective tool to reduce exploitation and abuse of workers through the formalisation of working practices (ISSA, 2014).

**Table 1: The main interrelationships between social protection, migration and the 2030 Agenda**

Relevant SDG Target	Migration challenge
<b>Goal 1: No poverty</b>	
1.3 Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.	<p>Labour migrants can be a particularly poor and vulnerable group, especially in terms of work and health-related risks, but often lack eligibility for legal social protection and/or are not effectively covered.</p> <p>Where migrants are legally covered by a social protection mechanism, benefits are often non-portable, further reducing coverage amongst a group that is highly mobile.</p>
1.a Ensure significant mobilization of resources from a variety of sources, including through enhanced development cooperation, in order to provide adequate and predictable means for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, to implement programmes and policies to end poverty in all its dimensions.	<p>Labour migrants present an opportunity to increase the tax base, and a greater number of contributors to social insurance-type schemes leads to better risk pooling and financial sustainability.</p> <p>However, high immigration can at first lead to increased costs for host countries if immigrants are eligible for tax-funded benefits and take-up is high. Due to political sensitivities around migration, with many countries (especially low-income countries) already having limited resources for social protection, it can be difficult to justify expansion of eligibility to labour migrants.</p>
<b>Goal 10: Reduced inequalities</b>	
10.4 Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality	<p>Social protection policies often do not guarantee equal access to social protection, particularly for 'non-natives', which means that labour migrants have lower eligibility for, and, where eligible, lower take-up of social protection. If vulnerable groups (such as labour migrants) are unable to participate in social protection, inequalities widen.</p> <p>The design of social protection policy can fail to account for mobility of beneficiaries, with portability being a key constraint for labour migrants in accessing benefits they have contributed towards.</p>

Finally **Target 10.4** calls for social protection to 'progressively achieve greater equality'. On the one hand, social protection has been shown to tackle income inequality and unequal access to basic services (UN ESCAP, 2015). For example, one study found that cash transfers alone reduced the Gini coefficient (a measure of inequality) in six Latin-American countries by 1%-9% (Lustig et al., 2013). On the other hand, as discussed in Section 3, social protection policies do not guarantee equal access, with 'non-natives' having lower eligibility and lower take-up when eligible. This implies that if vulnerable groups (including labour migrants) are excluded from social protection coverage, inequality remains the same or widens.

Policy design can widen this inequality, in particular with regards to portability. As shown in Section 3, some labour migrants may acquire entitlement to social protection by fulfilling their host country's national requirements, only to have these reduced or barred if they move back to their origin or another country. As a result, these migrants subsequently experience unequal access to social protection in both origin and host countries.

## 5 Conclusions and policy recommendations

The 2030 Agenda highlights the importance of social protection in reducing poverty and inequalities. It sets out specific targets for improving coverage amongst vulnerable groups and for mobilising funds to implement social protection programmes. International labour migrants are a vulnerable group, yet they often lack access to social protection, particularly those coming from low-income countries, those with irregular migration status and/or those working in the informal economy.

Improving social protection for labour migrants goes hand in hand with better management of labour migration. Providing legal channels to migrants and including them in national social protection systems expands the base of potential contributors. At the same time, increasing social protection coverage is tightly linked with bringing migrant workers into the formal economy (ISSA, 2014) and, as such, also increases the ability of states to manage migration. Increased formalisation of workers also leads to higher tax contributions and a more productive workforce (ibid). Finally, guaranteeing portability of benefits removes

some of the constraints to the mobility of labour so migration flows can be more closely matched to the supply and demand for labour. Effective coverage and portability are also important to ensure wellbeing and prevent vulnerability through the whole of a migrant's life.

The recommendations below set out key actions for national governments, international institutions and civil-society organisations to improve social protection for international labour migrants. Ultimately, increasing their participation in social protection is not only important to protect migrants, but also plays an important role in maximising the potential benefits of labour migration for migrants, origin and host countries.

### **Conclusion 1: Legal and effective social protection coverage is important for labour migrants, but is very patchy outside high-income countries.**

Most labour migrants moving to high-income countries are covered by a social protection agreement or provision giving some degree of access and portability. However, the proportion of those moving between low-income countries that are legally covered is less than 1%. These countries tend to have under-developed national social protection systems that also leave large shares of their native population uncovered. Furthermore, low legal coverage is especially prevalent among undocumented migrants and those working in the informal economy.

### **Recommendation: increase eligibility through new agreements and make it more feasible for migrants to participants in social protection.**

- Host countries can increase labour migrants' eligibility for social protection by building on existing measures and by concluding new agreements. Particular attention must be paid to improving legal coverage of migrants from low- and middle-income countries.
- Migrants in the informal economy are often in irregular work and unable to make regular social protection contributions. These factors need to be taken into account when designing the scope of benefits, financing mechanisms and administrative procedures for informal workers. In addition, governments, organisations and employers can provide effective informal protection for informal workers, for example by holding preventive health-education workshops or empowering informal worker alliances in certain industries (Lund, 2009).
- Where labour migrants are not legally or effectively covered through other measures, country-of-origin governments should consider migrant welfare funds for emigrants. These funds provide basic protection through contributions from employers, recruitment agencies and migrants. They can be a good bridging measure, when integration into social protection systems in the host country is not yet feasible.

### **Relevant SDG Targets**

1.3: Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.

1.a: Ensure significant mobilisation of resources from a variety of sources, including through enhanced development cooperation, in order to provide adequate and predictable means for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, to implement programmes and policies to end poverty in all its dimensions.

10.4: Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality.

5.4: Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.

### **Conclusion 2: Some migrants are legally covered by social protection in the host country, but lose these benefits when they move again.**

Even if a labour migrant is legally eligible to contribute to and receive benefits from their host country's social insurance system, their entitlements may not be transferrable when they move back home or to another country. This increases the migrant's vulnerability and reduces their incentives to contribute to social insurance systems. Some benefits that are in principle portable, such as pensions, carry limitations such as high transfer fees or not being transferable to certain countries.

### **Recommendation: extend and improve social protection portability for migrants.**

- Continue to negotiate bilateral and multilateral social security agreements along key migration corridors and within regional groupings of states, extending portability practices of pensions and other benefits to more countries. Focus on extending these to include low-income countries. Timely ratification of these agreements between states should also be encouraged to ensure they are operational as soon as possible.
- Lift any restrictions on existing portability arrangements by origin countries. This includes enabling the transfer of benefits to all countries and ending the practice of applying reduction rates to entitlement transfers to certain countries.

- Decrease the financial burden of transferring social protection benefits to countries of origin. Countries can do this by introducing fixed transfer fees for certain entitlements to keep these low, requiring transfer operators to disclose fees, tax charges and exchange rates to increase transparency, and/or ending any exclusivity arrangements with banks or agents to encourage operator competition (Watkins and Quattri, 2014).

### Relevant SDG Targets

10.4: Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality.

10.7: Facilitate orderly, safe and responsible migration, implement planned and well-managed migration policies.

10.c: Reduce transaction costs of migrant remittances.

### Conclusion 3: The implementation and enforcement of social protection arrangements for migrants can be ineffective.

Even with bilateral social protection portability agreements in place, many migrants continue to be left without effective coverage as the implementation and enforcement of these can be inadequate. The administration and financing of well-intentioned portability agreements can be beyond the capacity of under-funded national social protection departments. Further, take-up can be low amongst labour migrants due to burdensome and confusing documentation requirements, language barriers, and financial or time constraints.

### Recommendation: strengthen the capacities of national bodies to design and enforce social protection arrangements better.

- Make portability agreements legally binding, ensuring regional and bilateral portability efforts are enacted at the national level. Increase the enforcement capabilities of national social security administrations and other relevant bodies to implement and enforce these agreements. For example, where possible ensure that monitoring mechanisms for social protection arrangements include both national agencies and non-governmental organisations, to give a fuller picture of compliance.

- Introduce compliance procedures for employers and appropriate oversight mechanisms. For example, governments can introduce mandatory social protection provisions in work contracts which set out entitlements in detail. They can also improve protection of labour migrants against legal reprisals from employers by ensuring that effective and timely complaint, appeal and redress mechanisms are available to migrant workers free of charge. Such mechanisms should also be available in languages spoken by migrants and through channels accessible to them.
- Encourage social protection take-up by labour migrants. Tools for doing this include information campaigns that raise awareness on existing rights and entitlements (in different languages), greater efficiency and clarity in administrative procedures (including through better trained staff), and establishing more flexible rules and procedures to incentivise joining (ILO, 2014). Adopt a more migrant-centric approach by including migrants and migration organisations in the design process (Ratel et al., 2013).
- There is very little data on coverage of labour migrants, which exacerbates the ineffectiveness of social protection arrangements in place. This is partly because irregular migrants are usually missing from official population statistics, but also because even regular migrants are not always clearly identified in either data or legislation. Countries should work towards collecting data to help estimate effective, or de facto, social protection coverage of labour migrants. National data on social protection programmes should disaggregate by citizenship and residence status (a strong proxy for migrant status), so as to manage the financial implications of benefits becoming portable.

### Relevant SDG Targets

1.3: Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.

16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.

17.18: By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.

#### **Conclusion 4: Expanding legal social protection coverage can be politically and financially challenging.**

All too often, migrants are perceived as taking advantage of national welfare systems (Ford and Heath, 2014), which makes the expansion of legal coverage to migrants politically challenging. The expansion of a social protection system does carry a cost, especially where benefits are funded from general taxation, yet labour migrants have the potential to be a financial and economic asset for host countries. Indeed, host countries often draw a positive fiscal balance from labour migration, depending on demographic characteristics of migrants and status of national labour markets (OECD, 2013).

#### **Recommendation: recognise the economic and fiscal contributions of migrants and use these to expand social protection eligibility.**

- To fund improved legal social protection coverage, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (UN DESA, 2015) proposes that governments broaden and diversify the tax base. By allowing migrants to work formally and to contribute towards national social insurance systems, destination countries can grow their tax base and spread risk across a larger pool.
- Strengthen the political will to increase social protection eligibility for migrants, particularly in key destination countries. Policy-makers should be encouraged to use reliable, empirical evidence on the economic and fiscal contribution of migrants to host countries (Dustmann and Frattini, 2013; OECD, 2013) and the consequences of (not) granting migrants access to national social protection systems in order to help them make decisions in a polarised political context.
- Make efforts to shift public attitudes towards favouring migrant access to national social protection systems, by targeting specific groups with information about the economic and fiscal benefits of migration (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017).
- Governments need to cooperate to facilitate payments into and out of migrant welfare funds (for example, overseas workers funds) based in a migrant's origin country. Facilitation measures could include lowering transfer fees on remittances into social protection funds and host countries allowing administration offices for such funds to operate there.

#### **Relevant SDG Targets**

1.3: Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.

1.a: Ensure significant mobilisation of resources from a variety of sources, including through enhanced development cooperation, in order to provide adequate and predictable means for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, to implement programmes and policies to end poverty in all its dimensions.

10.4: Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality.

16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.

17.18: By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.



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