



MATCH
HIRING AFRICAN TALENTS



PILOTING SKILLS MOBILITY: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE MATCH PROJECT AND THE WAY FORWARD

Final Conference Report



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Introduction

The present document is a report of the conference “Piloting skills mobility: Lessons learned from the MATCH project and the way forward”. The event was organised by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in collaboration with Eurochambres and took place in a hybrid format (in Brussels and online) on Thursday, 17 November 2022. The main objective of the conference was showcase lessons learned from MATCH (Migration of African Talents through Capacity building and Hiring), a pilot project funded by the European Union (EU). MATCH aimed at addressing labour market shortages in four EU Member States – Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands – by helping EU companies with the sourcing and recruiting of African talents from Senegal and Nigeria, two countries offering a surplus of qualified professionals. In addition to the job placements, the MATCH project also included complementary activities such as skills development, capacity building and knowledge sharing between the participating EU and African countries in order to ensure that this labour mobility initiative is fully beneficial to the migrants and the participating countries.

Beyond serving as the official closing event of the MATCH project, the conference hosted a broader discussion around the views and strategies to build successful Skills Mobility Partnerships (SMPs) for the benefit of all parties involved: origin and destination countries, talents, and employers. Skills Mobility Partnerships are a specific approach to labour migration which is based on formalised bilateral (or regional) interstate cooperation and put worker’s skills formation and development at the core, while placing special emphasis on multi-stakeholder collaboration between stakeholders in the countries of origin and countries of destination. Accordingly, the conference agenda (available here below) included various interventions and panel discussions that focused on different aspects of SMPs, from labour-market responsive design, over stakeholders’ involvement and the role of employers, to the sourcing and attracting of international talents. The speakers and panels featured a wide range of stakeholders and representatives of both the private and the public sector from countries of destination and of origin that participated in the MATCH project and beyond, while the audience counted a total of 169 experts and practitioners (90 in person and 79 online).¹

Welcoming remarks

The conference was opened by high-level welcoming remarks outlining the importance of legal pathways for orderly and well-managed migration between EU Member States and countries of origin. Legal migration, and labour migration in particular, have indeed come at the centre of the policy debate on migration in the EU. Increasing labour shortages in the EU labour market, the risks of labour exploitation and human rights abuses linked to irregular migration, and the complex legal framework of labour mobility from third countries to the EU Member States, are some of the underlying reasons.

Johannes Luchner, Deputy Director General of the Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME) at the European Commission (EC) admitted that the large demand for workforce in EU countries is not yet being successfully matched with the large supply of workforce available in many countries of origin outside of Europe. According to his analysis, pilot projects such as MATCH have helped to pinpoint what the underlying issues are and what is needed to address them. Some issues pertain to the legislative framework while others are more operational in nature. From a legal point of view, access to the labour market is still primarily governed by domestic legislation and the EU does not yet constitute a single, common labour market for incoming third-country nationals whose work permit is generally limited to the country of destination/entry. On the other hand, one of the challenges from an operational point of view is that international recruitment is much more accessible for large employers and corporations than for smalls and medium enterprises, as the latter have more limited resources, capacity and experience with international (labour) markets. More generally, pilot projects implemented thus far have produced limited results when it comes to actual mobility of foreign labour force. Most legal pathways currently implemented by EU countries are directly sponsored by governments (including through EU funding) and the financing model

¹ In addition and as a complement to this report, the recording of the conference is also available at this [link](#) (password: 43N0kfj.#?).

remains very expensive. The contribution of the private sector in the cost sharing remains very limited and scalability remains an issue. Besides, many Member States still prefer to approach the issue of labour migration on a bilateral basis in order to cater for the specific needs of their national labour market. With its [Talent and Skills Package](#) and a number of other initiatives coming forth from the [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#), the EC aims to develop and promote comprehensive frameworks that would deliver “triple wins” for the countries of destination in the EU, the countries of origin, and the migrant workers themselves. The leading initiative in this sense is that of the “Talent Partnerships”, whose objective is to help EU Member States address skills shortages while strengthening mutually beneficial partnerships on migration with third countries.

Subsequently, Ben Butters, CEO at Eurochambres, presented the private sector’s view on labour migration elaborating upon the results of the yearly Eurochambres Economic Survey. The [2023 survey](#) highlighted that skills shortages constitute the second biggest challenges for European businesses after access to energy and raw materials, and that a proactive and a strategic long-term approach is needed to tackle this. In line with Mr Luchner’s remarks, this matter is particularly relevant for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which are less equipped for labour migration in terms of resources, capacity and expertise, but also constitute the largest part of their membership.

Marise Habib, Chief of Mission at IOM Country Office for Belgium & Luxembourg, emphasised how the [IOM 's Skills Mobility Partnership approach](#) to labour migration can offer a useful model for the EU to frame and operationalise the Talent Partnerships. Through formalised bilateral (or regional) interstate cooperation, IOM’s model focuses on multi-sided and multi-stakeholder partnerships between labour migration entities in origin and destination countries as well as stakeholders from the private sector and civil society. The Chief of Mission further stressed IOM’s readiness to support the EU and its Member States in designing and implementing such partnerships. She further emphasized that thanks to MATCH and other skills mobility projects, IOM has developed extensive operational and policy experience in this area and is currently supporting various Member States with technical expertise in developing national labour mobility strategies to attract talent, as well as providing operational support in implementing labour mobility pathways to Europe.

Setting the scene – Building Sustainable and Long-Lasting EU Talent/Skills Partnerships between EU Member States and Third Countries

In order to set the scene, the first session of the conference consisted of an exchange between a representative from DG HOME of the European Commission and governmental representatives from Nigeria and Senegal concerning the creation of sustainable and long-lasting EU Talent Partnerships.

Ibrahima Cissé, Head of Cabinet and Technical Adviser for the State Secretary for the Senegalese Abroad, opened his intervention by referring to [Plan Sénégal Emergent \(PSE\)](#), which constitutes the reference for economic and social policy in the medium and long term and identifies labour mobility as a top priority for the country. Accordingly, he emphasised that labour migration needs to be inserted in a long-term approach that considers also return, circularity and employment perspectives (both in countries of destination and in the countries of origin upon return).

Supporting Luchner’s argument, Dr Sunday Onazi, Head of the International Labour Migration Division at the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment of Nigeria, highlighted the importance of promoting regular labour migration, protecting migrant workers, and ensuring that labour mobility results in a win-win situation for concerned parties. For Nigeria, he pointed out that the best way to achieve such objectives is by signing Bilateral Labour Mobility Agreements or Memoranda of Understanding between origin and destination countries. By identifying specific sectors and types of mobility, such agreements would not only help to ease unemployment pressure in origin countries, but also to better structure the cooperation with destination countries.

Moreover, both government representatives from Senegal and Nigeria stressed the importance of a holistic approach to migration, covering not only labour migration but also return and reintegration, the fight against irregular migration, as well as the regularisation of irregular migrants already present on the EU territory.

Anita Vella, Head of Unit Legal Migration and Integration at DG HOME (European Commission), expressed the need to look at both the legislative and operational framework for legal and labour migration. The EC's Skills and Talent Package reflects this need by embedding two different pillars. The legislative pillar focuses on the revision of some key EU Directives and Regulations, including that pertaining to the [Single Permit](#). On the operational pillar, the European Commission is planning on setting up a partnerships framework based on common interests that would not only focus on legal migration, but would also be part of a broader cooperation on migration management with the partner countries. For this purpose, there is a need for political engagement of those Member States interested on these processes, as well as a thorough understanding of the workforce and needs of the selected countries of origin.

The EC is planning on piloting the Talent Partnership approach with a limited group of countries of origin first, in order to create a model that works and that could then be replicated in and adapted to different contexts. Ms Vella thus provided an overview of the progress of the discussions around the Talent Partnerships with first and second tier of selected partner countries, while stressing that this is a complex exercise that requires time, as many stakeholders and interlocutors need to be involved and consulted, in both the public and private sectors. On the question of funding, Ms Vella suggested that once a solid model is in place, funding opportunities could and should follow. In line with a "Team Europe" spirit, various existing funding streams could be combined based on the content and constellation of the Talent Partnerships framework in question.

Putting skills mobility into practice

Keynote presentation: Key outcomes and lessons learned from the MATCH project

To open the second session of the conference on "Putting skills mobility into practice", the MATCH project management team presented the key lessons learned from the MATCH project and some key considerations for the development of future Skills Mobility Partnerships (SMPs).

The objective of the MATCH project was to support companies with the identification and pre-selection of 315 qualified talents from Senegal and Nigeria for at least 105 vacancies from EU companies based in Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, where specific sectorial labour shortages have been identified, primarily within the information and communication technology and digitalisation sectors. Both targets were met and surpassed, with a total of 118 vacancies advertised through the MATCH project and 369 pre-selected candidates (as of 17/11/2022). The majority of the participating companies were large, international companies, with greater capacity than SMEs to undertake international recruitments. The majority of employers were interested in sourcing from Nigeria, as a high level of proficiency in English was required for most vacancies of a. While the pre-selection success rate was 37 per cent, with 138 candidates eventually interviewed by the companies, only 7 recruitments were completed (as of 17/11/2022, when some recruitment processes were still ongoing). The final recruitment decision lied on participating hiring companies and actual recruitments were not a formal target within the framework of the MATCH project. Nevertheless, the MATCH project provided an opportunity to analyse some of the key issues related to labour and skills mobility, including hiring companies' expectations in terms of technical, soft, and language skills; as well as the main reasons hindering recruitment under the MATCH framework, such as successful sourcing from other pools; and lack of commitment from companies. In addition, some talents also decided to withdraw from the recruitment procedure, the main reason behind such decision being the low attractiveness of the EU destination country and the job offers from EU companies vis-à-vis other countries like the US, Canada, or Australia, or even remote work offers in their country of origin.

Based on the experience of the MATCH project, the main recommendations brought forward by the project partners during the event are the following:

- 1) **An enabling environment is a starting point** with an adequate legal framework, improved operational modalities with lean and digital immigration processes, and support/expat desks that would work as one stop-shops for both talents and employers.

- 2) **Establish a whole-of-society approach involving all relevant actors.** An inception phase is crucial in order to build mutual trust and cooperation, and to co-design the SMPs, considering the needs and interests of employers as well as the quality of the labour supply. In addition, an agile management and flexibility to ensure project objectives and the strategy remain relevant in an evolving economic context.
- 3) **Build sustainable and mutually beneficial SMPs.** Ensure and facilitate co-design processes of SMPs fostering close cooperation between countries of origin and destination. Concerns about the rights, legal protection, and integration prospects of international talents must be addressed. Moreover, the focus should be in sectors with labour surplus in the longer run to avoid the negative impacts of brain drain. For this purpose, there is a need for foresight tools and alignment with national employment strategies.
- 4) **Secure the participation of employers** by ensuring flexibility in the types of mobility and recruitments that align with business and job opportunities in countries of origin. A financial contribution from employers and a skills development component should be embedded in the design and financing model of SMPs.
- 5) **Maximise the impact and the sustainability** by building long-term partnerships with local stakeholders (e.g. public employment services) in countries of origin through technical assistance and operational support. Invest into educational pathways to ensure that the development of a qualified labour force on the longer run. Access to vocational training and apprenticeship in destination countries should be further facilitated. Involve the diaspora communities and ensure that structural support is provided to employers and talents in a pre-departure and post-arrival contexts. Change the narrative and promote awareness about the quality of the labour supply in countries of origin to address potential biases on the side of employers.

Panel discussion: Unpacking the lessons from the MATCH project with the implementing partners: stakeholder involvement and labour market needs

A panel discussion followed with contributions of project partners from both the countries of origin and destination. Together, they unpacked the lessons learned from the implementation of MATCH, and focused on the topic of stakeholder involvement and labour market needs assessment. When discussing the key outcomes of MATCH, the project partners highlighted the issue of expectations management, on the sides of both the African talents and the EU employers. While on one hand the Senegalese and Nigerian talent pools that took part in the MATCH project presented remarkable levels of qualifications, skills, and work experience, the awareness and preparedness of European employers around international recruitment is still limited and their recruitment strategies and approaches are still primarily focused on the domestic and EU labour markets. On the other hand, employers engaged in the MATCH project highlighted the need to get additional support from public authorities and to develop their capacity to address cultural differences in the workplace and to manage and value diversity more broadly. On the other hand, from the perspectives of talents engaged in the MATCH project, financial packages offered by European companies are not attractive, especially when compared to those of American, Canadian, or British companies. According to the project partners, useful measures to address these issues include continuous awareness raising towards the private sector, diversity and inclusion trainings for employers, trainings on soft skills (such as communication, leadership, time management) for foreign talents, as well as 'soft landing' and integration support structures (e.g. expat desks, integration packages encompassing language classes and pre-departure orientation sessions, housing, etc.). On the question of remote work and flexible work arrangements for international recruitment, representatives of the private sector expressed interest but also caution: while this represents a promising avenue, especially for certain sectors like ICT, the current legislation does not directly provide for such flexibility yet and some shortage professions (e.g. health/care work) cannot be performed remotely.

Finally, there was an overall agreement on the need for qualification and skills recognition systems, the expansion of SMPs to different skills levels, protection mechanisms and ethical recruitment standards for international talents, as well as holistic approaches to migration management and policy coherence across different sectors of governance. Policy and institutional silos need to be dismantled across multiple intertwined dimensions of migration, stakeholders, and legal frameworks in both countries of origin and of destination.

Panel discussion: Beyond MATCH: How to build successful Skills Mobility Partnerships from the private sector perspective?

The role of employers: the EU perspective

In the afternoon, the conference featured testimonies from the private sector who shared their perspectives on how to build successful SMPs beyond the MATCH project. In particular, the role of employers from the EU perspective as well as the experiences of sourcing and attracting African talents were presented. In the first panel on the EU perspective, representatives of employers' organisations and of public and private employment agencies brought forward key issues such as employers' commitment, the need to focus on labour shortages, and an inadequate legislative framework. The current legal framework (and the single permit in particular) make international recruitment from outside of the EU challenging because of the complexity and lengthiness of the procedure and the disconnect with the reality that employers are confronted with. The speakers also pointed out that beyond the recruitment itself and the related challenges pertaining to language barriers and technical skills, support structures are needed to facilitate a 'soft landing' for talents,² as well as to enhance the capacity of companies to address and successfully manage diversity.

On matching, representatives of private employment agencies suggested that awareness raising and the management of expectations on both sides – employers and talents – is fundamental to increase the success rate of (international) recruitments. On the one hand, European companies need to be better informed about the quality of the talent pools available in third countries, potentially even by means of physical "talent scouting missions" in countries of origin. On the other hand, talents should be familiarised with the requirements of European employers in terms of soft and technical skills, and accurately informed on the financial packages and other entitlements, benefits and support offered to them in Europe.

Sourcing and attracting African talents

The last panel discussion of the conference focused on the experiences of sourcing and attracting African talents. Echoing previous discussions, the speakers made a case for European stakeholders to finance and support soft-landing mechanisms for African talents who are positioned to fill their skills shortages. Such support is crucial to sustain the job placement in the new country and thereby ensure talent retention. According to the speakers, civil society groups (including to some extent diaspora groups already present in the countries of destination) could be engaged and leveraged on in order to support the integration of African talents relocating to Europe. In addition, as many diasporans run successful businesses across Europe and beyond, the diasporas could also contribute to job creation and economic development in the countries that they bridge through those transnational networks.

The speakers stressed the importance on improving attractiveness by developing training and career development opportunities and having different entry points such as student mobility and student retention opportunities, right to work and right to family reunification. They also emphasized the relevance of not only approaching companies that are suffering labour shortages, but also those that are interested in exploring and expanding their business and investment horizons towards Africa as both a market and a talent pool. In addition, a "support package" for housing, taxes, education opportunities, as well as health and social protection benefits was also proposed in the conversation as a way to increase attractiveness. Moreover, among the solutions to overcome potential language barriers, participants mentioned the possibility of waiving language requirements for candidates from countries where the official languages spoken match the language requirements of the posts, and providing language training opportunities, including on the job. The need for holistic approaches was once again brought forward, as well as the importance of

² 'Soft landing' refers to a smooth relocation, onboarding and integration process for international talents. This includes inter alia information sharing and support as regards; housing and accommodation options (in the short and long term); administrative procedures such as opening a bank account, registering at the city hall, and subscribing to insurances; voluntary and mandatory integration trajectories and courses, including language classes; onboarding and integration in the workplace, including through mentoring programmes; etcetera.

understanding employers' requirements and expectations to review training curricula relevant for international employment. The speakers agreed that EU Member States should adopt legal and operational measures to simplify international recruitment, which in turn would increase the attractiveness of European companies and of job placements in Europe.

Closing remarks

The conference final remarks were delivered by the two co-organisers, IOM and Eurochambres. Their interventions provided a brief overview and analysis of the main issues and topics addressed throughout the day.

In particular, they emphasised once again the importance of holistic and multi-stakeholder approaches to migration management and labour mobility. Such approaches bring together different aspects of (labour) migration management, as well as all relevant stakeholders from the public sector (governmental departments and agencies, academia and training institutions, public employment agencies, certification entities, etc.), the private sector (companies, private recruiters, business organisations, etc.) as well as civil society (diaspora organisations, trade unions, etc.). Moreover, the focus of SMPs needs to shift from the short/medium term to the long term, as to ensure that labour and skills mobility initiatives rely on mutually beneficial partnerships based on common needs, common interests, common goals. By embedding a long-term vision, such approaches and partnerships will allow for sustainability from both an institutional and social perspective and contribute to sustainable development.

The closing remarks further highlighted the importance of capacity building and empowerment, at least at three levels. Firstly, capacity strengthening of national and local administrations and stakeholders, such as ministries of labour, public employment services, consular services, integration agencies, on matters such as data management, skills forecasting, the pre-departure orientation of labour migrants, and ethical recruitment standards. Secondly, awareness raising towards the European private sector and the enhancement of the latter's capacity to manage diversity in the workplace. Thirdly, empowerment of migrants along the migration continuum, from awareness raising around legal migration, to pre-departure orientation and post-arrival support, to reintegration support measures upon return.

Last but not least, another key takeaway related to the need for enhancing the attractiveness of job placements in Europe for international talents. For instance, by broadening training and career development opportunities, facilitating flexible working arrangements, providing "support packages" encompassing housing support, tax incentives, education opportunities and health benefits, social protection benefits, faster visa procedures, as well as tangible prospects for inclusion and participation in the workplace and in society.

The MATCH project is implemented by





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