International Initiative for Impact Evaluation

Evidence summary brief

Social protection



What We Know About Legal Pathways

What this summary covers

This summary descriptively synthesizes the available impact evaluations that examine the effects of *legal pathways* interventions on migration outcomes (e.g., migration flows).

The 2025 update of the Irregular Migration Evidence Gap Map (EGM) identified 10 studies on the effects of legal pathways interventions on migration outcomes. The EGM is a thematic collection of rigorous causal evidence on the effects of interventions addressing the root causes and drivers of irregular migration, which only includes studies that met our predefined study eligibility criteria. See the study search and selection summary for more details.

In this summary, *legal pathways* interventions refer to policies and programs that provide authorized migration pathways for migrants into a host country. Intervention types include **temporary work visas** and **visa provisions as part of labor and trade agreements**.

Reporting effects within this descriptive analysis could be misleading, as the small and heterogeneous set of studies available limits comparability and risks drawing inferences beyond what the evidence can support. Instead, this summary provides an overview of what is currently known, and highlights where future evaluations are most needed to strengthen understanding of *legal pathways*.

Key takeaways

- The evidence base on the effects of *legal pathways* interventions on migration outcomes comprises ten impact evaluations. It did not include any systematic reviews or qualitative evidence on underlying mechanisms. These interventions include formalized migration routes, such as temporary work visas and visa provisions embedded in labor and trade agreements.
- *Legal pathways* may generate substantial and immediate increases in regular migration flows among eligible populations by lowering legal, financial, and administrative barriers to movement. However, the interventions are likely to have varying migration impacts based on origin–destination income differentials, labor demand, conflict or crisis conditions, and migrants' awareness of and access to these pathways.
- The evidence base has important gaps, including: limited analysis of irregular migration outcomes; sparse and inconsistent cost or value-for-money data; short exposure periods for temporary visa programs; and concentration of individual-level evidence in a small number of South–North migration corridors.

What this summary covers

Legal pathways interventions create authorized migration pathways for migrants into a host country. These include visas (temporary, seasonal, sector, work-based, long-term, or humanitarian visas) or other incentives such as travel subsidies delivered by governments or non-governmental organizations.[1]

This summary draws on an aspiration–capacity model that distinguishes between migrants' aspirations and their capability to migrate.[2,3] *Legal pathways* are assumed to simultaneously affect migrants' aspirations and their capabilities. Host countries implement *legal pathways* for a wide range of reasons and, in the process, aim to attract migrants, thereby encouraging them to move. *Legal pathways* are also theorized to increase migrants' capacity to move by reducing reliance on irregular migration pathways into a host country.

The studies included in this summary articulate additional conceptual assumptions about how these interventions are expected to operate. *Legal pathways* are assumed to generate a substantial inflow of migrants who meet the requirements for the delivered visa or the offered incentives.[4,5,6] *Legal pathways* are also theorized to have other wide-reaching impacts at the macro level (e.g., remittance flows)[7,8] and within micro-level settings (e.g., household income and welfare),[9,10] which are beyond the scope of this summary.

Legal pathways are assumed to affect the types and flows of migration by removing physical and financial constraints. They are also theorized to replace irregular migration pathways and eliminate associated costs, such as loss of life, human smuggling, and border enforcement.[11] The costs of regular migration are assumed to be substantially reduced through improved access to migration opportunities.[5,12,13] Although *legal pathways* are typically driven by national economic motives (e.g., addressing labor shortages), their formalization and the associated cost reductions are assumed to reshape irregular migration.

Without *legal pathways*, regular migration is assumed to require extensive documentation and intermediation services, which are costly and often nearly impossible to fulfill based on the structures in origin countries.[12] An ILO study estimated that the costs of intermediation services for migrants were reduced by a factor of 10 through the government-to-government mechanism.[13] *Legal pathways* do not eliminate the complexity of migration, but they simplify and formalize these processes for migrants and destination countries.

The drivers or "root causes" of migration are theorized to determine the magnitude of the effects of legal pathways.[2] For example, work visas granted by a high-income country to individuals in a low- or middle-income country are assumed to generate substantially larger migration flows than visas issued in the opposite direction.[14] Socioeconomic status, environmental and climate-related stressors, and conflict or insecurity function as key moderators. The awareness of and access to *legal pathways* are also theorized to be critical determinants of their migration impacts.[15,16,17] Appendix Table A1 provides a detailed description of the aims and theorized mechanisms reported by the included studies.



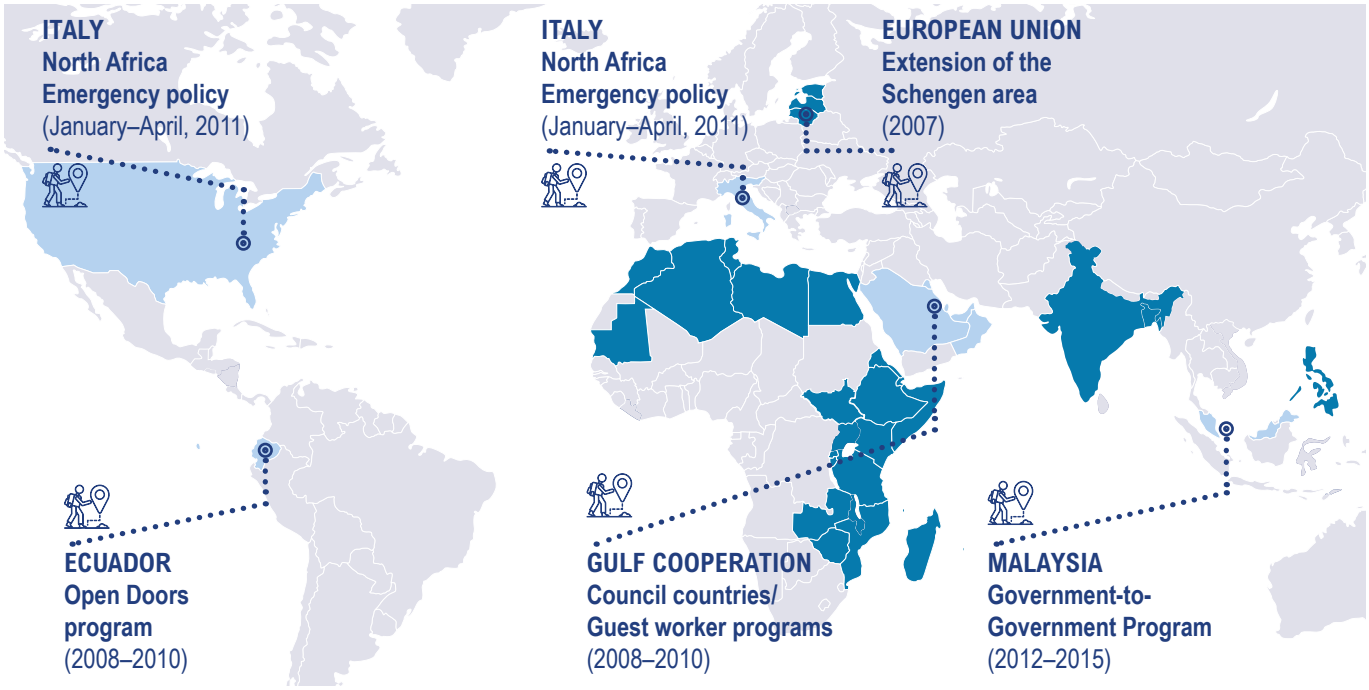
Evidence base characteristics

Ten studies evaluated legal pathways interventions, which can be distinguished into: temporary work visas (4), visa provisions within labor and trade agreements (4), and other legal pathways (2).



Map link

All four temporary work visa interventions targeted South–North labor migration, primarily involving Asian workers moving to high-income countries. In contrast, studies of visa provisions within labor and trade agreements adopted regional or global perspectives and examined country-level migration stocks rather than individual migration flows.



Color legend:

- Destination countries
- Origin countries

Legend for outcome measured:

- Migration flow/stock

Other legal pathways interventions not shown here:

- Regional trade agreements
- Bilateral labor agreements

All studies on temporary work visas used individual-level data, with two also estimating migrants' costs and benefits.

In contrast, studies of labor and trade agreements relied on macro-level data. These differences reflect the nature of the interventions: temporary work visas are time-limited and were evaluated over relatively short periods (on average, fewer than five years), whereas labor and trade agreements establish longer-term labor linkages and were analyzed over much longer horizons (nearly 28 years on average), including one study covering 1960–2000.

The remaining two studies examined other legal pathways interventions, universal visa freedom in Ecuador and emergency refugee support in Italy, both of which focused on short-term policy implementations.

Type of *legal pathways* interventions	Unit of analysis	Number of studies with cost data
Temporary work visas	Individual	2 out of 4
Labor and trade agreements	Country	None

Studies often lack details about costs or value for money, making it difficult to assess the efficiency of these interventions. However, two studies conducted cost–benefit analyses of their respective guest worker programs.

Narrative description of study results

The included studies provide informative context-specific effects of *legal pathways* interventions. For example, the American Competitiveness in the 21st Century Act of 2000 led to a substantial and statistically significant increase in the rate of migration to the US among Filipino nurses.[18] This **temporary work visa** successfully addressed the country's nursing shortages, and ended in 2007. Similarly, the Government-to-Government Program aimed to attract Bangladeshi migrants to Malaysia and meet demands for low-skilled manual work. The authors found that access to this program increased the likelihood of workers migrating to Malaysia and the effect was statistically significant.[5]

The extension of the EU Schengen area to Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, an example of a **labor and trade agreement**, facilitated cross-border movement of workers to Western Europe. Following this agreement, workers from these three countries were more likely to be living in a different country than citizens of countries that did not belong to the Schengen area (Romania and Bulgaria).[19] Finally, Ecuador's Open Doors policy eliminated entry requirements and allowed citizens of any nationality to enter the country without a pre-arranged visa for a period of 90 days. This resulted in a statistically significant and large increase in the number of entrants into Ecuador.[1]

One study documents potential stepping-stone dynamics, whereby legal access to one country may enable onward migration to alternative destinations that offer higher returns or stronger migrant networks.[1] In the case of Ecuador's visa-free entry regime, migrants entered legally but subsequently engaged in transmigration toward third countries, including the US.[1] A separate study on secondary migration to the US similarly described migrants using legally accessible intermediary countries as platforms for onward movement to preferred destinations.[20]



Research practices

In all included studies, outcomes focused on migration flows (6 studies) or migration stocks in the host countries (4 studies). The specific outcome measure was adapted to the context. Two studies on **temporary work visas** examined heterogeneity in effects: the share of skilled or unskilled migration in host countries by origin country[14] and effects across countries' income groups.[21]

Legal pathways interventions were often based on unexpected nationwide government decisions[1] or on a randomized controlled trial supported by the local government.[17,20,22,23,24,25,26,27] Both facilitated the identification of a counterfactual group to assess the interventions' effects on migration. All studies examining **temporary work visa** interventions employed randomized controlled trials, except one study which utilized an event study.[18] The studies on **temporary work visas** and **other legal pathways interventions** used quasi-experimental study designs such as difference-in-differences (five studies) or an event study.[21]

The studies included in this summary had the following limitations:

- They do not address the effects of interventions on irregular migration. Data on this type of migration are difficult to capture, and reliable administrative records of such migration are limited or unavailable. Migrants also often hesitate to share their experiences during semi-structured qualitative interviews.[1] Additionally, *legal pathways* interventions typically aim to address labor shortages in specific professions or to support greater economic activity, rather than primarily reducing irregular migration.
- They often lack details about costs or value for money, making it difficult to assess intervention efficiency. However, two studies did conduct cost–benefit analyses of their respective guest worker programs.[17,20,22,23,24,25,26,27]

Implications

- *Legal pathways* interventions may have substantial impacts on irregular and regular migration by alleviating many physical and financial constraints and providing migration incentives. The extent of these effects largely depends on the underlying economic, political, and other factors driving migration in both the origin and destination countries. Additionally, the consequences of *legal pathways* can be wide-ranging, potentially leading to decreased subjective well-being, increased remittances to countries of origin, changes in the availability of skilled labor, and even reduced support for welfare policies.
- With only ten studies conducted, the limited available research does not allow for a meta-analysis to rigorously synthesize the evidence. Most of these studies focused on the migration effects of temporary work visas and the visa provisions associated with labor and trade agreements. Some studies effectively utilized unexpected policy changes, such as elimination of entry requirements, and randomized controlled trials supported by local governments. This approach may encourage new research to adopt similar methods in order to precisely identify the effects of these interventions on migration.
- While the studies of visa provisions following labor and trade agreements have primarily focused on regional or global perspectives, research on temporary work visas should extend beyond the current evidence clusters found in South Asia (particularly India and Bangladesh).
- The recent increase in available evidence (with most studies published within the last seven years) should be supplemented with systematic data collection and analysis on the cost and benefit of *legal pathways* interventions, and their effects on irregular migration.

Endnotes

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About this brief

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Online appendix

Please read the Technical appendix and endnotes here.



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