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مركز التكامل المتوسطي

## ROUND 2

COVID-19 MED POLICY BRIEFS

# COVID-19 IMPLICATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Unlocking the potential of returned migrants in  
South Mediterranean countries through a  
three-pillar strategy

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## COVID-19 IMPLICATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN



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### Summary:

The present policy brief discusses cross-country cooperation opportunities in the area of human mobility and return migration for South Mediterranean countries (Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, Israel and Lebanon). The COVID-19 crisis, accompanied by travel restrictions and increased border controls, disrupted patterns of global mobility and remittances, which in turn have led to increased vulnerabilities to poverty, ill-treatment and exploitation of migrants and their families. In order to limit the negative and most probably long-lasting implications of the pandemic on livelihoods, policy attention to remittances and return migration appears crucial.

This brief starts by shedding light on the impact of the pandemic on migration and remittances trends in the South Mediterranean context. It then relies on good practices from South Eastern and South Mediterranean countries, to elaborate on and propose an institutionalized three-pillar strategy based on the systematic monitoring of emigration and return migration movements (pillar 1), skills anticipations and labour market needs assessments (pillar 2), and skills recognition and certification schemes (pillar 3).

The brief, anchored in the United Nations 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG1, 8 and 10, and objectives of the Global Compact on Migration (GCM), concludes with the formulation of a series of policy recommendations including: the operationalization of data collection on (return) migration movements, an emigration strategy involving and engaging the diaspora, an approach to skills recognition and certification, a proactive support to return migrant workers, a strategy to decrease remittance transaction costs, including a debate on the potential of cryptocurrency remittances and service provider licensing.

## 1. Introduction

Migration and remittances are one of the important international transmission channels of the COVID-19 shock. The pandemic is more than a health crisis. It is also a crisis of mobility, heavily impacting patterns of migration.<sup>1</sup> With mobility restrictions and increased border controls, in addition to the concomitant fall in oil prices in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries where thousands of expats work, South Mediterranean countries have been particularly affected in terms of disrupted patterns of migration, but also remittances, the funds that are transferred from migrants to their home country.

The pandemic exacerbated the vulnerabilities of migrant workers, in particular the low and medium-skilled ones, and their families. Early evidence shows that migrant workers have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, in terms of infection and death rates, but also on the labour market, in terms of loss of jobs and livelihoods. In addition, many became stranded, willing but unable to return to their origin country, facing a socio-economic deterioration of their situation in host countries, whose economic growth significantly slowed down. At the same time, those migrant workers that managed to return to their home countries, the situation upon their return was often very challenging, due to lack of income-generating activities, indebtedness or stigmatisation from host community members. In both cases, whether it is the loss of sources of income for migrants due to lack of employment opportunities in host countries, or that the migrant has returned home, the impact on remittances was negative. This led to increasing the risks of poverty and vulnerabilities to ill-treatment and the exploitation of return migrants and their families. This has resulted in an increasing pressure on the public finance of governments and limiting the effects that mitigate brain drain.

The present policy brief contributes to the policy debate related to international migration and remittances. It particularly focuses on the rehabilitation into the home labour market of return migrants,<sup>2</sup> who have long been an untapped source of human capital, especially in South Mediterranean countries. The brief starts by a contextualization of the pre-COVID-19 situation in South Mediterranean countries in terms of patterns of emigration, remittances, and return migration. Then, it examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on these

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<sup>1</sup> The present policy brief does not directly address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health and safety.

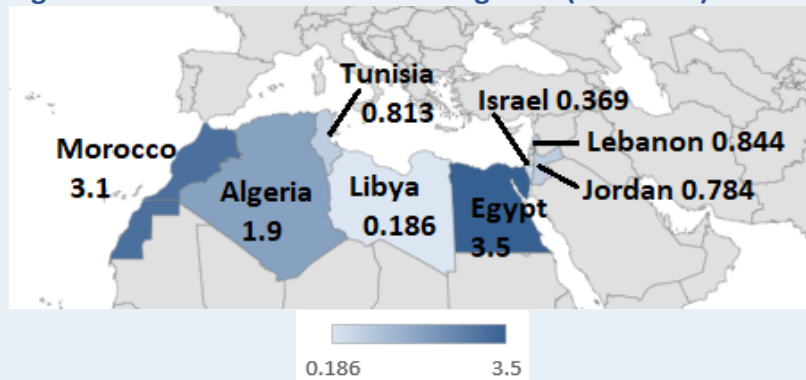
<sup>2</sup> Return migration includes in this policy brief, assisted and independent returns of migrants to the origin country based on the voluntary decision of the returnee, but does not focus on forced returns. As per the IOM 2019 Glossary on Migration, assisted return refers to the administrative, logistical or financial support to migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host country or country of transit and who decide to return to their country of origin.

patterns and proposes an institutionalized three-pillar strategy to unlock the potential of return migrants on the origin labour markets. It concludes with the recommendation of a series of concrete policy actions relevant to the South Mediterranean countries.

## 2. Migration and remittances trends: South Mediterranean context

In mid-year 2019, there were 272 million international migrants worldwide, which represented 3.5% of the world total population.<sup>3</sup> Of these 272 million, 10% were emigrants from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The stock of international emigrants by country in the South Mediterranean region is depicted in figure 1. In 2019 before the pandemic, the two most important diasporas were the Egyptian and Moroccan ones with 3.5 million and 3.1 million of migrants living abroad, respectively. They represented 3.5% and 8.5% of their total population, respectively. However, in relative terms, the Lebanese diaspora was the most important. In 2019, there were about 844,000 emigrants working abroad representing 12% of total Lebanese population.

**Figure 1: Stock of international emigrants (in million) in 2019**



Source: UN DESA (2020) and author's elaboration.

Interpretation: There are 3.1 million Moroccans living and working abroad.

More than half of the emigrants from South Mediterranean countries remained within the MENA region. European countries came second as a destination of emigrants from South Mediterranean countries. Overall, Jordan, France and Saudi Arabia were the top-three destinations in 2019, but with subregional variations. In particular, main migration corridors<sup>4</sup> were Algeria-France with 1.7 million migrants, Morocco-France with 1.1 million migrants, Morocco-Italy with 0.9 million migrants, Tunisia-France with 0.4 million migrants, Egypt-Saudi Arabia with 0.8 million migrants and Egypt-United Arab Emirates (UAE) with 0.7 million migrants.<sup>5</sup>

Viewing migration through a development lens<sup>6</sup> highlights the role of remittances.<sup>7</sup> Every year, migrant workers remit to their origin countries. In 2019, worldwide total remittances

<sup>3</sup> Consult [Migration data portal](#) for more info.

<sup>4</sup> According to UN DESA (2019), corridors represent an accumulation of migratory movements over time and provide a snapshot of how migration patterns have evolved into significant foreign-born population in specific destination countries.

<sup>5</sup> See IOM (2020) [World Migration Report](#).

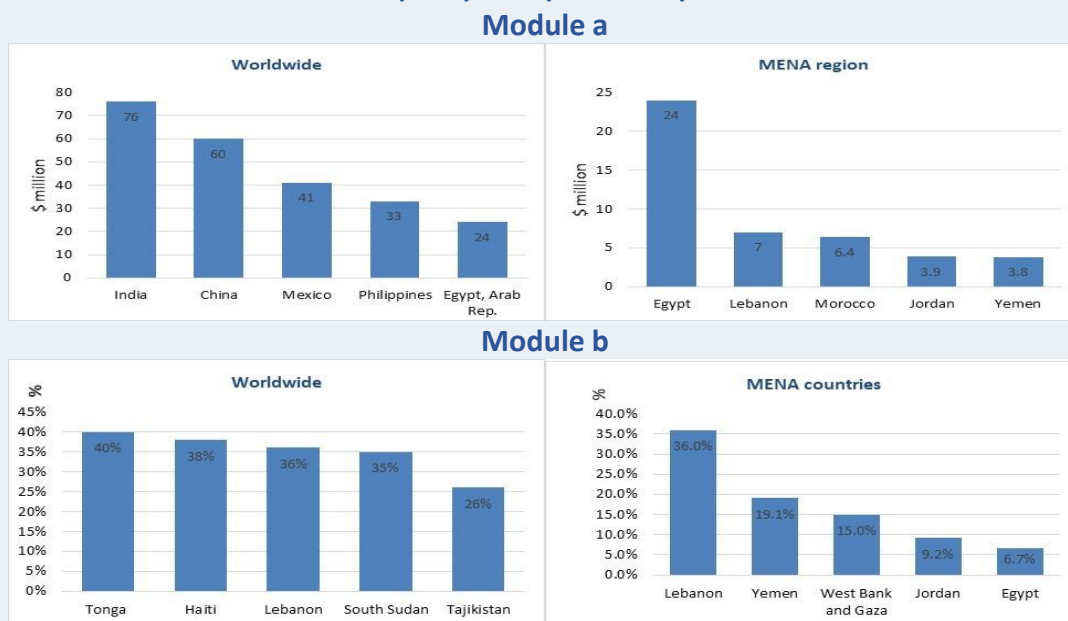
<sup>6</sup> For more info, see the [United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) that recognizes that migration is a powerful driver of sustainable development, for migrants and their communities.



reached 554 billion USD becoming for the first time larger than foreign direct investments (FDI) (World Bank, 2020).<sup>8</sup> Empirical studies showed that remittances play a crucial role in the development of origin countries. For instance, they significantly improve nutritional outcomes, reduce child labour in disadvantaged households, alleviate poverty and are associated with higher spending on education<sup>9</sup> and health. Studies have confirmed this positive influence, especially in Egypt,<sup>10</sup> Morocco,<sup>11</sup> Lebanon,<sup>12</sup> or Tunisia<sup>13</sup>.

South Mediterranean countries have a specific place in the international system of remittances. Thus, Egypt was among the top-5 remittance recipient countries in 2019, following India, China, Mexico and the Philippines, in descending order (figure 2a). In 2019, about 24 billion USD were remitted by Egyptian emigrants. When we consider relative terms, Lebanon was in the top-3 remittance-to-GDP recipient countries in 2019, following Tonga and Haiti in descending order. Inbound remittances to Lebanon accounted for more than one third of its GDP (figure 2b).

**Figure 2: Top-5 remittance countries in 2020, by total amount \$ billion (module a) and by share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in % (module b)**



*Source: World Bank staff estimates-KNOMAD*

<sup>7</sup> Migrants contribute to the development of their origin country through other channels, for instance investments. However, we do focus on remittances in this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Remittances are financial or in-kind transfers made by migrants directly to families or communities in their countries of origin. The World Bank compiles global data on international remittances.

<sup>9</sup> OECD/ILO (2018) "[How immigrants contribute to developing countries' economies](#)".

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Wahba, J. (2007) "[Returns to overseas work experience: The case of Egypt](#)" and Adams, R.H. (1991) "[The effects of international remittances on poverty, inequality and development in rural Egypt](#)".

<sup>11</sup> See for instance de Haas, H. (2006) "[Migration, remittances and regional development in Southern Morocco](#)".

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Chaaban, J. and Mansour, W. (2012) "[The impact of remittances on education in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon](#)".

<sup>13</sup> See for instance Jouini, J. (2015) "[Economic growth and remittances in Tunisia: Bi-directional causal links](#)".

There is no global estimation on return migration.<sup>14</sup> In South Mediterranean countries, migration movements are often part of circular migration, such as Jordanian or Egyptian emigrants working in Gulf countries, and/or are rather informal; making monitoring exercises even more challenging. Moreover, governments in the region have considered not relevant to systematically track return movements.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore difficult to go beyond anecdotal evidence that come from spontaneous assessments. Return movements are usually determined by a series of factors such as changes in immigration policies of and political instability in host countries. For instance, following the 11 September attacks in New York in 2001, restrictive immigration policies were adopted by the United States and European countries, resulting in the return of thousands of South Mediterranean emigrants.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, due to the civil unrest in Libya in February 2011, thousands of Egyptians and Tunisians returned to their home country.<sup>17</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM) Cairo and IOM Tunisia carried at that time socio-economic assessments in order to collect data on these sudden and large-scaled return movements of migrants.

Rather, there are data on assisted returns monitored by implementing institutions such as IOM. Before the pandemic, in 2017 and 2018, returning migrants assisted by IOM came mainly from a European country or from the MENA region. Assisted migrants returned mainly to Algeria, followed by Lebanon and Morocco.<sup>18</sup> Beneficiaries of return and reintegration assistance in vulnerable situations represented at that time 11% of the assisted migrants that return to MENA country, and mostly had health-related needs (85%). Unaccompanied and separated children (11%) and identified victims of trafficking (4%) were the other categories of beneficiaries in vulnerable situations.

### **3. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mobility, remittances and livelihoods**

COVID-19 has affected global mobility and migrants in various, overlapping, and interdependent ways.<sup>19</sup> First, in general migrants, such as the rest of population, have similar exposure to contract the coronavirus. However, evidence available for a few countries has already suggested that migrants, especially women and irregular workers, are on the frontline of the pandemic as they tend to work in precarious working conditions, often in the informal sector, placing them at higher risk of exposure to the virus.<sup>20</sup> For instance, as of May 2020, 75% of all new confirmed cases in Saudi Arabia were migrants.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, first data suggest that migrants in Norway, Sweden and Denmark tend to be more likely to have been infected by the coronavirus than non-migrants.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Public authorities might be reluctant to share the data on emigration or return movements for privacy and sovereignty concerns.

<sup>15</sup> ETF (2017) "[Migrant support measures from an employment and skills perspective \(MISMES\). Jordan](#)".

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> IOM (2010) "[Migrants caught in crisis. IOM experience in Libya](#)".

<sup>18</sup> IOM (2018) "[Return and reintegration key highlights 2018](#)".

<sup>19</sup> The present policy brief acknowledges the greater risk of xenophobia, anti-migrant sentiment, or stigmatisation as a result of the pandemic, but does not focus on such dimensions here.

<sup>20</sup> See recent data on the [Migration Data Portal](#) and UN Women (2020) [Guidance Note](#).

<sup>21</sup> According to the Saudi Ministry of Health.

<sup>22</sup> OECD (2020) "[What is the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on immigrants and their children?](#)" and Laczko, F. (2021) "[COVID-19 and migration in 2020: Five key trends](#)".

Second, migrants are among those who tend to be the first affected by lay-offs in response to the economic slowdown in host countries as their occupations are concentrated in sectors that have been particularly impacted by the pandemic (construction, domestic work, services, hospitality, agriculture among others).<sup>23</sup> These job losses lead to deteriorated income prospects, loss of livelihoods, high vulnerability to ill-treatment and exploitation, and reduced ability or willingness to remit. As a result, many migrants and their families became destitute or at risk of becoming destitute.<sup>24</sup> In particular, the pandemic was an opportunity for Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE where thousands of Egyptians live and work, to accelerate their efforts to reduce their migrant workforces.<sup>25</sup>

Third, mobility became hindered. Many migrants became stranded, wishing to return home but unable to do so due to mobility restrictions or costs of travel related to the pandemic. Globally, as of July 2020, there were more than 1.2 million stranded migrants in the MENA region out of 3 million worldwide.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, as of May 2020, 21,000 Moroccans were stranded around the world, willing but unable to return to Morocco, while stranded Egyptians were more than 12,000 at the same period.<sup>27</sup> Besides, in several destination countries such as Saudi Arabia or UAE, there were many cases of migrants in irregular status who were awaiting deportation in immigration detention facilities.<sup>28</sup> In parallel, assisted return programs such as the IOM's Assisted Voluntary Returns and Reintegration (AVRR) program, became temporary disrupted due to mobility restrictions, leaving migrants stranded in transit or in destination countries.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, migration from South Mediterranean countries was impeded as well due to mobility restrictions and policy changes, challenging the economic, social and demographic dynamics in destination countries. Data lack at the disaggregated level, but as a matter of example, it is estimated that migration flows have dropped by 46% towards OECD countries in the first half of 2020.<sup>30</sup> In Italy, harvest suffers from the lack of about 50,000 migrant workers, due in particular to the flight suspensions from Morocco.<sup>31</sup> In that sense, the recent pandemic offered an opportunity to acknowledge the value of migrants' skills especially in critical sectors such as healthcare and homecare services, and agriculture and to hope for a positive change in discourse on migration in destination countries.<sup>32</sup>

Fourth, migrants returned to their origin country. Data lack and modalities of return varied greatly: some migrants returned without requesting any assistance, while some others were evacuated or repatriated with the logistic and sometimes financial support of their

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<sup>23</sup> ILO (2020) "[COVID-19 impact and policy response in the Arab States](#)".

<sup>24</sup> Destitute migrants are individuals who have lost their means of support and are unable to meet their basic needs, IOM (2020) "[COVID-19 impact on stranded migrants](#)".

<sup>25</sup> Alsahi, H. (2020) "[COVID-19 and the intensification of the GCC workforce nationalization policies](#)".

<sup>26</sup> IOM (2020) "[COVID-19 impact on stranded migrants](#)".

<sup>27</sup> See [Voanews](#) and [Egypttoday](#) retrieved on April 26, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> ILO (2020) "[COVID-19 impact and policy response in the Arab States](#)".

<sup>29</sup> IOM (2020) "[COVID-19 impact on stranded migrants](#)".

<sup>30</sup> OECD (2020) "[International Migration Outlook](#)".

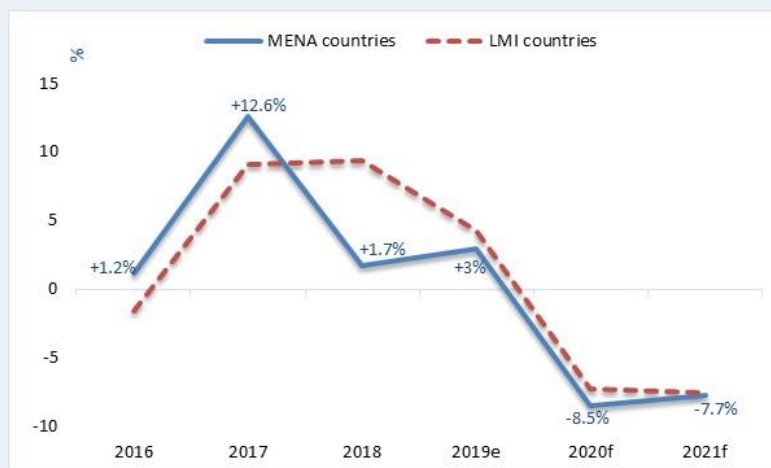
<sup>31</sup> Infomigrants (2021). "[Italian harvest could suffer without 50,000 migrant workers](#)".

<sup>32</sup> See for instance Euronews (2020) "[Why COVID-19 shows that migrants' integration in Europe is as important as ever](#)".

respective origin country.<sup>33</sup> Besides, some of the Gulf States established amnesties for irregular workers, to allow them to return home without penalty and Saudi Arabia launched the *Awdah* (return) initiative to assist the return of migrant workers whether they are legal or illegal residents.<sup>34</sup> A number of eligible migrants benefited also from the IOM AVRR program to facilitate both their return and reintegration. By way of an example, the Egyptian and Lebanese governments have organized return or repatriation flights for their nationals stranded abroad (Gulf and European countries, respectively) since the beginning of the pandemic. An estimated 1 million Egyptians returned to Egypt during the pandemic.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, as of May 2020, the Jordan Chamber of Commerce expected the return of 20% of Jordanian migrants, especially from GCC. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) talks about half a million returning migrants to Jordan due to job losses and decrease in oil prices in GCC.<sup>36</sup>

As a result of job losses and return migration, remittances are expected to drop.<sup>37</sup> Before the COVID-19 pandemic started, the World Bank had projected that 574 billion USD would be remit in 2020. A first downward readjustment was made in April 2020 and estimated that remittances would fall to 445 billion USD in 2020, representing a decline of 20% compared to 2019. A second upward readjustment of previsions and forecasts was made in October 2020 taking into account recent data from countries that were major recipients of remittances including Egypt. Figure 3 displays these last estimates and projections of remittances flows to MENA countries<sup>38</sup> and compares with low-middle income countries as per the World Bank’s calculations (2020). Drops of 8.5% and 7.7% are to be expected in 2020 and 2021 for MENA countries.<sup>39</sup>

**Figure 3: Estimates and projections of remittance flows to MENA countries and LMI countries (growth rate, %)**



Source: World Bank (2020).

<sup>33</sup> Returns does not only include workers, but students, spouses and children.

<sup>34</sup> See [Awdah initiative](#).

<sup>35</sup> Abdel-Fattah, D. (2020) "[The COVID-19 pandemic and Egyptian migrant workers](#)".

<sup>36</sup> JCC (2020) [Statement](#) and IMF (2020) "[Confronting the COVID-19 pandemic in the Middle East and Central Asia](#)".

<sup>37</sup> Other factors play a role in remittances’ movements such as oil prices and remittance costs.

<sup>38</sup> Data for South Mediterranean countries are not available yet.

<sup>39</sup> Estimates and projections were revised following preliminary data on remittances collected by the World Bank.



In Lebanon, remittances dropped by 17% in 2020 compared to the previous year. However, in countries like Morocco and Egypt,<sup>40</sup> the impact of the pandemic on remittances was not as expected in the short run. Remittances from Moroccans living abroad increased by 4% in November 2020 compared to the previous year.<sup>41</sup> According to the Central Bank of Egypt (CBE), remittances sent by Egyptians abroad increased by 10.6% (\$1.7 billion) during the period from July 2020 to January 2021.

Several concomitant factors can justify this upward trend: (i) migrant workers were able to maintain their employment in destination countries especially those working in the health sector or benefited from income support measures, (ii) migrant workers remit more in proportion of their income to support family members left in the home country to cope with the effects of the pandemic, (iii) they remit using formal channels rather than informal or illegal ones due to travel restrictions, closures of in person cash transfer facilities<sup>42</sup> and risks in carrying the money informally, (iv) linked with the previous point, migrant workers used innovative digital solutions such as cryptocurrency remittances that are usually cheaper and faster than traditional solutions, allowing migrants to remit more,<sup>43</sup> (v) stranded migrants remit rather than temporarily go back to their origin country due to mobility restrictions, and (vi) migrants actually send their savings back home upon return.<sup>44</sup> This finding corroborates past evidence: as an insurance mechanism for households, remittances tend to increase in times of crisis or at least are more resilient than other flows such as FDIs.<sup>45 46</sup> Nonetheless, overall remittances to South Mediterranean countries shall continue to decrease in 2021 as the factors that led to a rise are likely to be temporary<sup>47</sup> representing a loss of a vital financing support for many vulnerable households.<sup>48</sup>

#### **4. A three-pillar strategy to unlock return migrants' potential on labour markets**

There is a strong belief that returning home is a natural process. However, evidence has shown that return migrants face a series of challenges that makes the process of reintegration and reincorporation into the origin country, especially the labour market, difficult, especially for those who had a negative migration experience.<sup>49</sup> According to IOM's integrated approach to reintegration, challenges are economic, social and psychosocial and

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<sup>40</sup> As of Pakistan, Mexico and Nepal.

<sup>41</sup> Office des échanges (2020) "[Indicateurs des échanges extérieurs](#)".

<sup>42</sup> For instance, Qatar. In such situation, only digital transfers are available.

<sup>43</sup> World Economic Forum (2019) "[How digital remittances can help drive sustainable development](#)".

<sup>44</sup> Other factors such as financial schemes to attract remittances and decrease the cost of remitting can be included. For instance, Pakistani public authorities introduced a free foreign remittance service in 2019 that have boosted remittance inflows to the country.

<sup>45</sup> This is what happened during the financial crisis 2008-2009.

<sup>46</sup> According to the World Bank (2020), even with the decline, remittance flows are expected to become more important as a source of external financing for LMICs as the fall in FDI and official development assistance (ODA) are expected to be larger (more than 35 percent for the FDI). Factors that explain such drop are travel restrictions, investment and trade slowdown and changed priorities for donor countries.

<sup>47</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit (2021) "[Covid-19 and migrant remittances: a hidden crisis looming?](#)".

<sup>48</sup> Remittances are also a source of revenue for governments.

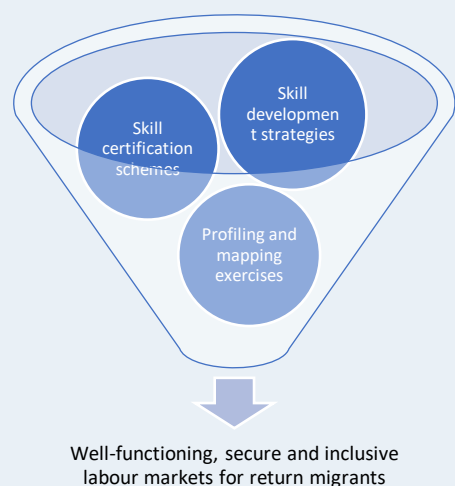
<sup>49</sup> Beyond immediate health risks of COVID-19.

involve not only the return migrant, but also the host community and the origin country.<sup>50</sup> A recent survey published in April 2021 on Bangladeshi returning migrants<sup>51</sup> shows that 47% do not have any income source at present, resulting in an heavy reliance on the family members' earnings and loans. Besides, 50% reported still being unemployed one year after their return in Bangladesh, 30% reported social stigma from the host community members and 98% reported being in stress and tensed.

On the labour market, the main economic challenges are related to the lack of access to information on how to access financial support, to find new employment opportunities and income generating activities, to use capital, and to have skills acquired abroad recognized and used, each of which can impact the ability of the returnee to thrive. Besides, a recent IOM study (2020) revealed that 60% of return migrants expressed a desire to upgrade and seek recognition of their newly-acquired skills and that 75% said that once overseas working opportunities resumed, they would prefer to work in a country where their skills would be justly recognized and awarded.<sup>52</sup> If not well managed, the return of these migrants can not only lead to poverty and indebtedness, but also intensified vulnerabilities to ill-treatment and exploitation, social and economic exclusion, hampering progress towards SDGs and GCM's objectives.

To structurally address these risks, an institutionalised three-pillar strategy is proposed to build well-functioning, secure and inclusive labour markets that would unlock the potential of return migrants and goes beyond *ad hoc* projects and reintegration assistance packages.<sup>53</sup> Figure 4 describes this strategy.

**Figure 4: Towards a three-pillar strategy for return migrants based on cross-country cooperation**



<sup>50</sup> IOM (2017) "[An integrated approach to reintegration to reintegration](#)". Upon return, first findings have shown that several return migrants reported having experienced xenophobia, discrimination and stigma within the origin community as they were viewed as bringing the virus back with them. For more info, see IOM (2020) "[COVID-19 impact on stranded migrants](#)".

<sup>51</sup> BRAC Migration Program Follow-up Survey "Searching and Analysing the socio-economic status of returnees".

<sup>52</sup> Study findings reported in ILO Dhaka (2020) "[Recognition of prior learning for migrant workers in Asia](#)".

<sup>53</sup> This strategy complements other interventions, in particular assisted return and reintegration assistance programs implemented by international organizations.

### ***1- Profiling and mapping exercises***

The first pillar consists in conducting systematic and recurrent profiling and mapping exercises on migrant workers and return migrants. In order to propose effective and tailored assistance programs and policy actions, disaggregated data on migrant workers and their households is needed. Profiling and mapping exercises aim to provide meaningful archetypes disaggregated by a series of parameters beyond demographic, socio-economic or migration history criteria. They include data on gender, age, level of education, use and patterns of remittances, regions of origin and destination, duration abroad, occupations and types of skills acquired abroad as well as expectations upon return. Also, it would allow for the assessment of the vulnerabilities of migrants, in the short and long term.

However, to date, data in this area is lacking, incomplete or not available. Few countries monitor emigration movements for capacity reasons and fewer even do so for return movements. Thus, there is little understanding of the needs of returning migrants, especially on the labour market and the process of reintegration is understudied. For instance, in Jordan, as of 2017, there is no (accessible) database recording the official number of Jordan emigrants, their socio-economic profile or the types of jobs held abroad.<sup>54</sup>

One good practice is to be found in Bangladesh. The government has long been considering the support of workers especially those who return under difficult conditions. Since 2015, comprehensive profiling exercises of migrant workers who have returned to Bangladesh have been carried out by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies in cooperation with international organizations, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Bangladesh Employers' Federation and the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training.<sup>55</sup>

A good practice in the South Mediterranean region is to be found in the MED-HIMS (Households International Migration Surveys in the Mediterranean countries) regional program of coordinated international migration surveys.<sup>56</sup> With time, the program became a joint initiative of the European Commission, World Bank, UNFPA, UNHCR, ILO, IOM and the League of Arab States and allows for comparison across South Mediterranean countries as questionnaires are standardized. Data on outward and return migration are collected, along with motives for first move, type and use of remittances, behaviour, attitudes, perceptions and cultural values of people with regard to international migration. The MED-HIMS surveys were carried out in Egypt in 2013, in Jordan in 2014 and in Morocco in 2013/14 (regionally) and 2018 (nationally) and were planned to be carried out in Tunisia in 2020 and in Lebanon, Algeria, Libya in the near future.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> ETF (2017) "Migrant support measures from an employment and skills perspective (MISMES). Jordan".

<sup>55</sup> See for instance ILO (2015) "[The homecoming: Profiling the returning migrant workers of Bangladesh](#)". Another useful example includes the Philippines.

<sup>56</sup> Eurostat "[Households International Migration Surveys in the Mediterranean countries](#)" retrieved on April 24, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Subject to funding confirmation.

Carrying out profiling and mapping exercises is the foundation for a skill development strategy (pillar 2) and a skill recognition scheme (pillar 3).

## **2- Skills anticipation and labour market needs assessments**

Profiling and mapping exercises provide data on skills and qualifications of return economic migrants, focusing on the supply side of the labour market. In order to have a comprehensive view of the labour market dynamics and provide return migrants with adequate assistance to reintegrate into the labour market, skills anticipation and labour market needs assessments, that focus on the demand side, are needed. They help understand the needs to reskill or upskill the workforce, formulate skills development and inform labour market policy.<sup>58</sup>

Such positive development in the understanding of current and future skills needs can have several beneficial implications for return migrants through tailored economic reintegration interventions, such as career counselling and vocational guidance services, for an effective reincorporation into the labour market.<sup>59</sup>

On the ground, most South Mediterranean countries, including Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia, undertake such assessments at the national, sometimes at the regional or sectoral level. However, evidence shows that there is a global lack of coordinated actions and poor data.<sup>60</sup> For instance, in Egypt, local and regional administrative levels started being involved in the process of assessment via the development of regional offices of the Industrial Training Office and recently launched tripartite committees (government, employers and social partners) to develop technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs. Moreover, when skills assessments are carried out and available, the translation of information into policy decisions remained challenging and return migrant workers are not yet a target population. For instance, in Tunisia, the public employment agency (ANETI) offers training modules on business plan development and entrepreneurship for job seekers, including return migrants. However, these modules are standardized, not updated and not tailored to the specific needs of its beneficiaries. The frequency of training is also subject to discussion. Similarly, the country established migrant resource centres in three different cities. However, very few returning migrants use the centres as these latter do not provide services that are tailored for them.<sup>61</sup> With the unexpected return of nationals, the COVID-19 crisis extrapolated these challenges and imposed the development of knowledge and tools for anticipating skills needs in the region.

There are examples of good practices though in South Mediterranean countries. For instance, Centres for Jobs, Migration and Reintegration (EGC) were recently launched by *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. Commissioned by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in Germany, this initiative aims to provide information, assistance and personal advice about employment and training opportunities in the respective countries to

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<sup>58</sup> ILO (2017) "Skill needs anticipation: systems and approaches".

<sup>59</sup> See OECD and ILO (2018) "[Approaches to anticipating skills for the future of work](#)".

<sup>60</sup> ILO (2017) "Skill needs anticipation: systems and approaches".

<sup>61</sup> European Training Foundation (2015) "[Migrant support measures from an employment and skills perspective \(MISMES\). Tunisia](#)".

return migrants. For instance, they would advise a Tunisian returning migrant worker from France to find employment or training opportunities in Tunisia. Such centre has been operating in Tunisia since 2017 in partnership with the Tunisian National Employment Agency (ANETI) and the International Placement Services (ZAV). The services are also provided to host community members willing to improve their career prospects. Thus, these centres propose individual counselling on career guidance, training programs on self-assessment, employability skills, skills for starting a new business, job placements in the origin country, and also economic and social reintegration of returnees.

### **3- Skills recognition and certification schemes**

Skills recognition schemes adapted to return migrants allow these latter to obtain formal recognition of their skills and experience acquired abroad -through formal and informal channels-, contributing to increasing their employability, their mobility, their social inclusion and self-esteem. The recognition of prior learning aims to ensure the reintegration into the labour market of returning migrants and proper skill matching, and also to prevent deskilling or skill waste. Vulnerable or low-qualified migrants are in particular need for such recognition of prior learning (RPL) procedures that are anchored on Objective 18 of the GCM that calls on nations to invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications, and competences.<sup>62</sup> Usually, public employment services serve as a point of referral to official agencies and provide assistance to individuals who requested the recognition of their skills acquired abroad.<sup>63</sup>

The implementation of skill recognition schemes can be challenging. In particular, employers in the labour market may be reluctant to recognize or value skills certificates. Similarly, individuals may not fully understand the usefulness of skills certificates.

Skill recognition schemes are at their early stage of development in most South Mediterranean countries. Current skills recognition systems are weak and often lack the relevant authorities to deal with it.<sup>64</sup> Recognition of prior learning that helps individuals acquire a formal qualification that matches their knowledge and skills exists but does not target return migrant workers. In Jordan, for instance, evidence shows that the possibility of investing in and thus, recognizing returnees' skills has never been a priority.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, as of 2017, there was no training or employment services for return migrants, while there would be investment programs that seek to promote return migrants' investments in Jordan. In Egypt, the e-portal that provides digital services to Egyptian emigrants includes guidance on investment opportunities in Egypt, the provision of a remittance service registration with the Central Bank of Egypt or a Science Hub to promote skills transfers, but does not include any information on the rehabilitation on the labour market for prospective return migrants.<sup>66</sup> Rather than institutional frameworks, there are a series of bilateral

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<sup>62</sup> For more info, see [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/73/195](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/73/195).

<sup>63</sup> ILO (2020) "[How to facilitate the recognition of skills of migrant workers](#)".

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> ETF (2017) "[Migrant support measures from an employment and skills perspective \(MISMES\). Jordan](#)".

<sup>66</sup> [E-portal for Egyptian emigrants](#).



cooperation agreements -reflecting migration corridors- on pre-departure that ease the process of recognition of skills upon return. For instance, the Italian Technical Institute *Don Bosco* in Cairo, issues competence certificates that are valid in both Egypt and Italy.<sup>67</sup> Another interesting example is the Belgium-Tunisia Skills Partnership.<sup>68</sup> Launched recently by the IOM, SMPs are a foundation to formalize State cooperation in the area of skills formation, development, recognition and certification.<sup>69</sup> In the case of Belgium-Tunisia, the agreement aims at providing opportunities for skills mobility to Tunisian migrant workers while ensuring skills return and job seeking support upon return to Tunisia.

South and Southeast Asian countries can serve as best practices for South Mediterranean ones. For instance, in Sri Lanka, the government in cooperation with ILO and local employers' groups recently set up a National Skill Passport (NSP) that aims to assist returnees and more generally workers in the country.<sup>70</sup> The initiative provides returnees with an access point to finding a job and gaining training for re-skilling, re-tooling and up-skilling. It also helps return migrant workers to obtain formal recognition of their skills acquired abroad through hands-on experience and informal employment and training.

The example of Bangladesh offers another interesting perspective. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, following large-scale returns of Bangladeshi workers, the ministry of expatriates' welfare and overseas employment (MOEWOE) jointly with the Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB) and ILO set up a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system that would certify return migrants to promote their reintegration and their potential remigration. RPL centres were therefore established in several districts within the country, including remote areas. The objective in the medium run is to scale up the scheme to all Bangladeshi workers across Asia in close cooperation with destination countries. To date, discussions started with Saudi Arabia to promote the RPL and national skills' passports to migrants based in the Kingdom.<sup>71</sup>

Another interesting example is given by the Philippines. Introduced with the COVID-19 crisis, the e-portfolio provides an authentic online evidence available demonstrating the knowledge, skills, and competences that a worker has gained over time. Such program is particularly useful for Filipino workers who have an international experience. Additionally, onsite assessments took place in preferred destination countries including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait between 2014 and 2019 to give skills certificates to Filipino workers in different occupations such as construction, hospitality, ICT-related or beauty-related occupations.

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<sup>67</sup> See *Don Bosco Cairo*.

<sup>68</sup> CEPS (2020) "[Paving the way for future labour migration. A Belgium-Tunisia Skills Mobility Partnership](#)".

<sup>69</sup> IOM (2020) "[Skills Mobility Partnerships \(SMPs\)](#)".

<sup>70</sup> See ILO Dhaka (2020) "[Recognition of prior learning for migrant workers in Asia](#)".

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

## 5. Implications and policy recommendations for the South Mediterranean region

Against this background, this brief formulates a series of considerations and policy recommendations for the South Mediterranean region that are anchored in the Sustainable Development Goals, but also in the objectives of the Global Compact on Migration.

1. **Operationalizing data collection on (return) migration movements of nationals of South Mediterranean countries.** Monitoring is essential to tailor responses and evaluate the outcomes and impacts of the interventions. It also helps to draw out lessons learned and to communicate them to relevant stakeholders. International organizations such as UN agencies (IOM, ILO) and World Bank can assist in developing data collection exercises, train government officials and partners on methods and provide guidance on the use of data to inform policies and programs. The EU and EU member states can also provide support and funding to public authorities of origin countries. Monitoring exercises could start in partnership with destination countries with whom migration corridors exist, such as Morocco-France, Morocco-Italy, or Egypt-Saudi Arabia. The creation of a data-sharing ecosystem across partners should be considered. The World Bank could provide guidance on how policymakers could build a secure, trusted, just and ethical data-sharing ecosystem.
2. **Organizing regular best practice exchanges for stakeholders across South Mediterranean countries and with main destination countries.** The development of regular dialogue and knowledge sharing to inform about current migration patterns, to share innovative ideas and experiences, and to identify best practices in the area is crucial. International organizations such as United Nations agencies (IOM, ILO among others) could support and facilitate knowledge sharing in cooperation with national authorities.
3. **Developing an emigration strategy.** The strategy would be led by a task force including main and line ministries such as the finance, labour market, or education ministries, but also social partners, employment services, and recruitment agencies. Such a strategy should embrace pre-departure and post-return with reintegration considerations and connect with the diaspora during the migration phase. The strategy, involving business networks and social partners, should especially provide information on employment and training opportunities upon return. South Mediterranean countries should conduct cost-benefits analyses of emigration, which would compare emigrant remittances and diaspora engagement and the costs of brain drain.
4. **Designing and implementing a national strategy to reduce remittance transaction costs and increase convenience:** South Mediterranean countries should simplify and improve the cross-border remittances ecosystem by designing a coherent regulatory framework. They should start by conducting mapping exercises of remittance service providers and their agents to describe the financial service landscape and the market

structure. They should also evaluate the relevance of designing and implementing free foreign remittance services or reimbursement schemes and the potential of cryptocurrency remittances and blockchain-based remittances. Moreover, the use of informal remittance services should be addressed, as well as the licensing of service providers.

5. **Adopting proactive support to return migrant workers.** Policy interventions in the labour market or education and vocational training should more systematically consider the case of return migrant workers and address their needs. Entrepreneurship and business development assistance schemes should be developed, and training content updated, adapted to the needs of both return migrant workers and of the labour market. The World Bank should support the development of micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and focus on improving their access to finance. Civil society and local community members should be involved in the provision of training courses as they benefit from relevant networks to return migrant workers.
6. **Building a bilateral or multilateral approach to skills recognition and certification.** South Mediterranean countries should explore collaboration with destination countries. Particularly, they should conclude bilateral or multilateral agreements with main destination countries through Skills Mobility Partnerships (SMPs) considering existing migration corridors. Awareness campaigns should be launched to inform migrant workers about their rights upon return, and the necessity of making a record of evidence of their skills development abroad to constitute, once back, a comprehensive portfolio. International organizations such as United Nations agencies, in particular the ILO, or the European Training Foundation (ETF), could provide support guidance in coordination with national authorities to develop skills recognition and certification schemes.
7. **Take the opportunity to build partnerships with European countries.** The EU released in April 2021 the new EU strategy on voluntary returns and reintegration<sup>72</sup> that belongs to the New Pact on Migration and Asylum and offers an opportunity for South Mediterranean to strengthen cooperation in this area. In particular, the strategy officially aims to support the ownership of the reintegration process in origin countries with capacity building, including staff training, peer-to-peer learning, exchange of good practices and governance structure support.

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<sup>72</sup> European Commission (2021) "[EU strategy on voluntary returns and reintegration](#)".

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