Global Sino Institute

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Research Article

Fall 2025

# Walls Won't Work: Only Jobs Can Solve the Middle East Migration Puzzle

A Policy-Oriented Economic Analysis for Labor Mobility and Youth Employment between the Middle East, West Africa, and the Sahel

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# Abstract

This paper proposes the Pan-Regional Labor Mobility and Skills Partnership (PALMS), a comprehensive policy framework aimed at addressing youth unemployment and irregular migration across West Africa, the Sahel, and the Middle East. Recognizing that migration is fundamentally driven by economic imbalances and demographic pressures, PALMS offers a legal and structured approach to labor mobility that benefits both origin and destination countries. The framework includes bilateral employment agreements, regional training hubs, enforceable labor standards, and reintegration support for returning migrants. Drawing on labor market data and comparative models such as the Philippines' overseas employment system, this paper argues that PALMS has the potential to reduce irregular migration by up to 40%, generate $13.5 billion in formal remittances over five years, and create hundreds of thousands of jobs. Migration, when governed responsibly, can become a driver of inclusive growth and regional stability.

**Keywords:** Labor migration governance; Youth unemployment; Economic Development

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# List of Acronyms

| | |
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| AfDB | African Development Bank |
| AU | African Union |
| ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States |
| GCC | Gulf Cooperation Council |
| GIZ | Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit |
| G2G | Government-to-Government |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| IOM | International Organization for Migration |
| OWWA | Overseas Workers Welfare Administration |
| PALMS | Pan-Regional Labor Mobility and Skills Partnership |
| POEA | Philippine Overseas Employment Administration |
| TVET | Technical and Vocational Education and Training |
| UN | United Nations |
| UN DESA | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs |

# Chapter 1: Introduction

**Background**

Migration in the regions of the Middle East, West Africa, and the Sahel is increasingly taking shape by economic drivers: youth unemployment, demographic stress, underdeveloped labor markets, and widening income disparities. The three regions have not aligned their labor supply and demand despite proximity and historical ties. In some of these countries in West Africa and the Sahel, population growth is one of the fastest globally; millions of young people are entering the labor force every year and finding precarious unemployment (United Nations, 2023). At the same time, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in this Middle Eastern region—Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar private-sector job dependence on foreign labor up to 80% (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022).

The resulting paradox is stark and urgent: Structural Unemployment among the Youth in West Africa and the Sahel; Labor Shortages in Gulf Economies. The present migration flows are terribly irregular and dangerous, therefore complementing them. According to current estimates by IOM, millions of migrants lose their lives every year while crossing the vast Sahara Desert or even the Mediterranean Sea. Besides this huge human loss, these irregular flows bypass all legal protection avenues, diminish the efficiency of remittances, and place a strong strain on both sending and receiving states.

This paper suggests a change in the way of thinking about policy: instead of setting migration as a problem to be fixed, it invites the regional actors to adopt mobility of workers as a method for achieving common economic development. It thus sets forth the Pan-Regional Labor Mobility and Skills Sharing (PALMS) — an international policy arrangement aimed at directing excess workers in West Africa and the Sahel toward Middle Eastern labor markets via official migration pathways, regional hubs for skills certification, and systems of legal protection.

If migration is viewed as a monetary facilitator and not as a border menace, PALMS would be able to offer scalable solutions toward unemployment, fairly bringing down irregular migration by 40%, and also generating huge remittance incomes. At the end of the day, this policy framework argues a little more for collaborative regionalism that brings demographic reality in line with economic opportunity and offers a way forward for greater stability, dignity, and development in two connected regions.

# Chapter 2: PALMS Economic Significance

The Pan-Regional Labor Mobility and Skills Partnership (PALMS) is more than a migration initiative— it is an essential economic intervention. It addresses the increasingly large structural mismatch between the supply of labor in West Africa and the Sahel and the demand for labor in the Middle East. Both regions are confronting very divergent development challenges, but they complement each other economically. But without formal arrangements, migration remains an inefficient, risky venture and grossly under-leveraged as a tool for economic growth.

**Demographic Pressures in Africa**

The demographic dynamics of the populations in West Africa and the Sahel are staggering and show no signs of abating. In fact, in these fast-growing countries — such as Nigeria, Niger, and Mali — population growth rates are some of the highest in the world. An estimated 5 million people are added to Nigeria's workforce every year (World Bank, 2023). More than 60% of Niger's population is under 25, while fertility rates remain above 6.5 births per woman (United Nations, 2023).

job creation does not keep pace with labor force growth. Figure 1 shows how badly youth employment matches up with available job opportunities for young entrants to the labor force in countries like Nigeria, Niger, and Mali. For example, over 35% youth unemployment in Nigeria was recorded in 2022; underemployment was over 50% for youths aged 15–24 in Mali and Senegal (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). Public sectors have very little space left, and the private sector is still informal, constrained by capital, and limited in scale. Consequently, migration turns out to be the default economic strategy for the youth. It is often facilitated by unregulated intermediaries or traffickers.

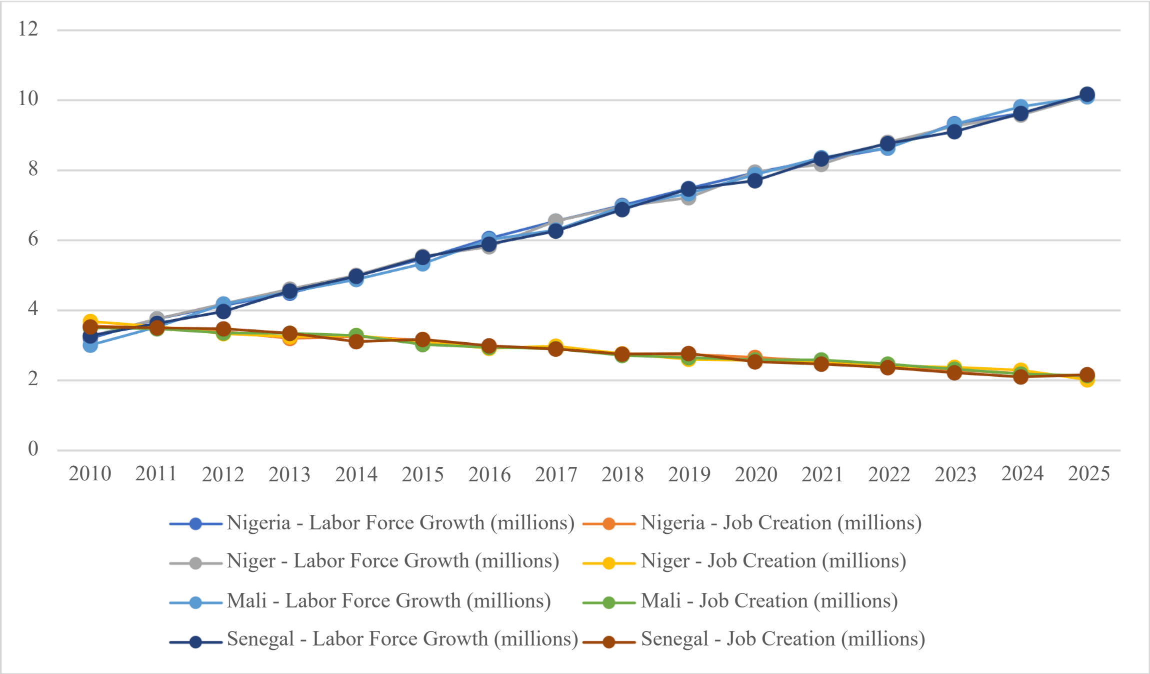


Figure 1: Youth Labor Force Growth vs. Job Creation in Selected West African Countries (2010–2025)

**Persistent Labor Demand in the Middle East**

In contrast, the workforce in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar is dominantly made up of expatriate workers constituting about 70 to 90 percent of the private sector workforce (ILO, 2022). As illustrated in Figure 2, foreign labor comprises an overwhelming majority of the private sector workforce across Gulf economies highlighting a regional characteristic of chronic labor dependency. High demand exists particularly in manual sectors such as construction work, caregiving, tourism-related hospitality work, food production agriculture, and similar activities. Labor nationalization policies (e.g., Saudi Arabia's "Saudization" policy) have not seen sufficient domestic labor come forward to fill these gaps at the pace needed to satisfy market requirements—particularly at low- and mid-skilled levels.

However, most of this tremendous importation of work continues to be from South and Southeast Asia; Africa remains underrepresented despite better availability and rising cultural overlap.

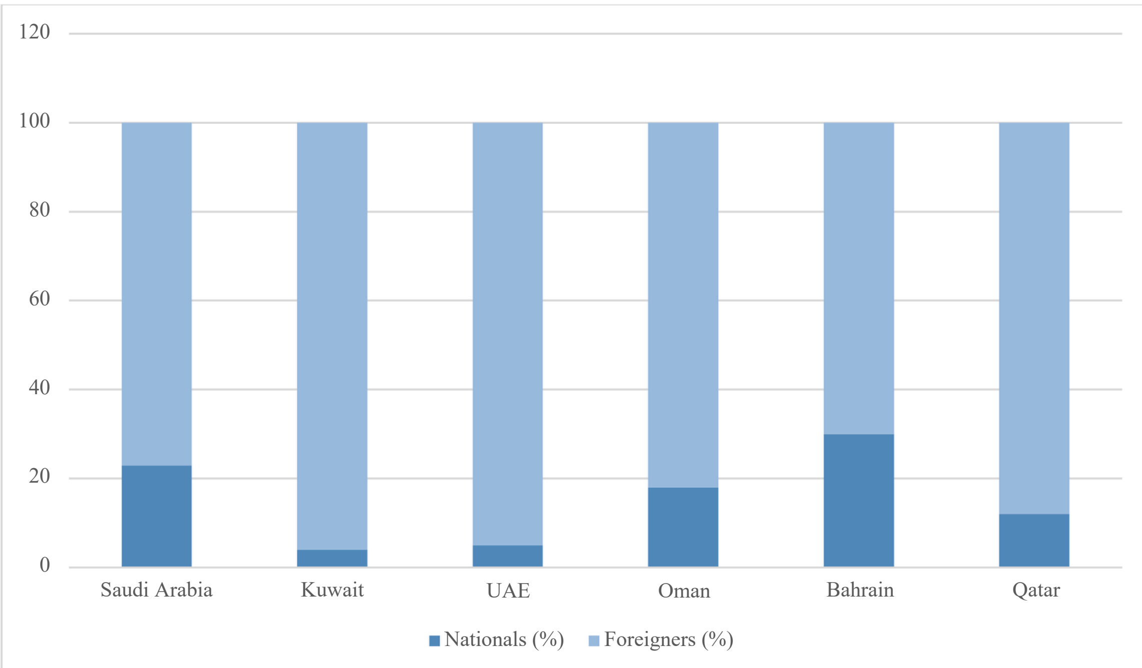


Figure 2: Foreign Workers as Percentage of Private Sector Labor Force in GCC Countries (2022)

### The Cost of Irregular Migration

Where structured migration channels do not exist, irregular migration takes hold—with all its immense human and economic costs. Over 20,000 deaths have been recorded on the Central Mediterranean Route since 2014 (IOM, 2023), many are from or passing through the Sahel. This puts African migrants in Libya on their way to Europe or the Middle East, where detention forced labor and abuse can again be documented (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Development-wise, irregular migration loses remittances and increases informal transfer costs plus limited labor protections. Informal channels lose taxation; that is uncountable contracts and benefits plus how to trace or reintegrate migrants. The average remittance fee for the Middle East sent to Africa was 7.8% in 2022 against a global average of 6.2%, therefore transfers economically lose value (World Bank, 2023).

**Untapped Economic Opportunity**

The absence of a well-structured interregional labor mobility policy has, for the most part, left this as an unrealized opportunity. When legal migration is managed well, it improves conditions in both the sending and receiving countries. Remittances are reported to be significant amounts of GDP— over 6% in Senegal, 9% in Egypt, and 3% in Nigeria (World Bank, 2023). More importantly, skills acquired abroad can benefit local economies if there are mechanisms for reintegration.

PALMS is designed to correct this disequilibrium by redirecting surplus labor from Africa towards regions of labor deficit in the Middle East through safe legal channels where their labor rights are protected under an explicit formal framework—an African worker's triple win with Gulf employers and their governments.

# Chapter 3: The PALMS Framework: Structure and Functions

**Pillar 1: Skills Mobility Corridors**

The first pillar—skills mobility corridors—sets up binding bilateral labor agreements between sending countries like Nigeria, Senegal, Niger, Mali, and Egypt and Middle Eastern receiving countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, and Jordan. These agreements specify structured annual labor deployment according to sector-specific demand in hospitality, construction, logistics services, or domestic care work. Labor force GCC economies rely on foreign workers for more than 70 percent of the private sector workforce (International Labour Organization 2022), but recruitment occurs mostly through private intermediaries rather than structured government-to-government mechanisms. PALMS fills this gap by pushing for transparent and enforceable public recruitment frameworks that lower costs deter fraud increase accountability from both employers and employees.

**Pillar 2: Regional Training and Certification Hubs**

The second pillar of the PALMS framework is the establishment of regional training and certification hubs in large cities within the sending regions. For example, these Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) centers would represent Lagos, Dakar, Niamey, Khartoum, and Cairo—aligned with GCC labor market needs—as places where standardization is a requirement. At these centers candidates will be prepared technically in line with labor market requirements; proficiency in language skills; knowledge about workplace safety; and legal rights to work in those countries. Such models have measurably worked as Egypt's "Tahseen" initiative will align TVET output to job markets in the Middle East (GIZ, 2022). These training centers raise job-matching efficiency and thereby improve the image of African migrant workers professionally abroad. PALMS sees this happening through a linkage between private-sector employers in the destination countries who share curricula development engagement of trainees before contracts are awarded and support skill certification hence workforce readiness upon deployment.

**Pillar 3: Labor Contracts with Protections**

The third pillar refers to the protection of migrant workers by providing legal protection through a standardized labor contract. This kafala system is the major cause of exploitation for migrants, particularly in the Middle East, because it ties the worker's legal status to an individual employer and hence any violation like wage theft or passport confiscation or restriction of mobility (Human Rights Watch, 2022) would be difficult to challenge. Under PALMS all migrants would be recruited under contracts enforceable and registered with both sending and receiving governments specifying wages, work hours, living conditions, and grievance redress procedures. The framework further envisions setting up a regional monitoring office backed by international organizations like IOM and ILO to ensure compliance as well as dispute mediation. PALMS sees that breaking down the kafala system fully will take time, it builds on the fact of recent changes, like Qatar's 2020 work laws letting workers switch jobs without boss okay (ILO, 2021).

**Pillar 4: Remittance and Reintegration Programs**

The fourth and final aspect of the PALMS framework is a holistic remittance and reintegration strategy. Migrants from Africa sent home above USD 53 billion in 2022; yet the majority still uses informal channels or relatively expensive transfer channels where the fees are on average 7.8 percent for intra-regional remittances (World Bank, 2023), therefore it shall be a precondition under PALMS that migrants are integrated into digital financial systems pre-departure to facilitate and encourage formal transfers. Receiving countries shall make agreements with financial institutions to lower transfer costs through bilateral agreements. Returning migrants will have access to economic reintegration programs, such as business training, microcredit services, and vocational upgrading. This could draw lessons from OWWA Overseas Workers Welfare Administration of the Philippines which helped insure train and finance small enterprises among millions of return overseas Filipino workers (Department of Labor and Employment, Philippines, 2022). Such a system applied to African returnees could shorten remigration cycles while stimulating local economic growth.

**Operational Governance**

To ensure harmonization and coordination, PALMS shall be governed by a multilateral task force made up of AU, ECOWAS, and Arab League representatives plus relevant labor ministries. ILO, International Organization for Migration, and World Bank involvement as technical advisors would provide oversight input in maintaining and evaluating the standards over time because of their best practice experience. This accords PALMS a patterned fair and development-oriented approach to labor mobility between Africa and the Middle East based on skill realignment with legal protection plus reintegration hence making the framework not only better migration outcomes but also a help in finding work for young people plus financial inclusion and stability in the region.

# Chapter 4: Quantified Impact: 5-Year Economic Outlook

**Legal Employment Generation**

The economic benefits that would result from the successful implementation of PALMS are, in fact, broad – spanning West Africa, the Sahel, and the Middle East. It is set on present demographic projections and labor market demand data within a five-year outlook for the program and international best practices. What follows in this section is an exposition of job creation numbers, remittance flows, secondary economic effects, and improvements to migration safety – an assessment package that comprehensively measures policy impact.

The direct labor placement impact of PALMS is expected to place about 150,000 African workers per year in the Middle Eastern labor market during the first five years of implementation, thus attaining a cumulative total of 750,000 workers. This figure is drawn from fairly recent data on unmet labor demand in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and projected workforce growth in West African and Sahelian countries (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). In Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, vacancies have been persistently reported in the construction, caregiving, logistics as well as hospitality sectors since then further infrastructure development plans such have recently unfolded; for example Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 (World Bank, 2023). Meanwhile, countries with an excess of workers—Nigeria, Mali, Niger—are seeing increasing rates of unemployment among the 15-to-29 age group, topping 30 percent in a number of states (United Nations, 2023). PALMS will help ease labor market pressures in sending countries as well as address demand where the migrants are employed.

**Scope Remittance Growth and Financial Inclusion**

The economic value of these labor flows is best captured in formal remittance estimates. Conservative calculations have each migrant under PALMS remit USD 300 per month through regulated financial channels. When multiplied by 750,000 workers over five years, the total cumulative remittance amount would be approximately USD 13.5 billion. This sum is significant both in absolute terms and relative to the GDP of the main sending countries. More than 6 percent of GDP was remittances to Senegal in 2022; almost 9 percent to Egypt (World Bank, 2023). Such a formalized framework like PALMS would increase the share of remittances sent through safe and traceable systems—currently, more informal channels, which are not only more expensive because the fees are much higher but also less transparent.

**Domestic Economic Spillovers**

Apart from direct employment and remittances, PALMS will also induce secondary employment in the countries of origin. The setting up and functioning of regional training and certification centers will spawn an environment of job opportunities for trainers, administrators, financial institutions, and local contractors. Preliminary modeling estimates that up to 50,000 indirect jobs may be created through the support industries around PALMS infrastructure (African Development Bank, 2023). Such jobs would be in vocational education, banking and microfinance, telecommunications, and enterprise development. The economic value of these labor flows is most clearly expressed through formal remittance projections.

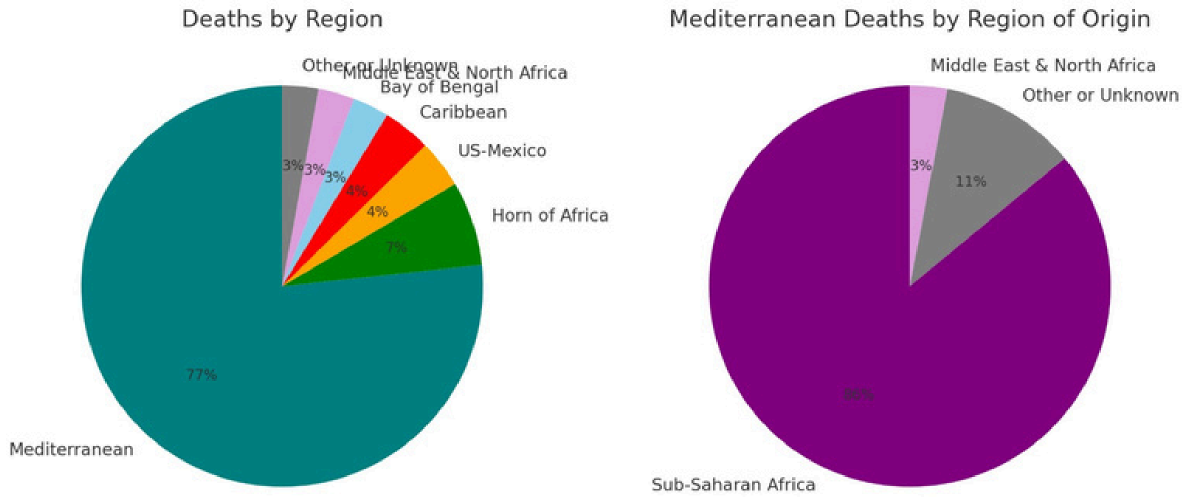


Figure 3: Global Distribution of Migrant Deaths by Region and Origin of Migrants Who Died in the Mediterranean (2015–2025)

## Reduction of Irregular Migration

PALMS is expected to drastically decrease irregular migration flows through the Sahel and North Africa from a migration governance perspective. According to the International Organization for Migration, 2023 report, irregular migration through Niger, Libya, and Sudan toward Europe and the Middle East remains a major humanitarian concern; in those routes, thousands of migrant deaths are recorded every year. This means that PALMS could potentially reduce irregular migration flows by 30-40% over five years through structured safe and predictable alternatives- an estimate based on comparative case studies in East Asia and Latin America where legal pathways were expanded IOM(2023). Figures 3 & 4 show that this is death is not only dramatic but also Mediterranean being the deadliest migratory route in the world with almost about 80% of all recorded migrant deaths early 2015 Majority of those fatalities were from Sub-Saharan Africa.

The economic gains forecast under PALMS, are not envisaged at the level of individual households or isolated communities alone. Such gains are scalable and replicable across sectors and regions. Increasing remittance flows can be leveraged by national governments to build their foreign exchange reserves, while returning workers, better equipped with skills and capital, will facilitate entrepreneurship and domestic job creation. There will probably also be greater financial inclusion as migrants access the formal banking system and previously unavailable financial products.

The five years impact forecast of PALMS shows that it can be a high-yield, development-focused migration strategy. If implemented in a structured manner, PALMS will have the capacity to deliver hundreds of thousands of legal job placements and formal remittances worth billions of dollars secondary tens of thousands of jobs and considerable reductions in irregular migration which returns the policy investment back to all regions it participates in a very robust manner.

# Chapter 5: Best Practice Comparison and Conclusion

### The Philippine Model of Managed Migration

The PALMS framework applies to the Africa–Middle East corridor. Global models that have realized the benefits of managed migration inspired it. One strong relevant example is labor export by the Philippines. More than 10 million Filipinos working abroad, institutionalizing international labor mobility, and making it a central development policy means putting it at the highest priority in that system. Two separate agencies oversee this system: one is POEA (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration) to control recruitment and placement of workers abroad; the second is OWWA (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration) for social protection services including insurance reintegration support (Philippine Department of Labor and Employment, 2022).

It is through this infrastructure that ensures the Filipino workers get standardized pre-departure orientation, contracts to be placed on which are government-approved, and welfare packages that comprise education grants, health coverage, and savings schemes. Consequently, in 2022 remittances from overseas workers amounted to about USD 36 billion, comprising close to 9 percent of the country's GDP (World Bank, 2023). These funds have helped not only household income but also national foreign exchange reserves, infrastructure financing, and social service expansion.

### Adaptation and Extension through PALMS

The PALMS framework adapts the strengths of the Philippine system to the specific institutional and demographic realities of West Africa, the Sahel, and the Middle East.

While both systems emphasize pre-departure training and legal protections, PALMS goes further by embedding multilateral governance and a stronger regional coordination mechanism. Unlike the more individualized, market-oriented approach taken by the Philippines, PALMS is designed to operate through intergovernmental agreements involving labor ministries, regional economic communities such as ECOWAS, and policy platforms such as the Arab League.

By harmonizing skills certification across countries and coordinating labor quotas based on demand forecasts, PALMS introduces a level of strategic planning that is particularly suited to regions with overlapping migration and security challenges. The inclusion of reintegration schemes, portable benefits, and remittance management systems also reflects lessons learned from Asia while addressing Africa’s higher vulnerability to irregular migration and financial exclusion.

**Conclusion: Migration as Shared Economic Strategy**

Migration is usually perceived as a crisis—a sudden, unmanageable problem at the borders which must be contained through deterrence. This view does not account for the economic logic of human mobility, particularly in areas where demographic pressure and labor demand articulate not only as complementary but also because an historic, geographic pathway links them with shared interests. The Pan-Regional Labor Mobility and Skills Partnership (PALMS) presents an alternative way of managing crisis migration; it reinterprets migration as a development tool and strategic investment in regional security, economic stability, and inclusive growth.

The labor force in West Africa and the Sahel is huge, and increasing but the countries face challenges in domestic population absorption due to weak private sectors, political instability, and under-resourced education systems (World Bank, 2023; United Nations, 2023). Meanwhile, Middle Eastern economies rely on immigrant workers to sustain and expand their main industries even diversification strategies such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 require them (ILO, 2022). Migration between these places is not very formal though these economic realities prevail. So many people are left unprotected from exploitation. On the other hand, unregulated migration bars development from gaining huge positive spillovers.

Bilateral employment pathways, alongside skills training hubs, labor rights enforcement mechanisms, and remittance-linked reintegration schemes are what the PALMS framework embodies as a multipronged integrated solution to several problems at once. This will not only curb irregular migration and youth unemployment but also promote financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, and reduce insecurity in fragile regions. This will deliver tangible scalable benefits for both sending and receiving countries whose ripple impacts can go much farther than individual workers or remittance recipients.

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