

Skills Mobility and Public Employment Services

By Miguel Peromingo March 2012

"Looking at international migration solely from a national perspective gives a distorted and partial view of what is happening (...) It is part and parcel of globalisation, the combination of distance-shrinking technology and market-opening government policy that is bringing the world closer together."

Philippe Legrain: Immigrants. Your country needs them, London 2007

The challenge of skills matches

An African surgeon with a proven record of competencies and experiences is working as a taxi driver in Asia.

Numerous European countries are ageing, while Latin America is home to millions of qualified and mobile, but unemployed job starters. In Africa, there are countries like Kenya, where the share of people under 24 years is believed to be almost 70% of the workforce. Most of them are without a decent job.

A school drop out that has been doing low-paid jobs on construction sites for years and years might be better skilled than a graduated brick-layer. Besides laying bricks, he can also built stairs, fit roofs and do accounting. He is very flexible. But he will never be given the preferred choice in a job interview.

All this are examples of a lack in skills mobility. The post-crisis economy and the resulting labour market effects are changing the world of employment. Since 2007, Europe has lost almost half of all its industrial jobs. Worldwide the midrange manufacturing skills, that used to be the bread and butter of the economy, are in decline. The demand for the high and low range of the skills spectrum is thus increasing. 40% of the jobs that are done by "older workers" are not replaced after they retire. Greening, outsourcing and specialized technologies have strong impacts on globalized labour markets.

However, there does not seem to be a lot of occupational mobility to compensate those changes. According to latest figures of the International Organization of Migration (IOM) and the OECD, only 3% of the world population is moving to another country or region for work reasons. In the sense of career mobility, significant occupational changes still happen only at the beginning and at the end of working life with little skills mobility inbetween, Georges Lemaitre, labour specialist at the OECD remarks.

In spite of a decreasing number of employers offering permanent contracts, most workers are sticking with the supposedly save option of not having to change their careers, in some cases also because training for new skills is not offered, it comes with monetary or non-monetary costs that are unaffordable, or the new skills will not be recognized afterwards. This is true for those, who stay in their countries and want to change their careers and all the more for the workers that move their skills over the country border.

Skills discussion in the European Union

In the European Union, where skills mobility is basically facilitated by the philosophy of free movement, the number of actual moves across careers and countries is only slightly above the global mobility rate, meaning rather low.

The European Migration Network states that the skills needed in the future for Europe will have to come from outside the continent. In their recently launched paper on a global approach to migration and mobility they define mobility of skills as an overarching topic.

In order to make migration a component of a successful economic policy, the paper suggests, governments should look at skills mobility from different angles. Most cabinets have their ministries of interior or home offices overlooking the topic of migration as a security issue, sometimes adding the aspect of economic development. But also educational and cultural aspects, as well as employment with all its implications on mobile skills need to be part of the discussion about migration and mobility.

The European Qualification Framework (EQF), a reference scheme to make qualifications across Europe more transparent and comparable, tries to ease the immobility that results from keeping education purely national or even regional. It also tries to change the mindset of assessing skills when employing. The EQF focuses on transferable skills and learning outcomes, like level of responsibility, the job-seeker is ready and able to take, rather than formal paper records of qualifications and experience only.

In the example of the construction workers mentioned in the beginning, that would mean that the school-drop out would have a higher chance to be noticed on the job-market, because he might have a reasonable number of learning outcomes.

The EQF started in 2008 and has so far been implemented into domestic systems by 15 EU countries. It is developing into a fruitful dialogue on global level. 120 countries worldwide – Australia, China and India, together with the EU being in the lead, are involved in this discussion about global qualifications frameworks.

Initiatives of public employment services

If governments have recognized the need to create policies for the good of labour migration and career change, how do public employment services, as organizations, which are closer to the end-user, pick up the topic of skills mobility?

“They are well-positioned to become key actors in the integration of migrants, particularly less skilled workers”, Anna Platonova, Specialist at IOM says. A couple of examples show that public employment services are on the way to take up this role, and not only for less skilled clients.

In countries as different as the Netherlands and Honduras, the spirit of a wider assessment of skills is influencing the way the career advisors work in the employment offices. WAJONG Atlas, a profiling system used in the Dutch public employment service UWV WERKbedrijf, links work preferences and fields of interest to potential vacancies for lower skilled disabled people, opening a bigger choice of job opportunities for them.

In Honduras, the Ministry of Labour is taking in the fact, that most of the lower skilled jobs are done in an informal setting. The career advisors help the clients without an official job record to identify their skills and build a cv with them, even if official diplomas or certificates might not form part of it. The notion what a person can actually do and is ready to learn is valued as high as the actual written proof of a qualification. This approach combined with the EQF rationale would help the so called “unskilled” to not only be able to illustrate their skills, but also have someone helping to put them into workable schemes that are attractive to employers.

In Argentina the training policy of the directorate for employment is not necessarily linked to the current or most likely-to-take position of a job-seeker. It follows a long-term career plan and upskills clients for the needs of the global labour with its fragmented production processes, the allround use of ICT and high-skill specialization in new sectors. Over one million job-seekers underwent trainings between 2007 and 2011 and are now part of a workforce with higher skills mobility in a huge country that has strong regional differences and has been struggling for years to balance unemployment and social exclusion.



Bosnia and Herzegovina has started a pilot project for migrating nurses to Germany called *Triple Win Migration*. Triple because it helps Germany to close its skills gap in health care, it opens a new career chance for the nurse, and it also helps the sending country, when the nurse comes back after some years with a higher, internationalized skills portfolio. The project shows that migration does not have to be a nightmare of irregular residence, bad working conditions, and brain drain, but can be a well-managed process to the benefit of all. Monika Varnhagen, Director of the Zentrale Auslands- und Fachvermittlung co-ordinating this project emphasizes that Triple Win Migration satisfies needs of development and skills mobility with long-term perspective. This project is being extended to Vietnam and Indonesia, also for engineers and technical staff short in Germany.

Similar projects are already underway between South European countries and the Maghreb.

The fact that skills on the labour market nowadays need to be mobile, either geographically or throughout competencies, implies that the agents that can help with migration and education need to cooperate and keep mobile themselves. For public employment services this is core business.