



Transforming Refugee Response: RefugePoint's Impacts

Vol. 9: Shifting Systems to Open and Expand Labor Mobility for Refugees

Quick summary: *RefugePoint has played a leadership role in establishing labor mobility as a durable and scalable solution for refugees. RefugePoint has led in shaping refugee-centered systems, influencing policy and practice, and demonstrating that labor mobility can deliver protection and economic benefits for both refugees and receiving countries.*

System change description

RefugePoint has been a lead contributor¹ in establishing labor mobility pathways as a durable solution for refugees. The organization was a main partner (and the only partner in Africa) in designing and implementing the work of the Canadian Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP), the first formal labor mobility pathway for refugees. The program launched in 2018 as a partnership between the Government of Canada, civil society organizations (RefugePoint and Talent Beyond Boundaries), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Through the program, skilled refugees and other displaced people relocate to Canada on a path to permanent residency while contributing to communities facing labor market shortages.

The EMPP provided an initial proof of concept for designing and establishing labor mobility pathways in other countries besides Canada. To date, 12 countries in Europe, North America, and Australia have subsequently developed labor mobility pathways for refugees and others forcibly displaced or have created flexibility and accommodations for refugees within existing labor-based visa mechanisms.² Each initiative reflects the existing systems, priorities, and contexts of each country. Together, these programs demonstrate labor mobility pathways for refugees can be put into operation within national and international systems.

These pilots have involved changes in administrative processes and procedures at the country and regional levels, signaling early but meaningful systems change. Nations have also recognized the need for flexibility so refugees can

ABOUT THIS SERIES

RefugePoint partners with refugees to access life-changing solutions and transforms how the world supports them. This series showcases examples of how RefugePoint contributes to systems change, which we understand as changing one or more of the factors that keep existing refugee response systems from serving refugees adequately and equitably. These factors include policies, practices, resources, relationships between actors, distributions of power, and mindsets (beliefs and ideologies).^{*} This brief presents the results of an externally-led, participatory evaluation that draws on extensive interviews with RefugePoint partners, colleagues, and other stakeholders, participatory sense-making activities with RefugePoint staff, and document review. The brief summarizes what has changed, why change was needed, how change came about, RefugePoint's unique role, and the relevance of the change for refugees.

^{*} Kania, J., Kramer, J., & Senge, P. (2018). "The water of systems change."

¹ See [No Royal Road: Finding and following the natural pathways in advocacy evaluation](#) for a typology of roles (p.30).

² Countries that have established programs include Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, United Kingdom, and United States. Countries with emerging or pilot programs include France, Slovakia, and Spain. See Talent Beyond Boundaries [Refugee Labor Mobility Global Impact Dashboard](#) and [Displaced Talent in Europe webpage](#) for additional information and data.

apply for immigration benefits that were not created explicitly for them. As a result of the EMPP, Canadian policy has incorporated flexibilities for labor mobility programs. Some of these affected the initial design of the EMPP, including fee exemptions and flexibility around requirements to submit original documents or other evidence. Other flexibilities emerged later in response to the reality of refugees' experiences, including the program expanding to offer two pathways: one for refugees with job offers from employers and another for refugees without offers but with in-demand skills. The Canadian government also started using trusted partners, such as RefugePoint, to confirm eligibility for the program instead of directly conducting refugee status and protection assessments.

The Canadian government later adapted the EMPP to incorporate several other flexibilities in response to lessons that emerged during implementation, aiming to reduce barriers and better support refugee families. The program exempted families from income requirements that might have prevented larger families from resettling together. It also counted paid internships, volunteer experience, and incentive-based work as work experience for refugees in camp contexts. The program waived requirements for police clearance certificates from the applicant's country of origin for immigration purposes. Thoughtfully sequencing steps in the adjudication process reduced costs and burdens of traveling between refugee camps and capital cities. The program also permitted virtual interviews at certain stages.

Since the initial conceptualization and implementation of labor mobility pathways, mindsets among civil society organizations and governments about refugee-centeredness have shifted noticeably, highlighting the importance of building strong systems in the departure countries to support refugees throughout the process. Multiple partners noted shifts in thinking about refugees as passive recipients of aid to explicitly recognizing the human capital, skills, experience, and agency of refugees. These shifts have been acknowledged by governments engaged with labor mobility (such as Canada), articulated by civil society organizations, and voiced by refugees themselves.

By bringing concerns about protecting refugees to the forefront of this work among civil society organizations and governments, RefugePoint was central in defining roles among key actors more clearly. The organization also highlighted and addressed constraints and priorities of the "sending" side of the program, focusing on more than just the interests of receiving countries and employers. Through its refugee-centered lens, RefugePoint exerted positive system change in the labor

mobility field. RefugePoint advocated for balancing the economic needs of receiving communities and skills and assets refugees bring with their need for protection. As a result of these efforts, several countries have established labor mobility pathways for refugees and other forcibly displaced people and interest in those pathways is growing.

Why change was needed

Several factors underscore the importance of labor mobility pathways for refugees. First, the number of refugees globally has increased dramatically, yet opportunities for durable solutions, such as resettlement, have decreased. These changes require finding new pathways for refugees to secure long-term protection. Humanitarian agencies turned their attention to non-refugee visa categories such as labor, study, and family-based immigration visas. Canada created the EMPP because refugees' access to these visa pathways was uncertain.

At the same time, global workforce shortages have contributed to a slowing growth of per capita gross domestic product, inflation, and overburdened public services.³ Phenomena such as demographic shifts, misalignment between the workforce and the skills required by employers, and migration gaps have exacerbated these shortages. The combination of aging populations and low birth rates leaves many countries with a shrinking pool of qualified workers and jobs that are difficult to fill.⁴ Drawing on the skills of refugees can help alleviate the global workforce shortage. For example, Talent Beyond Boundaries, a leader in labor mobility pathways and the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) project lead for the EMPP, has developed an online talent catalogue with more than 100,000 refugees seeking employment in a range of fields such as health care, information technology, and hospitality.

RefugePoint's unique contribution

This evaluation finds that RefugePoint has been a lead contributor to the design and development of labor mobility pathways for refugees and other forcibly displaced populations. The EMPP was the first example and flagship program for labor mobility pathways for refugees.

RefugePoint's role in the EMPP focused on identifying skilled refugees in Africa who qualify for the in-demand occupations specified by Canada. The organization matches refugees to employers, prepares them for job

³ See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development publication [OECD Employment Outlook 2025: Can We Get Through the Demographic Crunch](#) for data on global workforce shortages and links with GDP (pps. 5–6, 13–19).

⁴ See [OECD publication](#) for data on migration and demographic shifts (pps. 68–84, 88–90).

interviews, readies them before travel, and develops and coordinates all necessary pre-departure processes in the departure country (Kenya). Supported largely by private funding, RefugePoint worked extensively with key stakeholders in Kenya, including UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to develop local systems for processing. These systems included language testing, exit permits, health screening, travel to and from camps, and processes for displaced people without refugee status. RefugePoint also worked with employers and settlement agencies in Canada to ensure a successful experience on arrival. The organization influenced the program in other ways, advising on the specific circumstances of refugee women (for example, their frequent disadvantages related to education and work opportunities). A partner from Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB) highlighted how RefugePoint's work with the EMPP resulted in a successful pilot in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia.

“There was an initiative in Nova Scotia to move skilled refugees there.... RefugePoint has been a full, active, and important participant in that effort and was able to identify, from the refugee populations it was serving in Africa, people fully qualified to meet the needs of Nova Scotia and successfully move people from refugee circumstances in Africa to Nova Scotia. [The EMPP]... helped demonstrate to the Government of Canada that this program could work, this idea could succeed. It helped really prove the concept for Canada that refugee labor mobility matters.” (Bruce Cohen, Talent Beyond Boundaries)

Through the work of RefugePoint, TBB and other partners, more than 1,200 people have secured a migration solution to Canada through the EMPP.⁵

RefugePoint advised on the design and development of subsequent labor mobility pathways developed in the European Union (EU) and beyond. RefugePoint played a technical advisor role to support labor mobility pathways in Belgium, Ireland, and Italy as part of EU Passworld, a project to design, pilot, and implement innovative complementary pathway programs.⁶ In 2023, RefugePoint hosted a convening in Nairobi to share its approach to identifying and referring cases in Kenya as part of the EMPP.

RefugePoint has also been an important contributor to the Global Task Force on Refugee Labor Mobility. Since its inception in 2022, the Task Force has provided a platform for states, civil society organizations, the private sector, and refugee representatives to collaborate, share expertise, and advance shared objectives. RefugePoint led the Departure Country



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Coordination Mechanisms Work Stream within the Task Force and led the establishment of its Refugee Advisory Committee (RAC). RAC members provide technical guidance based on their lived experience as refugees who have used labor mobility pathways and serve as ambassadors for the Task Force with states and businesses. In partnership with Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB), RefugePoint supports the RAC by recruiting refugee advisors and providing administrative and coordination support to enable their effective participation in Global Task Force processes and discussions.

RefugePoint has also been a strong and effective proponent of refugee-centeredness in labor mobility pathways and for departure country systems considerations. For example, the organization has emphasized the importance of allowing families to access pathways together versus allowing only the employed person to travel. RefugePoint has advocated to ensure refugee applicants receive a path to permanent residency, are free to change employers, and can move within Canada. Without this advocacy, there would be more examples of programs with time-limited work visas and/or those that tie immigration status to continued employment with the same employer. By consistently identifying and communicating refugees' needs, RefugePoint has raised awareness among partners and promoted concrete adjustments to program design. As Janet Ouma from RefugePoint stated,

“We're now hearing some of these partners champion a refugee-centered approach. This extends even to destination countries, where employers are beginning to see refugees not just as migrant workers, but as people who require a holistic approach to protection and long-term, durable solutions.”

⁵ As of December 2025, 1,248 people had secured a migration solution through the EMPP, including 393 who had already traveled to Canada. See Talent Beyond Boundaries [Refugee Labour Mobility Global Impact Dashboard](#) for additional data.

⁶ See [EU-Passworld website](#) for more information on the program, a three-year initiative funded by the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund that links community sponsorship to labor and education pathways.



A candidate completes paperwork for a labor mobility interview before meeting with a Canadian employer.
Photo by Diana Karua/RefugePoint

Levers of change

Levers of change are relatively small changes that actors such as RefugePoint can make that can bring about a bigger change in the overall system. RefugePoint has identified levers of change important to its work overall, all of which helped to open labor mobility pathways for refugees.⁷

Influence and advocacy. RefugePoint's strongest lever of change for this work identified across stakeholders was to provide thought leadership and influence key decision makers. *"RefugePoint was able to come to the table and talk about all of the different aspects of this that might not be obvious—for example, that there are many individuals who may have been displaced and brought in family members who aren't their biological children... They were also a really useful partner in helping inform not only the Canadian government, but the other NGOs and the employers who were in the mix as well."* (Sarah Wiseman, Shapiro Foundation)

Convening partners and stakeholders, leading by example, testing new ideas, and compiling evidence.

Through the document review, across stakeholder interviews, and in the sensemaking workshop these other levers of change emerged as priorities. As the first agency to implement a labor mobility program in Africa, RefugePoint led by example and was at the forefront of testing this new idea. Through its direct service work,

RefugePoint has supported more than 1,700 displaced people to apply for labor mobility pathways through 2025.

RefugePoint has also prioritized learning from the process and using that learning to propose adaptations to the EMPP and influence the future design of labor mobility programs. While building the necessary

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Sarah Wiseman, Shapiro Foundation

⁷ The five levers of change are: (1) Convening partners and stakeholders, (2) Testing new ideas and compiling evidence, (3) Leading by example, (4) Building capacity of others in the sector, and (5) Influence and advocacy.

processes in the departure country, the organization identified access and system barriers. RefugePoint then brought these lessons to both the Global Task Force on Refugee Labor Mobility and direct engagement with civil society and government partners.

Relevance for refugees

RefugePoint's involvement in labor mobility helped to expand access to durable solutions for refugees and to permanently embed this pathway in the toolbox of refugee protection. Nearly 2,500 displaced people across 26 nationalities have secured a migration solution through labor mobility pathways globally since 2018.⁸ Though a relatively small number, this demonstrates an opening of labor mobility as a pathway. Partners agree that there have been significant strides made in changing the narrative on refugees.

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It's given them a sense of hope that the world does care, that there is a way that they can use their skills, their language, and their experience to effect solutions for them.”

Janet Ouma, RefugePoint

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“There have been positive unintended outcomes for refugees as well. For example, young men in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya who saw no opportunities ahead of them were “inspired and incentivized” to go back to school,” explained Janet Ouma from RefugePoint.



Siyat poses before departing for Canada to begin a new employment opportunity.

Photo by Jessica Masibo/RefugePoint

⁸ See Talent Beyond Boundaries' Global Impact Dashboard on refugee labor mobility [here](#), which represents programs Talent Beyond Boundaries has supported and includes refugees who have received support from partners such as RefugePoint.

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Attribution

Elizabeth Frank and Francisca Fils-Aime conducted and authored this evaluation. Sarah Mutheu Nzioka, Patrick Guyer, and Amy Slaughter served as editors and convenors of the evaluation.