

Responsible migration management from the business perspective: the case of human value chains

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Migrant worker predicaments and human rights violations are prolific and well documented. Previous research has identified policy options for national governments and development actors. However, very little attention has been paid to the role of the private sector- large and small firms - in redressing the abuse of migrant labor as it evolves into a critical part of global production networks and trade. In this policy brief, we explore the implications of international migration for the operations and strategies of firms, describe the role that businesses and associated actors can play in shaping global mobility, and provide policy recommendations for both firms and governments.

Context

Over the past few decades, global economic trends and demographic shifts have jointly increased the participation and prominence of migrant workers in modern industry. Today, the large-scale recruitment of migrant workers is a major feature of the global economy involving an estimated 169 million international migrant workers — or 1 in 20 workers — worldwide (IHRB 2022). There is prolific media coverage of illegal immigrant workers and refugees, and government's role in national immigration and integration policies. In comparison, despite the scale of legally recruited international migrant flows, both the media and government policy dialogue related to international migrants have usually been sparse and narrowly focused on complaints regarding worker abuse. The roles and responsibilities of businesses who employ the legally recruited international migrants in the migrant-receiving or host country have been glaringly absent from both media coverage and the discourse on government policy. With business and labor (legally recruited international migrant workers) both missing from the discussion table, the cause of international migrant workers remains neglected even as their role in the production of goods and services continues to grow in the global economy.

This KNOMAD Policy Brief first highlights some of the emerging trends and challenges affecting legally recruited, relatively less-skilled international migrants in their host firms located in destination countries. It explains the complex dynamics of *Human Value Chains* whose role in global production networks is growing as middle-income countries become more prosperous and their populations age. Second, it demonstrates the vital importance of putting the forgotten business perspective at center stage in identifying a menu of good practices that employers - both large and small businesses - can adopt in redressing the abuse of international migrant workers in their workplace and fostering sustainable migration management practices into businesses' strategies and operations. Third, it presents policy options that host country governments can adopt to protect internationally recruited workers in their country's private sector.



Replacement Migration and Human Value Chains

Historically, the offshoring and nearshoring practices of firms in high-income countries were primarily associated with cheap labor availability in low-income countries. Offshoring meant moving production overseas, and nearshoring meant moving it to countries neighboring or near the home market. However, in the 21st century, economic growth and emigration led many low-income countries to evolve into middle-income ones. An increase in their wages and education levels led their native populations to start shunning low-wage, low-status jobs (de Haas et al. 2020), resulting in significant labor shortages. Today, there is a growing labor demand in traditionally offshoring/nearshoring destinations as varied as Malaysia, Mexico, and South Africa. Similarly, today, businesses with production facilities in the former Eastern Bloc states in Europe such as Poland and Hungary are bringing in workers from as far as Nepal and the Philippines (Hajro et al. 2023). This phenomenon, referred to as *replacement migration*, occurs at the global level when migrants from middle-income countries move to high-income countries, and the firms they leave behind them recruit migrants from poorer countries to fill the growing gaps in labor supply (de Haas et al. 2020).

The phenomenon of replacement migration is also reflected in international migration statistics. From 2013 to 2019, middle-income countries experienced a 7.8 percent increase in the number of migrant workers, whereas high-income countries experienced a 7.3 percent drop (IOM 2021).

The implications of replacement migration for the private sector are immense. The global mobility of workers has resulted in complex transnational migrant worker recruitment networks, management practices and challenges. In this Policy Brief, we discuss these multiple issues under one definitional umbrella term *Human Value Chains* (see Gordon 2017).

In nearly all migrant host countries, visa regulations require employers to hire foreign workers while they are still in their place of origin or home country. Because few companies have the capacity to dispatch their own recruiters, it is estimated that nearly 80 percent of documented migrant workers are recruited via intermediaries (Gordon 2017). For instance, in the Netherlands alone, there are 3,600 employment agencies that fill a critical role in recruiting Eastern European and non-EU workers (Berghege et al. 2018).

There is a large body of evidence that many intermediaries engage in unethical business practices, maintain ties with human traffickers, and charge workers inflated fees for recruitment and placement (Faraday 2022). In some countries, the average recruitment fee is the equivalent of several years of a worker's future wage (ICCR 2017). Most workers have no option but to borrow the recruitment fee from private moneylenders, often at outrageous monthly interest rates of 10 percent or higher (UN Situation Report 2017). These loans can easily leave individuals in debt bondage, especially when their earnings abroad fall short of the recruiters' promises. In addition to recruiters, businesses also hire additional brokers to assist with the required documentation, conduct medical tests, and organize transit within applicants' home countries as well as cross-border travel. And in many host countries, the renewal of work visas is just as complicated, costly, and subject to corruption as the original work permits or visas.

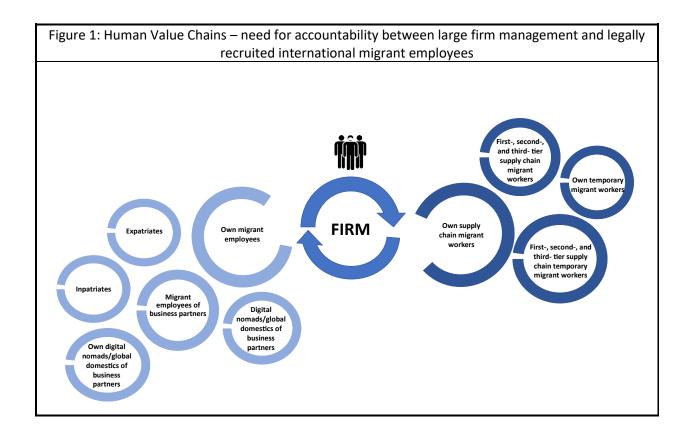
To date, studies of international worker mobility in the business context have focused on corporate expatriates and more recently, on high-skilled migrants and refugees. Meanwhile, discussions of *Human Value Chains* are virtually missing from business studies and business school coursework.



Figure 1 below provides an overview of different types of migrant employees and workers that firms recruit and who they should be held accountable to.

This policy brief focuses on migrant workers employed in lower-status positions (the right side of the visual illustration), whether by a firm, its business partners, or first-, second-, and third-tier suppliers.

There is a big variation in how firms treat migrants. Evidently, some violate workers' human and labor rights, as it has been exposed by the highly publicized scandals that shook the food, electronics, and consumer goods industries. However, there are also some best-practice examples that offer useful lessons for businesses but have received less attention in policy circles.



The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) recognize the private sector as a *partner* in achieving migration related Sustainable Development Goals' (SDG) targets. The combined revenues of the world's 500 largest corporations account for more than a third of the global GDP (Fortune 2022). Firms are among the most successful and long-lived forms of secular organization (Buckley 2022). Hence, it is difficult to argue that businesses lack the prerequisite skills or resources to become the agents of change in their spheres of operations. Below we discuss the varied forms in which business can serve as an agent of change for internationally recruited migrant workers in host destinations.

Multinational Enterprises





Multinational enterprises (MNEs) are a key potential agent of change because of their economic power and reach. MNEs generally outsource most of their activities. Their actions impact the entire regional or global value chains that they orchestrate, including their first-, second-, and third-tier suppliers, many of whom are small and medium size firms.

MNEs are also crucial change agents as they can choose which recruitment intermediaries to contract, which Business to Business (B2B) relationships to foster or discontinue, and how to use their negotiating power when interacting with government agencies. In this way, they have the power to address human trafficking and violations of migrant workers' labor rights, lend support for the legal identity of migrants, and strengthen equal opportunities for migrants directly and indirectly.

MNEs should be concerned with responsible Human Value Chain management for two significant reasons. First, civil society's expectations of MNEs have grown significantly in recent decades. Consumers, investors, shareholders, and civil society all pay close attention to MNEs governance and compliance practices. A growing number of indices and benchmarks, like the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) framework, are now routinely used to evaluate and compare the human rights commitment and corporate social responsibility of MNEs. Reputation is an important currency in the business world, and an imperative for sustaining the license to operate.

Second, there is a strong business case for responsible migration management in MNEs. Staffing shortages and demand for workers to fill open positions is apparent everywhere. In the face of stiff competition for labor, MNEs need to attract and retain migrant workers to run their operations, meet their clients' targets and remain competitive.

Who should be responsible for migration management within MNEs? The driving force of due diligence for safeguarding migrant rights in MNEs should be a large circle of executives committed to the proper implementation of adequate policies and practices. These executives should be anchored within C-Level, Human Resource Management (HRM), Operations, Compliance, Sustainability, Diversity and Inclusion, and Public Relations units. They should use their mandate to communicate and hook up with other departments, unions and labor associations, as well as across the MNEs supply chains and work together toward joint solutions.

One example of *responsible migration management within MNEs* is the clothing/apparel company *Patagonia*, headquartered in California. It first established its standards for protecting migrant workers internally, then announced them to its first-tier suppliers in Taiwan where audits had spotted instances of forced labor. The company arranged in-person meetings including its Chief Operating Officer, directors of supply chains, and executives responsible for social and environmental responsibility. According to Patagonia's staff: "It was important to show [our suppliers] that the company is united behind this *standard*; this is not just important to the social and environmental responsibility department, but to the entire company. Through the in-person meeting, Patagonia also made clear to its suppliers that it would work with them to implement improvements, not just leave them alone to change the way things have been done for decades on their own." Afterward, the standards were further communicated to the rest of Patagonia's supply chain, including the second-tier suppliers in other countries (ICCR 2017).

In the electronics industry, *Hewlett Packard* (HP) introduced specific standards for the recruitment and employment of foreign workers after realizing that they faced challenges that were distinct from those of





local workers. The "HP Foreign Migrant Worker Standard" was published in 2014 (HP 2014). It requires written job contracts in migrant workers' language and prohibits charging the workers recruitment fees or withholding of any identity documentation. Like Patagonia, HP worked closely with suppliers to implement the standards.

A third example is global electronics manufacturer *Flex*. To deal with labor shortages in low-cost locations, Flex's leadership restructured its Human Resource Department, introducing new units across various countries to ensure fair treatment of migrant workers. Flex allocated over 400 of its staff members to deal specifically with migration related issues (Hajro et al. 2022).

The examples of Patagonia, Hewlett Packard, and Flex show that these MNEs needed to have written standards, work closely with their suppliers, and dedicate sufficient resources to the departments that were accountable for migrant workers.

MNEs should also have migrant worker grievance mechanisms in place to facilitate a formal procedure for receiving, evaluating, and responding to workers' complaints, including remedies to solve them. There are different types of grievance mechanisms: direct workplace mechanisms (e.g., HR complaint processes, whistleblower hotlines/apps, company ombudsman), supply chain mechanisms (e.g., B2B contract clauses, firm requirements for supplier conduct, third party auditing), and state-based mechanisms (e.g., OECD National Contact Points or national hotlines, like UK Modern Slavery helpline) (twentyfifty 2022).

Small- and medium- size enterprises

According to the World Bank, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) account for nearly 90 percent of businesses and over 50 percent of employment worldwide, and they contribute 40 percent or more of Gross Domestic product (GDP) in low-income countries (World Bank 2023). However, when it comes to responsible migrant workforce management, SMEs face great challenges. The needed company infrastructure for responsible migrant management requires both human and financial resources which SMEs usually lack.

First, SMEs depend heavily on their founders and have less access to talent to fill key positions. As a result, they do not have the skilled and specialized human resources that are needed to implement sustainable migrant workforce management policies and practices. They are often not as attractive to skilled workers because they cannot afford formal training programs, graduate schemes, and many other benefits that large corporations offer.

Second, SMEs are less likely than MNEs to obtain bank loans. The International Finance Corporation estimates that 65 million firms, or 40 percent of formal micro, small and medium enterprises in developing countries, have an unmet financing need of \$5.2 trillion every year. East Asia and the Pacific accounts for the largest share (46%) of the total global finance gap and is followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (23%) and Europe and Central Asia (15%) (World Bank 2023).

Due to the paucity of skills and financial resources, SMEs are prone to nepotism, corruption, and exploitative labor force management practices. From the perspective of *Human Value Chains*, SMEs can easily become entangled in the structural culture of corruption since they are often unable to afford the real costs of recruitment or what labor brokers charge prospective migrants for working abroad and visa renewal.



In a nutshell, SMEs may be culprits of human and labor right abuses of migrant workers. But, if nudged by policy and provided adequate support, the SME sector has the potential to become an important contributor to responsible migration management solutions.

Industry Alliances

In recent years, there has been a rise of industry alliances that address human and labor rights issues in global supply chains. Companies that operate in several industries commonly maintain memberships in more than one such association. This type of collaboration allows for faster information exchange, creation of shared standards, unified auditing procedures, and joint lobbying to influence national governments. Alliances also provide their members with self-assessment tools and organize supplier training.

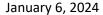
As an example, to support their member companies, the Responsible Business Alliance in the electronics industry and The Consumer Goods Forum have established assessment frameworks and provide tools for due diligence on forced labor issues. Members are asked to implement these measures as part of their quality control (Hajro et al. 2022).

Companies' responses to the new industry norms vary. On the one hand, by becoming members of industry alliances, they become subject to public exposure. Adopting more rigorous standards for auditing increases the likelihood of problematic findings which can lead to negative publicity and jeopardize firms' social licenses to operate in challenging markets (Hajro et al. 2022). On the other hand, the work of industry alliances reveals that people management problems can occur anywhere, i.e., everybody is "in the same boat." In fact, transparency can be leveraged as a competitive advantage. Examples of companies that have allowed negative findings of their migrant workforce assessments to be made publicly accessible include The Coca-Cola Company and Patagonia in Taiwan, HP in Malaysia, the Migros Group in India and China, and Marks & Spencer in several locations (ICCR 2017; CGF 2019).

The World Employment Confederation (WEC) is another important industry actor. It represents the recruitment industry at the global level. WEC includes national associations from 50 countries and seven of the largest recruitment companies, like the Adecco Group, ManpowerGroup and Kelly Services. It brings together 190,000 employment agencies and 3.7 million HR specialists (WEC 2023).

National associations that have WEC membership should commit to International Labor Organization (ILO) Private Employment Agencies Convention No. 181 (C181) that calls for adequate protection of migrant workers during the recruitment process and prevention of fraudulent practices in placement and employment (ILO 2017). However, as of today, only 37 countries have ratified the C181 (WEC 2022). Moreover, WEC does not include among its members some of the national associations from the Global South, such as the Nepalese Association of Foreign Employment or the Bangladeshi Association of International Recruitment Agencies because these associations have difficulties in meeting WEC membership standards.

WEC has the potential to increase the number of countries that ratify C181. As an example, in Egypt, the ratification of C181 would align well with its new labor legislative framework. There are also countries that already have the core principles of C181 embedded in their current legislations even though they have not officially ratified the Convention yet (WEC 2022). Their ratification efforts could be further





strengthened by leveraging the expertise and capabilities of the seven leading recruitment companies that are part of WEC. These companies understand the economic trends that drive the labor market needs, and they could support WEC in bridging the dialogue gap between supporters and opponents of C181 ratification. They are well equipped with tools to analyze, develop, and communicate practical ways of how to push the ethical recruitment agenda worldwide.

Consultancies

Recent research has emphasized the importance of labor inspections in protecting migrant workers in precarious situations (Faraday 2022). Labor inspectorates are, typically, national bodies that check employers' compliance with legal provisions for health and safety at work (ILO 2011).

Private sector consultancies, especially those that specialize in helping businesses to implement and monitor responsible approaches in their operations, often in alignment with the corporate social responsibility and/or ESG goals can also become important agents of change for protecting migrant workers rights. There are at least two good examples: LRQA Sustainability headquartered in Hong Kong with offices around the world, and twentyfifty with operations in the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, India and Kenya.

The expertise at LRQA Sustainability is on developing and managing "data driven sustainability linked programs with assessment, advisory, program management and analytics" for companies that seek to improve social sustainability in their global supply chains (ELEVATE 2023). The company conducts up to 20,000 audits per year, collecting data on migrant workforce demographics (age, gender, country and increasingly, even province, of origin), as well as recruitment fees, wages, working hours, and more.

Similarly, twentyfifty, consults businesses on how to develop "strategic yet practical approaches to respect human rights and, ultimately, address many related social sustainability issues" in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the SDGs (twentyfifty 2023). They conduct field research, have an advisory panel of international lawyers to keep track of legislative changes, and collaborate with governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other consultancies in the field.

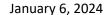
These two examples show that the job of consultancies does not end with detecting violations in *Human Value Chains* of companies. Instead, their ultimate service is to support the implementation of social sustainability of firms, in alignment with the financial performance that they need to maintain their operations.

Policy recommendations

The key message of this KNOMAD Policy Brief is that business leaders should be at the table together with policy makers and migration experts to tackle existing challenges, build avenues for collaboration, and drive an efficient and fair approach to global human mobility.

Recommendations for businesses

1. MNEs and SMEs should introduce specific migration management policies into their due diligence practices related to the human rights of workers. It is easy to forget that migrant workers' rights are



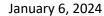


a relatively new feature for corporate due diligence.

- 2. MNEs and SMEs should implement responsible corporate practices for managing migrant workforces that can be turned into prompt responses, especially in times of crisis. These include:
 - a. Incorporate Human Value Chain-specific concerns into the Code of Conduct.
 - b. Adhere to "Employer Pays Principle"—commit to reimbursement of fees incurred by migrant workers (IHRB 2022). In times of crises, like unforeseen repatriations during Covid-19, speed up the reimbursement process.
 - c. Operate anonymous helplines in the languages of migrant workers so that they can express grievances such as workplace exploitation, confiscation of legal documents, and problems with occupational health and safety standards. If this is not possible due to company size or lack of resources, partner up with existing national or NGO-run helplines.
- 3. MNEs should monitor and communicate responsible migrant workforce management standards across their supply chains. They should have a Supplier Code of Conduct in place and enforce its implementation among their first-, second-, and third-tier suppliers. If firms lack the necessary skills to do so, they should refer to industry alliances and specialized consultancies which are familiar with best practices and provide the right tools. Specialized NGOs, such as IHRB, Verité and KnowTheChain, know what is occurring on the ground (this can be a more affordable option, especially for SMEs).
- 4. MNEs can choose between opting out of supply chains in which they do not have enough control and continuing to operate supply chains where they can gradually improve the situation. Choosing the latter option is generally recommended. MNEs can also contribute to improvements at the supplier level in different ways. One example is liquidity support. MNEs sometimes pay SME suppliers in advance of order completion to establish trust. They could also include a request to redirect agreed amounts of money to protect the most vulnerable workers. This is just one of the ways in which MNEs can play an important role in incentivizing SMEs within their supply chains.
- 5. MNEs and SMEs should embed responsible migrant workforce management practices within all different areas, including HRM, operations, compliance, sustainability, and diversity and inclusion.

Recommendations for governments

- Governments should design policies that require firms to conduct risk analysis about human rights
 risks in their own business activities and across their supply chains. Existing examples include UK
 Modern Slavery Act 2015, Australia Modern Slavery Act 2018, the US Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention
 Act 2021, and the German Supply Chain Act 2023. Other examples worthy of mention include US
 Customs and Border Protection enforcement actions to prevent the entry of products made with
 forced labor into the US market, and the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive 2022,
 which obliges European companies and those operating in the EU to take accountability for social
 impacts in their supply chains. This directly and indirectly affects both large companies and SMEs.
- 2. Governments should incentivize and support SMEs that lack know-how and financial resources needed for responsible migrant workforce management. A regulatory environment that enables





positive change includes better access to financing and advisory services (World Bank 2023). For instance, it is possible to estimate the approximate cost of responsible recruitment of a migrant worker from a specific country. Thus, governments could support SMEs by subsidizing some of the real

- Governments should pressure MNEs to assume full responsibility for their global supply chains—nearly 80 percent of companies have low knowledge of the actions of their suppliers (Murcia, Panwar Tarzijan 2020). Governments could undertake the following:
 - a. Identify and close policy loopholes that are being used as an excuse by MNEs to reap short-term benefits.
 - b. Have an effective carrot and stick regulatory system in place. One of the forms of punishment that some countries, e.g. Singapore, use is to temporarily or permanently ban companies that are convicted of worker abuse from bringing in migrant workers (Ministry of Manpower 2023). They should also consider incentivizing and rewarding companies that have best practices in place.
 - c. Ensure that government policies do not result in penalizing migrants. Frequently, in an attempt to penalize companies, governments send migrant workers back to their home countries. Such practices do not provide a remedy and appropriate compensation for migrants (Faraday 2022).
- 4. Besides labor inspectorates (see Faraday 2022), governments could engage with industry alliances and consultancies, and assist with assessment tools and human-scale data on migrant workforce demographics, recruitment costs, and working and living conditions. Gauging the effect of workers' indebtedness on their wellbeing and productivity can also help states to obtain a better picture of the overall cost of migration.
- 5. Finally, for both migrants' host and migrants' home countries, governments could raise awareness among workers about their rights. Over the years, excessive recruitment fees have become so ubiquitous that they are "often viewed as perfectly normal, including by workers, who may even be suspicious of ethical agencies who operate without charging fees" (IHRB 2022: 16). Use help of NGOs and other civil society organizations.

Conclusions

The prevailing view in business research has been that human capital assets are location-bound, meaning, that human resources are a product of investment by national governments (like education, healthcare, and welfare).

However, as we discussed in this policy brief, economic and demographic shifts have changed the global landscape. Human capital assets are not necessarily location-bound. To foster development and to remain competitive, ever-more countries have to rely on migrants to fill their labor shortages.

But migrant worker pool is not bottomless either. Migration continues to be a stable phenomenon, with the great majority of people on our planet staying in the countries where they were born (IOM 2022). Thus, those nations and firms that are developing capabilities for responsibly managing migrant workforces will have a competitive edge in the years to come.

January 6, 2024



Of course, above all, responsible migration management in *Human Value Chains* is not about strategic implications. It is a question of human rights, ethics and simply the right thing to do.

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POLICY BRIEF 24 January 6, 2024



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Endnotes

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The research presented in this policy brief was funded by the Thematic Working Group on Environmental Change and Migration. KNOMAD, a global hub of knowledge and policy expertise on migration and development. KNOMAD is supported by a multi-donor trust fund established by the World Bank. The European Commission, and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH commissioned by and on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) are the contributors to the trust fund. The views expressed in this policy brief do not represent the views of the World Bank or the partner organizations.