

# INSIGHT BRIEF

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## Enhancing Humane and Orderly Labour Migration from Guatemala

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### Labour Migration from Guatemala

The Republic of Guatemala has historically been a country of destination, transit, and origin of international migration. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in 2023 there were 245,000 forcibly displaced Guatemalans, and 23% of locals expressed intentions to emigrate within the next three years (IOM, 2024). This emigration is primarily driven by insecurity and a lack of economic opportunities, with 56% of the population living in poverty, including 16.2% in extreme poverty, according to the National Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2024). Irregular migrants often face inhumane conditions from smugglers, such as dehydration, hunger, and death, with limited support from national or international organizations.

Labour mobility is seen as a sustainable alternative, promoting safe conditions for migrants and their communities as found by an Action Against Hunger study from 2023 (Acción contra el Hambre, 2023). While international labour mobility from Guatemala has existed since the 1960s, primarily to the United States, Mexico, and Honduras, it lacked regulation to ensure workers' well-being and human rights. In 2003, with IOM's support, the Guatemalan government initiated a pilot project to regulate labour migration, led by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Labour and Social Welfare. Almost two decades later, the Temporary Workers Program was officially launched in May 2021, establishing a Labour Mobility

### Highlights

Guatemala faces high levels of international migration due to insecurity and lack of economic opportunities, with 56% of the population living in poverty and many migrating irregularly under inhumane conditions.

The Temporary Workers Program, officially launched in 2021, has managed over 10,000 contracts, providing a regulated alternative to irregular migration.

Developed economies face shortages in technical and clerical jobs, with over 8.6 million new jobs expected in fields like transport, mechanics, and vocational education by 2027.

Aligning the skill set of Guatemalan workers with international demand, providing training on working conditions and rights, and promoting financial literacy for effective use of remittances and earnings is necessary.

International agreements and diplomacy efforts, such as the Global Compact for Migration and U.S.-Guatemala labour agreements, aim to strengthen legal pathways and economic opportunities for Guatemalan workers abroad.

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Department to create and implement necessary systems and manuals (Ministerio de Trabajo y Previsión Social, 2021). Since its inception, over ten thousand labour contracts have been managed by Guatemalan authorities.

Despite the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare's efforts, in diplomacy and commerce, to increase working contracts—from 15 in 2019 to 4,503 in 2023—concerns persist regarding the program's capacity to meet current demand and engage private sector companies abroad. Utilizing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs network, including Commercial Advisors, Consulates, and Embassies, is crucial for promoting the program and monitoring workers abroad in coordination with the Ministry of Labour.

Furthermore, approximately 150,000 high school graduates enter the labour market in Guatemala each year, yet the chances of securing decent employment remain relatively low.

A United Nations Development Programme report suggests strengthening vocational programs and governmental employment services (including those by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare), formalizing employment, enhancing government agency capacities, and involving the private sector (UNDP, 2024).

### International Labour Market Imbalances

The international labour market remains imbalanced, with demand for technical and clerical jobs exceeding supply in developed economies. A McKinsey's article highlights that current labour market tightness is not a temporary issue but a long-term trend (Manyika, Sneider & Woetzel, 2024). The article suggests that companies and policymakers should encourage foreign worker programs to balance workforce supply and demand, making diplomacy an important way to achieve it.

The imbalance in the international workforce results from various evolving factors, including the shortage of skilled individuals in developed economies and the lack of job opportunities in developing economies, compounded by

demographic shifts. Labour shortages are already evident in countries like Germany, Canada, and the United States, where job vacancies outnumber available candidates. Most European countries face an ageing population that is less willing to engage in clerical or physically demanding jobs. According to the World Economic Forum (2023), the highest job growth from 2023 to 2027 will be for Agricultural Equipment Operators, Heavy Truck and Bus Drivers, Vocational Education Teachers, and Mechanics and Machinery Repairers, collectively creating over 8.6 million new jobs globally.

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While the Guatemalan government is making progress with diplomatic efforts, the international market presents an opportunity to expand the number of contracts and workers in the Program, improving conditions for locals and addressing irregular migration. Enhanced legal pathways and strengthened partnerships with the private sector and international entities can further promote sustainable development and economic growth, thanks to the diplomatic and commercial efforts of its officials. Additionally, aligning the skill set of Guatemalan workers with international demand, providing training on working conditions and rights, and promoting financial literacy for effective use of remittances and earnings are necessary to enhance the program's effectiveness.

### Efforts to Address Labour Market Imbalances

Addressing labour market imbalances has been on the international agenda, with several diplomatic efforts, including:

- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015), with Goal 10 targeting reduced inequality and Target 10.7 focusing on safe, regular, and responsible migration.
- The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018), aiming to enhance pathways for regular migration, facilitate ethical recruitment, and invest in skills development.
- The USAID Guatemala Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) for 2020-2025, which seeks to enhance justice and security to reduce irregular migration by strengthening Guatemalan institutions.
- The Agreement between the Republic of Guatemala and the United States of America (2019), facilitating temporary employment for Guatemalan workers in the U.S. with protections under U.S. labour laws.
- The USAID's Agreement No. 72052021IO000001, addressing the Root Causes of Irregular Migration Project (RCP) (2021) and aiming to reduce irregular migration by connecting Guatemalans to opportunities for a prosperous and dignified life.
- The U.S. Call to Action for Central America (2021), launched to address the root causes of migration by promoting economic opportunity and inclusive growth.
- The Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection (2022), endorsed by 22 countries to promote regular pathways for migration and international protection.
- The Memorandum of Understanding between IOM and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (2022), strengthening the Labour Mobility Department and Temporary Workers Program.

## Conclusion

Guatemala faces high levels of international migration due to insecurity and lack of economic opportunities, with 56% of the population living in poverty and many migrating irregularly under inhumane conditions.

Labour mobility, seen as a sustainable alternative, has been regulated since 2003, culminating in the official launch of the Temporary Workers Program in 2021, managing over ten thousand contracts.

The international labour market is imbalanced, with a high demand for technical and clerical jobs in developed economies. Encouraging foreign worker programs is essential to balance this. Diplomatic efforts are crucial.

The Guatemalan government is progressing, but there are opportunities to expand the program further, enhance legal pathways, and promote partnerships with the private sector and international entities. Diplomacy is key as engagement with foreign governments will be crucial for the development of new initiatives.

International efforts such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and the U.S. Call to Action for Central America support these initiatives, though challenges remain in meeting demand and improving worker quality. Diplomacy needs to play an important role in the implementation of actions contained in the different instruments.

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- The Trilateral Joint Statement on Joint Commitment to Latin America (2023), by the U.S., Canada, and Spain, promoting safe, regular migration and creating economic opportunities.competitiveness.

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## EDITORIAL INFORMATION

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This insight brief was developed by Hugo Aguilar as part of the assessment for the School of Modern Diplomacy, with insights drawn from lectures, discussions, and research. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions of the School of Modern Diplomacy.

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