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Transnational Figurations of Displacement

Creating a way out of the maze Supporting sustainable futures for displaced persons

Caitlin Katsiaficas, Camilla Fogli, Martin Wagner & Benjamin Etzold

As displacement continues to rise globally, more and more people are ‘stuck’ in situations of protracted displacement, where they find themselves in a long-term situation of vulnerability, dependency and legal insecurity, lacking or actively denied opportunities to rebuild their lives. While the protracted nature of many conflicts is a critical contributing factor, there is considerable room for improvement in policies and practices to more effectively address protracted displacement—and an urgent need to strengthen responses. The complicated ‘maze’ of international, national and local laws, policies and practices often backfires, exacerbating precarity and preventing many displaced persons from finding sustainable solutions for themselves and from contributing to receiving communities.

It is not only the widening gap between the scale of displacement and the solutions offered but also the diversity of individual profiles and experiences that underscores the urgent need to expand the range of solutions so that more displaced persons can find long-term prospects. A paradigm shift that places people at the heart of solutions, meaning that countries enable displaced persons to make use of their own capacities, would open new doors for people to become ‘self-reliant’. Such an approach is not only vital for addressing existing protracted situations—but it can also help prevent those more recently displaced from finding themselves in protracted situations in the future. The lessons below highlight critical entry points for European stakeholders seeking solutions for (protracted) displacement.

Key findings & policy recommendations

1. Networks are a vital part of the resources that displaced persons possess and rely on and are a key source of information, emotional and financial support, other livelihood and integration support and even third-country solutions. EU stakeholders should leverage family and diaspora ties while also strengthening relationships between refugees and locals (inside and outside of Europe), including employers, to facilitate networking and livelihood opportunities.
2. Mobility can be an important resource for creating a livelihood and enabling displaced persons to utilise their assets. It should be seen as part of the solution. The European Union and its member states should expand migration opportunities for displaced persons to and within its countries that take their human and social capital into account—and policymakers can tap into networks to expand such pathways. Meanwhile, allowing for temporary return and circular mobility can enable people to maintain ties and businesses in their home country and thus support sustainable solutions.
3. Displaced persons bring a variety of skills, experiences and other human capital that they can use to rebuild their lives—and must be supported in utilising them and developing them further. European policymakers should expand opportunities for displaced persons to cultivate their human capital inside and outside of Europe, including through education, apprenticeships and short-term work opportunities.

1. Introduction

Intensified conflict in Ukraine has pushed the number of displaced persons across the globe past the [100 million mark](#) for the first time in recorded history, meaning that one in every 78 people worldwide has been forced to flee (UNHCR, 2022). Alongside a steady increase in global displacement, the gap between displacement and existing solutions has been widening for years. As a result, more and more displaced persons have found themselves in situations of long-term vulnerability, dependency and legal insecurity, otherwise known as ‘protracted displacement’. While the long duration of many conflicts is a critical contributing factor, there is an urgent need to strengthen policies and practices to more effectively address protracted displacement.

This is where the [Transnational Figurations of Displacement \(TRAFIG\)](#) research project aims to contribute, exploring how solutions can be strengthened and expanded. For three years, the project investigated why people end up in protracted displacement situations and what coping strategies they use. From more than 2,800 interviews with displaced persons, policymakers and practitioners in 11 countries in Africa, Europe and the Middle East, a troubling and consistent picture emerged across the countries covered: An all-too-frequent story in which attempts to build a new life constantly run into obstacles, barriers and dead ends. Hundreds of stories shared the feelings of uncertainty and temporariness and the sense of an endless wait for an opportunity that is not guaranteed—for a clear path to get out of a tangled maze of temporary solutions, year after year.

Contrary to common perceptions, people who find physical protection in a host community do not necessarily also find an environment that enables them to rebuild their lives. Current approaches too often fail to offer long-term prospects for displaced persons—and too frequently hamper displaced persons from finding their own solutions. This policy brief explores how the European Union can not only help displaced persons but also benefit from putting people at the centre of finding solutions to displacement and how networks and mobility can work as force multipliers towards this goal. The European Union’s response to displacement from Ukraine in fact illustrates the crucial roles that networks and mobility can play, especially when this is supported by policymakers, civil society and the private sector. Such an approach can both address existing protracted situations and help prevent those more recently displaced from finding themselves in protracted situations.

This is the final *policy brief* in the TRAFIG series and, as such, synthesises findings and policy recommendations across our major countries of study, in particular DR Congo, Ethiopia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Jordan, Pakistan and Tanzania.

2. Why should the European Union address protracted displacement?

The recent outbreak of war between Ukraine and Russia notwithstanding, an increasing number of refugees—[16 million in 2020, or four million more than in 2016](#)—find themselves in protracted displacement. While not captured in these statistics, internally displaced persons (IDPs) may also find themselves in similar circumstances. The majority of displaced persons ([83% at the end of 2021](#)) stay within their country or in neighbouring, mainly low- and middle-income, countries. With ever-increasing numbers of people forced to leave their homes, the number of people who cannot find sustainable solutions will also rise, particularly if the responsibility remains mostly with low- and middle-income countries.

Meanwhile, although policy discussions on protracted displacement have traditionally focused on non-Western countries, prolonged uncertainty and vulnerability are also a real risk for people displaced in Europe (Katsiaficas et al. 2021a; Roman et al., 2021). At the same time, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Europe is seeing its [fastest-growing displacement crisis since World War II](#), underscoring the urgent need to also prevent new displacement from becoming protracted.

Generally speaking, current approaches struggle to find solutions to forced displacement, contributing to the growing solutions gap (UNHCR, 2022, pp. 36–41). And while policies may enable displaced persons to find physical protection, this does not necessarily mean they have long-term prospects: Too often, policies restrict displaced persons’ mobility and hamper their ability to maintain and make use of their networks and other social and human capital. This includes:

- policies that confine refugees to camps;
- limitations to accessing work and education;
- a dearth of aid for displaced persons in urban areas;
- mobility restrictions during EU asylum procedures;
- difficulties faced when moving within countries, such as police harassment;
- SIM card registration requirements and other policies that disconnect refugees;
- low levels of resettlement to third countries; and
- slow and narrowly defined eligibility for family reunification.

Such policies hinder integration and prevent people from rebuilding their lives (Wagner, Katsiaficas & Fogli, 2022).

Protection from physical harm is undoubtedly the main reason why forcibly displaced persons leave their place of origin or residence. However, by itself, this is not sufficient in the longer term: Displaced persons need to be in a position to build a sustainable future. Host countries, and the donors supporting them, must create enabling frameworks for refugees to rebuild their lives.

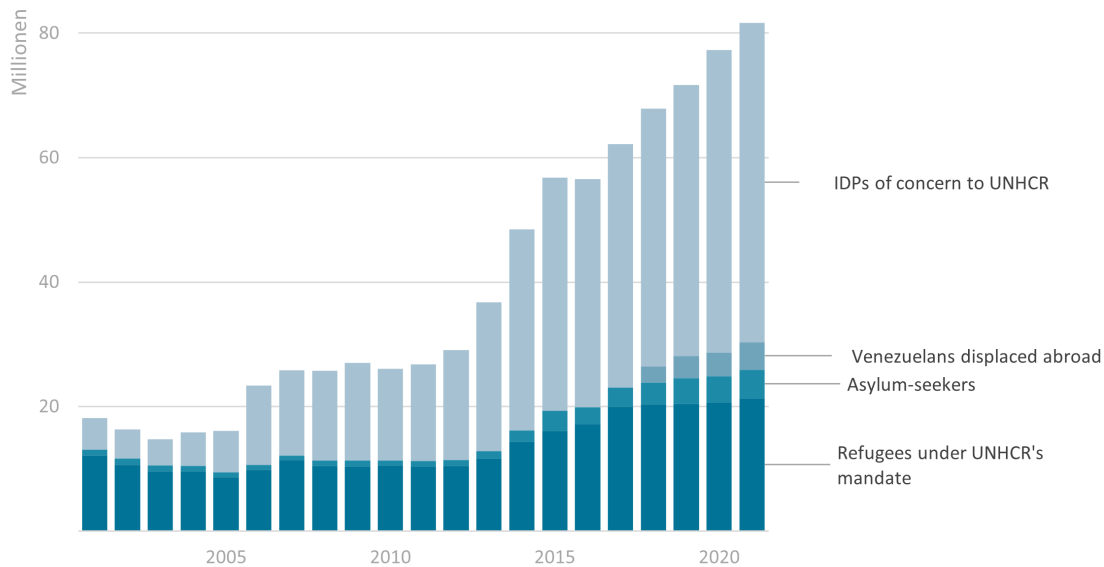


Figure 1: Displacement on the rise; Source: [UNHCR Data Finder](#)

Without an enabling framework, the exclusion and marginalisation of refugees lead to irregularity, exploitation and social tensions. Ultimately, this also influences aspirations to move on to countries seen as providing a better future, even through undertaking dangerous journeys (Etzold, B. et al., 2022). Addressing protracted displacement is not only an important sign of solidarity with major host countries and the displaced persons, but it is also invaluable for the European Union itself to avoid irregular movements, exploitation and human tragedies during onward movements.

3. Three doors poised to provide a way out

Rethinking and re-energising the response to protracted displacement can open new doors for people to break out of the maze of protracted displacement and become 'self-reliant'. TRAFIG research shows that:

Networks are a vital part of the resources that displaced persons possess and rely upon at the local, national and transnational levels. These networks include family members, friends, professional connections, religious institutions, volunteers and diaspora communities. According to the [TRAFIG survey](#), 42 per cent of the 1,897 displaced persons interviewed maintained contact with relatives in other countries—particularly with relatives elsewhere in the region and Europe, including origin countries. For around half of the interviewees, local connections were critical, with their social relations mainly centred around where they lived (Etzold et al., 2022). Local networking can be particularly helpful for accessing job and entrepreneurship opportunities (Katsiaficas et al., 2021c)

and supporting other facets of settling in. With limited access to formal support, personal networks emerge as a key source of information, emotional support, financial resources and other livelihood support, and even third-country solutions for displaced persons. Yet displacement disrupts the quality and quantity of such networks, making many dependent upon state or international support and more likely to live in protracted displacement. International, national, and local organisations also have an important role to play in building and strengthening displaced persons' networks (Wagner, Katsiaficas & Fogli, 2022).

Mobility can be a key resource for displaced persons to create a livelihood and make use of their assets. Mobility after initial displacement is the norm, not the exception. Illustrating this phenomenon, the [TRAFIG survey](#) showed a high degree of internal mobility and a frequent desire to move onward again in many countries, as well as considerable long-distance mobility and returns in some countries. These movements come in many forms, including family visits, business trips, seasonal work, family reunification in another city or country and resettlement, and thus may be shorter or longer in distance and duration and circular or linear. In many cases, mobility enables displaced persons to pursue opportunities they cannot find locally. It can also help displaced persons to maintain and leverage their networks, utilise their skills and resources and contribute to local communities. Mobility restrictions prevent displaced persons from making full use of their potential and their networks—and can even compel them to undertake irregular and dangerous journeys in an attempt to improve their prospects (Etzold et al., 2022). When laws, policies and practices impede displaced persons from rebuilding their lives, those who can afford it will

seek ways to navigate or circumvent legal and practical obstacles (Katsiaficas et al. 2021a). For some, these strategies may pay off but, for most, this will only lead deeper into irregularity and precarity, with life-threatening circumstances faced during displacement. Meanwhile, those unable to move are often forced to remain where they are and face considerable challenges to building a sustainable future.

Displaced persons bring a variety of skills, experiences and other human capital that they can use to rebuild their lives. This valuable resource can help displaced persons rebuild their lives, but it remains mostly overlooked and untapped by policymakers and programmes. If programmes considered the skills and capacities of displaced persons, smaller yet tailored support, whether in the humanitarian, development, migration, or integration domain, could achieve a more profound impact than broader, less bespoke support. For instance, those who lack the financial, human or social capital necessary to find a solution on their own are most vulnerable to becoming stuck in protracted displacement situations. This group may thus need more intensive support from humanitarian, development and integration stakeholders. Others might benefit from more targeted assistance to leverage their networks and utilise their skills to find sustainable solutions. Those with very strong human, social and financial capital, in turn, may require little to no support. They may barely enter international protection regimes, despite being forced to leave alongside other migrants—or not enter at all (Wagner & Katsiaficas, 2021c).

These findings are entry points for EU policymakers to intervene in the internal and the external dimension—in other words, to add more doors people can use to get out of the maze of protracted displacement.

4. Opening doors

TRAFIG’s [findings across 11 countries in three world regions](#) show how mobility, networks and skills can be crucial in the search for (durable) solutions out of protracted displacement. Is such a paradigm shift in policy beyond the realm of possibility for the European Union? As several recent examples show, there are precedents for enabling and supporting persons to move and make use of their networks and human capital, most notably following the 2022 outbreak of conflict in Ukraine, and these can be built upon:

A. The European Union’s response to the war in Ukraine

We are currently witnessing the power of mobility and networks in supporting solutions to displacement in the case of the [5.3 million people](#) who have fled Ukraine for neighbouring countries since the war started. With the swift activation of the [Temporary Protection Directive](#), EU member states agreed to grant immediate temporary residence permits and access to education, housing and the labour market—ultimately proving that greater flexibility, timeliness and cooperation are in fact possible.

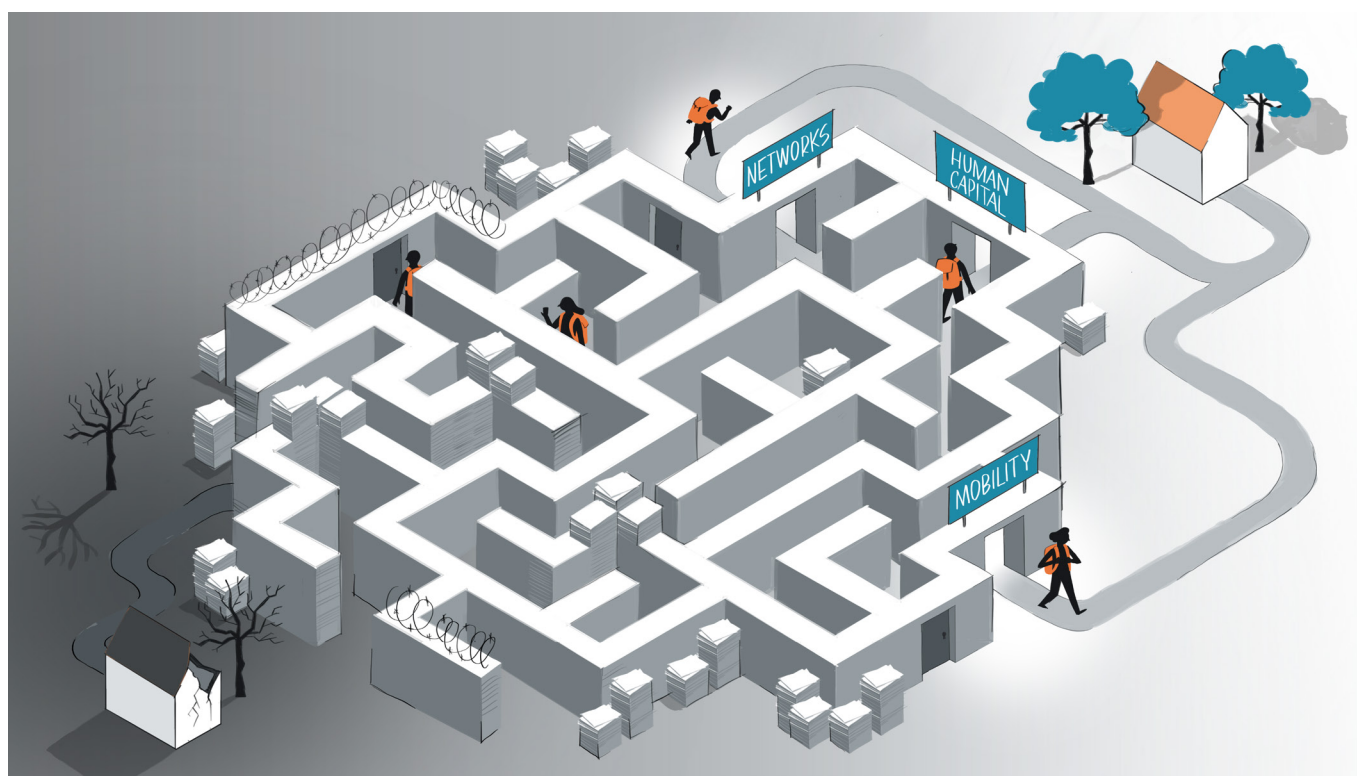


Figure 2: Doors for existing protracted displacement
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Temporary protection and visa-free travel (the latter enacted before the war) enable Ukrainians to move freely within the European Union for 90 days, giving them the chance to tap into their human and social capital to find a viable solution where they believe they have the best prospects of doing so. Many have chosen to go where their personal networks are or where they speak the local language, while diaspora communities and other volunteer support networks have quickly stepped up to welcome new arrivals and help them find housing and jobs. Those initially fleeing to Moldova have been able to travel on to Romania and other EU member states, and several EU countries [agreed to transfer](#) those deemed most vulnerable from Moldova to ease pressure on the country and share responsibility. Free [train](#) and [metro](#) tickets have helped facilitate transnational and local mobility for those already in the European Union. Also noteworthy, EU member states have thus far typically understood the need for some Ukrainians to return temporarily and have allowed them to do so without implications for their temporary protection status. Meanwhile, recognising the importance of keeping people connected, companies have provided Ukrainians with [free calls and texts to Ukraine, free roaming, free SIM cards and free Internet](#).

B. Pathways for higher education

Displaced youth often pay the highest price, having too often to give up their prospects and aspirations for the future. According to UNHCR estimates, only [five per cent of refugees globally](#) are enrolled in tertiary education. However, some schemes are working to increase displaced people's access to higher education abroad, helping them cultivate their human capital to find opportunities elsewhere. 'University corridors' offer refugee students in Africa the chance to continue their studies in Italy, where selected students can pursue a Master's degree free of charge and also receive financial assistance for travel, visa and living costs. This initiative operates through a partnership between UNHCR, Italy's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 32 universities and civil society. The approach has since been implemented in France, where the [Universities for Refugees programme](#) will begin admitting students in autumn 2022.

Other initiatives have been targeted toward Syrian students specifically. The [Global Platform for Syrian Students](#) was launched to provide emergency scholarships for Syrian students following the outbreak of war. Germany's [Leadership for Syria](#) initiative, funded by the German Foreign Federal Office and the State of North Rhine Westphalia, provides scholarships and language courses for Syrian students pursuing their Bachelor's degree and hoping to contribute to rebuilding their country when the war ends.

Outside of Europe, Canada's [Student Refugee Program](#) harnesses the power of networks to help people arrive and settle in, using the private/community sponsorship model. World University Service of Canada, a Canadian NGO, has a sponsorship agreement with the government through which 100+ educational partners and youth sponsors support more than 150 students

each year, who arrive as permanent residents. This approach thus combines resettlement with placement in Canadian higher education institutions. Additionally, several universities have taken it upon themselves to offer scholarships, and thus visa opportunities, for displaced students.

C. Pathways for employment

While some displaced persons already move on their own to take up employment, outside of the refugee regime, complementary pathways to protection that match the skills of displaced persons with the needs of employers in other countries have gained prominence as a tool for expanding access to livelihood opportunities (Wagner & Katsiaficas, 2021). Canada's [Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot](#) supports skilled refugees in moving to Canada using existing immigration channels while also providing a new source of talent for employers. While assessing candidates against economic immigration criteria, the pilot provides assistance abroad that is tailored to refugees. Australia established a pilot of its own, the [Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement program](#), under which businesses can sponsor skilled refugees whom they will employ in temporary or permanent positions. NGOs such as [Talent Beyond Boundaries](#) are also active in this area. This organisation connects displaced persons in major host countries with employers in Western countries using its [Talent Catalog](#). Such skills-based pathways support displaced persons in using their skills and education while also benefiting receiving economies.

For displaced persons already in the European Union, initiatives to support intra-EU mobility can help more forced migrants to take up employment and more employers to meet their labour needs while also tapping into displaced talent. Here, [Cedefop](#) (with ICMPD) has explored the potential of skills-based relocation between Greece and Portugal, while [moveurope!](#) supports refugees in using youth exchange, voluntary service, internship and apprenticeship channels to take up an opportunity in another EU country.

Since 2015, Germany's [Western Balkans Regulation](#) has allowed people from the Western Balkans to obtain a visa to work in Germany as long as they have a binding job offer from a German employer for which an eligible candidate in the country cannot be found. While this measure does not target displaced persons, it demonstrates the power of networks for facilitating mobility: An Institute for Employment Research (IAB) analysis found that most of those who made use of this initiative relied on personal or professional connections to do so (Brücker et al., 2020). Such a measure puts skills and professional connections at the centre of labour mobility, facilitating access to employment and enabling people to make full use of the potential of their social and human capital and can serve as inspiration for offering more mobility for displaced persons (Wagner & Katsiaficas, 2021).

D. Community sponsorship across pathways

Community sponsorship has received increasing attention as a community-based approach that leverages the support of individuals, civil society and the private sector to welcome more refugees. While community sponsorship has traditionally been linked to refugee resettlement programmes, it could be applied to a range of migration channels, supporting both mobility and integration in receiving communities for those arriving to work, study, or join family. Networks are central to the idea of community sponsorship: Sponsors help refugees find housing and employment, learn the language and navigate their new environment, and in the process, newcomers build relationships with sponsors and connect to others in their community. Some programmes, such as that of [Canada](#), enable sponsors to name those refugees they wish to sponsor, thus tapping into existing networks and enabling the reunification of relatives who do not fulfil the strict definition of family needed for family reunification channels. Many programmes do not provide this option but rather initiate the creation of new networks for sponsored refugees (Katsiaficas & Wagner, 2021; Etzold & Christ, 2021).

As part of the global response to displacement from Ukraine, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States have all rolled out sponsorship programmes to provide temporary protection for those fleeing the war. Some of these initiatives tap into family and other existing ties, while others rely on broader public support (Katsiaficas, 2022).

5. Recommendations for further tapping the potential of networks, mobility and human capital to address displacement

TRAFIG research in Africa, Europe and the Middle East showed that while displaced persons rely first and foremost on their own human, social and financial capital to build a more secure future, they are not always able to do so. An approach that focuses on displaced persons' capacities and resources—and enables these to be leveraged—offers a fresh perspective and opens new doors. Policymakers should allow—and support—displaced persons to make use of their own capacities. Simply put, such an approach can lead to more and better results for the people and countries concerned. Building on these approaches to leverage networks, mobility and human capital can help to provide more solutions for more displaced persons in third countries and countries of first asylum.

It is not only the scale of protracted displacement but also the diversity of individual profiles and experiences that underscores the imperative to expand the range of solutions. These solutions—whether in countries of origin, neighbouring countries, or farther afield—should be tailored to individuals, considering their differing human and social capital. This entails recognising the human and social capital of displaced persons that already exists, as well as finding innovative ways to tap into these resources and help develop them further.

Here are three central recommendations for European policy-makers on how to create more doors out of the maze of protracted displacement, stemming from TRAFIG's research:

1. Realising the potential of networks

The European Union should work to strengthen relationships between refugees and local communities inside and outside of Europe to build the foundation for successful networking, which can unlock livelihood and other opportunities and support local integration. This can be furthered by promoting a balanced narrative about displaced persons that includes information about their experiences and positive messages about their (potential) community contributions; offering intentional programming to foster positive interactions, such as arts and religion courses and entrepreneurship training; and expanding community sponsorship schemes.

Policymakers can leverage transnational family networks to improve refugee protection. Policymakers should understand the importance of family networks in helping displaced persons rebuild their lives and make it easier for relatives to support one another: Expanding family reunification, creating additional pathways through private/community sponsorship, facilitating remittances and providing material and technical support for host families are some options.

Policymakers should also look to diaspora communities to help ramp up the response to protracted displacement. They can help build connections among diaspora members and organisations and across diasporas, as well as between diasporas and development agencies, to create networks for sharing ideas, strengthening coordination, identifying business opportunities and building capacity for collective activities that can scale up support.

To boost access to livelihoods for refugees in Europe, policymakers should build networks of support for refugees and employers. Intermediary support is vital for making the talent of displaced persons visible and accessible to employers, including helping refugees to document their experience, sharing their curricula vitae with prospective employers, liaising with employers and supporting the interview process. Meanwhile, because many potentially interested employers are unfamiliar with the asylum system, a network to raise awareness, share information and connect employers to displaced talent is crucial for growing refugee employment.

To advance complementary pathways, policymakers should strengthen networks to, and expand their capacities in, key countries of first asylum. Development actors and embassies of potential refugee-receiving countries can provide spaces where refugees can learn about and apply for education and employment opportunities and navigate the required bureaucracy to move.

2. Tapping into mobility

Mobility should be seen as part of the solution—and providing more pathways to the European Union would help more displaced persons escape protracted situations. These migration opportunities should take refugees' human and social capital into account and include expanded resettlement but also go beyond this to include more opportunities for work, study and family reunification.

More flexibility in intra-EU mobility can enable applicants and beneficiaries of international protection already in Europe to use their networks and skills to improve their long-term prospects. Within EU countries, easing reception-related movement limitations, enabling family-related and work-driven mobility and strengthening transportation infrastructure between camps and cities can improve livelihood and integration prospects. Across EU countries, expanding skills-, family- and education-based relocation opportunities can help more forced migrants make use of their skills and networks to find a solution in another European country.

Leveraging networks can expand legal pathways for refugees. Family reunification and humanitarian admission programmes that entail a private sponsorship element tap into refugees' own networks to facilitate mobility and integration, while community sponsorship can rely on existing or new support networks. These channels should be expanded.

Policymakers can allow temporary returns so that refugees can maintain their networks and tap into their resources without jeopardising their legal status as refugees. Temporary return, or circular migration, enables people to maintain their ties and businesses in their home country and can facilitate sustainable solutions, which are not necessarily limited to just one place.

3. Leveraging human capital

Member states should expand opportunities for displaced persons to cultivate their human capital. These include educational pathways, apprenticeships and opportunities to gain professional experience through short-term work opportunities in first countries of asylum and third countries.

Policymakers should ramp up efforts to recognise the skills and qualifications of displaced persons so they can fully utilise their skillset in destination countries, benefiting both receiving labour markets and refugees themselves. Existing tools that can be used and scaled up include the [EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals](#), the [European Qualifications Passport for Refugees](#) and various national competence checks. Additionally, [fast-track initiatives](#) can help refugees take up skilled jobs more quickly while also alleviating labour shortages.

Policymakers should allow national and transnational mobility so that those with in-demand skillsets can follow the job opportunities. [Skills-based relocation](#) can enable forced migrants already in the European Union to go where the job opportunities are and build a sustainable future in Europe, while complementary pathways for work can help displaced persons outside of the region to come to Europe to take up employment that is commensurate with their experience.

6. Concluding remarks

Three years of TRAFIG research underscores the need for a paradigm shift—and that this is not beyond reach. There is a huge potential to build solutions based on displaced persons' own priorities, capacities and networks, thereby complementing conventional approaches. This paradigm shift requires thinking outside of the box and overcoming policy silos (Wagner, Katsiaticas & Fogli, 2022). This means that migration, asylum, integration, development assistance and humanitarian aid must not be seen as separate from each other but rather as interconnected and complementary policy areas. Solutions are never one-dimensional—and policies should not be either.

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