

*It is clear that, against a background of growing regional and intercontinental mobility, the consequences of environmental and geopolitical shocks will be ever more global. Looking beyond the currently unfolding refugee crisis, therefore, it is in the best interest of all OECD countries to identify ways of strengthening response systems and international co-ordination mechanisms capable of meeting the challenges of shock-related migration in the future. In that regard, analysis of past and ongoing experience highlights the fact that long-standing mechanisms to provide pathways to protection for refugees are no longer up to this task.*

*This edition of **Migration Policy Debates** presents an overview of some “alternative pathways” that could help take the pressure off the main traditional pathways for refugees in general and assesses their potential application for Syrians in particular. Some of these pathways are already being used to good effect and need to be scaled up. Others will need policy adjustments to be utilised. Overall, these alternatives can help provide safe channels and good integration prospects to refugees who might otherwise be tempted to risk their fate with smugglers and illegal border crossings.*

## Are there alternative pathways for refugees?

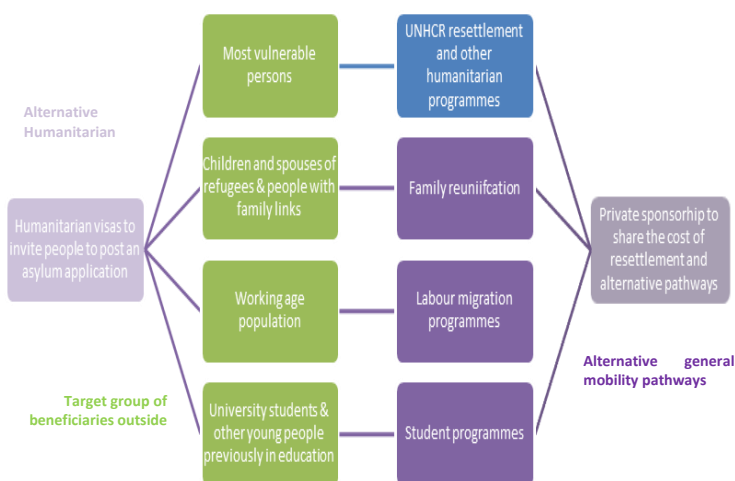
- Alternative pathways are channels of migration not necessarily designed for refugees, but which can be used by refugees, in order to avoid using costly and often dangerous routes through the asylum channels. They complement standard resettlement programmes. These pathways include labour, international study and family migration, as well as humanitarian visas and private sponsorship schemes.
- Using general **labour migration** channels for refugees requires policy instruments and employer incentives to enable refugees to compete with other migrant workers. Incentives should be in line with general labour standards for native workers, to avoid undermining public support and efforts to integrate refugees already in the country.
- OECD countries have mostly overlooked the labour migration route in their responses to the Syrian crisis. They have granted only about 18 200 work permits to Syrian workers in the past five years, even though almost 2 million 18-to-59 year-old Syrians have been displaced to countries bordering their homeland.
- Of all alternative pathways for refugees, **student programmes** elicit the greatest public support in destination countries, particularly in the academic community. Such programmes must, however, meet a number of challenges, such as ascertaining candidates’ levels of education in the selection process and adapting services to beneficiaries’ special needs. Although student scholarship programmes for refugees are the most expensive option, they have a valuable role to play in building a highly qualified workforce for post-conflict situations.
- About 15 300 young Syrians have benefited from student visas to OECD countries in the past five years. This may represent up to 10% of all displaced Syrian university students to date. Building on grassroots support, the student pathway may gain further importance in coming years.
- **Family migration** is the alternative pathway that can create the most places for displaced people in need of protection. Although international law and standards contain family reunification provisions for UNHCR refugees, people who have only been granted temporary/subsidiary protection have to meet more stringent conditions.
- More than 72 000 Syrians have been reunited in the past five years with family members in the OECD. However, family reunification of Syrian refugees remains quite low so far (about 27 600 persons) – partly because of delays in processing applications from refugees, and partly because the family reunification entitlements of people under temporary/subsidiary protection are more restrictive. As family-related migration offers ample potential as a way of affording protection to Syrians, it should be considered with more attention and less prejudice.
- **Humanitarian visas** are used to enable people to lawfully enter a destination country to file a formal asylum application. About one-third of OECD countries have developed this pathway, a highly flexible tool that complements traditional resettlement speedily and cost effectively. The non-discretionary use of such visas is, however, a very unlikely prospect, and it is more likely that more countries will begin to use them than that countries that already use them will issue more of them.
- Under **private sponsorship** programmes, private stakeholders share the costs of resettlement and other alternative pathways. Canada has been a pioneer in this and runs a large programme. A few other OECD countries use it intensively (e.g. Germany) or are considering doing so (e.g. the United Kingdom). Australia has operated a trial community support programme since 2013. Private sponsorship programmes require careful regulation and safeguards, especially if the sponsors can play an active role in the selection process.

## What is the issue?

People in need of international protection usually flee first to neighbouring countries to save their lives. Some may then be resettled in another country through UNHCR programmes or country-specific humanitarian arrangements. In case of protracted crises, others are left with two choices if they are unable to go home: rebuild their life in the country of first asylum or move onward to seek a better future further away. Large unmet resettlement needs have prompted much recent interest in alternative pathways, although a proper evaluation is still pending.

Alternative pathways are migration channels which, though not always originally designed for international protection, can complement resettlement schemes. There are two kinds – general mobility and humanitarian. Alternative general mobility pathways encompass labour, international study and family migration visas.

Alternative humanitarian channels are via humanitarian visas and private sponsorship programmes. With humanitarian visas, people can lawfully enter a destination country where they submit a formal asylum application. In sponsorship programmes, private stakeholders share the costs of resettling refugees or of facilitating the use of an alternative general mobility pathway. Such channels aim to increase the number of potential beneficiaries. The figure below illustrates the different options and links them to relevant target groups:



## What are the options?

### Labour migration

There are three broad approaches to consider labour migration as an alternative pathway for refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection:

- Helping refugees to **better access existing labour immigration** channels;
- Creating **incentives for employers** to recruit people under international protection from abroad within the broad parameters of labour migration policies;
- Drawing up **new labour migration programmes** specifically for refugees.

Any consideration of the labour migration channel should not lose sight of the fact that, under almost all existing labour migration programmes, it is the employer rather than the foreign worker who applies for the work permit. Thus, if the policy goal is to enable refugees to access labour migration programmes, employer buy-in is of central importance.

### Student migration

A large proportion of the world's refugees are young people, some of whom are in higher education or have qualifications that would enable them to start university or post-secondary education. In principle, many refugees could potentially benefit from a student pathway into OECD countries. In practice, though, there are obstacles to getting their prior qualifications recognised and applying for a student visa, as well as to covering the tuition fees and living costs or applying for scholarship programmes.

### Family migration

All OECD countries provide channels for family migration and recognise that family reunification is a precondition for protecting and integrating refugees. The European Union has a Family Reunification Directive that provides for family reunification subject to basic income, housing and health insurance conditions but most countries have provisions that are more favourable and longer-lasting than the directive requires. The conditions for unaccompanied minors and beneficiaries of temporary and subsidiary protection, which are not covered by the EU directive, vary significantly across countries. In the past few months, a number of countries have restricted the conditions for family reunification for these groups, sometimes drastically.

### Alternative humanitarian pathways

There are two main types of alternative humanitarian pathways, namely humanitarian visas and private sponsorship programmes. They are of very different nature. With humanitarian visas, people can lawfully enter a country and file a formal asylum request. Under private sponsorship, multiple stakeholders share the cost of resettlement or of alternative general mobility pathways, in order to lower the costs and thus to increase the number of potential beneficiaries.

## Which options are realistic?

The *OECD International Migration Outlook 2016* (OECD, 2016) carefully reviews and assesses the potential of these various options.

There are **three criteria against which alternative pathways must be assessed**: the **protection** that they provide; the **acceptability** for the host-country population; and the **feasibility** of implementing them. Although it may appear obvious, it is nevertheless important to emphasise that no single policy can ever be “the best” across all of these three criteria and that there can be tension between the different objectives. For example, a policy (e.g. temporary protection) may offer basic physical protection to a large number of people. However, the quality of that protection may be limited – it may not, for example, offer opportunities for longer-term human development and integration. **There is a trade-off between the scale and quality of protection.** What is more, the final policy assessment does not depend solely on how the different objectives are prioritised and how trade-offs are managed. It also depends on the time horizon considered in the policy evaluation, as some policy options that appear difficult or costly in the short-term may turn out to be more beneficial in the long term.

**The labour migration option, however appealing, may not be the easiest to implement.** Within the context of existing labour migration schemes, which tend to be highly skills-oriented, the number of beneficiaries is likely to be relatively low. Facilitating the temporary labour migration of lower-skilled refugees would have a much greater potential, but would also have to face the fact of forcible readmission to the country of first asylum or accept that most temporary workers would, in all likelihood, apply for asylum during or at the end of their contract.

**Family migration has potential as the channel that would offer protection to the largest number of people, even when confined to spouses and children.** The reason why several OECD countries have recently taken measures to restrict family reunification is partly the anticipated costs at a time of large inflows of asylum seekers, and partly to avert the perceived pull factor. The former could be mitigated through more intensive use of private sponsorship and through time-bound programmes with more favourable conditions.

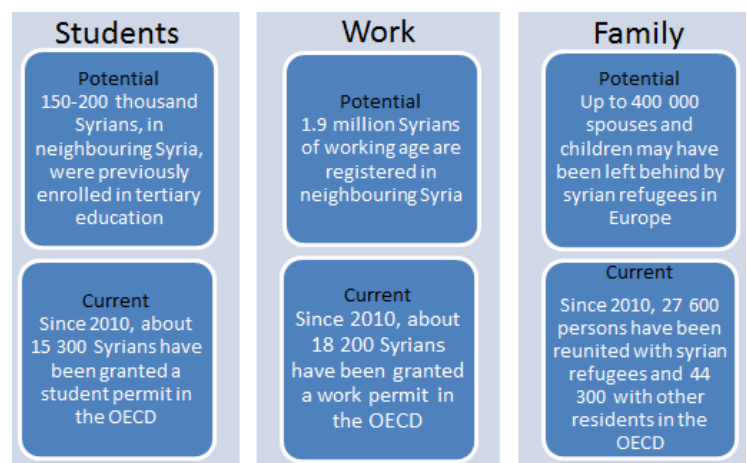
**Private sponsorship** (as long as its selection effects can be contained) **and student scholarships could both potentially get greater support from public opinion.** While private sponsorship programmes are,

by definition, cheaper than traditional resettlement programmes, their cost should not be underestimated. The cost of the student programmes is clearly the largest but may also yield substantial dividends in the long term when students become fully integrated in the destination country or return to their countries of origin and maintain their ties to their country of asylum.

Humanitarian visas are available only in a handful of OECD countries, most of whom make only marginal use of them. **If countries use humanitarian admissions to extend protection to selected groups of people, they could be a flexible, complementary instrument to resettlement.**

## What is the potential of these options for Syrian refugees?

The figure below provides an overview of the actual and potential use of alternative migration pathways in the case of Syrians:



It emerges that, **for Syrians, the labour migration route has been widely overlooked so far.** As discussed above, there are objective reasons why there is a glaring discrepancy between the channel’s potential and its actual use. But **clearly this channel is worth considering more closely.** Narrowing the gap would necessitate mapping the skills of Syrian workers and matching them with potential labour demand in destination countries. It would also require finding practical working arrangements with countries of first asylum to facilitate the mobility of beneficiaries of international protection.

**Probably about 10% of all displaced Syrian university students have benefited from a student visa in the OECD to date. That percentage represents a sizeable number that could further increase in the coming years** thanks to the strong grassroots backing for the alternative pathway of international studies, and many recent national and international initiatives in

support of it. Welcoming refugees into international student programmes, however, requires more than just covering tuition fees and living costs. It entails creating an enabling environment for study which takes into account the special needs of displaced Syrian students.

Unsurprisingly, family migration has already generated the highest numbers of arrivals. **Family reunification among Syrian refugees, however, has been low.** The reasons for this are multiple. First, most Syrians who arrived in the second half of 2015 have not yet been able to apply for family reunifications, or their request is still pending. Second, family reunification is often restricted for beneficiaries of temporary protection, which is becoming the most common status for Syrian refugees in Europe. Finally, the share of women and children has risen towards the end of 2015; and resettled refugees usually arrive anyway with their family.

By contrast, reunion with relatives already living in OECD countries has been relatively widespread and is increasing, a development attributable to the growing use of private sponsorship. Still, **the potential of family migration as a pathway to protection for Syrians remains considerable.**

## Conclusion

UNHCR resettlement programmes are highly selective by nature as they target the most vulnerable people. These programmes need to be expanded to meet the global needs for resettlement. At the same time, most of the people in need of international protection currently putting their lives in the hands of smugglers are not regarded as being among the most vulnerable and would seldom be chosen for resettlement. Scaling up traditional resettlement programmes would not be enough to stem the inflows of asylum seekers who arrive via smuggling routes, including in the context of the current crisis.

Alternative pathways – labour, study and family migration channels as well as humanitarian visas and private sponsorship schemes – can also be highly selective, though they generally address very different groups of people than those targeted by traditional resettlement. Student and work migration channels, for example, are more likely to consider people with greater human capital. Family migration and private sponsorship will, by definition, prioritise people and communities with more social capital and links abroad.

Family migration has been much debated in many countries but deserves less prejudice and greater attention as an alternative pathway. While it clearly

has the potential to protect large numbers of people, other alternative pathways cannot benefit as many people. However, even though they are smaller in scope, they should be seriously considered as part of the solution. The fact that they open new options to people who would not otherwise be resettled makes them a valuable complement.

One way of affording all potential beneficiaries a chance of international protection would be to allot a certain number of additional resettlement places on the basis of a neutral, lottery-based, selection process in which all UNHCR-registered people in countries of first asylum would stand a chance. Provided that enough places are available, such an approach could act as a strong disincentive against using smuggling routes when even those at the bottom of the list for resettlement realise that they could be resettled if they stay where the UNHCR registers them.

## References

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## Useful links

[www.oecd.org/migration](http://www.oecd.org/migration)

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