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# THAMM

● Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa

REGIONAL CONFERENCE N°1

**LABOUR MIGRATION RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS  
IN EUROPEAN AND NORTH AFRICAN COUNTRIES:  
STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL TRENDS, LESSONS AND SHARING OF EXPERIENCE**

July 2021



**DRAFT CONCEPT NOTE**

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## 1. Introduction to the conference

THAMM, which stands for “Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa”, is an international cooperation programme implemented by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the Belgian Development Cooperation Agency Enabel and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. Enabel has joined the THAMM programme in August 2020. This programme is co-financed under the North Africa window of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) by the European Union (EU) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

THAMM proposes to approach labour migration holistically, in terms of both technical dimensions (governance frameworks, skills recognition and qualification, statistical data and information systems) and end beneficiaries (integration of foreign workers into labour markets and assistance to national workers seeking employment abroad). As recent research from the European Commission's Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography suggests, “the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the government responses to it could reshape migratory movements, shift migration routes and alter the composition of migrant populations worldwide”.<sup>1</sup> **A better understanding of key trends shaping labour migration governance, in particular in a crisis of the nature, duration and depth which the COVID-19 crisis, is needed to shape and refine intervention within THAMM in North Africa.**

This proposed first regional conference offers to **share strategic and operational trends, lessons and experiences with regard to labour migration responses to the COVID-19 crisis observed in European and North African countries.** Through presentations from the latest research findings and the sharing of practitioners' experiences produced within and beyond the programme, this regional conference intends to:

- **take stock of current labour migration and mobility trends** observed within and between the two regions;
- **inform implementation of programme activities** among all partners involved in THAMM half way into the programme;
- **engage a range of labour migration and mobility stakeholders to help build consensus of practice** around establishing regular pathways including in a crisis situation;
- **prepare the post-crisis phase** building on lessons learned in 2020 and 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission's Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography, *2020 Atlas of Migration*. 2020 <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/news/how-coronavirus-reshaping-migration-worldwide>

A **second regional conference**, due to take place towards the end of the programme in July 2022, will be specifically focused on drawing lessons on mobility schemes and their implementation once more substantial knowledge is available.

## 2. Background of the THAMM Programme

The THAMM Programme builds on the experience of the implementation institutions in North Africa and beyond **to foster mutually beneficial migration and mobility for North African countries**. The programme addresses **both the South-North and the South-South dimensions of labour migration and mobility through regional dialogue and cooperation**. Planned over 36 months, it covers three countries: Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia and is inclusive of and open to other North Africa countries for sub-regional activities which will be invited to this regional conference.

The Programme is **aligned to existing policy frameworks** at global (Sustainable Development Goals, Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration) and regional (African Union Migration Policy Framework Plan of Action 2018-2030) levels and in line with national priorities as identified through a series of preliminary consultations and national workshops with relevant national stakeholders conducted in the preparation phase.

Furthermore, the Programme contributes to Objective (3) "Improved migration management in countries of origin, transit and destination" of the **EU Trust Fund for Africa** and in particular to the Priority Action II – Advancing mutually beneficial legal migration and mobility of the Operational framework of the North of Africa window. The action is also aligned with the **Valletta Action Plan Priority Domain 2** "Legal migration and mobility", and with the Communication on the Delivery of the European Agenda on Migration<sup>2</sup> that sets legal migration channels with third countries via pilot initiatives as a strategy for achieving concrete results.

The **Overall Objective** of the Action is to **increase mutually beneficial legal migration and mobility** and this is addressed through the following specific objectives:

- **SO 1:** Policy, legislative, institutional and regulatory frameworks in the field of legal migration and mobility in particular those aiming at enhancing migrant workers' rights and combatting forced labour, child labour and slavery are progressively established;
- **SO 2:** Mechanisms for assessment, certification, validation and recognition of migrants' skills and qualifications are improved;
- **SO 3:** Migration related knowledge and data management in the field of legal migration and mobility is improved;
- **SO4:** Mobility Schemes are established and/or improved;
- **SO 5:** Cooperation between relevant stakeholders in the field of legal migration and mobility, in particular job placement, is improved.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Communication from the Commission to the EP, the Council, the EESC and the CoR on the Delivery of the European Agenda on Migration, COM (2017) 558 final.

This Regional conference is organized more specifically as part of the implementation of SO1 and SO5.

### 3. Labour migration and the COVID-19 context

In an unprecedented turn of events in a time of globalisation, the **COVID-19 crisis has resulted in an almost complete closure of borders between regions of the world**, and within them. While these decisions were taken over a few weeks in direct relation with the urgent imperative to contain the pandemic, their immediate and longer-lasting effects on migration policies, and more specifically on the mobility of workers, ought to be appraised and understood.

The **shared space between the European Union and North African countries**, the Mediterranean geo-political area, is no exception. The 2015 migration crisis created a political momentum at the Valletta summit to address immediate and root causes of African - European migration dynamics and placed a renewed emphasis on the need to identify regular pathways for labour migration.

The **COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted 2.2 billion workers and economies worldwide**, according to the ILO, with the equivalent of 305 million jobs lost and 436 million enterprises facing high risks of serious disruption. Migrant and refugee workers have been particularly affected as many serve on the front lines carrying out essential jobs in health care, services, food retail, agriculture, and other sectors. Along with high levels of unemployment and the resulting loss of income, migrant and refugee workers are facing rising levels of discrimination and xenophobia, food insecurity, increased risk of virus transmission due to cramped or inadequate living conditions, and restrictions on movement. Many are also having to return to home countries already suffering high levels of unemployment. Migrant workers are also particularly affected as they tend to be overrepresented in the informal sector which tends to be even more harshly impacted by the effects of the pandemic as health and safety measures are typically neglected and social protection nonexistent in informal contexts. Recent research by Fasani and Mazza (2020) for the Joint Research Centre provides evidence to the fact that “(f)oreign born workers - especially ExtraEU migrants - are at a disadvantage [...in terms of] temporary employment, [earning of] lower wages and [occupation of] jobs that are less amenable to teleworking.”<sup>4</sup>

Another serious outcome of the crisis is the **decrease in remittances** which already affects migrant households and economies in countries of origin. The World Bank estimates that, due to the economic crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and shut-down, global remittances will decline by about 20 percent in 2020 and, for the MENA

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<sup>4</sup> Fasani, F. and Mazza, J., A Vulnerable Workforce: Migrant Workers in the COVID-19 Pandemic, EUR 30225 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Ipsra, 2020.  
<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC120730/online.pdf>

region, by 19.6 percent to \$47 billion in 2020, following the 2.6 percent growth seen in 2019. Dilip Ratha, Head of the Knomad programme at the World Bank<sup>5</sup>, calls for “Quick actions that make it easier to send and receive remittances can provide much-needed support to the lives of migrants and their families. These include treating remittance services as essential and making them more accessible to migrants.”<sup>6</sup> In a context, as in North Africa, where Remittance inflows have outstripped Foreign Direct Investment from 2013 to 2018, such a downturn could have dire consequences especially for the most vulnerable, most dependent populations. For the Africa region, North African countries (Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria) featured among the top ten recipients in millions of US dollars in 2019<sup>7</sup>.

These effects show in many ways **how important and useful approaches in terms of migrant workers' protection act as a buffer to the worst effects of such crises**. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed many of the fault lines of existing labour migration practices, the risks attached to leaving out workers in the informal sector and how important it is (and would have been) to better safeguard migrant workers' fundamental rights at work, their safety and security, their protection over the entire migration cycle, and of course their social protection, drawing on existing international fair and ethical recruitment standards.<sup>8</sup>.

However, border closure decisions taken within the EU, and across North African countries, have revealed the **endurance of the idea of territorial sovereignty** and could even reactivate conservative protectionist approaches to labour market integration, while possibly having the simultaneous negative effect of exacerbating underground economies of passage and labour exploitation. There is concern among several analysts that while the COVID-19 crisis is not a migration crisis per se, it may create favourable ground for radical pseudo-policy solutions, such as total border closure, walls, etc<sup>9</sup>.

In **Europe**, the Schengen space has de facto been suspended (15 member states have in fact taken unilateral decisions on the closure of their borders in March).<sup>10</sup> On its external borders, the Commission has issued on 16 March 2020 a temporary restriction on

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<sup>5</sup> The Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) is a global hub of knowledge and policy expertise on migration and development issues. (For more info. visit: <https://www.knomad.org/about-us>)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/22/world-bank-predicts-sharpest-decline-of-remittances-in-recent-history>

<sup>7</sup> Kalantaryan, S. and McMahon, S., *Covid-19 and Remittances in Africa*, EUR 30262 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020, p.12, [https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC121055/remittances\\_in\\_the\\_context\\_of\\_covid\\_19\\_africa\\_12062020\\_final\\_online\\_clean.pdf](https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC121055/remittances_in_the_context_of_covid_19_africa_12062020_final_online_clean.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Several publications have pointed to existing frameworks [Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) ; [Seasonal Migrant Workers' Schemes: Rethinking Fundamental Principles and Mechanisms in light of COVID-19](#);

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/south-africa-build-40km-fence-zimbabwe-border-200320062936120.html>

<sup>10</sup> Some analysts note the multiple consequences of the crisis on European common migration and asylum policy: <https://oecd-development-matters.org/2020/04/02/covid-19-consequences-for-international-migration-and-development/>; [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/tardis\\_bertossi\\_migrations\\_covid\\_2020-1.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/tardis_bertossi_migrations_covid_2020-1.pdf)

non-essential travels to the European Union, a few days after the American *Europeans Travel Ban*. The New Pact on Migration announced in September 2020 advocates for the abolition of the Dublin II framework and profound policy reshaping.<sup>11</sup> The European Commission together with trade unions, chambers of commerce and employers' organisations, is working on enhancing the integration of migrants and refugees into the labour market in the framework of the European Partnership on Integration signed on 20 December 2017 and the European Skills Agenda presented in July 2020.<sup>12</sup>

**North Africa** is not a free movement space and while belonging to the African Union and in spite of its commitment to such, remains dominated by national migration policies. But beyond the lack of an integrated circulation space, let alone a single labour market, several agreements between North African countries, in the form of visa waivers, "*conventions d'établissement*" and social security agreements, have for decades allowed a degree of fluidity in terms of labour migration flows between these countries. With Covid-19, international commercial flights to and from Europe and between North African countries have been suspended for months; borders were closed unilaterally by all countries in March and visa issuance suspended until further notice. The situation only eased up for some countries in September but reversals were also observed when the second wave hit Europe and North Africa with Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco deciding to go back to curfews and partial closing of their international borders.

There are however **encouraging signs of a degree of measure and of constructive intentions on both shores of the Mediterranean**. Most North African countries have taken steps to authorise bi-nationals and residents to travel / repatriate their family members; mobility schemes have not been cancelled but slowed down or temporarily put on hold and pre-departure orientation and screening and training has continued, often remotely, and, last but not least, development cooperation programmes destined to strengthen regular labour migration schemes have continued implementation. Many analysts are calling for lessons to be drawn from the crisis and translated into profound reforms of migration policies, particularly in terms of regularization and better protection of migrant workers.<sup>13</sup> Recently conducted research confirms the very critical role played by migrant workers in key occupations: A recent study found that on average, 13% of key workers are immigrants in the EU and in some occupations (e.g. cleaners and helpers and labourers in mining and construction), up to a third of key workers are

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<sup>11</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/cwp\\_2020\\_new\\_policy\\_objectives\\_factsheet\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/cwp_2020_new_policy_objectives_factsheet_en.pdf) and [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1657](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1657)

<sup>12</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1561](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1561)

<sup>13</sup> Some of the papers accessible here contain such analyses: [Historic shocks can bring about historic changes. Fixing our broken migration system should be one of them](#) ; [Regularizing Migrant Workers in Response to COVID-19](#); [Less gratitude, please. How COVID-19 reveals the need for migration reform](#); [Migrants' contribution to the COVID-19 response](#); [Four Reasons to Keep Developing Legal Migration Pathways During COVID-19](#); [Labor Mobility in the Post-COVID-19 Era: The Case for Partnerships](#); [Foreign, essential and undocumented: A snapshot of irregular immigration in Spain](#).

foreign born<sup>14</sup>. In some sectors, such as agriculture, native workers can only partially fill in the positions left vacant by migrant workers following mobility restrictions during COVID<sup>15</sup>.

## 4. Conference questions, expected outcomes and outputs

Therefore, in view of the uncertainty created by these various measures, the bulk of which remained unchanged until early 2021, and the already palpable impact on thousands of stranded and returned workers, **several questions** deserve consideration:

- What do we learn from current confirmed COVID-19 related labour migration policy decisions in both Europe and North African countries?
- What are key variables or factors likely to influence strategic approaches and operational decisions on labour migration issues in the upcoming months?
- What is available in terms of assessments on labour market needs and skills foresights in sending and destination countries? How are private sectors reacting in different countries and what lessons are they drawing from the crisis regarding labour migration and mobility?
- Has COVID-19 created new opportunities regarding the protection of migrant workers, for instance in terms of regularisation of jobs occupied by migrants (following the realization of their essential nature) or in terms of renegotiated bilateral labour migration agreements and social security agreements?<sup>16</sup>

This regional conference aims to contribute to **mid- to high-level labour migration governance dialogue aimed at policy makers and practitioners** on both shores of the Mediterranean with a view to the following outcomes:

1. Stock-taking of the labour migration governance situation, strategic and operational trends looking into women and men migrant workers' protection gaps and how they may be taken into consideration in THAMM's implementation and more broadly by regional stakeholders;
2. Identification of lessons to be drawn and spaces for further research and monitoring of identified trends in labour migration governance, taking specifically into account the 2021 EU agenda on talent ;

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<sup>14</sup> Fasani, F. and Mazza, J., Immigrant Key Workers: Their Contribution to Europe's COVID-19 Response, 2020. <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/immigrant-key-workers-their-contribution-to-europes-covid-19-response>

<sup>15</sup> Kalantaryan, S., Mazza, J., Scipioni, M., Meeting labour demand in agriculture in times of COVID 19 pandemic, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/annual-reports/meeting-labour-demand-agriculture-times-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>16</sup> In Germany for instance, new regulations for seasonal workers were put in place to facilitate their recruitment; see also communication from the EU: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/docs/pages/00\\_eu\\_inform3\\_labour\\_migration\\_2020\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/docs/pages/00_eu_inform3_labour_migration_2020_en.pdf)

3. Formulation of concrete and pragmatic policy recommendations to the EU Commission, to EU Member States (in particular those involved in the THAMM programme), and to North African states, aiming to strengthen the protection of North African migrant workers sustainably in times of crisis.

The conference's **main outputs** are expected to be:

- A **baseline discussion paper** synthesizing existing recent research findings on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on labour migration governance trends within and between the two regions (EU and North Africa) and showcasing THAMM's findings;
- A **conference report** containing the summary of discussions, key recommendations formulated by experts and group discussions, all presentations, and list of referenced research and practitioners' published works;
- A **series of video podcasts** of the conference and experts and practitioners' interviews;
- A **press release**.

## 5. Methodology and format

On the basis of this concept note shared with and enriched by all implementing partners, donors, and national partners through the THAMM programme governance structures, the ILO in close collaboration with IOM will commission **a baseline study to produce a discussion paper on “The Impact of the COVID-19 on European and North African Labour Migration Governance trends”**, which will serve as the basis for the conference discussion. Drawing on the most recent research findings from European, North African and international research, the paper will provide a synthesis of current labour migration governance trends in reaction to the pandemic across the EU and in the concerned North African countries and will also relate them to lessons drawn from existing data on the actual impact of the crisis on women and men migrant workers. This paper will be available ahead of the conference to inform and guide discussions during the conference.

More detailed methodology for the conference, identification of experts from the concerned regions drawing on research produced within the THAMM programme and beyond, and of facilitators for the discussions during the conference will be drafted in early 2021

The **target participants** will be invited from THAMM national partners' lists including practitioners and policy makers (Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia), enlarged to relevant international and regional organizations, and relevant stakeholders from governments and social partners, and as mentioned including practitioners and policy makers in Algeria and Libya. The total number of targeted participants will be in the range of 120 to 150 depending on the format.

The **format** of the conference will be planned for both virtual and face-to-face situations and a final decision will be taken three months ahead of the event, based on the conditions in countries of implementation and standard operating procedures in place within implementing institutions.



## 6. Indicative timeframe

The conference is planned for **early July 2021**. This timing seems the most opportune to benefit from recent research findings as well as direction provided by events related to the EU agenda on talent partnership due to take place in the first half of 2021 and still have time to disseminate broadly key conference recommendations and incorporate them into programme implementation.