



*Empowered lives.  
Resilient nations.*

# The Migrant Union

## Navigating the Great Migration



September 2019

## Migrant Union

**Migrant Union** is an on-going initiative established to advance approaches to enabling the growing numbers of displaced people to access decent, sustainable livelihoods. Envisaged is that the Union will become an international ecosystem of displaced people accessing decent sustainable livelihoods and enabling capabilities, rights and resources.

Created in mid-2018, the initiative has to date been curated by the Project Catalyst platform of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in close association with the Open Society Foundations, which has provided financial support for the investigatory, start-up phase.

**Migrant Union: Navigating the Great Disruption** summarises the initiative's work to date: (a) highlighting today's practice; (b) the case for a more innovative, systemic approach to addressing the nexus between displacement and livelihoods, and (c) an ambitious set of proposals for transforming envisaged building blocks in practice.

Opinions, conclusions and recommendations presented in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the initiative's sponsoring organisations or partners.

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## Project Catalyst

**Project Catalyst** is an initiative of the UNDP established to catalyse systemic interventions in pursuit of sustainable development. Created in early 2018, it has developed a portfolio of higher-risk, high-leverage, workstreams, of which the Migrant Union is one element. Other workstreams are focused on how to harness digitalization in accelerating financing of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the development implications of reshaping global value chains, and the development opportunities associated with governance innovations at the corporate and financial system levels.

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Documents are available for download at:

<https://www.catalyst.undp.org/content/catalyst/en/home/what-we-do/migrant-nations-initiative/>

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## Acknowledgments

This paper is the outcome of a year of research, prototyping, and discussion with hundreds of actors in this space, including people in government, international organizations, foundations, NGOs, networks of people who are themselves displaced, academics and researchers, and private corporations. The authors are grateful for the input and thoughts of all partners, community members, and contributing friends of the Migrant Union.

The authors wish to thank the Open Society Foundations (OSF), in particular Sean Hinton for his inspiration, thoughtful reflections and his openness to exploration and experimentation. Across OSF’s Economic Justice Program, we would also thank Scott Abrams, Andrew Kramer, Julie McCarthy, Roxanne Nazir, Robin Varghese, and at the International Migration Initiative, Anna Crowley, Gregory Maniatis, Sarah Rosengaertner and Colleen Thouez.

At the United Nations Development Programme, we are appreciative of the leadership of its Administrator, Achim Steiner, in supporting this piece of Project Catalyst’s portfolio, and thankful for the support of Bruno LeMarquis, Henny Ngu, Asako Okai, Owen Shumba, Arti Singh, all at Headquarters, and Claudio Tomasi at UNDP Turkey-Ankara, Milica Begovic at UNDP-Eastern and Central Europe, Sudipto Mukerjee at UNDP-Bangladesh, and Anir Chowdhury and his team at a2i Bangladesh.

Thanks to Alexander Betts, Evan Easton-Calabria, Roger Zetter and Jeff Crisp at the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre; Adam Cooper, Dakota Gruener, and Aiden Slavin at ID2020; Ziad Ayoubi, Jaime Bourbon de Parme, Nicholas Oakeshott, and Cian O’Brien at UNHCR. Special thanks also to Neville Crawley, Sam Grundy, Mia Eskelund, Andreas Hackl, Marie Godin, Indy Johar, Sasha Kapadia, Aarathi Krishnan, Stuart MacAlpine, Heloise Ruaudel, Annemieke Tsike-Sossah, Mustafa Turan and Paul van Zyl.

Finally, we thank the Open Society Foundations for its financial support of this initiative.

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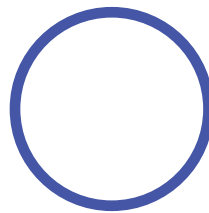
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**The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds.”**

*John Maynard Keynes<sup>1</sup>*



# 1. Executive Summary

**Migration has always been a feature of the world we live in.** Yet today, we are not coping well with the historically high levels of migration, including the growing number of those who have been forcibly displaced. Moreover, we are largely unprepared to deal with the expected growth in future years in forced displacement resulting from climate change, conflict and economic disruption.

**Humanitarian actions providing immediate relief to those in crisis, and those to mitigate the causes of displacement, are clearly a priority.** Notwithstanding such efforts, there is a need to prepare for an unprecedented era of people on the move with few if any of the hard-won rights of citizenship in Westphalian states.

**Displacement needs to be understood both as an immediate humanitarian crisis and a permanent development challenge.** Yet today's mainstream approaches have not, despite huge effort, forged this bridge successfully, with humanitarian tragedies spilling over into dangerous, systemic failure. Largely excluded from livelihood opportunities, displaced people are dependent on ever-more thinly spread public resources. This in turn reinforces frictions between displaced people and their host communities. As we have seen, such friction spills over into the wider political economy, undermining open societies, which in turn reinforces resistance to more productive approaches to displaced people and many other issues.

**Without livelihood opportunities, displacement will transform a humanitarian challenge into a development disaster.** Much is being done to increase the access displaced people have to livelihood opportunities. Yet these efforts remain ad hoc and fragmented, and wholly incommensurate with today's needs, let alone the scale of tomorrow's challenges. There are many reasons for this shortfall, from an unwillingness of the international community to acknowledge that the future will include large-scale, forced migration, through to the broader challenges for populations to provide sustainable livelihoods in a period of great turmoil.

**The Migrant Union initiative envisions a world where anyone, anywhere can secure decent livelihoods.** Its focus is on displaced people excluded from many of the rights of citizenship, rooted in the aims set out in the Global Compact on Refugees and its equivalent for migrants, which encourage continued experimentation and innovation. With this focus, the initiative seeks to both provide practical solutions and opportunities relevant to this disadvantaged group, and so also the growing numbers of people struggling to secure access to livelihood opportunities in a rapidly changing context.

**The Migrant Union is envisaged as a global community of displaced people accessing decent sustainable livelihoods and enabling capabilities, rights and resources.** Four, interlinked

building blocks together form the basis of the envisaged ecosystem.

- *First is a commonly accepted approach to credential displaced people to enable them to access livelihood opportunities, whether in terms of jobs, business start-ups, or trading.* Such credentialing would form the basis for a 'membership' pathway for displaced people, and others, to access livelihood opportunities.
- *Second, is an ecosystem of gateway platforms and organisations to livelihood opportunities* that are open to people with such credentials, including for example employers, e-commerce platforms and tax and trade regulatory authorities.
- *Third, is a collective, bottom-up advocacy function* that can negotiate as required with public and private organisations, to legalise livelihood pathways and develop an enabling environment.
- *Fourth, are the core learning and governance functions* that enable the ecosystem that is the Migrant Union to learn iteratively, build capacity and be self-governed, as well as provide a basis on which the entire enterprise could be self-financed.

**The Migrant Union is being advanced through a three-prong approach.** In its initial phase, the Migrant Union initiative has engaged in extensive dialogue and explored current practices.

- *Advance institutional innovations* that could underpin a borderless and productive economy accessible to people on the move.

**Considerable progress has been made on all three fronts so far.** Outreach and dialogue are contributing to moving the narrative towards a resolute and strategic focus on the livelihood needs of a growing, population of permanently displaced people. Commissioned research has surfaced for the first time the strengths and shortfalls of an emerging practice at the nexus of the digital economy and displacement. Engagement in Bangladesh and Turkey supports analysis and prototyping that can provide specific insights as well as open up broader, international opportunities. Building on these aspects of progress, substantive work is now advancing through building a system of credentialing for livelihoods and e-markets for products and services.

**The Migrant Union has proved both attractive and contentious.** Positively, it has engaged those recognizing the need to embrace the systemic implications of an emerging era of many people on the move, as well as those seeking to advance governance innovations more broadly. Moreover, it reflects many of the concerns and aspirations of those active at the nexus of displacement and livelihoods, in highlighting both the weaknesses of today's practices and the possibilities of innovative approaches that leverage new institutional thinking, digitalisation and a world beyond international development aid.

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