



## A Skills-Based Solution: Opening Canada's Economic Pathways to Refugees

Brief Submitted by Talent Beyond Boundaries to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM)

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Talent Beyond Boundaries envisions a world in which refugees can move to secure futures on the basis of their skills and not just their status. We are pioneering international labour mobility for refugees. We are the only organization engaging the global private sector and national governments to provide safe and legal economic migration options for refugees in addition to other humanitarian protection. To do this, we are demonstrating the wide range and depth of talent among refugee populations, engaging private sector employers that need to fill skill gaps, and working with governments to identify barriers in economic immigration systems that unintentionally penalize refugees. Talent Beyond Boundaries is a not-for-profit organization founded in response to the unprecedented displacement of people in the Middle East and throughout the world.<sup>1</sup> We are currently working with the Canadian Government on removing barriers and opening economic migration pathways for skilled refugees to move from over-burdened host countries, where their futures are precarious, to companies and communities where their skills are needed.

Previously, economic migration streams were not designed to include skilled refugees and were developed without refugee circumstances in mind. That has led to unintended barriers to the inclusion, consideration, and participation of refugees in economic migration. If they are not excluded by unnecessary administrative barriers but allowed to compete for positions, skilled refugees can be part of the talent pipeline that fills skill gaps and fuels economic development.

### **Refugee Talent**

More than 25 million people have been forced from their homeland by conflict. This population includes individuals who are immensely talented but whose lives and careers have been interrupted by war or persecution. Many have university or college degrees, speak English or French, and have competitive experience with in-demand occupations. And yet, it is difficult for them to access safe, legal pathways to a country where they can rebuild their lives and careers and return to self-reliance. Annually, the traditional humanitarian solution of resettlement to a safe country, like Canada, reaches less than one percent of eligible refugees. While Canada has been a leader in humanitarian efforts, including resettlement, worldwide the number of humanitarian resettlement spots has been decreasing. Last year

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<sup>1</sup> Sayre Nyce, Mary Louise Cohen and Bruce Cohen, May 2016, "Labour mobility as part of the solution," *Forced Migration Review*, 52 (May 2016), <https://www.fmreview.org/solutions/nyce-cohen-cohen>.

it decreased by 48 percent and continues to decline.<sup>2</sup> Refugees not resettled face difficult choices such as undertaking irregular and dangerous travel, or remaining in a country of first asylum where they may have limited rights and face prohibitions against work.

Meanwhile, countries around the world are facing skill gaps and demographic shortfalls, especially in rural communities. In Canada each year, immigration is a lifeline for workforce growth and innovation. Canada is an international leader in its economic immigration programs. The Government has announced plans to welcome as many as 330,800 immigrants in 2019, with the largest share, nearly 60 percent, coming through the economic stream.<sup>3</sup>

It is often said that Canada intends to win the global competition for talent. Based on our work at Talent Beyond Boundaries, we know that among refugee populations are many educated and skilled people who want to compete for international employment. Beginning in 2016, we opened a first-of-its-kind online, digital portal and invited refugees in Lebanon and Jordan to share with us their education, skills, work experience and language abilities.<sup>4</sup> Within less than a year, more than 10,000 refugees had registered and become part of our searchable Talent Catalog database. They span more than 200 occupations from engineers, IT developers and healthcare professionals to carpenters, tailors and chefs. One-third have tertiary education, and more than 40 percent report some level of English, while another 4 percent speak French.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Information and Communications Technology Council, Canada's fast-growing tech sector will face a shortage of 220,000 workers by 2020.<sup>6</sup> The Manpower Group reported this year that 41 percent of Canadian employers have difficulty filling jobs, and that skilled trades have consistently ranked in the top five roles that are hardest-to-fill in Canada for the last 10 years.<sup>7</sup> The talent need has led Atlantic provincial governments to make immigration a central pillar in their economic strategies.

Skilled refugees have been an invisible population, unrecognized for purposes of economic migration. We hope that our work and that of a growing community of organizations interested in labour mobility for skilled refugees is helping to overcome the negative image of refugees as burdens, and to recognize them as assets who have the skills and experience to contribute to companies and communities in need of talent.

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<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, June 2018, "UNHCR Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2019," 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Government of Canada, October 2018, "Notice – Supplementary Information 2019-2021 Immigration Levels Plan."

<sup>4</sup> Leah Nichles and Sayre Nyce, "Towards greater visibility and recruitment of skilled refugees," *Forced Migration Review*, 58 (June 2018), <https://www.fmreview.org/economies/nichles-nyce>.

<sup>5</sup> For profiles of IT candidates in the Talent Catalog, see: <http://talentbeyondboundaries.org/s/TTB-IT-Candidates-Packet.pdf>; for information on the Talent Catalog, see: <http://talentbeyondboundaries.org/talent-catalog.html>; <http://talentbeyondboundaries.org/s/TBB-Analytics.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC), "Digital Talent: Road to 2020 and Beyond," March 2016, 8.

<sup>7</sup> ManpowerGroup, 2018, "Solving the Talent Shortage: Build, Buy, Borrow and Bridge."

## Canadian Business Perspectives

Leading Canadian businesses have demonstrated their interest in recruiting from the global refugee talent pool. Across Canada, Talent Beyond Boundaries works with employers in diverse sectors facing labour shortages including IT, healthcare, food services, and manufacturing. While these employers have embraced our mission to help open new solutions for refugees, they have partnered with Talent Beyond Boundaries to consider skilled refugees because they face a critical need for skilled workers.<sup>8</sup>

Bob Collier, the President and Founder of Davert Tools, an advanced manufacturer in Niagara Falls, said: “My company is experiencing the demographic challenge of too many experienced people retiring without enough well-trained people coming into the workforce to replace them.” He interviewed refugee candidates through Talent Beyond Boundaries and found them “impressive on many levels.” He describes them as “driven, persistent and determined to succeed and an asset to any company.” The tool and die maker to whom he extended a job offer, a Syrian refugee living in Lebanon, has received a provincial nomination.

Other Canadian companies engaging international refugee talent include Bonfire,<sup>9</sup> Paramount Fine Foods, Emanuele Furniture Design, and Closing the Gap Healthcare.<sup>10</sup> The refugee talent pool offers Canadian businesses like these:

- Qualified workers to fill skill gaps and meet business challenges;
- Diversity of staff, which can be a competitive advantage;
- Enriched staff culture and employee engagement as teams welcome refugee employees; and
- Higher retention, as studies have shown that refugee staff post higher retention rates than their non-refugee peers.<sup>11</sup>

## Canada Leading the Way

Talent Beyond Boundaries has successfully identified skilled refugees who could fill skill gaps and found private sector companies that need and want to hire them. Labour mobility is a market-based solution to those who are part of a humanitarian crisis that generates economic benefits. We are overcoming the information barriers that hid talented refugees from companies and international job opportunities. Now what is needed is ensuring that those who have the needed skills and human capital also have a viable pathway through economic immigration.

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<sup>8</sup> Talent Beyond Boundaries would like to acknowledge the significant pro bono legal services provided to it and refugee candidates by Heather Segal and Veronica Wilson at Segal Immigration Law in Toronto.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Keung, “Pilot project aims to bring refugees to Canada as skilled workers,” *The Toronto Star*, October 12, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> For further insights from Canadian business leaders, see: <https://talentbeyondboundaries.org/s/TBB-BusinessPerspectivesReport-Sep2018.pdf>; see also Sara Miller Llana, “In global refugee flow, Canada finds a surprising solution to a labor shortage,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 16, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> David Dyssegaard Kallick and Cyierra Roldan, May 2018, “Good Retention, Strong Recruitment: A Report on Refugees as Employees,” Tent Foundation.

Canada is a leader on this front, as well. This year, the Government of Canada, through Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), created the Economic Mobility Pathways Project (EMPP) to test refugee access to federal and provincial economic pathways, to identify barriers, and, we hope, to develop solutions. The EMPP does not create a new pathway to Canada, rather it tests refugee access to existing economic pathways. The EMPP is implemented by IRCC, Talent Beyond Boundaries and RefugePoint, with participation from UNHCR. Provinces and territories taking part in this project are Manitoba, Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and the Yukon. It includes refugee populations living in East Africa and the Middle East. Eligible skilled refugees will be referred to the participating provinces and territories through IRCC. Those with employment offers or expressions of interest from provinces and territories proceed to immigration application.<sup>12</sup>

This unique, innovative pilot speaks to Canada's commitment to understanding how the global refugee talent pool can fit into Canada's skilled immigration future. Qualified refugees should have a place in Canada's economic pathways and can make significant economic contributions. We believe that Canada can strengthen its economic pathways in order to ensure Canada's competitiveness as a country that attracts top talent from anywhere in the world, including from among refugee populations, by adjusting its economic streams to make them more equitable to skilled refugees. By doing so, Canada will also establish a model for the international community that a skills-based solution can contribute to ameliorating the global refugee crisis.

## **Conclusion**

Talent Beyond Boundaries is committed to working with the Government of Canada to continue building on the infrastructure being created through the Economic Mobility Pathways Project and to removing barriers facing refugees across all federal and provincial economic pathways.<sup>13</sup> Labour mobility is a solution for skilled refugees that is additional and complementary to traditional humanitarian resettlement. Canada has the opportunity to be a global leader in developing this new, durable solution for refugees, one that benefits refugees and their families and Canadian businesses and communities in need of talent.

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<sup>12</sup> See Government of Canada, August 8, 2018, "Minister Hussen wraps up trip to Uganda and Tanzania."; and Ahmed Hussen, Marie-Claude Bibeau and Jean-Nicolas Beuze, "Why Canada will lead the charge on the UN's global refugee plan," *Maclean's*, September 24, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> The barriers we see adversely affecting skilled refugees include 1) unnecessary administrative barriers, such as the requirement to hold a current passport; 2) potential financial barriers, such as requiring a preexisting bank account holding settlement funds; 3) work experience barriers, such as requiring proof of recent work when many refugees are unable to work lawfully in host countries; 4) documentation barriers, such as requirements to produce official transcripts and inflexible proof of employment; and 5) processing timelines, which are a principal impediment to employers hiring skilled refugees internationally. We look forward to working with IRCC to find ways to meet Canada's important policy goals through alternative means that would not adversely affect skilled refugee candidates.