



What We Know About Human Capital Strengthening Interventions

What this summary covers

This summary descriptively synthesizes completed impact evaluations (IEs) that examine the effects of *human capital strengthening* interventions on migration outcomes (e.g., migration behavior, intentions). Five IEs assessed interventions that **specifically target (potential) migrants**, drawn from a total of 28 completed IEs identified through [the 2025 update of the Irregular Migration Evidence Gap Map \(EGM\)](#). The remaining 23 studies did not assess interventions targeting (potential) migrants. The EGM is a thematic collection of rigorous evidence on the effects of interventions addressing the root causes and drivers of irregular migration, which includes studies that meet our predefined [study eligibility criteria](#).

This summary focuses on these five IEs as they were expected to provide more direct insights into migration movement associated with *human capital strengthening* interventions. This approach reflects evidence from the prior synthesis, which showed that studies in which migration is only a secondary outcome are often underpowered and weakly informative for migration policy decision-making.¹ Further details on the study search and selection are provided in the EGM report and the [study search and selection summary](#).

Key takeaways

- The summary focuses on five impact evaluations, which assessed *human capital strengthening* interventions (i.e., aiming to protect or enhance individuals' human capital by supporting non-food basic needs) that explicitly targeted (potential) migrants.
- The included studies focused mainly on unconditional cash/voucher transfers for forced migrants, health insurance for deported migrants, and a voucher transfer for potential young economic migrants. The studies measure migration indirectly and capture short-term effects.
- The interventions were conceptualized to influence migration indirectly by either changing migration aspirations (e.g., by improving local opportunities or increasing the opportunity cost of migration) or increasing migration capabilities.
- In crisis and displacement contexts, migration is framed as a distress-driven coping response that may be reduced through the provision of basic needs and security support. In the context of deported migrants, social protection or livelihood interventions are theorized to lower incentives for re-migration by mitigating post-return vulnerability. The study findings are broadly consistent with these mechanisms.
- The evidence base has several limitations, including: reliance on intention-based or proxy migration measures rather than realized mobility; short follow-up periods; and a near-absence of cost or value-for-money evidence.

In this summary, *human capital strengthening* interventions refer to policies, programs, or projects that aim to protect or enhance individuals' human capital by supporting non-food basic needs, such as cash transfers and health insurance, which could be foundational to individuals' income security, learning, and health.

Reporting effects within this descriptive analysis could be misleading, as the small and heterogeneous set of studies limits comparability and risks drawing inferences beyond what the evidence can support. Instead, this summary provides an overview of what is currently known, and highlights where future evaluations are most needed to improve our understanding of *human capital strengthening* interventions.



How human capital strengthening interventions influence migration pathways

This summary draws on an aspiration–capability model^{2,3,4} used as a conceptual framework in the EGM. In this framework, migration aspirations are theorized to be influenced by an individual's life aspirations relative to the perceived or lived conditions and prospects in their country of origin. Gaps in the individual's ability to attain life aspirations are assumed to influence a desire for change that involves migration aspirations. The studies included in this summary further suggest that:

- Under voluntary, labor, or economic migration decisions, human capital and well-being outcomes are directly related to conditions and prospects. Therefore, interventions that aim to improve these outcomes are assumed to affect migration indirectly in two non-exclusive ways, depending on the reference point of the individual (see Migration Hump Theory⁵):
 - By reshaping migration aspirations and perceived opportunity structures, including the relative costs and feasibility of pursuing migration; or

- By increasing the individual's capability to access legal or irregular migration channels.
- For crises-affected and displaced populations, migration aspirations are driven by survival and necessity and are therefore a distress-driven coping response to conflict, displacement, or protection failure. Interventions are theorized to reduce premature return or household fragmentation by improving basic needs and security.
- Among return and deported migrants, migration is framed as a response to post-return insecurity and vulnerability. Social protection or livelihood interventions are assumed to reduce incentives to re-migrate.

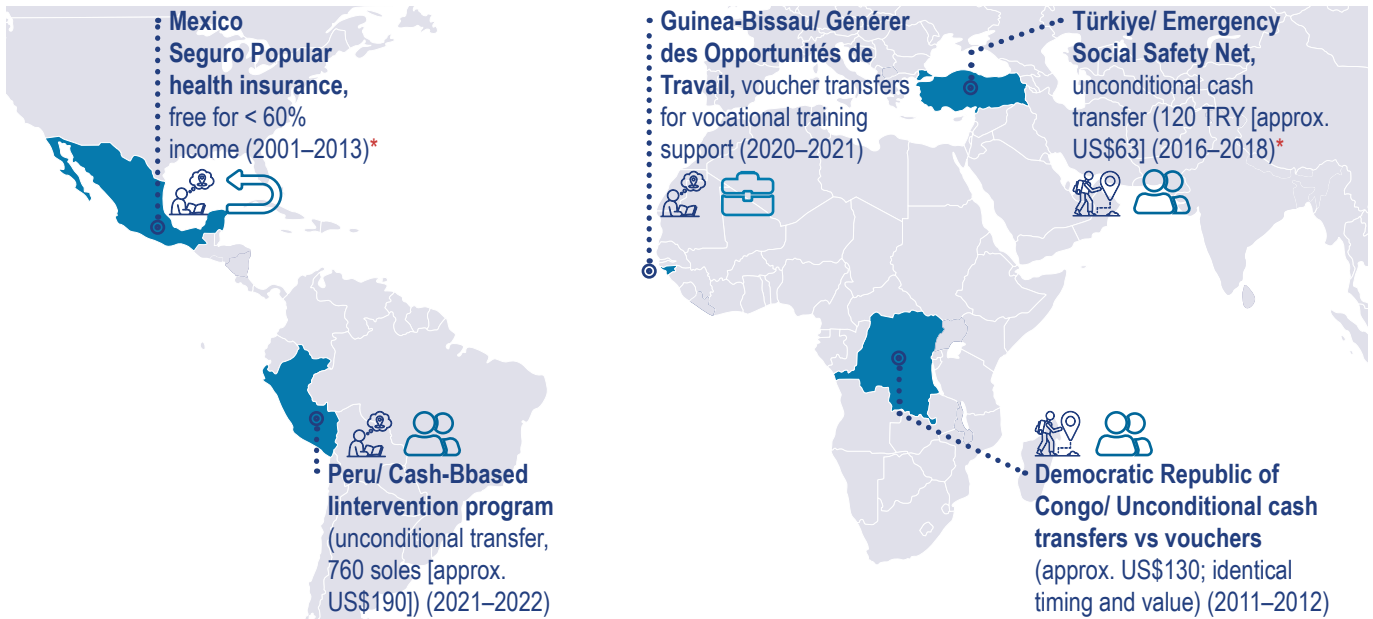
Further details on the conceptual framework for the human capital strengthening interventions are provided in [Appendix Table A1](#).

Evidence base characteristics



Even when interventions are filtered to those targeting migrants, migration outcomes are rarely the primary focus of evaluation, as many studies focus on forced migrant populations for whom migration is measured as part of broader coping strategies.



[Map link](#)



Outcome measured

-  Any migration outcome measured (unspecified [ir]regularity)
-  Intention to migrate (unspecified [ir]regularity)

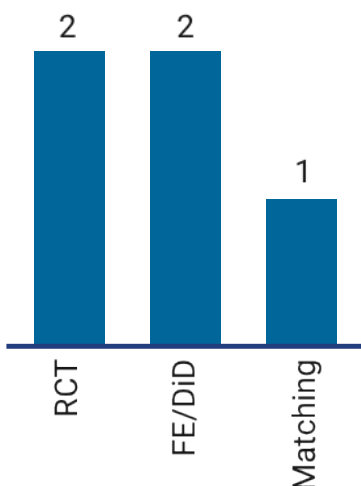
Interventions delivered

-  Forcibly displaced populations
-  Non-forced/economic potential migrants
-  Returnees following forced return

* Study analysis window, policy ongoing

Across studies, both the unit of analysis and the observed exposure to interventions vary: cash and voucher interventions were analyzed at the individual or household level with observable durations, while the health insurance intervention was analyzed at the cohort level through eligibility.

Type of human capital strengthening interventions	Unit of analysis	Average exposure to the interventions observed in the studies
Cash transfers	Household; Individual	0 (one-off)–7 months
Voucher/In-kind transfers	Household; Individual	3–7 months
Health insurance	Cohort (state of birth × age cohort of deported migrants)	Cohort-level eligibility over 2001–2013



Two studies used RCTs (one cash/voucher transfer, one voucher only), two used fixed-effects/difference-in-difference or matching to evaluate cash transfers, and one used fixed-effects/difference-in-difference to assess a health insurance intervention.

One RCT study used mixed-methods (focus group discussions) to interpret quantitative findings explanatorily.

Cost evidence is limited, with one study reporting the Générer des Opportunités de Travail program-level cost–benefit analysis (without disaggregating by a voucher arm). The program delivered large employment and income gains, but its very high per-participant cost resulted in poor value for money (Benefit – cost ratio = 0.4; Return on investment = –59.9%).

Narrative description of study results

All cash transfers assessed by the included studies were delivered to forced migrants. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, cash-transfer households were more likely than voucher households to report sending a member away as a short-term coping strategy (measured up to one month after the final transfer).⁶ In Peru, cash transfers increased intentions to emigrate (measured three months after their receipt).⁷ The increases were interpreted as reflecting liquidity relief that enabled longer-term plans (e.g., returning to Venezuela or onward migration to third countries), as the intervention simultaneously improved economic, social, and navigational integration outcomes.

In Türkiye, Emergency Social Safety Net program beneficiary households were less likely to have

members return to their country of origin (primarily Syria) at the six-month follow-up, consistent with the program's stabilization objective of easing immediate economic pressure.⁸

In Mexico, deported migrants eligible for Seguro Popular health insurance were significantly less likely to report an intention to re-migrate in the short term; this was interpreted as improved access to health insurance and social protection in the country, thereby reducing the need to re-migrate as a coping or survival strategy. [9] The Générer des Opportunités de Travail program in Guinea-Bissau, which includes a vocational training voucher arm, significantly reduced young men's intention to emigrate within the next 12 months (measured as a short-term effect).¹⁰



Implementation and research practices

Implementation practices

- Implementation practices were sparsely and unevenly reported across the evidence base, with meaningful implementation learning largely absent. Where implementation details were reported, they highlighted operational constraints and unintended behavioral responses rather than deliberate design choices. The cash-based intervention in Peru was rolled out gradually due to administrative and operational capacity constraints, reflecting limitations typical of humanitarian delivery contexts.⁷ The Emergency Social Safety Net program for refugees in Türkiye reported household re-composition (e.g., sending their children to other households) in response to eligibility rules, showing an implementation challenge (e.g., accurately targeting the intended population).⁸

Research practices

- Across the evidence base, migration outcomes were frequently operationalized as intentions (e.g., intention to emigrate or re-migrate^{7,9,10}) or proxy behaviors embedded in coping-strategy indices,^{6,8} rather than as observed mobility.
- Existing studies employed robust causal designs (e.g., RCTs, quasi-experimental fixed-effects/difference-in-difference models), enabling attribution of effects beyond confounding external factors. However, migration indicators remained rarely disaggregated by destination or duration, thereby limiting interpretability of migration pathways even where causal identification was strong.
- Evaluations generally captured only short-term effects on intentions, rather than longer-term effects and/or realized migration outcomes.

Implications

Policy implications

- Policymakers should be cautious in using the current evidence base to draw conclusions about how *human capital strengthening* interventions affect migration pathways. Strengthening the policy relevance of future evidence will require interventions and evaluations that more explicitly integrate migration-related objectives and outcome measurement.

Research implications

- Future research should prioritize robust causal evaluations explicitly designed to test how *human capital strengthening* interventions influence migration pathways. This includes a clearer possible theory of change that distinguishes between competing mechanisms (e.g., influencing migration by improving

local opportunities or by expanding people's ability to move) and explicit assessment of heterogeneous effects by socio-economic status.

- Evaluations would benefit from measuring realized migration outcomes (e.g., actual departures and returns), rather than intentions or proxy behaviors alone.
- It is critical to incorporate longer follow-up periods and systematic disaggregation by migrant type (e.g., transit migrants and aspiring migrants) and gender.
- To support value-for-money decision-making, future interventions and evaluations should systematically collect and report cost data alongside outcomes, including disaggregation by intervention arm and, where feasible, formal economic evaluation (e.g., cost-effectiveness or cost-benefit analysis).



Endnotes

¹ Anda Leon, María Daniela, Carolyn Huang, Miriam Berretta, Promise Nduku, Andile Madonsela, and Shannon Shisler. 2023. *Systematic Review on the Effect of Skills-Based Active Labor Market Interventions on Migration Outcomes*. London: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie). <https://doi.org/10.23846/SR00048>.

² Carling, Jörgen, and Kerilyn Schewel. 2018. "Revisiting Aspiration and Ability in International Migration." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44 (6): 945–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384146>.

³ Carling, Jörgen, and Cathrine Talleraas. 2016. *Root Causes and Drivers of Migration: Implications for Humanitarian Efforts and Development Cooperation*. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).

⁴ Carling, Jörgen. 2002. "Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28 (1): 5–42.

⁵ Martin, P. L., and J. E., Taylor. 1996. "The Anatomy of a Migration Hump." In *Development Strategy, Employment, and Migration: Insights from Models*, edited by J. E. e. Taylor. Paris: OECD, Development Centre.

⁶ Aker, Jenny. 2013. *Cash or Coupons? Testing the Impacts of Cash Versus Vouchers in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. CGD Working Paper. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/cash-or-coupons-testing-impacts-cash-versus-vouchers-democratic-republic-congo-working>.

⁷ Ahrens, Achim, Marine Casalis, Dominik Hangartner, and Rodrigo Sánchez. 2024. "Cash-Based Interventions Improve Multidimensional Integration Outcomes of Venezuelan Immigrants." *World Development* 181: 106658. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2024.106658>.

⁸ Özler, Berk, Çiğdem Celik, Scott Cunningham, P. Facundo Cuevas, and Luca Parisotto. 2021. "Children on the Move: Progressive Redistribution of Humanitarian Cash Transfers Among Refugees." *Journal of Development Economics* 153: 102733. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2021.102733>.

⁹ Bechara Bitar, Anuar. 2019. "Essays on Economic and Social Policies in Mexico." PhD diss., University of Minnesota. <https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/211763>.

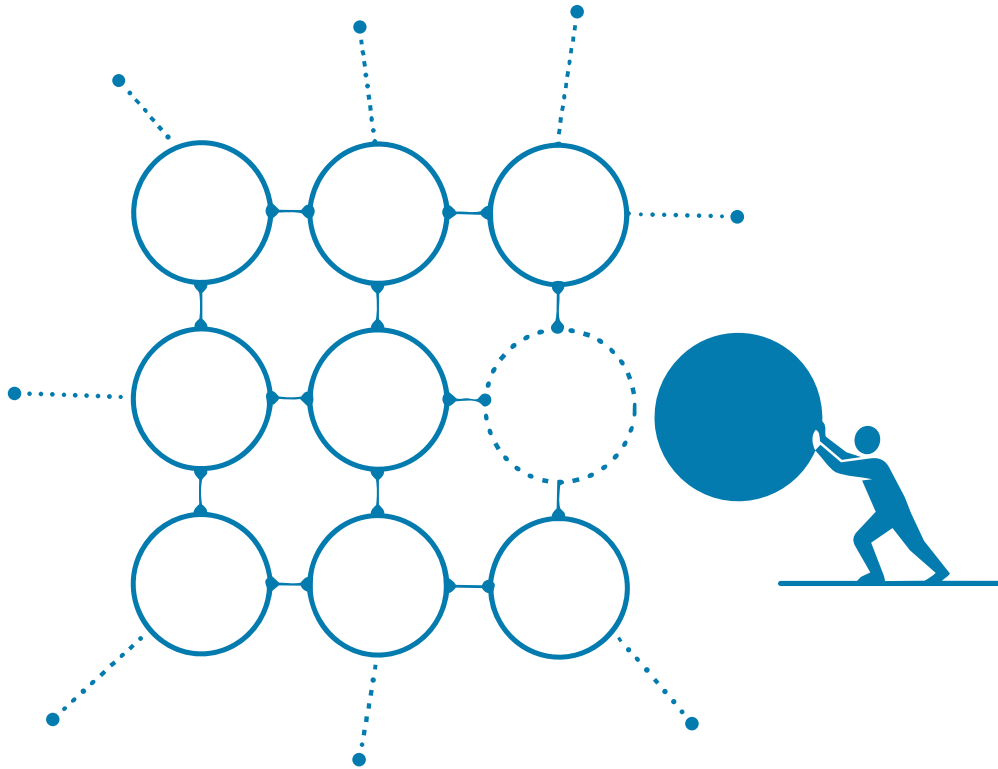
¹⁰ Gamito, Carlos Alberto Coca. 2025. "The Impact of Providing Vocational Training to Young Men on Labour Outcomes and Attitudes Towards Migration in Northern Guinea-Bissau." *Journal of African Economies* 34 (3): 371–86. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jae/ejae013>.

¹¹ While interventions not directly targeting (potential) migrants can offer valuable implications for broader contexts in influencing mobility, studies of non-migrant-targeted interventions can often be underpowered to detect effects on migration behavior and/or intentions. A descriptive synthesis that maps intervention types and study characteristics is therefore needed before undertaking deeper analysis. Such a synthesis could help to assess the extent to which existing findings are informative for migration policy.

About this brief

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