



Creating Inclusive Urban Economies for Migrants and Refugees

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Executive Summary

As cities around the world welcome more migrants and displaced people, supporting their economic inclusion can help determine whether local economies stall or grow. Immigrants make up increasing shares of the workforce in many cities, yet more work is needed to unlock their ability to fully contribute. In some places, opening basic pathways out of informal, low-paid, or unsafe work is the priority, while in others, it is tapping into underused talent or supporting entrepreneurship that drives local growth. Cities are negotiating this challenge of building inclusive economies while also grappling with the green and digital transitions, housing and infrastructure pressures, and changes in the world of work.

The building blocks of economic inclusion are well documented: secure status and work authorization, destination-country language skills, access to training and upskilling, and recognition of foreign qualifications. Importantly, addressing barriers to inclusion is both good for newcomers and strengthens urban economies. Allowing migrants to work in jobs that match their skills and helping them leave the informal economy can boost economic growth significantly. But few cities can achieve

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economic inclusion on their own. National governments control most migration and labor policy, cities face financial constraints, and political debates are often polarized. The central question therefore is not what a perfect model looks like but how cities can use political capital and existing resources to make meaningful progress—and what each should prioritize, given different goals and constraints.

Rapid change, shrinking budgets, and heightened sensitivity to investing in newcomers at a time when native-born residents also face challenges require cities to invest surgically and strategically. City leaders and their partners should consider three principles when investing in economic inclusion:

Enable labor market *advancement*, not just entry. Cities should approach economic inclusion as an ongoing process that requires repeated, targeted investments rather than one-off interventions. More city programs should emphasize connecting newcomers to high-quality, stable jobs over time instead of treating the first job as the end goal. Meanwhile, supporting migrants and refugees who pursue viable and sustainable entrepreneurship rather than subsistence activities can facilitate economic inclusion while also generating jobs and economic benefits for local communities.

Align employment opportunities with high-growth sectors and those facing labor shortages. Cities cannot invest expansively across the entire job-readiness continuum, so leaders will need to prioritize according to their most pressing economic and societal goals and adapt as needs change. For instance, some cities may opt to build targeted upskilling programs that respond directly to local labor shortages or priorities such as the green economy, while others may prioritize moving vulnerable workers out of low-wage, precarious, or unsafe jobs.

Prioritize win-win employment and entrepreneurship measures that benefit both newcomers and long-term residents. City leaders should be attuned not just to what policies are technically feasible but also to which can garner broad support and avoid backlash. This often means embedding economic inclusion into broader city priorities, such as filling local labor needs in the green and digital transitions, infrastructure, and care systems. Many high-impact interventions that connect newcomers to opportunity may in fact be nestled within mainstream programs available to all residents, including ancillary supports such as child care and housing assistance that indirectly affect economic participation and that, as core services, often have more stable funding than migrant- or refugee-specific programs.

To advance these principles, city leaders should consider the following high-impact, practical, and politically feasible actions:

- 1 Set the agenda and the tone.** At a moment of heightened polarization around immigration, city leaders' ability to define and advocate for economic inclusion as a local priority can be a powerful lever. Welcoming infrastructure, the rhetoric of top officials, and including immigrants and refugees in long-term city planning can create enabling conditions for economic inclusion, even if other barriers remain.
- 2 Break down siloes.** Cities can centralize existing programs and address integration as a comprehensive policy area rather than a distinct intervention. In Cuenca, Ecuador, for example, a representative of a nongovernmental organization noted that one-time seed grants for entrepreneurs may be insufficient to catalyze business growth without additional investments in wraparound services that connect newcomers to support networks and child care. Some cities have created dedicated offices or coordinators for migrant and refugee inclusion, while others have strengthened coordination across employment, housing, education, and planning portfolios.
- 3 Leverage usable data in new ways.** Most local data on newcomers' economic inclusion are fragmented and imperfect, but cities may be able to pool together existing administrative data sources rather than build new data collection capacity. For example, identifying key indicators and combining data from different agencies—such as employment services, business registration databases, and housing and social programs—can build a clearer picture of how migrants and refugees participate in labor markets and where barriers are. Where possible, cities should also invest in tracking the outcomes of their programming over time; otherwise, policymakers may lack information on key issues such as job quality, retention, and income progression, evidence that can make the case for funding promising initiatives.
- 4 Use innovative financing to do more with less.** Pooled funding and matching programs that blend public and private resources are a promising route to sustaining and scaling economic inclusion programs. A soon-to-be-launched pilot in Mexico demonstrates one such creative financing approach. This pooled fund is being designed to draw from philanthropy, employers, and multilateral banks to support migrant economic inclusion.

- 5 Include diverse community voices in program design and implementation.** City leaders should draw on the expertise of nongovernmental partners and migrant and refugee communities to ensure that economic inclusion programs reflect real barriers and opportunities in local economies. Co-design processes, advisory boards, and joint working groups can collect these insights at an early stage and help obtain buy-in for economic inclusion goals among key constituencies.
- 6 Plan for future labor market needs, not the status quo.** Technological advancements are reshaping the types of jobs available in cities, which means city authorities will need to build flexible systems that adapt to changing needs rather than building infrastructure based on today's barriers and opportunities. For instance, city-level employment services may need to help displaced workers from multiple sectors reenter the workforce while also helping immigrant and local jobseekers build skills (such as proficiency in using artificial intelligence).
- 7 Appeal to a diverse coalition of stakeholders to make the practical case for inclusion.** Scaling successful initiatives depends as much on getting political and public buy-in as on technical solutions. Cities that demonstrate tangible returns for local communities—such as filling local skills gaps, expanding the tax base, or helping create more sustainable infrastructure—are more likely to secure broader buy-in, attract investment, and make initiatives more sustainable.

Cities hold powerful policy levers: they can set the agenda, convene key partners, control a set of core services, and enforce local regulations. However, they also face hard limits on funding, time, and decision-making authority. Economic inclusion thus requires creative thinking on how to link investments to desired outcomes, how to promote coordination and realize economies of scale, and how to capture and share promising practices and success stories. By focusing on what is achievable, sequencing reforms, and aligning inclusion measures with broader economic and urban priorities, cities can transform familiar principles into tangible progress to ensure that migrants and refugees contribute to urban economies' adaptation and shared prosperity for all residents.

1 Introduction: What Roles Do Migrants and Refugees Play in Urban Economies?

More than half of the world's population and the majority of international migrants and refugees live in cities.¹ Cities are magnets for innovation, job creation, and economic growth, by one estimate generating 80 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP).² Migrants and refugees can contribute significantly to urban economies by filling labor shortages, starting businesses, paying taxes, and increasing consumer spending.³ But persistent barriers to accessing quality employment and entrepreneurship can limit their

1 According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 78 percent of refugees now live in cities. Across Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, 62 percent of foreign-born residents live in large metropolitan areas, compared with 45 percent of native-born residents. See Mael Astruc-Le Souder et al., *The OECD Municipal Migration Database: Going Granular* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024); USA for UNHCR, "Refugee Camps," accessed January 22, 2026.

2 World Bank, "Urban Development," accessed February 24, 2026.

3 See, for example, analysis of the economic and fiscal impacts of immigration in the United States: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Immigration* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2017); Julia Gelatt, "Immigrants and the U.S. Economy" (explainer, Migration Policy Institute [MPI], Washington, DC, October 2024).

contributions, thus leaving a key avenue to growth and revenue on the table for cities.⁴ Ensuring that all urban residents, including migrants and refugees, can participate fully in local economies will be key to sustaining economic dynamism and growth in the decades ahead.

While immigration and labor market policies are typically set at the national level, economic inclusion unfolds at the local level. Cities decide how to build welcoming infrastructure and connect new arrivals to economic opportunities, from education and training to job placement and entrepreneurship support. However, their ability to act varies widely. Some cities have broad mandates to design and deliver services but have limited fiscal autonomy, particularly where national and local priorities for immigration and integration diverge. And in low- and middle-income settings, local budgets for inclusion efforts may depend on humanitarian and development aid budgets that have faced cuts in recent years. Creating the conditions for successful economic inclusion requires understanding the local context and the policy, political, and budgetary constraints cities must navigate.

This task comes at a defining moment for cities. Demographic change combined with rapid urbanization is driving growth in some cities, adding pressure on local labor markets, infrastructure, and housing, while other cities face population decline and shrinking tax bases. Climate change compounds these challenges by driving rural-urban movement in unpredictable ways and increasing climate risks for urban communities receiving new arrivals. Meanwhile, the green and digital transitions are driving demand for qualified workers and underscore the importance of tapping the skills and experience of foreign-trained residents, though the pace of change also creates uncertainty. For example, as the digital transition reshapes what jobs are available and where they are located, cities must plan future municipal budgets with very different workforce scenarios in mind.

BOX 1 Defining Economic Inclusion

Definitions of economic inclusion vary, as do interpretations of core goals, the policies and conditions needed to achieve them, and the metrics to measure success. To guide this project, researchers from the Migration Policy Institute developed the following definition: Economic inclusion is a multidimensional process that ensures all individuals, including migrants and refugees, have equitable access and benefit from economic opportunities such as employment, entrepreneurship, education, and financial services.

This report draws on a global review and consultations with city officials, civil-society actors, and migrants and refugees across multiple cities and regions, selected in order to fill knowledge gaps and highlight a range of local experiences in supporting urban economic inclusion for migrants and refugees.⁵ It

4 For example, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre notes the fiscal benefits of policies to boost labor market participation of immigrants in Europe, estimating that achieving parity in participation between natives and all categories of migrants and refugees would generate up to 1,000 euros more in per-capita fiscal contributions. See Alain Bélanger, Michael Christl, Alessandra Conte, Jacopo Mazza, and Edlira Narazani, *Projecting the Net Fiscal Impact of Immigration in the EU* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020).

5 The project began with a global mapping of key barriers and promising practices, using national and local data and benefitting from published and unpublished information shared by the Mayors Migration Council (MMC). The authors of this study then conducted eight thematic interviews with experts across the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe, followed by 23 interviews with city officials and representatives of civil-society organizations (including three migrant- and community-based organizations) in the following cities: Chiang Mai, Thailand; Cuenca, Ecuador; Gdańsk, Poland; Guadalajara, Mexico; Jijiga, Ethiopia; Kanifing, The Gambia; Quezon City, the Philippines; and St. Louis, United States. These cities were selected to reflect a range of local experiences with urban migration and economic inclusion.

examines how cities can mobilize their resources to help migrants and refugees overcome persistent barriers to employment and entrepreneurship and, in doing so, lay the groundwork for strengthening their contributions to economic growth and productivity in the decades ahead. Recommended strategies focus on moving beyond entry-level jobs, informality, and “necessity” entrepreneurship to promote durable inclusion, including by filling critical data gaps, creatively harnessing existing policy tools, and developing innovative city-led programs that help migrants and refugees tap into sustainable economic growth opportunities.

2 Barriers to Economic Inclusion

Migrants and refugees play a critical role in bolstering urban workforces and driving innovation and economic dynamism in cities around the world. But newcomers often encounter legal, practical, and social barriers that limit their access to quality employment or entrepreneurship opportunities, despite significant investments by some cities in bridging these gaps.

The legal right to work remains a principal barrier. Some migrants and refugees face legal restrictions on whether or where they can work. In Ecuador, for example, short renewal periods for legal status and changes in national migration policies have left some Venezuelan migrants in legal limbo. Migration Policy Institute (MPI) consultations in Cuenca, Ecuador, highlighted how this situation can result in fines for unauthorized work and prevent newcomers from registering their businesses.⁶ Over time, migrants and refugees may also cycle in and out of legal status. For example, workers from Myanmar often enter Thailand through informal recruitment channels before later applying to regularize their status. In Chiang Mai, a civil-society representative also discussed how migrant workers from Myanmar were only allowed to work in unskilled jobs in certain industries, such as agriculture, construction, domestic work, manufacturing, and services.⁷

Even where migrants and refugees have the right to work, they can face steep hurdles to employment, including:

- ▶ **Language barriers.** Lack of proficiency in the destination or host country’s language can impede successful economic inclusion and prevent workers at all skill levels from reaching their full employment potential. In Chiang Mai, for example, the civil-society representative noted that younger migrants who learn Thai have more economic opportunities than older generations without Thai language skills.⁸ Indeed, studies from various national contexts indicate that more advanced destination-country language skills are associated with higher employment rates, less underemployment, and higher earnings.⁹

6 According to data from the Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants (R4V), as of November 2025, approximately one-fourth of Venezuelans in Ecuador were regularized, most through temporary permits. R4V, “[Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela](#),” updated May 2025; R4V, “[Residence Permits and Regular Stay Granted](#),” updated November 15, 2025.

7 MPI interview with Brahm Press, Executive Director, MAP Foundation, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 15, 2025.

8 MPI interview with Brahm Press, Executive Director, MAP Foundation, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 15, 2025.

9 See, for example, Hans G. Bloemen, “[Language Proficiency of Migrants: The Relation with Job Satisfaction and Matching](#)” (IZA discussion paper 7366, Institute for the Study of Labor, Bonn, Germany, April 2013); Li Xu and Feng Hou, *Official Language Proficiency and Immigrant Labour Market Outcomes: Evidence from Test-Based Multidimensional Measures of Language Skills* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2023); Mette Foged et al., “[Language Training and Refugees’ Integration](#),” *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 104, no. 4 (2024): 1157–66.

- ▶ **Validating credentials.** In some regulated professions, getting foreign credentials recognized may entail steep costs or additional language requirements, which can exclude migrants and refugees from their professions. In Gdańsk, Poland, a government official noted that the costs of credential recognition and a requirement to speak fluent Polish can prevent foreign-trained professionals from working in their chosen fields, even where gaping labor shortages exist (for example, teaching) and push them instead into lower-barrier industries such as construction and logistics.¹⁰
- ▶ **Skills mismatch.** Migrants and refugees sometimes arrive with skills and experience that do not match local needs or demand, potentially requiring more extensive training or upskilling as a result. The same can be true for returning nationals who seek to reenter the local labor force after a period spent working in another country. For example, a government official in Quezon City, the Philippines, noted that most job openings are in the information and communications technology and business process outsourcing industries, while nationals returning after working overseas typically have experience in construction and domestic work.¹¹ Skillsets can also intersect with migrant and refugee identity and culture; for example, a UN representative explained that trade is central to the identity and livelihoods of refugees in Ethiopia's Somali Region, which could discourage refugees from setting their traditions aside to take up employment in agriculture.¹² Finding local employment may thus require more extensive and culturally sensitive upskilling or retraining strategies.
- ▶ **Lack of local networks.** Access to local social and professional networks can open doors to employment, particularly in settings where personal connections are highly valued. For example, in Ethiopia, Somali refugees in Jijiga, a city within the Somali Region, have achieved greater integration than those in other parts of the country, including Gambella, because they could draw on traditional systems and shared linguistic, cultural, and religious customs to access employment opportunities.¹³ Discrimination and stigma can also significantly affect access to economic opportunities.

While investing in these areas requires significant resources, doing so can reap significant returns. Newcomers working in roles commensurate with their skills and experience (rather than in jobs for which they are overqualified or in the informal labor market) have higher earning potential and more opportunities, and this has knock-on effects for their local community. Although jobs with few qualification or experience requirements can provide easier entry points for migrants and refugees, their lower wages and sometimes precarious nature (particularly in the gig economy) should make them more of a stepping stone than a final destination, especially for workers with many productive working years ahead.¹⁴ Across Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, immigrants on average have higher employment rates than the native born, but earn significantly less, in part a reflection of their

10 MPI interview with Michał Miguła, Head of Strategy and Social Programs Unit, Social Development Department, Gdańsk City Government, Poland, November 19, 2025.

11 MPI interview with Sebastianne Sherwin Acuzar, Assistant Head of the Migration Services Division, Public Employment Service Office, Quezon City Government, the Philippines, November 18, 2025.

12 MPI interview with a representative of UN-Habitat, September 15, 2025.

13 Abudallahi Boru Halakhe, *Beyond the Camp: Realizing Ethiopia's Commitment to Refugee Self-Reliance* (Washington, DC: Refugees International, 2025); MPI interview with Kadar Muhumed Ismail, Deputy Mayor, Jijiga City Administration, Ethiopia and Abdinasir Hassen Mohamed, Project Management Support - Senior Officer, Supporting Urban Integration of Displacement-Affected Communities, Cities Alliance, December 8, 2025.

14 Agnieszka Piasna and Wouter Zwysen, "Migrant Labour in the 'Gig' Economy: Progress or Trap?," Social Europe, April 17, 2024.

concentration in low-wage sectors and roles.¹⁵ The earnings gap between immigrants and the native born narrows gradually as immigrants move into higher-paying sectors and roles, illustrating the importance of promoting job mobility and quality employment in addition to labor market entry.¹⁶ Meanwhile, a study by the OECD and International Labor Organization (ILO) examining immigrants' contributions to the economies of ten developing countries explicitly connects these economic benefits to the quality of their labor market integration.¹⁷

Addressing underemployment not only improves individual outcomes but also provides societal benefits. Unlocking newcomers' productivity can boost GDP. In the United States, estimates suggest that underemployment among college-educated immigrants resulted in USD 39 billion in forgone wages and more than USD 10 billion in lost tax revenue for federal, state, and local governments as of 2016.¹⁸ This underuse of local workforces represents a missed opportunity for cities, particularly those grappling with skills shortages, aging populations, and shrinking fiscal bases. In lower- and middle-income countries that host the largest shares of the world's migrants and refugees, the right policies could unlock billions for urban economies.

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Informal employment is another important dimension of economic inclusion. Globally, about 2 billion people work in the informal economy, which accounts for a significant share of total employment in many low-income countries.¹⁹ For migrants and refugees, informal work may be the only option when legal or practical barriers block access to the formal labor market. While

informal work can provide an economic lifeline for otherwise excluded groups, it typically involves lower earnings, fewer protections, and greater risks of exploitation. It also has consequences for cities, as informal employment can reduce tax receipts from workers and the businesses that employ them. Expanding access to the formal labor market can result in greater labor market participation, higher rates of formal entrepreneurship, and improved financial stability—all of which can translate into higher tax revenues and spending in local economies.²⁰

15 OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2025* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025).

16 OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2025*.

17 OECD and International Labor Organization (ILO), *How Immigrants Contribute to Developing Countries' Economies* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018).

18 Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and James D. Bachmeier, *Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2016).

19 ILO, "Statistics on the Informal Economy," accessed November 19, 2025; ILO, "SDG Indicator 8.3.1—Proportion of Informal Employment in Total Employment by Sex and Sector (%)," accessed November 19, 2025.

20 Studies from Colombia on the regularization of Venezuelans and the expansion of work permits for Syrians in Jordan illustrate the positive impacts on labor market participation and financial stability for these communities, and how regularization and expanded work permits translate into higher tax revenues and more spending in local economies. In Colombia, regularization was also associated with a greater likelihood of registering a new company and associated job creation. See Ana María Ibáñez et al., "Life Out of the Shadows: The Impacts of Regularization Programs on the Lives of Forced Migrants" (policy research working paper 9928, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2022); Svein Erik Stave, Tewodros Aragie Kebede, and Maha Kattaa, *Impact of Work Permits on Decent Work for Syrians in Jordan* (Geneva: ILO, 2021); Dany Bahar, Bo Cowgill, and Jorge Guzman, "Legalizing Entrepreneurship" (SSRN working paper, July 2022). A 2023 study from Bogotá found that foreign-owned businesses generally contributed nearly 188,000 jobs to the local economy between 2019 and 2022. See Juliana Aguilar Restrepo et al., *Efectos económicos de la migración internacional en el mercado laboral y el tejido empresarial de Bogotá* (Bogotá: Colombian Economic Development Secretary and International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2023).

Finally, entrepreneurship can be both an economic opportunity and a response to exclusion. Migrants and refugees are often overrepresented among entrepreneurs: for example, across two-thirds of OECD countries, immigrants are more likely to be self-employed than the native born.²¹ Migrant and refugee entrepreneurship can drive job creation and contributed to 15 percent of employment growth across OECD countries between 2011 and 2021.²² However, the broader literature on this topic as well as interviewed government officials and civil-society representatives caution that migrants and refugees may turn to entrepreneurship because job markets are inaccessible.²³ This points to the importance of distinguishing between opportunity-driven and necessity-driven entrepreneurship.²⁴ Access to entrepreneurship thus should be examined alongside access to paid employment.

At the same time, there are documented barriers that can prevent migrants and refugees from pursuing opportunity entrepreneurship or scaling sustainable businesses. Common barriers include limited destination-country language skills, lack of access to credit and capital or traditional collateral for loans, and difficulty navigating local requirements such as obtaining licenses and permits and paying taxes.²⁵ Limited access to information and participation in local business networks can also hold back immigrant entrepreneurs and thus limit the benefits that successful businesses bring to local economies.

To address these barriers, cities should consider three areas for intervention: filling data gaps to better target investments, using policy tools more holistically to support economic inclusion, and implementing promising practices to support access to employment and entrepreneurship. These will be discussed in the next three sections.

3 Closing Local Data Gaps

A clear economic case exists for promoting urban economic inclusion, but cities can struggle to access even basic data points on labor market participation, skills, and inclusion needs among their migrant and refugee residents. These gaps can be an obstacle to city-led efforts to support economic inclusion and to tap migrants' and refugees' potential within broader economic growth strategies.

21 The OECD and other research organizations use labor force survey data to identify people who are self-employed and who were born in another country; however, the OECD itself notes that while many entrepreneurs would identify as self-employed, this label excludes some entrepreneurs who are employed by their business (e.g., as a director) while including some self-employed people who would not be considered entrepreneurs (e.g., those whose main source of income is platform work). See OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2024* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024).

22 OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2024*.

23 MPI interview with Ellene Sana, Executive Director, Center for Migrant Advocacy, the Philippines, November 13, 2025; MPI interview with Trosky Serrano, Secretary-General, Provincial Government of Azuay, Ecuador, November 11, 2025.

24 OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2024*; OECD and European Commission, *The Missing Entrepreneurs 2023: Policies for Inclusive Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023); MPI interview with Trosky Serrano, Secretary-General, Provincial Government of Azuay, Ecuador, November 11, 2025; MPI interview with Michał Miguła, Head of Strategy and Social Programs Unit, Social Development Department, Gdańsk City Government, Poland, November 19, 2025; MPI interview with Hiram Angel Lara, Professor, University of Guadalajara, Mexico, November 3, 2025; MPI interview with Ellene Sana, Executive Director, Center for Migrant Advocacy, the Philippines, November 13, 2025.

25 MPI interview with Hiram Angel Lara, Professor, University of Guadalajara, Mexico, November 3, 2025; MPI interview with Kadar Muhumed Ismail, Deputy Mayor, Jijiga City Administration, Ethiopia and Abdinasir Hassen Mohamed, Project Management Support - Senior Officer, Supporting Urban Integration of Displacement-Affected Communities, Cities Alliance, December 8, 2025; MPI interview with Sebastianne Sherwin Acuzar, Assistant Head of the Migration Services Division, Public Employment Service Office, Quezon City Government, the Philippines, November 18, 2025.

Reliance on infrequent census counts, for example, can leave municipal budgets and infrastructure planning misaligned with current demographic realities, particularly in cities experiencing rapid population change. Limited understanding of local migrants' specific needs—from language proficiency gaps to how legal status shapes access to services—hampers the design of targeted and effective initiatives. Finally, the absence of credible, localized data prevents cities from showcasing migrants' and refugees' economic contributions, which can help build public support for inclusive policies and counter misperceptions about migration at the local level.

Even when cities collect data, they often measure access rather than outcomes, which gives policymakers an incomplete or skewed picture of where investments are needed the most.

Even when cities collect data, they often measure *access* rather than *outcomes*, which gives policymakers an incomplete or skewed picture of where investments are needed the most. For example, rising program participation or completion rates do not show policymakers what they need to know: whether these programs are leading to improvements in job retention rates, employer and employee satisfaction, business longevity, and similar.²⁶

However, a few bright spots stand out. Some city governments and their partners have developed more granular monitoring systems to track migrants' economic outcomes.²⁷ Other initiatives—including joint work by the Mayors Migration Council (MMC), C40 Cities, and the Climate Migration Council measuring urban green job shortages—map valuable data on city-level labor shortages in target sectors and highlight opportunities for migrant workers to fill local labor gaps.²⁸

Cities can take the following steps to generate better local insights on economic inclusion:

- **Unlock underused data sources.** Many cities already collect valuable data on migrants and refugees that provide insights into their economic inclusion (e.g., public employment service records, municipal services use, and business registration data), but local governments might not systematically gather, analyze, or share these data in a way that can inform policy. Local employment offices may use different indicators and definitions than housing or shelter providers, and agencies with different mandates may not share information regularly because of privacy laws. In Quezon City, for example, strict implementation of the data privacy act prevents officials from sharing raw data with personally identifying information, even within the same government.²⁹ Combined with operational limitations, these restrictions can lead to information becoming fragmented. In Gdańsk, officials noted there is no national system for collecting data on immigrants at the local level, and that while the city can draw

26 World Bank, “[Advancing Refugee Entrepreneurship: Guidelines for the Private Sector, Governments, and the Development Community](#)” (PS4R Policy and Research Paper, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2023).

27 For example, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, publishes socioeconomic data on recent and long-term migrants and other resident groups through its Metropolitan Region Dashboard and *Migration Monitor* reports. See Gemeente Amsterdam Onderzoek en Statistiek, “[Dashboard Metropoolregio](#),” accessed September 30, 2025.

28 C40 Cities, Climate Migration Council, and MMC, *From Shortages to Solutions: Good Green Jobs and Labour Migration in Cities* (New York: MMC, 2025).

29 MPI interview with Sebastianne Sherwin Acuzar, Assistant Head of the Migration Services Division, Public Employment Service Office, Quezon City Government, the Philippines, November 18, 2025.

on data from different sources (e.g., educational institutions, insurance systems, and labor market statistics), these combined data remain fragmented, limited, and non-comprehensive.³⁰ Cities can advocate for greater access to national data, including formal data-sharing frameworks, and promote better coordination of local and national data sources by establishing a dedicated team or centralized portal to share data.³¹

- ▶ **Improve data literacy among officials who use these data.** Municipal staff may need training to interpret and apply data on economic inclusion in their daily work, especially those in non-migration-related portfolios. Some initiatives provide platforms to use local economic or migration indicators, such as UN-Habitat's Urban Inclusion Scoreboard or the Mixed Migration Centre's 4Mi Cities project.³² Cities can also build data literacy directly. In the United States, Austin, Texas has the Data Impact Visuals and Exploration platform, which offers tools and workshops to help city officials and the public access and use city-level data, including for internal operations and decision-making about policy and resource allocation, although sustaining funding for the initiative has proved challenging.³³
- ▶ **Expand data collection and analysis capabilities, including through partnerships with nongovernment actors.** Many cities—particularly in resource-constrained environments—partner with nongovernmental actors to fill information gaps and build data collection capacity. In Kenya, the Nairobi City County government established a citywide coordination mechanism to work with international and local nongovernmental organizations directly on data sharing and referrals.³⁴ Beyond international actors, municipalities also partner with local academic institutions and civil-society organizations to conduct targeted needs assessments, an approach likely to gain importance as international funding tightens. In Cuenca, an interviewed representative of an international nongovernmental organization cited collaborations with universities, foundations, and organizations such as Cáritas Ecuador to collect data on the vulnerabilities and needs of migrants and internally displaced people in the region.³⁵ As cities invest in external partnerships, ensuring robust privacy and data protection safeguards is critical, especially for smaller municipalities handling sensitive information and for improving trust with populations underrepresented in official data (such as those without legal status).³⁶

30 MPI interview with Michał Miguła, Head of Strategy and Social Programs Unit, Social Development Department, Gdańsk City Government, Poland, November 19, 2025.

31 See, for example, the Gdańsk in Numbers portal, which shares some local socioeconomic statistics (although it currently does not include economic data on foreign residents), or the Barcelona Observatory of Migration and Refuge (established in late 2025) that aims to compile data on migrants and refugees in the city and inform policymaking. Gdańsk City Hall, "Gdańsk in Numbers," accessed January 27, 2026; Barcelona, "The Barcelona Observatory on Migration and Refuge Starts Life," October 1, 2025.

32 UN-Habitat's Urban Inclusion Scoreboard measures a city's capacity to offer residents universal access to services and the aggregate level of inclusion across spatial, social, economic, and cultural dimensions. This scorecard and its expanded counterpart set out robust indicators across areas, including socioeconomic diversity. The economic opportunities area includes two dimensions—proximity to businesses and access to livelihood opportunities—and five indicators, including general unemployment, youth unemployment, and self-employment. For more information, see UNHCR, IOM, and UN-HABITAT, *Ficha metodológica del Marcador de Inclusión Urbana* (N.p.: UNHCR, IOM, and UN-HABITAT, 2022).

33 OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, "Data Literacy Awareness through Impact Visualization and Exploration," updated July 2, 2024.

34 MMC, *Localizing the Global Compacts: Second Report on Local Action for Migrants and Refugees—2023* (New York: MMC, 2023).

35 MPI interview with a representative of an international nongovernmental organization, Ecuador, October 31, 2025.

36 Comments made at the private roundtable "Inclusive Economies for Urban Migrants and Refugees," hosted by MPI and MMC, April 15, 2026.

- **Monitor economic impact.** A small but growing number of actors are experimenting with approaches to track how inclusion programs affect migrant and refugee economic outcomes over time. In Nairobi and in Kampala, Uganda, the Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development (Re:BUiLD) project conducted randomized controlled trials and found that cash grants to refugee entrepreneurs were generally more cost-effective and produced better business outcomes than mentorship—an actionable policy insight.³⁷ Though costly, highly targeted studies like this can provide much-needed granular evidence on what works for specific populations and contexts. In Ecuador, the Entrepreneurship and Innovation Agency uses indices from the Latin American Intelligent Ecosystems Group to assess conditions that enable dynamic businesses, including migrant-owned firms, to scale—another way to collect valuable data on what works to drive entrepreneurship.³⁸

These approaches point to concrete steps cities can take, particularly in resource-constrained environments, to optimize and better use existing systems rather than creating new ones. In the short term, cities can use low-cost, common-sense strategies to fill data gaps by building partnerships and strengthening collaboration across government and between agencies. Over time, cities should advocate for the inclusion of more granular migration and inclusion indicators in national surveys and censuses (e.g., to make possible finer disaggregation of data by migrant background, duration of stay, country of origin, and legal status).

4 City-Level Infrastructure and Responsibilities for Supporting Economic Inclusion

Cities hold only some of the policy levers for supporting economic inclusion. National governments typically decide admissions policies and labor market access, for example, and national or regional authorities often lead integration programming. But cities can support economic inclusion through their broader employment, education and training, and entrepreneurship support services as well as by designing and coordinating local integration measures targeting migrant and refugee populations specifically. While cities' legal mandates and responsibilities around economic inclusion vary widely, their activities broadly fall into several categories: advocacy and agenda-setting, service provision, coordination, and funding and financial levers.

A. *Advocacy and Agenda-Setting*

Even when cities have limited legal mandates for areas such as issuing work permits, they can advocate for relevant policy reforms at the national or regional levels, such as expanding work authorization or making it easier for noncitizens to access credit, and more generally make the case locally for economic inclusion.³⁹

37 Immigration Policy Lab, “Re:BUiLD: Improving the Economic and Social Integration of Urban Refugees in Kenya and Uganda,” accessed February 25, 2026.

38 The Latin American Intelligent Ecosystems Group is a learning and collaboration network that measures and supports the development of local entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems in cities across the region. See Grupo de Ecosistemas Inteligentes de America Latina, “¿Quiénes somos?” accessed February 24, 2026.

39 MMC, *Cities Leading Regular Migration Pathways in the Americas* (New York: MMC, 2025); Samer Saliba and Savarni Sanka, “Pushing Boundaries: The Role of City Governments in an Era of Urban Migration,” Perry World House, University of Pennsylvania, June 11, 2025.

For example, member cities of the United States Conference of Mayors have advocated in recent years for more local input on admission decisions, faster work authorization for newly arrived asylum seekers, and recalibrating immigration enforcement to reduce its impacts on local communities and economies.⁴⁰ And while local governments also cannot lift restrictions on starting businesses or change credit access requirements, for example, they can advocate for these changes with national counterparts and financial actors and adapt business support programs and economic development strategies so that migrant and refugee entrepreneurs can benefit if those changes occur.

A growing number of U.S. cities have dedicated offices for immigrant integration that promote integration priorities and improve coordination across city agencies and with noncity partners.

Cities can create dedicated policies or strategies that articulate a local vision for economic inclusion and serve as a blueprint for coordinating services. For example, Aurora, Colorado, developed an immigrant integration plan for 2020–30 to guide the work of its Office of International and Immigrant Affairs. The plan

sets goals and metrics in 12 different areas, including several actions linked to economic inclusion, such as promoting immigrant entrepreneurship, providing job skills and certifications, and expanding English language instruction.⁴¹ Even in settings with highly centralized responsibilities for migration and immigrant integration, city-level policies can help organize and publicize available services and promote economic inclusion as a local priority. For example, in Upala, Costa Rica (a small border town near the Nicaraguan border), local authorities developed a human mobility policy that includes measures on economic inclusion, such as helping immigrants access public employment services and encouraging employers to hire those with legal status. Cities can also signal commitment to immigrant integration by establishing dedicated teams or offices for these issues. For example, a growing number of U.S. cities have dedicated offices for immigrant integration that promote integration priorities and improve coordination across city agencies and with noncity partners.⁴²

B. Mainstream Services

Cities can provide job placement services, education and training (including destination-country language instruction), and entrepreneurship support directly through mainstream services available to all residents, along with support in areas such as child care and housing that affect economic participation indirectly. For example, Gdańsk's labor agency provides dedicated support to migrants, refugees, and other residents on preparing their résumés and job applications. The agency also offers workshops and webinars on building the soft skills needed to apply for jobs and go through interview processes. As frontline actors, cities can test programs that can adapt to fast-moving local needs.

40 United States Conference of Mayors (USCM), “Endorsing Heartland Visas Pathway for Skilled Immigrants and Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Communities Facing Population Stagnation or Decline” (resolution adopted at the 92nd annual meeting, 2024); USCM, “In Support of Work Opportunities and Additional Federal Resources for Asylum Seekers” (resolution adopted at the 91st annual meeting, 2023); USCM, “America’s Mayors Trumpet Progress Reducing Crime and Warn of Immigration Enforcement Overreach on Day Three of USCM’s 93rd Annual Meeting” (news release, June 21, 2025).

41 Surveys, interviews, and focus groups with foreign-born residents, service providers, city agencies, and other stakeholders informed this plan. Office of International and Immigrant Affairs, *Immigrant Integration Plan 2020–2030: Aurora is Open to the World* (Aurora, CO: City of Aurora, 2020).

42 Gateways for Growth, “Municipal Toolkit,” accessed April 6, 2026.

Much of this programming is open to all residents and might not necessarily be identified as an economic inclusion intervention. For example, cities in Latin America have focused on structural issues that affect displaced Venezuelans and local residents alike, such as underemployment, labor informality, and widespread poverty.⁴³ As more cities introduce programming intended explicitly to support the economic inclusion of migrant and refugee communities (discussed in Section 5), mainstream services can reduce costs and avoid singling out specific groups for dedicated resources, which can create resentment and perceived competition between groups. For example, Chicago has moved toward a unified shelter system for migrants and locals following criticism that newcomers were being prioritized over marginalized locals.⁴⁴

A mainstreamed approach can create economies of scale but will work only if services are accessible and responsive to immigrants' needs. In some contexts, that responsiveness may include translation services or extra support in navigating new systems. For example, Chicago offers some targeted employment programs, such as the Heartland Human Care Services' Refugee and Immigrant Community

Services program, alongside helping migrants and refugees access mainstream workforce development and entrepreneurship programming.⁴⁵ Targeted services are especially helpful for new arrivals, who may need specialized support to understand and access unfamiliar systems or address challenges related to their migration or displacement journey. But over time, improving systems that all residents can access may be a more sustainable approach than stand-alone programs, which can be more vulnerable to political or funding shifts.

Cities in Latin America have focused on structural issues that affect displaced Venezuelans and local residents alike, such as underemployment, labor informality, and widespread poverty.

C. Coordination

Cities can play an important coordination role, either formally or informally. Some cities have established dedicated integration teams or stand-alone offices to coordinate services and programming, often with their own budget line. For example, Bogotá, Colombia, is creating a dedicated migration office with an allocated budget, and government officials in Quezon City have advocated for separating the migration services unit from the public employment service office to create an independent office with its own budget for migration-related programming.⁴⁶

Cities can also create processes that include civil society and migrant and refugee voices in policy decisions to better represent affected communities. For example, Quezon City established the Migration

43 Diego Chaves-González, María Jesús Mora, Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, and Catalina Vega-Méndez, "Colombia's Evolving Approach to Immigrant Integration: An Institutional Mapping" (unpublished report, MPI, Washington, DC, 2023); María Jesús Mora and Diego Chaves-González, *Migration Financing in Crisis: Donor Responses to Venezuelan Displacement* (MPI, forthcoming).

44 Samantha Chatman "Chicago Residents Demand Resources for South, West Side as City Focuses on Migrant Crisis," ABC7 Eyewitness News, September 27, 2023; City of Chicago, "Shelter," accessed February 4, 2026.

45 Chicago Office of Immigrant, Migrant, and Refugee Rights, "Work and Economic Empowerment," accessed February 4, 2026.

46 As of April 2026, this proposal was going through the local legislative process. MPI interview with Sebastianne Sherwin Acuzar, Assistant Head of the Migration Services Division, Public Employment Service Office, Quezon City Government, the Philippines, November 18, 2025; MPI interview with Andrés Felipe Segura Arnaiz, Immigration Affairs Consultant, Bogotá, Colombia, December 8, 2025.

Development Council that helps civil-society organizations provide input on the economic reintegration of returnees and other issues. Gdańsk has created an advisory board for people with a migrant background to advise the mayor and local authorities on immigrant integration issues and policies—an example of how to involve migrants and refugees in both program design and implementation.⁴⁷ Incorporating insights from people with lived experience of economic inclusion into policy decisions, particularly in a more institutionalized format, can improve effectiveness. But results depend on how regularly cities use these consultative mechanisms and how much influence they have on city policymaking, as well as on whether such participatory approaches are adequately resourced to facilitate engagement and to compensate participants for their time.⁴⁸

A growing number of cities now offer one-stop shops that bring together integration services and supports typically provided by different departments and agencies (see Box 2). Instead of interacting with multiple

BOX 2

One-Stop Shops Providing Economic Inclusion Services

Around the world, cities have introduced integrated service centers, known as “one-stop shops,” that centralize key services for migrants and refugees in one location. Services can include information about workplace norms and worker rights, along with legal assistance; these services help promote decent work among migrants and refugees. National governments or cities may operate these centers.

In Europe, for example, Barcelona’s Servei d’Atenció a Immigrants, Emigrants i Refugiats provides newcomers with comprehensive guidance on finding employment, job training services (including support for diploma recognition) and broader resources on education and training opportunities. The center also offers information on the city, immigration processes, and social programs. Riga, Latvia, opened a support center for Ukrainian nationals shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The one-stop shop brings national and local government services to displaced Ukrainians, such as registration, temporary residence permits, social assistance, and access to employment opportunities.

One-stop shops have also expanded in the Americas. Since 2022, the Colombian government has established 15 integration centers in 12 cities, and the centers consolidate national and local integration services in one place for immigrants, refugees, and Colombian returnees. The centers also serve other disadvantaged residents to avoid perceptions of unfair treatment. In 2014, São Paulo, Brazil, opened its Reference and Assistance Center for Immigrants to provide comprehensive services, including a mobile unit that reaches remote communities. Since its launch, the center has inspired similar service centers across Brazil.

Sources: Barcelona, Directorate for Immigration and Refugee Services, “Care Service for Immigrants, Emigrants, and Refugees (SAIER),” accessed December 18, 2025; Eurocities, “Cities of Welcome: Driving Integration and Equality in a Changing Europe,” updated November 21, 2024; Colombia, Ministry of Equality and Equity, “Primer Encuentro Nacional de Centros Intégrate de Min Igualdad,” updated July 9, 2025; OECD, *Working Together for Local Integration of Migrants and Refugees in Barcelona* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018); Fundación Juntos Se Puede, “¿Qué son los Centros Intégrate y cuál es la oferta para los venezolanos?” updated May 17, 2022; Quezon City, the Philippines, “OFW Help Desk,” updated September 5, 2025; Strengthening the Skills of Social Workers in a Europe in Crisis, “Support Centre for Residents of Ukraine” (best practices card, September 2025); MMC, *Cities Leading Regular Migration Pathways in the Americas* (New York: MMC, 2025); European Social Network, “One-Stop Agency Approach for Supporting Ukrainian War Refugees in Riga,” accessed February 24, 2026.

47 MPI interview with Ellene Sana, Executive Director, Center for Migrant Advocacy, the Philippines, November 13, 2025; Moving Cities, “The Immigrants’ Council of Gdańsk,” accessed February 4, 2026.

48 Sharmarke Dubow, *Participatory Policy-making with Refugee Claimants in the City of Toronto* (Toronto: Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2023).

systems and service providers, immigrants can access economic inclusion services and other integration-related supports in one place. Assessments suggest that this approach can be cost-effective and may move migrants and refugees into the labor market more quickly, particularly when delivered as part of an early intervention. However, evaluations have not rigorously measured the impacts of these services on labor market outcomes such as quality of employment.⁴⁹

D. Funding and Financial Levers

Most city-level inclusion efforts draw on a combination of municipal revenues, donor funding, and external financing, though funding sources vary across contexts.⁵⁰ In high-income countries, cities often access a more diversified set of funding sources, including own-source revenues, international grants, philanthropy, and public-private partnerships. By contrast, municipalities in low- and middle-income countries tend to rely more on project-based funding and donor support, which is often short-term, highly competitive, and subject to sudden withdrawal—U.S. aid cuts, for example, have forced many organizations to close offices or reduce services sharply. Locally generated revenue streams are more sustainable and adaptable to local needs, but cities may not be able to access them where municipal budgets face increasing strain.

Considering future stability, cities can explore funding models that address budgetary shortfalls and support program expansion. Government and civil-society representatives consulted for this project frequently cited a lack of sustainable funding. In Kanifing, for example, a representative of a civil-society organization noted that even when external funding is available to pilot new projects, cities face challenges in determining how to transition from short-term projects to system-based support.⁵¹ Even in high-income settings, uncertainty about federal funding has prompted U.S. cities such as St. Louis to explore ways to augment budgets with private and philanthropic funding.⁵²

In Mexico, a pioneering pooled fund will mobilize philanthropic capital, employer contributions, and multilateral bank resources to support migrant integration and economic inclusion.

Pooled funding and matching programs that blend public and private resources are a promising approach to sustaining and scaling economic inclusion programs. In Mexico, a pioneering pooled fund will mobilize philanthropic capital, employer contributions, and multilateral bank resources to support migrant integration and economic inclusion.⁵³ The pilot will be launched in July 2026 in Mexico City, Nuevo Leon, and Jalisco, with plans to expand to other cities if successful. In Brazil, several cities use a trust fund model to raise capital for city programs, with state, municipal, and private-sector actors contributing jointly. These funds support projects such as building climate-resilient water and sanitation infrastructure in Campinas, Fortaleza, Maracanaú, and Pacoti; low-carbon urban mobility in Belo Horizonte; and sustainable waste

49 Eurocities, “Setting Up a One-Stop-Shop for Migrant Integration” (how-to guide, Eurocities, Brussels, 2022).

50 MMC, “Municipal Finance for Migrants and Refugees: The State of Play” (brief, MMC, New York, 2022).

51 MPI interview with Bai Gassama, Head, Network of Reintegration and Irregular Migration Data, Kanifing, The Gambia, November 6, 2025.

52 MPI interview with Stephen Davis, Vice President of Strategic Partnerships and Initiatives, Saint Louis Development Corporation, and Gilberto Pinela, Director of the Office of New Americans, City of St. Louis Government, United States, October 29, 2025.

53 MPI interview with a representative of an international foundation based in Mexico, December 17, 2025.

management in Curitiba (landfill-gas-to-energy projects).⁵⁴ These sustainable financing mechanisms could help mobilize more funds for projects with clear economic returns that attract investors.

5 Identifying High-Impact City-Led Interventions

Cities can support migrants and refugees directly in accessing more stable and durable career pathways through economic inclusion services. But deciding what to invest in and how to achieve the greatest impact depends on context. Local labor market structures, the strength and dynamism of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and how migrants and refugees access work all shape what is feasible and where investment returns are highest. For instance, programs that succeed in high-income cities might not translate to cities in low-income countries. The Re:BUiLD livelihood program shows that even between two somewhat similar urban settings, the same model can benefit new business owners in one setting (Nairobi) but can increase profits for already moderately profitable businesses in another (Kampala).⁵⁵

Identifying and understanding the motivations and constraints of migrants and refugees is critical when designing interventions. In contexts where migrants and refugees pursue entrepreneurship out of necessity rather than opportunity, or where the entrepreneurial landscape is weak, a strong case exists for focusing first on lowering barriers to employment and improving job quality. In such contexts, launching a series of small-scale entrepreneurship programs might generate limited returns for participants and minimal contributions to the local economy. The key question is not whether to promote either employment or entrepreneurship but how to design market-oriented interventions that align with local demand and provide migrants and refugees with realistic pathways to improve their livelihoods.

The Re:BUiLD livelihood program shows that even between two somewhat similar urban settings, the same model can benefit new business owners in one setting (Nairobi) but can increase profits for already moderately profitable businesses in another (Kampala).

A. Employment

Employer-Employee Matching Services

Local networks are critical to successful labor market entry, and city-led matching services can broker connections between employers and workers and help level the playing field for newcomers with sought-after skills. In Monterrey, Mexico, for example, the Secretariat of Equality and Inclusion conducts inclusion

⁵⁴ MPI interview with a representative from the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, November, 26, 2025; Brazilian Development Bank, “Funding Sources,” accessed January 21, 2026; Thatyenne Gasparotto, Julia Ambrosano, and Barbara Brakarz, “Opportunities for Sustainable Infrastructure Investments at the City Level in Brazil” (Technical Note IDB-TN-1967, Inter-American Development Bank, Washington, DC, 2020).

⁵⁵ Immigration Policy Lab, “Re:BUiLD”; Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development (Re:BUiLD), “The Impact of Cash Grants and Cash + Mentorship on Ugandan and Refugee Business Owners in Kampala, Uganda” (policy brief, Re:BUiLD, Kampala, Uganda, June 2025); Re:BUiLD, “The Impact of Cash Grants and Cash + Mentorship on Kenyan and Refugee Business Owners in Nairobi, Kenya” (policy brief, Re:BUiLD, Nairobi, June 2025).

fairs and sets up booths that bring together state and federal agencies and businesses offering job opportunities and other services such as health, education, and identity documentation. Since 2022, the fairs have served more than 20,000 migrants, refugees, returnees, and displaced persons, speaking to the demand for these services.⁵⁶ Cities can also help newcomers understand what opportunities are available locally and what the requirements may be. For example, Barranquilla, Colombia is using funding from the MMC's Global Cities Fund for Migrants and Refugees (GCF), described in Box 3, to expand its Opportunities Center to identify job vacancies and required skills among nearly 200 potential employers and to provide migrants with specialized vocational training and connections to those employers.⁵⁷ Critically, cities can also use these platforms to connect jobseekers with vacancies in sectors facing labor shortages or those with projected growth in demand. In northern Italy, where officials estimate a need for nearly 50,000 migrant workers in the Piedmont and Valle d'Aosta regions to address demographic decline, Turin is using GCF funding to match local employers with refugees in Uganda to fill vacancies in critical sectors—a notable step further, as this would represent a city-led labor mobility pathway.⁵⁸

BOX 3

The Mayors Migration Council's Global Cities Fund for Migrant and Refugees

The Global Cities Fund for Migrants and Refugees (GCF) is the Mayors Migration Council's instrument for channeling direct funding and technical support to city-led inclusive projects. With grants of up to USD 500,000 per proposal, the GCF supports city leadership and provides flexible funding to city governments, which traditional donors have historically overlooked and which struggle to access resources. As of January 2026, the GCF has mobilized USD 32 million and helped 33 cities, 90 percent of which have used the seed funding as proof of concept to unlock additional investment. While some projects are still in the pilot phase, GCF grantees are implementing innovative initiatives that address both the current challenges cities face and the evolving goals of urban economic inclusion.

Preparing cities for a greener and more sustainable future is a chief priority among grantees. In Nairobi, Kenya, the CHOICE Innovation Hub trains migrants, refugees, and disadvantaged youth on green job readiness and supports green start-ups, which will help clean the Nairobi River and create an inclusive green jobs corridor along its riverfront. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, launched a project that connects migrants and refugees to jobs that strengthen the circular waste management economy, improve local sanitation, and build climate resilience—key challenges the city faces in its unplanned communities.

Other GCF grantee cities are prioritizing digital inclusion and efforts to narrow the technological divide. Manta, Ecuador, supports business associations of migrant, displaced, and local women in the food and textile sectors. The grant will help fund business and technical training for these sectors, such as on managing online deliveries, and support access to local and digital markets, including through the development of an online sales platform.

Sources: Mayors Migration Council (MMC), "[Global Cities Fund for Migrants and Refugees](#)," accessed February 24, 2026; MMC, "[Nairobi, Kenya: The City of Choice](#)," updated November 16, 2022; MMC, "[Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: Enhancing Urban Migrant Resilience through Sustainable Waste Management Practices](#)," updated November 16, 2022; MMC, "[Manta, Ecuador: Manta Para Mujeres \(CreActivas\)](#)," updated September 25, 2025.

56 Nuevo León Secretaría de Igualdad e Inclusión, "[Realiza Igualdad e Inclusión Cuarta Edición de la Feria de Inclusión para personas en contexto de movilidad](#)," accessed September 30, 2025.

57 MMC, "[Barranquilla, Colombia: Todos Somos Barranquilla](#)," updated January 7, 2021.

58 MMC, "[Turin, Italy: From Kampala to Turin](#)," updated September 25, 2025.

Investing in matching services and mentoring can greatly aid labor market outcomes. For example, a 2020 evaluation of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council's mentoring partnership found that participants were twice as likely to find quality employment after the three-month mentoring commitment.⁵⁹ In some cases, cities may bundle employment services with other supports that affect

Vienna's StartWien Hub provides integration services ... and counselling for new arrivals, and offers free child care for immigrant women who are taking courses there.

inclusion, such as upskilling programs (discussed below) or subsidized or free child care to enable parents to find work or attend courses.⁶⁰ For example, Vienna's StartWien Hub provides integration services (including German language and literacy classes) and counselling for new arrivals, and offers free child care for immigrant women who are taking courses there.⁶¹

However, more work can be done to track migrant outcomes after participating in different employment initiatives. Few cities collect or publish data on job quality, retention, or income progression, which makes it difficult to assess whether they improve economic inclusion in the medium and long term and to compare cost-effectiveness with less intensive models.

Effective matching also involves providing guidance for employers on avoiding hiring processes and job requirements that exclude immigrants unintentionally. For example, requiring local work experience can exclude new arrivals, and employers could find other ways to assess whether a candidate is qualified for a role. For example, career services increasingly use competency tests to capture the skills of nontraditional candidates, although city authorities should coordinate these efforts with employers to ensure that tests align with hiring needs and that employers understand and trust the results.

Some cities also support credential recognition processes, which can assist in effective matching, especially in highly regulated labor markets. Berlin, Germany, established a website for professionals with qualifications from other EU countries, Single Point of Contact Berlin, which provides information about how and where to apply and allows online applications.⁶² Official statistics show that in 2025, the platform processed almost 1,300 applications for foreign qualification recognition.⁶³ Meanwhile, in Colombia, the city of Cali, with GCF support, is building a blockchain-powered, open-source digital employment system that will securely verify and document the skills and credentials of jobseekers (including migrant and returnees) for employers and connect participants with them directly.⁶⁴

These digital tools can reduce bureaucratic barriers, but it is important to ensure local efforts do not duplicate national platforms. Berlin's platform operates within a multilevel governance framework that

59 TRIEC's program focuses on improving career outcomes for skilled immigrants (who arrived within the last five years) in the greater Toronto area. TRIEC, *Demand for & Impact of Mentoring Newcomer Professionals: The case of TRIEC Mentoring Partnership. Evaluation Findings* (Toronto: TRIEC, 2020).

60 For single-parent households, subsidized or free child care can be critical for parents' ability to participate in training or find work. For example, a study of Ukrainian refugees in Germany found that child-care services greatly boosted Ukrainian women's participation in employment or training (88 percent) or in integration courses (80 percent) as well as aiding their social integration. See Ludovica Gambaro, Mathias Huebener, Sophia Schmitz, and Katharina C. Spieß, "Unlocking Potential: Childcare Services and Refugees' Integration, Employment and WellBeing" (IZA Discussion Papers No. 17181, Institute of Labor Economics, Bonn, 2024).

61 Interface Wien, "StartWien Hub," accessed April 8, 2026.

62 ServicePortal Berlin, "Recognising Foreign Professional Qualifications: Professional Recognition," accessed December 18, 2025.

63 Berlin, Germany, "Single Point of Contact Berlin and Digital Business Services," accessed February 24, 2026.

64 MMC, "Cali, Colombia: Digital ID and Job Matching for Migrants," updated December 12, 2025.

includes federal and EU-level portals, which creates some information overlap.⁶⁵ A key question is how cities can design user-friendly platforms that reduce administrative hurdles while being integrated with national databases, rather than creating parallel systems.

Upskilling Workers

Cities can help migrants and refugees bridge gaps in technical or soft skills by providing or funding training or referring them to opportunities run by civil-society or private-sector partners. Improving destination-country language skills, for example, can help migrant and refugee jobseekers become more competitive in local labor markets, leading to higher earnings and lower rates of underemployment.⁶⁶ Examples of this programming include Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality's Art and Vocational Training Courses, which offer free courses in digital and information technology skills and Turkish language training for Syrians and other refugees, and the GCF-funded First Steps in Milan project, which provides job readiness, job placement, and language courses to 250 caregivers of migrant and refugee children.⁶⁷

These services can direct jobseekers to sectors with better job opportunities and which may be experiencing labor shortages. For example, the nonprofit Welcoming Center in Philadelphia uses donor support (including city grants) to provide immigrants with free English language instruction, training in digital skills and workplace communications, and career services tailored to specific industries in the city, such as health care and manufacturing.⁶⁸ Participants in the center's international professionals program, which is geared toward college-educated and English-language-proficient individuals, reported much higher rates of employment a year later.⁶⁹ And Denver's WorkReady Denver Program—a pilot program under the Denver Asylum Seekers Program—prepares asylum seekers for jobs in sectors facing labor shortages, such as hospitality, construction, health care, and green energy. The program combines mentoring, language and soft skills training, and vocational training with unpaid internships and job placement services.⁷⁰

65 Anerkennung In Deutschland, "[Wie bekomme ich die Anerkennung](#)," accessed February 26, 2026; Your Europe, "[Questions on Your Rights in the EU? Or Your Obligations?](#)" accessed February 26, 2026.

66 For example, a study of Denmark's 1999 reform to provide an additional 430 hours of language training in the first three years after arrival found it increased refugees' annual earnings by 15 percent, with a larger impact on earnings for refugee women. See Linea Hasager, Giovanni Peri, and Mette Foged, "[Language Training and Placement in Strong Labour Markets Promote Refugees' Long-Run Economic Integration](#)," VoxEU, December 11, 2022. The positive effects of destination-country language proficiency on employment outcomes are well documented; a study from Canada, for example, found that immigrants who were not proficient in English or French had a far greater chance of being overqualified for their jobs (48 percent, compared to 18 percent for English speakers and 12 percent for French speakers). See Parisa Mahboubi and Tingting Zhang, *Harnessing Immigrant Talent: Reducing Overqualification and Strengthening the Immigration System* (Toronto: C.D. Howe Institute, 2024).

67 Carmine Conte and Alexander Wolffhardt, *Effective Inclusion of Refugees: Participatory Approaches for Practitioners at the Local Level* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2021); MMC, "[Milan, Italy: First Steps in Milan](#)," updated June 20, 2023.

68 The Welcoming Center, "[English and Digital Skills Training](#)," accessed February 4, 2026.

69 An assessment found that 83 percent of participants were in employment a year after completing the International Professionals Program (compared to 40 percent prior to participation), although details were not provided about the type of employment. Results for America, "[Workforce Programming for Immigrants: Philadelphia, PA](#)," updated August 20, 2024.

70 City and County of Denver, "[WorkReady Denver Program](#)," accessed September 30, 2025; City and County of Denver, "[For Employers](#)," accessed September 30, 2025.

For cities, upskilling programs are an upfront investment that can yield long-term returns.⁷¹ Getting people into work and, crucially, putting them on a pathway to higher earnings can provide higher fiscal returns for local and national authorities alike, and underscores the benefit of ensuring that migrants and refugees can access these services.

Proactive investment in building the workforce in sectors projected to grow (such as clean energy and health care) or in helping workers develop essential skillsets such as digital literacy can yield long-term benefits for workers, employers, and cities. Such investments can also be a way for cities to connect economic inclusion with other city priorities, such as meeting green transition targets or adapting health-care services for aging populations. For example, Boston's immigrant-led home-care cooperative aims to create higher-quality jobs and business ownership pathways for migrants, with GCF support, while addressing a shortage of qualified care workers for its aging population.⁷² Other cities receiving GCF funding have used green job initiatives to advance inclusion and meet climate resilience goals. Freetown, Sierra Leone, created its Climate Resilient Market Hub for migrant women and youth as part of its efforts to generate 120,000 decent green jobs by 2028. The hub introduces participants to waste-to-energy technology, cold-chain infrastructure, and approaches to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.⁷³

Freetown, Sierra Leone, created its Climate Resilient Market Hub for migrant women and youth as part of its efforts to generate 120,000 decent green jobs by 2028.

Creating opportunities for teams made up of migrants and native-born residents to work together on livelihood projects can also strengthen social cohesion. These efforts can create conditions for positive contact between those groups, which is more natural and longer lasting than what voluntary or leisure-based social cohesion initiatives typically achieve. Projects that enable migrants to contribute to communities in visible ways, such as collecting trash for recycling, can also promote more positive narratives than digital information or messaging campaigns alone.

B. Entrepreneurship

Cities can help migrant and refugee entrepreneurs access the networks and services needed to establish businesses while addressing related barriers such as legal status and language. This programming serves several interconnected goals: improving access to entrepreneurship, enhancing business outcomes and sustainability, and supporting meaningful contributions to host communities. The premise is that, by supporting the establishment and growth of local businesses, these programs can aid the local economy by creating jobs and boosting tax revenue, although in practice, few of these programs are rigorously

⁷¹ For example, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre estimated that in the European Union, the positive impact on GDP would offset public investment in all integration services for refugees (e.g., language and vocational training, but also accommodation, welfare benefits, and education for children) within 9–19 years. See D'Artis Kancs and Patrizio Lecca, "Long-Term Social, Economic and Fiscal Effects of Immigration into the EU: The Role of the Integration Policy" (JRC Working Papers in Economics and Finance 2017/4, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2017).

⁷² MMC, "Boston, United States: Cooperating Care," updated September 25, 2025.

⁷³ MMC, "Freetown, Sierra Leone: Climate Resilient Market Hub," updated October 30, 2025.

evaluated to assess these economic contributions or to track how participating entrepreneurs' businesses fare over time.

Small Business Start-Up Support

Cities can play a critical role in helping newcomers navigate local requirements and norms for starting and running a business. Some cities have reduced barriers by expanding eligibility and directing foreign-born residents to entrepreneurship support services available to native-born residents, with targeted adaptations. For example, Chicago's Welcoming Ordinance allows migrants and refugees to access city-run entrepreneurship resources and programs regardless of legal status, with guides translated into multiple languages. The city also established quarterly events for immigrant entrepreneurs that cover licensing, taxes, access to capital, and other issues. However, reporting suggests the city has decreased the focus on immigrant business owners.⁷⁴ These mainstreamed models can reduce perceptions of preferential treatment, and because cities use existing programs, they can also improve cost-effective and financial sustainability.

In other settings, cities have consolidated specialized support and services to address barriers that early-stage migrant and refugee entrepreneurs face, such as language skills, legal requirements, and access to credit. For example, the Welcoming Center's entrepreneurship program in Philadelphia offers an entrepreneurship program in English as well as Dari, Spanish, and Ukrainian.⁷⁵ In Zurich, the organization Capacity runs an entrepreneurship program that offers non-European participants training and access to an incubator. The program helps them develop their business models and understand cantonal legal requirements before entering more mainstream support systems.⁷⁶ Between 2016 and 2024, it supported 172 entrepreneurs and helped develop 93 businesses and nonprofits.⁷⁷ The program's founders have noted that relying on a patchwork of short-term external grants leads them to depend heavily on volunteers and limits their ability to plan for the long term and achieve sustained growth.⁷⁸

Cities can combine specialized initiatives with outreach to groups at risk of informality. For example, Denver partners with the Rocky Mountain MicroFinance Institute in a pilot that rethinks enforcement-only approaches to informal entrepreneurship. Instead of issuing fines to Spanish-speaking entrepreneurs running unlicensed food businesses, the city uses inspections to refer them to the institute for resources and guidance on business licensing.⁷⁹ Although it is too early to assess outcomes, this approach aims to help shift migrant-owned microenterprises into the formal economy, expand the tax base, and show how cities can address licensing, outreach, and tailored entrepreneurship services at the same time.

Taken together, these two models highlight trade-offs between breadth, depth, and sustainability.

Mainstream approaches that open general services to migrants and refugees, with slight adaptations, are

⁷⁴ Bipartisan Policy Center, "[The Immigrant Entrepreneurship Landscape: Chicago as Case Study](#)," updated May 4, 2022.

⁷⁵ An assessment found that a year after completing the program, 67 percent of participants reported having a self-sustaining business (up from 44 percent prior to participation). See Results for America, "[Workforce Programming for Immigrants: Philadelphia, PA](#)," updated August 20, 2024.

⁷⁶ OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2024*.

⁷⁷ Capacity, "[How We Work](#)," accessed February 24, 2026.

⁷⁸ Capacity, *Annual Report 2023* (Zurich: Capacity, 2024); Capacity, *Annual Report 2024* (Zurich: Capacity, 2025).

⁷⁹ Rocky Mountain MicroFinance Institute (RMMFI), "[RMMFI Business Launch Boot Camp](#)," accessed February 4, 2026; information provided to the authors by MMC, January 2026.

likely to reach larger numbers and are easier to sustain with city budgets, but they may overlook the specific and compounded challenges immigrant entrepreneurs face. Highly targeted services can provide intensive, tailored support at the idea stage, but they risk running out of funding before businesses become viable.⁸⁰

In less-resourced settings, cities can also expand access to entrepreneurship by providing physical infrastructure, such as market spaces, that migrants, refugees, and other disadvantaged groups need. In Jijiga and surrounding migration corridors, a city-administered wholesale market offers young migrants access to business sheds, enabling them to trade and purchase goods at lower prices than when operating on the street.⁸¹

Kairouan, Tunisia, built an artisanal market and wooden market stalls through a partnership with Cities Alliance to provide selling space to migrant entrepreneurs.⁸² Access to market stalls can also provide a safer environment for self-employed migrants and refugees, especially in contexts with high levels of discrimination.

Kairouan, Tunisia, built an artisanal market and wooden market stalls through a partnership with Cities Alliance to provide selling space to migrant entrepreneurs.

Along with training and infrastructure, some municipalities support access to capital through citywide programs or initiatives targeted to smaller groups such as migrants and refugees. For example, Cuenca established a savings fund for vulnerable populations, including immigrants, returnees, and internally displaced Ecuadorians, that combines financial literacy training with access to loans for viable and innovative business ideas.⁸³ WE NYC, a New York City initiative supporting women entrepreneurs (with a focus on women of color and immigrant women), provides financial literacy and credit-building support as part of its programming, helping participants access USD 8.9 million in loans between 2015 and 2020.⁸⁴ And in St. Louis, the Afghan Chamber of Commerce, with support from the International Institute of St. Louis, runs an entrepreneurship awards program that provides USD 15,000 in start-up funding to Afghan entrepreneurs and hosts award ceremonies at St. Louis City Hall.⁸⁵ These examples show how cities can work with local partners to expand access to finance while prioritizing business proposals that can benefit local labor markets.

Promoting Long-Term Business Success

Most support for migrant and refugee entrepreneurs focuses on the start-up phase, which means that many entrepreneurs lose access to assistance just as they begin their ventures.⁸⁶ However, a growing number of city-based initiatives are helping to fill this gap in growth-stage support, with the goal of making

80 Impact Hub and The Human Safety Net, *Mapping Refugee and Migrant Entrepreneurship Ecosystems in Europe* (Vienna: Impact Hub, 2021).

81 Cities Alliance, *Leveraging Migration for Improved Jobs and Services* (Brussels: Cities Alliance, 2023).

82 Cities Alliance, “Tunisia: Rural-Urban Migration as a Driver of Economic Development” (news release, October 13, 2022).

83 City of Cuenca, “El Congreso de Cajas de Ahorro y Cajas Solidarias 2025 reúne a más de 500 mujeres del cantón Cuenca” (press release, November 21, 2025); MPI interview with Zunilda Rodríguez, Participation and Protection Networks Analyst, Municipal Council of Rights Protection in Cuenca, Cuenca Government, November 20, 2025.

84 NYC Department of Small Business Services, *Unlocking the Power of Women Entrepreneurs: The Influence of the WE NYC Initiative* (New York: NYC Department of Small Business Services, 2020).

85 MPI interview with Stephen Davis, Vice President of Strategic Partnerships and initiatives, Saint Louis Development Corporation, and Gilberto Pinela, Director of the Office of New Americans, City of St. Louis Government, United States, October 29, 2025.

86 Impact Hub and The Human Safety Net, *Mapping Refugee and Migrant Entrepreneurship*.

the businesses more sustainable, scalable, and profitable. Many such initiatives concentrate on training, individualized coaching, access to business networks, and incubation support.⁸⁷

Evidence suggests that at the growth stage, foreign-born entrepreneurs benefit more from mainstream support services than from parallel programs designed solely for migrants and refugees, in contrast to the early idea stage.⁸⁸ Building social capital and entrepreneurial networks can help migrants and refugees participate in the broader entrepreneurship ecosystem instead of being confined to small, isolated markets (such as ethnic enclaves) with low growth potential. While relying on co-ethnic customers and suppliers can be beneficial in the short term, it can inhibit business growth in the long term.⁸⁹ For this reason, some programs focus deliberately on integrating foreign-born entrepreneurs into local supply chains and markets. Quito's Economic Promotion Corporation (CONQUITO), the metropolitan agency for economic development, helps migrants gain social capital by building relationships with buyers, suppliers, and peer entrepreneurs so they can approach the market independently over time.⁹⁰

Local business associations, such as chambers of commerce and industry, are key actors in embedding migrant and refugee business owners in local economies, for example, by including them in formal networking activities such as business-to-business matchmaking.⁹¹ Bogotá's Migración Productiva connects migrant and refugee entrepreneurs to mainstream business networks through the Chamber of Commerce's virtual platforms, such as BazaarBog (the chamber's commercial showcase) and Negocia (a business-to-business platform that connects new suppliers with clients).⁹² The St. Louis Mosaic Project also connects immigrant entrepreneurs with at least four ethnic chambers of commerce in the city that offer programs and networking opportunities.⁹³ Even though these efforts are small-scale and have limited outcome data, they show promise in helping to integrate migrant and refugee businesses into wider economic networks with greater growth potential, along with other interventions such as promoting business formalization in some contexts (see Box 4).

Business incubation support can help migrants and refugees establish viable, scalable projects that go beyond survival entrepreneurship. Cities increasingly recognize the force multiplier effect of partnerships with external stakeholders, especially as municipal budgets shrink. For example, in Montreuil, France, the L'incubateur de la Ruche program offers individualized mentoring and access to a network of experts in a shared space.⁹⁴ The mayor's office in Aurora, Colorado, partnered with Community Enterprise Development Services and the Community College of Aurora to create a year-long entrepreneurship training program

87 OECD and European Commission, *The Missing Entrepreneurs 2023*.

88 World Bank, "Advancing Refugee Entrepreneurship"; Impact Hub and The Human Safety Net, *Mapping Refugee and Migrant Entrepreneurship*.

89 World Bank, "Advancing Refugee Entrepreneurship"; Impact Hub and The Human Safety Net, *Mapping Refugee and Migrant Entrepreneurship*.

90 In 2023, 328 migrant entrepreneurs were trained, and 214 completed their business model. These participants accessed commercial link processes, including testing labs and entrepreneurship fairs. Economic Promotion Corporation (CONQUITO), *Informe preliminar rendición de cuentas 2024* (Quito, Ecuador: CONQUITO, 2025).

91 World Bank, "Advancing Refugee Entrepreneurship."

92 Cámara de Comercio de Bogotá, "Lanza programa de migración productiva para impulsar emprendimientos de migrantes venezolanos," updated May 6, 2021.

93 St. Louis Mosaic Project, "Ethnic Chambers in St. Louis," accessed February 21, 2026.

94 La Ruche, "À Montreuil, agir pour l'épanouissement des personnes réfugiées," accessed September 29, 2025; Moving Cities, "Montreuil: Un accès 'inconditionnel' aux droits et aux services pour toutes les habitantes," accessed September 29, 2025.

BOX 4**Promoting Business Formalization to Improve Economic Outcomes**

In contexts where labor informality is widespread, cities may prioritize business formalization along with regularizing immigration status. Moving into the formal economy can improve productivity and profitability and expand migrant and refugee entrepreneurs' access to support. However, for some other cities, the priority may simply be ensuring that workers in the informal economy can work safely and productively.

Bogotá's Migración Productiva, for example, offers assistance to regularized Venezuelan entrepreneurs only if they are registered in the local chamber of commerce and have scalable or tested business models. Through the program, Bogotá's Chamber of Commerce aims to leverage migration to support labor market diversification, increase productivity and consumption, and reduce informality by strengthening the business community. Encouraging this shift will require cities to make formalization more accessible—for example, by simplifying processes and reducing time and cost—and make it more advantageous than operating in the informal economy.

Sources: Cámara de Comercio de Bogotá, “[Lanza programa de migración productiva para impulsar emprendimientos de migrantes venezolanos](#),” updated May 6, 2021; Economic Promotion Corporation (CONQUITO), “[Ruta del Emprendimiento](#),” accessed September 29, 2025; Donor Committee for Enterprise Development, “[Firm Creation and Registration Lead to Higher Productivity/Revenues](#),” accessed February 3, 2026.

that includes access to incubator space with computers, design equipment, meeting space, and other benefits.⁹⁵ Kanifing's municipality, with GCF support, is establishing a migrant resilience hub to provide business incubation support and seed funding to up to 40 young migrants and returnees.⁹⁶ Through Denver's partnership with the Rocky Mountain MicroFinance Institute, immigrants who are ready to launch or scale their businesses can access the institute's Business Launch Boot Camp, which includes access to microloans of up to USD 3,500.⁹⁷ These programs show how city leadership, working in partnership with specialized stakeholders, can give small groups of entrepreneurs access to capital, professional mentorship, and dedicated space that training programs alone rarely provide.

While these specialized incubation models provide needed holistic and one-on-one support, they face challenges in scaling and sustaining operations. Organizations that run incubators must often fundraise continuously, and the highly individualized mentorship and training they provide often relies on volunteers rather than paid staff.⁹⁸ To extend limited resources, some incubators, such as the Capacity program in Zurich, do not have a dedicated space to convene beneficiaries and instead rely on partners to lend venues. With stronger and more stable funding, these partnership-based approaches could be valuable models for helping migrants and refugees grow and scale their businesses.

Training and mentoring for entrepreneurship can connect to other city economic priorities. For example, a government official in Quezon City reported providing training in sectors with strong demand, such as

95 City of Aurora Office of Immigrant and International Affairs, *Immigrant Integration Plan (2020–2030) Findings Report* (Denver: Root Policy Research, 2020).

96 MPI interview with Kemo Bojang, Youth Councillor, Kanifing Municipal Council; Khadija M. Tambadou, Technical Advisor; Kanifing Municipal Council; Purava Joshi, Technical Advisor, Kanifing Municipal Council; and Amie Jobie, President, Safe Home for Migrants' Association, Kanifing, The Gambia, October 27, 2025.

97 RMMFI, “RMMFI Business Launch Boot Camp”; information provided to the authors by MMC, January 2026.

98 World Bank, “Advancing Refugee Entrepreneurship”; Hub and The Human Safety Net, *Mapping Refugee and Migrant Entrepreneurship*.

In Ecuador, the province of Azuay established an ecotourism project for Ecuadorian returnees to help them establish businesses in sectors such as plant nurseries, coffee harvesting and sales, and aromatic cacao production.

producing soap or dishwasher liquid from cooking oils, food processing, and garment or slippers production.⁹⁹ In Cuenca, the municipality and other local partners are spearheading trainings in business administration, hospitality, and health sciences, along with general business training modules on branding and financial education.¹⁰⁰ Also in Ecuador, the province of Azuay established an ecotourism project for Ecuadorian returnees to help them establish

businesses in sectors such as plant nurseries, coffee harvesting and sales, and aromatic cacao production.¹⁰¹ By targeting specific industries, cities can fill market gaps and equip migrants and refugees with skills their communities demand the most.

Opportunities exist for skills exchange and entrepreneurial support to go both ways, benefiting migrants or refugees and local communities simultaneously. For example, in Greater Mafraq Municipality in Jordan, the city partnered with the United Nations Development Program and the nonprofit Business Development Center to run a program that recruited Syrian refugees to deliver training in agriculture, beauty and hairdressing, construction, food production, sewing, and embroidery with Jordanians and other Syrian refugees. The program also provided start-up grants and business coaching.¹⁰² It aimed to support business creation in priority sectors and promote social cohesion through exchange.

However, in interviews, government officials and civil-society representatives cautioned that the sustainability of migrant and refugee businesses and their ability to generate broader community benefits, including job creation, depend on market depth and migrants' and refugees' legal rights. A government official in Guadalajara noted that where migrants lack work permits, as is common in Mexico, entrepreneurship support could steer them to subsistence entrepreneurship.¹⁰³ And in Cuenca, an interviewee warned that one-off seed grants may not be enough to help entrepreneurs who lack support networks and struggle to establish their business while covering expenses such as rent and child care.¹⁰⁴ Addressing these factors may require cities to advocate for national labor inclusion reforms and to consider related supports to improve stability for entrepreneurs. Such measures may include facilitating access to regularization options to address issues related to legal status and providing financial literacy education and coaching to strengthen resilience.¹⁰⁵

99 MPI interview with Sebastianne Sherwin Acuzar, Assistant Head of the Migration Services Division, Public Employment Service Office, Quezon City Government, the Philippines, November 18, 2025.

100 In Cuenca, these trainings are a joint effort of the municipality, the Municipal Council of Rights Protection in Cuenca, the Association for the Well-being of the Ecuadorian Family, and the San Isidro University Institute. MPI interview with Zunilda Rodriguez, Participation and Protection Networks Analyst, Municipal Council of Rights Protection in Cuenca, Cuenca Government, Ecuador, November 20, 2025.

101 MPI interview with Trosky Serrano, Secretary-General, Provincial Government of Azuay, Ecuador, November 11, 2025.

102 World Bank, "Advancing Refugee Entrepreneurship."

103 MPI interview with Nadine Cortés, Director, Directorate of International Relations and Migrant Services, Guadalajara Government, Mexico, November 26, 2025.

104 MPI interview with a representative of an international nongovernmental organization, Ecuador, October 31, 2025.

105 Zara Sarzin, "Advancing the Jobs Agenda: Toward Self-Reliance in Refugee Situations" (Policy Research Working Paper 11246, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2025); ILO, "Entrepreneur Perspectives: What Does It Take for Forcibly Displaced Entrepreneurs to Succeed?" (learning memo, ILO, Geneva, 2023).

At the very least, cities can strengthen collaborative ties between actors in the entrepreneurship ecosystem and social and economic integration service providers. A mapping of entrepreneurship programs in ten European countries by Impact Hub and The Human Safety Net found that entrepreneurial support is broadly isolated from employment agencies and other integration and referral services. In some contexts, job centers are reluctant to refer potential migrant and refugee entrepreneurs to these programs.¹⁰⁶ Greater coordination can help bring together the different supports needed to aid entrepreneurs, which may be split among different agencies and different levels of government.¹⁰⁷ When cities use coordinated pathways to bridge these siloes, migrants and refugees are more likely to succeed and build businesses that contribute to cities' economies.

6 Changing Priorities for Urban Economic Inclusion

While demographic trends reshape urban populations, the green and digital transitions are also transforming how cities work toward economic inclusion. As climate change accelerates, cities will see more people moving in from other parts of the country and from other countries in response to environmental degradation and extreme weather events. For example, a 2024 C40 Cities and MMC joint study projected that climate change may lead 8 million people to move internally to ten cities by 2050: Accra, Amman, Bogotá, Curitiba, Dhaka, Freetown, Karachi, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, and São Paulo.¹⁰⁸ City leaders will need to act quickly to help new arrivals enter local labor markets and ensure that climate migration and mitigation planning includes strategies for economic inclusion.

Creating smooth pathways into work and training for migrants and refugees can help cities address shortages in green jobs and avoid delays in progress toward green transition goals.¹⁰⁹ Estimating future growth in green jobs is a very imprecise art, not least due to the challenge of agreeing on what exactly constitutes a “green job.”¹¹⁰ But it is clear that meeting green labor shortages in sectors such as construction, clean energy, engineering, transportation, and waste management can yield climate and economic dividends.¹¹¹ Along with ensuring a greater focus on green jobs in existing matching and training services, cities should work with partners to address potential skills waste, particularly when foreign-trained workers must complete formal recognition procedures.¹¹² This illustrates how economic inclusion can support other city priorities.

Technological advancements may also reshape the types of jobs available in cities, with far-reaching implications for how city authorities and their partners help different groups access employment. Little consensus exists about the pace and scale of the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on jobs. Certain jobs

106 Impact Hub and The Human Safety Net, *Mapping Refugee and Migrant Entrepreneurship*.

107 This issue was identified in a recent needs assessment in Munich and Turin, for example. Mojib Rahman Atal, *Strengthening Coordination to Support Migrant Entrepreneurship* (Brussels: Migration Policy Group, 2026).

108 C40 Cities, *Future Urban Landscapes: Climate Migration Projections in Cities* (New York: C40 Cities, 2024).

109 C40 Cities, Climate Migration Council, and MMC, *From Shortages to Solutions*.

110 Kate Hooper and Lawrence Huang, *The Role of Immigrant Workers in the Green Transition* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2024).

111 For example, a 2025 study of 25 cities estimated that training pipelines and immigration policies could address a projected shortage of 3–6 million green-skilled workers and thus generate up to USD 280 billion in economic growth by 2040. C40 Cities, Climate Migration Council, and MMC, *From Shortages to Solutions*.

112 For example, one-third of foreign-trained engineers in Australia reported being underemployed as of 2021. Justine Romanis, *Barriers to Employment for Migrant Engineers* (Barton, Australia: Institution of Engineers Australia, 2021).

that involve routine tasks are often discussed as at particular risk of automation, but companies' growing adoption of AI tools also threatens entry-level white collar jobs.¹¹³ Along with these displacement effects, however, AI can increase productivity and help less-qualified workers perform more expert tasks in sectors such as health care, legal services, software development, and the creative industries.¹¹⁴ Because urban workers are more likely to encounter generative AI in their jobs than workers in non-urban areas, cities will be at the forefront of managing both the risks and opportunities.¹¹⁵ City-level employment services will need to help displaced workers reenter the workforce and support both immigrant and local jobseekers in building their AI skills.

The advent of AI, coupled with the increase in remote work, may also transform both the modalities and the goals of economic inclusion services. For example, AI-powered chatbots can provide information in multiple languages to users who lack destination-country language fluency and map jobseekers' skills and experiences to identify potential career pathways, which could expand access significantly.¹¹⁶ In Europe, about half of public employment services now use AI in limited ways, such as using jobseeker data to match individuals with available services and career guidance.¹¹⁷ While digitalization can improve overall access, national and local authorities should maintain analog services for groups with lower use of internet-enabled devices and fewer digital literacy skills, such as older immigrants and refugees.¹¹⁸

The advent of AI, coupled with the increase in remote work, may also transform both the modalities and the goals of economic inclusion services.

The rise of remote work also opens up new employment opportunities, which can have a meaningful impact on smaller cities that may have fewer local job opportunities but offer lower living costs and higher quality of life. Some cities have capitalized on this trend. For example, Tulsa, Oklahoma had attracted more than 3,500 remote workers through its Tulsa Remote program as of late 2025, which offers a grant of USD 10,000 and tailored relocation services.¹¹⁹ In countries of first asylum, interest is growing in connecting refugees with online freelance work opportunities, especially where refugees cannot access local employment. However, digital infrastructure constraints may make these opportunities more feasible in cities than in camps. Ongoing challenges include making direct payments to refugees, ensuring oversight

113 Beatrice Nolan, "AI-Driven Layoffs Are Shrinking the Job Market for Recent Grads," *Fortune*, August 8, 2025; Ben Kesslen, "Two-Thirds of Companies Will Slow Entry-Level Hiring Due to AI," *Yahoo*, November 18, 2025.

114 David Autor, "AI Could Actually Help Rebuild the Middle Class," *Noëma*, February 12, 2024; Flavio Calvino, Jelmer Reijerink, and Lea Samek, "Unlocking Productivity with Generative AI: Evidence from Experimental Studies," OECD blog, July 8, 2025.

115 OECD, "AI, Jobs, and Inclusion: Local Strategies for the Digital Transformation" (briefing note, Paris, OECD, 2025).

116 OECD, "A New Dawn for Public Employment Services: Service Delivery in the Age of Artificial Intelligence" (OECD Artificial Intelligence Paper no. 19, Paris, OECD, June 2024).

117 Willem Pieterse, *Opportunities of AI within PES Processes and Services: PES Network Report Exploring PES Experiences, Best Practices and Emerging Business Value* (Brussels: European Commission, 2025).

118 Nuriyar Safarov, "Personal Experiences of Digital Public Services Access and Use: Older Migrants' Digital Choices," *Technology in Society* 66 (August 2021): 101627; Prince Chiagozie Ekoh et al., "Understanding the Impact of Digital Technology on the Well-Being of Older Immigrants and Refugees: A Scoping Review," *Digital Health* 30, no. 9 (2023): 20552076231194947.

119 Tulsa Remote, "The Tulsa Remote Program," accessed September 22, 2025. For a discussion of the program's results, including retention rates and estimated economic benefits, see Tulsa Remote, *2024 Sustainable Growth and Economic Impact 2024* (Tulsa, OK: Tulsa Remote, 2024).

and safeguards against exploitative work practices, and addressing a gender gap in access to internet-enabled devices in low- and middle-income countries.¹²⁰

7 Charting the Road Ahead: Investing in Inclusive Urban Economies

Many cities have embraced the goal of ensuring that all residents—including migrants and refugees—can access economic opportunities. Yet gaps persist, and critical opportunities remain untapped. Despite sustained investments in employment services and innovations in education and training, there remains a persistent wage gap between immigrant and native-born workers and pervasive underemployment of skilled immigrants.

As demographic changes, climate pressures, and technological shifts reshape local economies, economic inclusion can strengthen urban resilience that fuels long-term growth, fiscal stability, and social cohesion. Cities can unlock the skills of migrants and refugees by supporting credential recognition, skills assessment, and improved matching with employers, while linking upskilling and workforce development efforts to critical labor shortages. Cities can also provide resources to make entrepreneurship a viable option, not just a last resort, for migrants and refugees.

The right configuration of interventions will differ by context, reflecting each city's priorities, market constraints, and institutional capacities. Some cities may need to focus on expanding wage employment, while others may prioritize entrepreneurship or hybrid models that better align with migrant and refugee skills and local demands. Amid mounting fiscal pressures, cities will also need to explore different funding streams (including innovative financing opportunities) and partnerships to ensure these interventions are sustainable. The core task for city governments, donors, and implementing agencies is to identify and prioritize interventions that improve migrant and refugee economic outcomes and advance broader city priorities. To do this, city leaders and partners should keep three principles in mind:

- 1 **Enable labor market advancement, not just entry.** Economic inclusion does not stop at labor market entry or business creation but is an ongoing process. Cities can proactively invest in their new residents' long-term success by helping migrant and refugee workers access quality employment with stable pay, social protections, and opportunities for career advancement and by supporting entrepreneurs with resources to help establish and grow their businesses. These efforts can generate economic rewards for both individuals and local communities. Economic inclusion should also connect to other city priorities, such as managing the green and digital transitions, adapting

¹²⁰ See, for example, projects run by Na'amal that train refugees in advanced digital skills and soft skills: Na'amal, "Our Impact," accessed February 26, 2026. At the June 2024 Migration Summit, a common theme was payment issues: some refugees could not open bank accounts (because of restrictions on opening an account with a refugee ID, for example) and broader challenges related to sending money to a specific country (for example, limited money transfer services for countries such as Ethiopia). Migration Summit 2024, "Migration Summit 2024 Report," accessed February 26, 2026. For a discussion of these barriers for refugees, see Kathryn McDonald, "Structural Barriers to the Digital Platform Economy for Forcibly Displaced Workers," *Forced Migration Review* 73 (April 2024). For a discussion of gender-related barriers, see Kristy Crabtree and Rana Obadi, "Addressing the Digital Gender Gap among Displaced Communities in Yemen," *Forced Migration Review* 73 (April 2024).

infrastructure and housing to population change, and promoting decent work. This approach requires strong coordination across city departments and agencies and the ability to communicate the benefits to build financial and political support for inclusive policies.

2 Align employment opportunities with high-growth sectors and those facing labor shortages.

Cities cannot invest expansively across the entire job-readiness continuum. Instead, they should set clear economic and social priorities and goals and build flexible systems and infrastructure that can respond to changing labor market needs, particularly in sectors or occupations experiencing growth such as green jobs in construction, transportation, energy, and waste management and roles in the digital economy. To prevent skill waste and avoid widening economic divides, cities should prioritize upskilling, reskilling, and matching programs that connect all residents—including migrants and refugees—to these targeted sectors. Investing in digital and soft skills can also help displaced workers reenter the workforce and ensure they benefit from emerging work modalities.

3 Prioritize win-win employment and entrepreneurship measures that benefit both newcomers and long-term residents.

Cities should consider not only what is technically feasible but also what can build broader support and avoid backlash, which may mean embedding economic inclusion into broader city priorities, including filling local labor shortages tied to green and digital transitions, infrastructure, and care services. Some of the highest-impact programs that connect newcomers to economic opportunity may not carry labels such as “immigrant integration measure” or “economic inclusion intervention.” This approach can not only be more efficient but also avoid perceptions that cities prioritize the needs of some groups over others.

To advance these principles, city leaders may wish to pursue the following high-impact, practical, and politically feasible actions:

- ▶ **Set the agenda and the tone.** City leaders’ ability to define and advocate for local priorities can be a powerful lever, particularly at a moment where fissures between national and local immigration priorities are emerging in some countries. The rhetoric of top officials, welcoming infrastructure, and including immigrants and refugees in long-term city planning can create important enabling conditions for economic inclusion even as other barriers persist.
- ▶ **Break down siloes.** Even where highly centralized systems place constraints on local governments’ decision-making and budgeting authority, cities control key levers such as setting economic inclusion goals, defining responsibilities, and allocating local resources. Cities can centralize existing programs and address integration as a comprehensive policy area rather than a distinct intervention. Some cities have created dedicated offices or coordinators for migrant and refugee inclusion, while others have strengthened horizontal coordination across employment, housing, education, and planning portfolios. If cities cannot provide services directly, they can still serve as “connectors” by linking migrants and refugees to nongovernmental partners that help them find pathways to regular status and work permits, job search support, language and vocational training, and entrepreneurship programs. Cities should formalize these partnerships and integrate them into local economic inclusion strategies, which turns ad hoc cooperation into durable collaboration.

- ▶ **Leverage usable data in new ways.** Fragmented and incomplete data create an inaccurate picture of foreign-born populations' economic outcomes in local economies and obscure their untapped potential, so cities may struggle to make evidence-based decisions about priorities for economic inclusion investments. Fragmented data also make it harder to argue for greater investment to national or regional counterparts who often hold the purse strings. But cities can use common-sense strategies to combine existing administrative data sources rather than investing in expensive new data collection capacity. For example, identifying the most valuable indicators and combining data from different agencies—such as employment services, business registration databases, and housing and social programs—can build a clearer picture of how migrants and refugees participate in labor markets and where barriers remain. Cities should also invest in monitoring and evaluation as part of their programming; initiatives often do not track migrant outcomes after hiring, which limits knowledge about job quality, retention, and income progression—factors that are critical to long-term inclusion—and this data gap can weaken the case for continuing to fund these initiatives.
- ▶ **Use innovative financing to do more with less.** Budget constraints require cities to use creative funding models for economic inclusion. Short-term grants and projects allow cities and other local stakeholders to experiment with novel approaches, but cities must identify more sustainable funding streams for efforts to have a lasting impact. Cities can diversify funding sources by blending public, private, and philanthropic resources or embedding economic inclusion components into other funded projects, such as green infrastructure or urban renewal. Pooled funding models also hold potential for scaling inclusion initiatives under the right conditions. A soon-to-launch pilot in Mexico, where a pooled fund will draw from philanthropy, employers, and multilateral banks to support migrant economic inclusion, offers an example of how financing can be creatively leveraged to drive inclusion. Effective application of such approaches will require clarity about desired outcomes, credible and well-defined metrics to track impact, and a compelling return on investment (financial, fiscal, or social) to attract private and public investors.
- ▶ **Include diverse community voices in program design and implementation.** City leaders should draw on the expertise of private-sector and civil-society counterparts and migrant and refugee communities to ensure that economic inclusion programs address real barriers and opportunities in their local economies. Co-design processes, advisory boards, and joint working groups can collect these insights at an early stage and help obtain buy-in for economic inclusion goals among key constituencies.
- ▶ **Plan for future labor market needs.** Technological advancements are reshaping the types of jobs available in cities. City authorities should therefore build flexible systems that adapt to changing labor market needs rather than building infrastructure based on current barriers and opportunities. For example, city-level employment services may need to help displaced workers from multiple sectors reenter the workforce while also helping immigrant and local jobseekers build their AI skills.
- ▶ **Appeal to a diverse coalition of stakeholders to make the practical case for inclusion.** Scaling successful initiatives depends as much on getting political and public buy-in as on technical solutions. Some cities have scaled economic inclusion initiatives successfully by identifying shared interests with opposing parties that transcend political differences and humanitarian arguments. And sophisticated

engagement strategies have secured private-sector buy-in in some cities. Strategies such as advising local businesses on how to hire international talent and connecting businesses with a local talent pool of migrants and refugees with sought-after skills have led to solid, years-long partnerships with companies in high-demand industries that cannot find enough skilled workers.¹²¹ Cities that demonstrate tangible returns for local communities—such as filling local skills gaps, expanding the tax base, or helping create more sustainable infrastructure—are more likely to secure buy-in from different stakeholders, attract investment, and make initiatives more sustainable.

As cities become more diverse in the coming decades, investing in economic inclusion may help determine whether cities experience economic growth or stagnation and decline. Cities are often hubs of innovation for promoting labor market entry, job mobility, and entrepreneurship. But this does not happen by chance. In a challenging funding landscape, cities will need to think creatively about what is achievable, where there are opportunities for coordination and partnerships, and ways to align economic inclusion measures with broader economic and urban priorities.

As cities become more diverse in the coming decades, investing in economic inclusion may help determine whether cities experience economic growth or stagnation and decline.

121 MPI interview with Suzanne Sierra, Executive Director, St. Louis Mosaic Project, St. Louis, United States, November 14, 2025.

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