

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR REGULATING YOUTH LABOR MIGRATION IN UZBEKISTAN THROUGH THE EXPANSION OF PRODUCTIVE EMPLOYMENT

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Abstract. *This scientific article examines the strategic directions for regulating youth labor migration in Uzbekistan through the expansion of productive employment within the national labor market. The study is grounded in the recommendations of the International Labour Organization (ILO) concerning the identification, measurement, and monitoring of productive employment and working poverty. The paper argues that youth labor migration should not be viewed solely as a demographic or external labor mobility process, but also as a manifestation of productive employment deficit, insufficient income levels, and limited access to decent work opportunities within the domestic economy. Based on empirical analysis and international experience, the article proposes institutional and policy mechanisms aimed at reducing working poverty among youth, increasing access to stable and adequately paid employment, and strengthening the role of productive employment as a key instrument for regulating migration flows and ensuring sustainable economic development.*

Keywords: *International Labour Organization (ILO), youth labor migration, productive employment, productive employment deficit, efficient employment, working poverty, decent work, unemployment, labor market regulation.*

Migration in world scientific literature is defined as any territorial movement of the population involving the crossing of internal or external administrative-territorial borders. However, in the context of modern labor economics, youth labor migration should also be interpreted as a response to deficits in productive employment within the national labor market.

The term migration originates from the Latin word *migratio*, meaning movement or relocation. In a narrow sense, migration refers to a change in territorial position resulting in a change of permanent residence. In a broader sense, it includes any movement of individuals between settlements within one or several administrative-territorial units, regardless of duration, regularity, or purpose [1].

From the standpoint of labor market theory, such movements are often driven by differences in wage levels, employment stability, working conditions, and access to productive employment. Productive employment implies work that generates sufficient and guaranteed labor income enabling workers and their dependents to maintain a level of consumption above the national poverty line, while ensuring stable and decent working conditions.

Productive employment is an activity not prohibited by law, in which an individual utilizes his or her productive and creative labor capacities to generate guaranteed labor income sufficient to ensure a level of consumption for themselves and their dependents above the national poverty line.

In many developing economies, including Uzbekistan, youth labor migration is frequently associated not only with unemployment, but also with **productive employment deficit** — a situation where employment exists but does not provide adequate income, stability, or opportunities for professional growth. In this regard, migration becomes an adaptive strategy for young people seeking higher returns to labor and improved living standards.

According to international labor migration recommendations, migrants are categorized based on the duration of stay:

1. **Visitors** – individuals staying for less than three months (e.g., tourists). Although not officially classified as migrants, short-term labor mobility may occur in this period, particularly seasonal work or temporary employment.

2. **Migrants**, including: **Short-term migrants** – individuals moving abroad for 3 to 12 months; **Long-term migrants** – individuals relocating for at least 12 months.

However, beyond duration, the economic quality of employment is crucial. If domestic employment opportunities are characterized by low wages, informal contracts, temporary jobs, and weak social protection, young people are more likely to migrate. Conversely, the expansion of productive employment within the national economy can reduce outward migration pressures by increasing youth income, enhancing job stability, and ensuring decent working conditions.

Countries such as Turkey, China, India, Philippines, and Japan demonstrate that effective migration regulation is closely linked to structural transformation policies aimed at expanding productive employment, increasing labor productivity, and integrating youth into high-value-added sectors.

Therefore, the regulation of youth labor migration in Uzbekistan should not be limited to administrative or legal measures. It should be strategically aligned with policies aimed at reducing productive employment deficit, promoting decent and stable jobs for youth, and strengthening the institutional foundations of a competitive and inclusive labor market.

In general, labor migration may be viewed as a response to structural imbalances and crisis phenomena in the domestic labor market. However, in contemporary labor economics, such a crisis should not be interpreted solely as high unemployment. It increasingly manifests itself through the expansion of unproductive and vulnerable forms of employment, reflecting a deficit of productive employment opportunities.

A number of structural problems characterize labor market crises and directly influence youth migration flows:

- Inefficient employment in certain sectors of the economy (for example, in agriculture), where low labor productivity and insufficient wage levels prevent workers from earning income above the poverty line. Such conditions represent a clear form of productive employment deficit and contribute to working poverty.

- Weak entrepreneurial and business activity, limiting the creation of stable and adequately paid jobs for young people, thereby reducing access to productive employment.
- Uncertainty about the future, including instability of employment contracts, informal labor relations, and limited social protection, which diminish confidence in long-term income sustainability.
- The persistence of outdated equipment and technologies, reliance on manual labor, and engagement in low-income, socially unprotected activities. These factors constrain labor productivity growth and prevent employment from meeting the criteria of productive employment.
- Underdevelopment of labor-intensive and high value-added industries, which restricts the diversification of employment opportunities and limits the absorption of skilled youth into productive sectors of the economy.
- Weak regional and professional mobility, partly due to the underdevelopment of modern housing markets in certain regions. Limited mobility reduces the efficient allocation of labor resources and restricts access to productive jobs.

Mismatch between the professional and qualification structure of the labor force and labor market needs, resulting in structural unemployment and underemployment among youth. When education systems do not align with labor market demand, even employed young individuals may remain in low-productivity and low-income jobs⁴.

Taken together, these structural distortions generate a situation in which youth labor migration becomes an economic strategy for overcoming productive employment deficit rather than merely escaping unemployment. Therefore, effective regulation of youth labor migration in Uzbekistan must be grounded in policies aimed at structural modernization, technological upgrading, skill development, and the systematic expansion of productive employment across regions and sectors.

The current stage of migration processes differs significantly from previous periods in terms of scale, geographical patterns, transformation dynamics, integration intensity, and socio-demographic composition. In recent years, the direction and structure of migration flows have been changing globally, including among citizens of Uzbekistan. In addition to traditional migration to neighboring countries such as Russia and Kazakhstan, there has been a growing trend toward migration to more distant destinations, including the United States, European countries, Arab states such as United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, as well as Southeast Asian countries including South Korea, Thailand, and Malaysia.

The sharp increase in global migration flows observed in the pre-pandemic period is expected to persist in the post-pandemic era. This expansion is driven by multiple factors, including poverty, unemployment, human rights violations, uncertainty about the future, social unrest, and conflicts. However, from a labor market perspective, these drivers are closely linked to the insufficient expansion of productive employment in countries of origin.

⁴ Яковлева Е.А. Тенденции разделения труда в сельском хозяйстве. Теория и практика. Воронеж: ВГУ, 2010. (Yakovleva E.A. Labor division trends in agriculture. Theory and practice. Voronezh: Voronezh State University, 2010.)

When domestic labor markets fail to generate stable, adequately paid, and skill-matching jobs, migration becomes a rational economic alternative, particularly for youth.

In this context, the regulation of youth labor migration should not be limited to border management or bilateral labor agreements. It must be strategically aligned with policies aimed at expanding productive employment opportunities within the national economy. This requires:

- strengthening vocational guidance systems that are directly connected to sectors with high labor productivity and income potential;
- digitizing both existing and newly created jobs to increase transparency, efficiency, and formalization of employment;
- ensuring that newly created jobs meet the criteria of productive employment, including adequate wages, job stability, and social protection;
- developing mechanisms for managing high-quality migration processes that enhance skills acquisition rather than result in long-term loss of human capital.

Science and practice today possess effective tools for vocational orientation of youth, digital labor market platforms, and migration management systems. However, to minimize professional, qualification, and regional imbalances in the youth labor market, a comprehensive concept is required—one that integrates migration regulation with strategies for reducing productive employment deficit.

Such a concept would form the foundation for a scientific and policy-oriented approach to regulating and improving the youth segment of the labor market in Uzbekistan. Ultimately, expanding productive employment domestically can serve as the most sustainable mechanism for reducing involuntary youth migration while maintaining balanced and development-oriented mobility flows.

Migrants, by their very nature, are economically active and initiative-oriented members of society. Historically, migration has contributed to economic growth, cultural exchange, technological diffusion, and the integration of national economies [2]. From the perspective of labor economics, migration can also serve as a mechanism for reallocating labor resources toward more productive employment environments, where returns to labor are higher and working conditions are more favorable.

However, significant challenges arise in the analysis and management of migration processes. In many cases, migrants face exploitation, violation of labor rights, inadequate social protection, and difficulties in adapting to the cultural and institutional environment of the host country. Additionally, concerns may arise in receiving countries regarding job competition with the local population, which can shape negative social attitudes toward migrants. For these reasons, migration must be studied comprehensively — from economic, political, sociological, and institutional perspectives.

A socially in-depth scientific approach to migration regulation should, on the one hand, address the modernization of labor market infrastructure, the development of labor-intensive and high value-added industries, and technological upgrading of production processes. On the other hand, it should strengthen market mechanisms in traditional sectors of the economy to expand productive employment opportunities domestically.

In recent years, migration has been at the center of active political debate worldwide. While many recognize its economic benefits, misconceptions persist — including the perception that migrants constitute a burden on the economy. Empirical evidence demonstrates that well-regulated migration, particularly when linked to skill development and productive employment expansion, produces positive economic and social outcomes.

One of the most important tools for regulating migration processes is the continuous improvement of the legal and regulatory framework. In Uzbekistan, significant institutional reforms have been undertaken in this direction. In particular, Decree No. PP-4829 “On Measures to Implement a System of Safe, Orderly and Legal Migration,” signed on September 15, 2020, marked an important step toward addressing existing challenges in external labor migration management.

The main objectives of the Decree include improving the activities of competent authorities in the field of external labor migration; providing vocational training in high-demand professions for citizens intending to work abroad; protecting the rights of citizens working overseas; facilitating the employment of returning labor migrants; and ensuring social support for their families.

The system of safe, orderly, and legal labor migration was defined through the following priority directions:

- expanding the organized sending of citizens abroad for temporary employment and strengthening the responsibilities of ministries, departments, and local authorities;
- developing international cooperation in external labor migration and reinforcing ties with compatriot organizations and Uzbek diasporas;
- establishing effective systems for vocational and language training prior to departure, including internationally recognized certification of professional qualifications;
- expanding financial and social support mechanisms for migrant workers in vulnerable situations, ensuring the protection of their life and health;
- promoting and safeguarding the rights of citizens engaged in labor activity abroad and creating favorable conditions for their employment;
- implementing reintegration measures for returning migrants, including employment assistance, professional development, and support for entrepreneurial initiatives [3].

From the standpoint of productive employment development, these measures should not only facilitate safe migration but also serve a broader strategic objective: reducing productive employment deficit within the domestic labor market. In particular, reintegration policies should prioritize the inclusion of returning migrants into stable, adequately paid, and skill-appropriate jobs, as well as support their transition into productive entrepreneurship.

Thus, migration regulation in Uzbekistan must operate in two interconnected dimensions: (1) ensuring safe and rights-based external labor mobility, and (2) expanding productive employment opportunities domestically to reduce involuntary migration pressures among youth.

Only through the systematic expansion of productive employment can migration become a matter of choice rather than economic necessity.

According to Decree No. PP-4829, one of the priority directions of the safe, orderly, and legal migration system is the effective implementation of vocational and foreign language training for citizens of Uzbekistan prior to their departure for employment abroad, as well as the introduction of internationally recognized certification of professional competence.

From the perspective of productive employment development, this measure is particularly significant. Pre-departure vocational training enhances the quality of human capital and increases the likelihood that migrants will access higher value-added and better-paid jobs abroad, rather than being concentrated in low-skilled, vulnerable forms of employment. At the same time, the recognition of professional qualifications creates opportunities for returning migrants to be reintegrated into productive employment within the domestic labor market.

Furthermore, beginning January 1, 2021, additional financial mechanisms were introduced:

- the issuance of microloans to individuals registered in the information system “Unified Register of Social Protection” and belonging to low-income families who are participating in organized labor migration for temporary employment;
- provision of microloans of up to 10 million UZS for one year to cover employment-related expenses abroad (including travel and work permit registration);
- compensation by the State Employment Promotion Fund of the portion of the microloan interest rate exceeding the Central Bank’s base rate (within the established limit).

While these measures facilitate organized migration, it is important to ensure that financial support mechanisms are also aligned with the expansion of productive employment within Uzbekistan. In particular, similar financial instruments should be directed toward supporting youth entrepreneurship, technological modernization, and job creation in high-productivity sectors domestically in order to reduce productive employment deficit.

A study presented in Chapter 4 of the World Bank World Economic Outlook (Q2 2020) concludes that migration typically contributes positively to economic growth and efficiency in host countries [4]. Migration allows receiving economies to allocate labor more efficiently and enhance productivity. However, this also implies that sending countries may experience a loss of skilled labor if domestic productive employment opportunities remain limited.

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily disrupted global migration flows, increasing unemployment in host countries and reducing remittance inflows to households in sending countries. The decline in remittances highlighted the vulnerability of households whose income depends heavily on external labor markets. This experience underscores the importance of diversifying income sources through the development of stable and productive employment within the national economy.

Migration should also be viewed as a complex socio-economic process affecting multiple spheres of social life. Historically, migration has influenced collective labor relations, land development, and the formation of cultures and societies. In the context of globalization, youth labor migration has become a structural component of global economic integration [5].

Globalization facilitates the integration of national economies into the world market, promotes access to technology and knowledge, and increases labor mobility. However, it also

intensifies competition in labor markets. Different forms of migration — economic, ethnic, and labor-intensive — reflect the degree of a country's integration into global processes. At the same time, migration can generate social tensions and conflicts if not properly regulated.

Rapid population growth in developing countries often creates an oversupply of labor resources. Modern education systems enable young people to meet the requirements of developed labor markets, yet without sufficient expansion of productive employment at home, this human capital may be channeled outward.

Sustained youth migration over decades has led to segmentation of labor markets in developed countries. Migrants are often concentrated in low-skilled, labor-intensive, and poorly paid sectors, frequently under harsh working conditions and within informal segments. Such outcomes indicate that migration does not automatically guarantee productive employment; rather, migrants may shift from domestic productive employment deficit to external vulnerable employment conditions.

Increased youth migration may also generate interethnic tensions due to cultural, religious, and value-based differences, potentially leading to social conflict [6]. Therefore, migration regulation should be based on a balanced strategy: expanding productive employment domestically while ensuring that external migration occurs safely, legally, and with adequate protection of labor rights.

In this regard, the strategic regulation of youth labor migration in Uzbekistan must focus on reducing productive employment deficit, strengthening labor market institutions, modernizing economic sectors, and creating sustainable, high-quality jobs capable of retaining young human capital within the country.

The growing international mobility of intellectual labor resources is influenced by several structural factors. Among them are: declining birth rates in developed countries combined with increasing demand for highly qualified specialists in modern sectors of national economies; the desire of recipient countries to save time and resources on education and training by attracting already qualified professionals; shortages of domestic specialists due to rapid technological change; expansion of multinational corporations; development of global labor mobility networks; strengthening of intellectual partnerships between research institutes, universities, and medical centers; harmonization of educational and qualification standards; and the virtualization of knowledge transfer through digital technologies.

From the standpoint of productive employment, these trends reflect a global competition for high-productivity human capital. Developed economies expand productive employment opportunities in technology-intensive sectors and attract skilled youth from developing countries. If domestic labor markets fail to generate comparable productive employment conditions—characterized by adequate wages, innovation-oriented sectors, and career mobility—youth outmigration intensifies.

At the same time, youth labor migration has a number of potential advantages:

1. Migration may provide young people with employment opportunities that are unavailable in their regions of origin, particularly in sectors with higher productivity and better income prospects.

2. The outflow of job seekers can temporarily reduce internal labor market pressure caused by excess labor supply and productive employment deficit.

3. Migration may expand economic opportunities for young women, contributing to greater gender equality and improved access to productive employment.

4. Education- or employment-related migration can delay early marriages and promote human capital development.

5. Remittances contribute to economic growth and poverty reduction in countries of origin and may increase investment in education and skills development.

6. Young migrants may serve as channels for technology transfer, foreign investment, and venture capital flows to their home countries.

7. The physical or “virtual” return of skilled workers enhances domestic human capital, facilitates skills transfer, and strengthens international professional networks.

8. Unmarried youth often demonstrate higher mobility and adaptability, making them more active participants in international labor markets.

However, while these advantages are significant, migration should not substitute for the systematic expansion of productive employment within the country of origin. Sustainable development requires transforming temporary migration gains into long-term domestic capacity building. This includes channeling remittances into entrepreneurial activity, innovation, and high value-added sectors; facilitating reintegration of returning migrants into productive jobs; and strengthening institutional mechanisms that reduce productive employment deficit.

Thus, international intellectual mobility should be viewed not only as a demographic or labor phenomenon, but also as an indicator of the relative competitiveness of national productive employment systems. Countries capable of generating stable, well-paid, and innovation-driven jobs are more likely to retain and attract skilled youth, whereas countries with limited productive employment opportunities face persistent outward migration pressures.

For Uzbekistan, the strategic regulation of youth labor migration must therefore be closely linked to policies aimed at technological modernization, diversification of the economy, development of knowledge-intensive industries, and the systematic creation of productive employment opportunities capable of absorbing skilled young labor resources.

Negative Consequences of Youth Labor Migration in the Context of Productive Employment

Despite its potential benefits, youth labor migration may generate several negative socio-economic consequences, particularly when domestic productive employment systems remain underdeveloped:

- Loss of highly skilled workers (brain drain), leading to a decline in the quality of essential services and weakening the domestic stock of human capital.
- Reduction in economic growth and productivity, as the outflow of qualified labor resources limits innovation capacity and slows structural transformation.
- Social and psychological challenges within migrant families, including adverse effects on child development due to prolonged parental absence.

- Increased vulnerability to exploitation and discrimination, especially among inexperienced young workers and young women engaged in informal or low-skilled employment abroad.
- Permanent loss of highly qualified personnel, when skilled migrants remain abroad and do not reintegrate into the national economy.
- Potential socio-cultural impacts, including tensions related to changes in social values and national identity.

From the perspective of productive employment theory, many of these negative consequences arise when migration becomes a substitute for domestic employment reform rather than a complementary mobility mechanism. When countries fail to generate stable, adequately paid, and innovation-driven jobs, youth migration shifts from being an opportunity to becoming a structural response to productive employment deficit.

Globalization and the Strategic Need for Productive Employment–Based Migration Policy

The globalization of youth migration processes increases the permeability of national borders and accelerates transnational flows of human resources. Migration outcomes, as observed, can be both positive and negative, depending on the institutional framework and economic structure of the sending country.

Therefore, in the era of globalization, one of the primary tasks facing countries is to develop an effective migration policy that clearly regulates migration processes while simultaneously expanding domestic productive employment. Sustainable economic, political, cultural, and social development requires balancing outward labor mobility with internal job creation, technological modernization, and human capital development.

Strategic Proposals for Regulating Youth Labor Migration through the Expansion of Productive Employment

In this regard, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. **Establish common digital labor platforms.** The development of unified digital employment platforms would enhance transparency, formalization, and international competitiveness of youth employment. Digitalization should not only facilitate foreign employment but also expand access to productive online and remote work opportunities within Uzbekistan, enabling youth to generate income aligned with international standards without necessarily migrating.

2. **Create international and non-governmental vocational training centers aligned with the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO).** Certification systems recognized internationally will increase youth competitiveness abroad. At the same time, aligning training programs with high-productivity sectors domestically will contribute to reducing productive employment deficit within the national economy.

3. **Develop mechanisms for in-depth analysis of employment contracts for highly educated young migrants.** Systematic evaluation of working conditions, wage levels, and skill utilization abroad will allow policymakers to assess whether migration leads to productive employment or merely shifts youth into vulnerable segments of foreign labor markets.

4. **Establish a comprehensive labor migrant database.** Creating an integrated information system on labor migrants would enable monitoring of migration trends, reintegration pathways, and remittance utilization. This database would serve as a foundation for evidence-based policies aimed at channeling returning migrants into productive employment, entrepreneurship, and innovation-driven sectors.

Concluding Strategic Position. Ultimately, youth labor migration should not be perceived solely as a demographic or mobility issue. It is an indicator of the relative strength or weakness of a country's productive employment system.

For Uzbekistan, the most sustainable strategy for regulating youth labor migration lies in systematically expanding productive employment, modernizing economic sectors, enhancing labor productivity, and creating stable, high-quality jobs capable of retaining and attracting young human capital.

Only under conditions of sufficient productive employment can migration become a matter of individual choice rather than economic necessity.

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