**Draft Background Paper**

**GFMD Roundtable on ‘Leveraging New Technologies to Empower Migrants’**

**(September 2020)**

***(Comments made on and after 1 October 2020 have not yet been incorporated in the document)***

**1. Introduction**

This draft roundtable background paper builds on the report of the GFMD Regional Consultative Process (RCP) on the theme of ‘Leveraging New Technologies to Empower Migrants’, published in August 2020. The report was a summary of the key points and examples that arose from the RCP discussions, supplemented with relevant thematic analysis, observations and synthesis. The report was the subject of further consultative discussion at the thematic Practitioner Meeting on 18 September 2020, with participants from member states and the three GFMD mechanisms.

Under the guidance and leadership of the Philippines and Kenya as the GFMD thematic roundtable co-chairs, this draft background paper will be discussed on 1 October 2020 as part of the GFMD Friends of the Forum and Roundtable meetings. After the meeting, member states, GFMD observers and mechanisms will have the chance to provide further written submissions on the theme during the month of October. A final draft of the roundtable background paper will be produced in November for submission and final discussion in December 2020, prior to the GFMD summit on 11-15 January 2021.

The main purpose of the background paper is to highlight facts and trends on the policy and practice of ‘leveraging new technologies to empower migrants’, and identify gaps, priorities, policy options and practice opportunities. Such analytical background should assist member states and other stakeholders to focus their summit discussions and contributions on the practicalities of how to leverage, expand and enhance ever evolving new technologies, to empower migrants of different age groups from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and circumstances. Using technology to empower migrants is applicable to sending, transit and host countries, and member states may develop programmes to address all forms of migration patterns.

**2. Summary of Relevant Technological Trends**

As it is in many fields in the information age we live in, discussions of new technologies relate mainly to Information and Communication Technology (ICT). This is true in the field of migration management, for which some of the relevant megatrends are highlighted below.

**I. Smart Phones and Internet Access:** For migration-related management and other sectors, two key industry realities have become defining factors, namely the global ubiquity, preponderance and standardisation of smart mobile phones, and internet communication. The impact of these developments is so profound that they have become public utilities. Many people have access to them, and it is likely that in the near future, they would be generally recognised by the global community as an integral part of the portfolio of basic human rights. Lack of access to mobile phones and the internet undermines the quality of most, if not all other human rights.

**II. App-Based Specialist Services:** As the ongoing improvement of both the mobile phone and internet industries proceeds, innovations and new technological developments in different sectors seem to be focussed on how to use these two mega-facilitators to improve general, specialist and personalised services. To leverage new technologies to empower migrants, governments and other stakeholders are likely to have maximum impact by focussing on problem-solving and facilitative apps, software, products and services, as well adequate accessibility, data security and information storage.

**III. Front-End Interoperability:** Another important trend in ICT is front-end interoperability, with a person’s individual mobile device being able to communicate with the infrastructure of institutions and corporations. For example, a Quick Response (QR) code on a person’s mobile phone can be used to access secure data on an institution’s database and IT system. The parts of the technological system that require greatest development are the back-end security and storage infrastructure, and the programming and design software and applications which create and manage the products and services that are beneficial to migrants and migration-related stakeholders. To a great extent, industry has taken care of front-end infrastructure such that off-the-shelf products generally communicate with each other using a variety of standardised inter-device connectivity technologies.

**3. Empowering Migrants by Leveraging Technology**

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) identified specific areas in which the use of technology can improve the welfare of migrants. These include: provision of identity and consular documentations; border management; application procedures; and skills recognition. During the GFMD Regional Consultation Process (RCP), governments and other stakeholders indicated their recognition that technology is a crosscutting subject, relevant to different aspects of migration management and migrant empowerment. The potential to use technology for empowerment is extensive, but a number of factors need to be considered and addressed in order to turn potentiality into actual reality.

**I. Doubled-Edged Technology:** In practice, technology is neither neutral nor is it necessarily always a good thing. It can be a double-edged sword, and it is amenable to being used for good or bad, relating to migrants. As such, it should be seen as a tool rather than a panacea, and be used with alertness, positive purposefulness, and with necessary checks and balances from diverse stakeholders.

**II. Purposeful Empowering of Migrants:** The existing migration-related tech-platforms are generally set up to expand and enhance services to migrants. This by itself can empower migrants, even though that may not necessarily be the fundamental and foundational goal of the platform. Given the doubled-edged nature of technology, governments should purposefully commit to the principle of empowering migrants as a virtue in itself, accepted as beneficial to all stakeholders, in line with agreed global and regional frameworks.

**III. E-Government and Digital-Nations:** Most governments are committed to the use of technology for migration-related services. This commitment is rooted in national strategies and policies within the wider context of setting up e-government and digital-nation capabilities. Many governments already run migration-related tech-platforms, although the levels of operational success vary immensely.

**IV. Actions for Empowering Migrants:** New technologies can be used to empower migrants through different sets of actions including: optimising data sharing and processing; improving trust, accessibility and usage of migration-related platforms; reducing the cost of migrant recruitment, remittance and migration in general; and improving migrant access to welfare services. These categories serve as a guide for setting up tech-platforms to empower migrants.

**V. Effective and Equitable Service Delivery:** As part of e-government and digital-nation programmes, many governments see migration-related tech-platforms as means of improving general migration management and extending public services to their citizens abroad. There seem to be two foundational elements needed to build enough trust for migrants to use these tech-platforms. Firstly, they should deliver services in an effective and efficiency operational manner which actual and potential users find useful and beneficial. Secondly, services need to be provided in an overtly fair and equitable manner, from the perspective of the diverse users coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds. With such a premise, the platforms address needs and wants, whilst anticipating and responding to migrant expectations.

**4. Improving the Effectiveness of Migration-Related Tech-Platforms**

Having reviewed different types of migration-related tech-platforms and services operated by governments, corporations and civil society organisations in different parts of the world, it is possible to identify common characteristics and features. Understanding the structure and operations of existing tech-platforms can help in designing improvements so as to expand and enhance the positive impacts for migrants.

**I. Typology of Migration Tech-Platforms:** Migration-related tech-platforms assist and support prospective and actual migrants through the processes of emigration, employment, sending remittances, managing social and earned benefits, and accessing welfare services. These platforms vary in interactivity and can be classified into the following main types:

* Non-interactive information and awareness-raising platforms
* Exchange, dialogue and consultative platforms
* Applications and document processing platforms
* Matching and specialist service provision platforms
* One-to-one welfare service platforms.

(The least interactive platforms are common; the one-to-one welfare platforms are rarer).

**II. Migration Management Technology:** The migration loop of pre-departure, travelling, living and working abroad, diaspora engagement, circular and actual return, involves a wide range of bureaucratic, administrative and operational processes. These standardised and repetitive tasks are amenable to machine processing. Machine learning, artificial intelligence and other technological advances have facilitated automated identity and document checking and validation.

**III. Tech-Based Migration Processing:** Case studies around the world indicate that core migration processes can undergo transformational change and improvement through the use of technology. These processes include amongst other things: visa and permit applications, issuances and extensions; worker recruitment, interviews, selection, induction and ongoing training; ticketing, check-in, security clearance and boarding for air and international travel; wages, remittances and trans-boundary financial services. Migrant databases can also help improve migration management systems in a manner that satisfy national regulatory requirements without putting onerous, intrusive and unfair constraints on migrants. Employers can share and update migrant worker details with national authorities, without the need to take possession of the documents of migrants, a practice that infringes on migrant and labour rights.

**IV. Social Media and Specialist Platforms:** Governments and other operators use existing global social media platforms such as facebook, instagram, snapchat, telegram and WhatsApp to reach vast numbers of their migrants and diaspora. This form of communication is likely to continue simply because of the convenience, relative low cost and extensive reach. These platforms are effective for information sharing, meetings, seminars and one-to-many advisory sessions. However, it is recognised that specialist and tailor-made platforms are needed to address the specific and specialist requirements of different categories of migrants, bearing in mind language, age group and socio-economic backgrounds, technicality of migrant queries, and confidentiality and privacy of migrants.

**V. Linkages and Portals:** Irrespective of which entity runs a migration-related platform or its primary operational purpose, data sharing can be optimised by adding functionalities and links so that they serve as portals leading to other relevant and useful information. Such enhanced platforms can also serve as one-stop-shops that deliver a portfolio of core services, and provide easy access to a wide range of migration-related services delivered by other governments, institutions, businesses, civil society organisations and other providers.

**VI. Multi-Purpose Platform Usage:** In addition to information sharing and service delivery, the platforms can serve multiple and complementary purposes including: being online interactive communities of migrants for mutual learning and support; youth forums; hub for user surveys, research and rating of migration-related services; forum for research and consultations on policy and practice; repository of relevant information, presented in different languages and in multiple formats including text, audios and visuals.

**VII. COVID 19 Lessons:** The COVID 19 pandemic has affected migration and migrants in many ways, whilst bringing to the fore the opportunities of using technology to improve migrant welfare and migration systems. Existing technology allows for remote and distant document and identity checking and verification, including use of secure methods such as iris and facial recognition, through mobile phones. Similarly, Fintech allows for versatile app-based bank accounts, which can be linked to wages, remittances, social security benefits, pensions, investment options and general shopping and payment for services. Given that these digital services are based on Artificial Intelligence, machine learning, Blockchain and other new technologies, they reduce the cost of processing, and the financial benefit should be passed on or shared with migrants.

**5. Enhancing the Usage of New Technologies through Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships**

The new technologies themselves are generally developed by the private sector, be it multinational tech corporations or innovative specialist and start-up companies. To create and maintain international standards for tech-platforms, multilateral bodies and international organisations have a critical role to play. At the user end, to maximise usage of tech-platforms, migrant, diaspora and other civil society organisations are effective brokers and connectors. Independently, academic and research institutions can provide empirical assessments and insights on concepts, effectiveness and impact relating to the theme of applying new technologies to empower migrants. Given the diversity of relevant competencies, expertise and mandates, practice-based multi-stakeholder partnerships are essential to optimise the deployment and usage of migration-related tech-platforms.

**I. Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships:** In addition to using global social media platforms for migration-related information sharing, multi-stakeholder collaboration can deliver multiple benefits and dividends to diverse partners, not just migrants. Partnerships can include the global tech companies, new and innovative specialists, civil society, regional and international organisations, and groups of countries. Services, functionalities and platform design can be expanded, replicated and upgraded through partnerships. Open standard packages can be used to construct the tech-platforms, where applicable. It is important to use software and functionalities which facilitate open and easy accessibility for migrants using different types of devices and mobile phones. International organisations such as UNESCO can work with educational institutions globally to serve as a repository for formal certificates, thereby providing easy third party verification of migrant qualifications.

**II. Diverse Platforms and Interoperability:** Complementary to government technology platforms, there are many other digital and online platforms run by civil society, international and other types of organisations. This diversity can be a good thing, but it needs to be matched with stronger partnerships through multi-stakeholder functionalities and platform integration. In practice, this would mean ensuring intra-operability amongst the different government platforms, and inter-operability with platforms run by non-government and foreign government partners.

**III. Brokerage, Partnership and Intermediation:** Due to reasons such as literacy challenges, lack of awareness, distrust of government and formal institutions, many migrants are refraining from using tech-platforms despite the fact that they can benefit from services on offer. Migrant and civil society organisations that work with different categories of migrants can serve as brokers and intermediaries, helping build trust and improve access to services.

**IV. International Principles and Standards:** Given the trans-boundary nature of migration and the global dimensions of new technology, international standards, guidelines and frameworks for migration tech-platforms can be an important basis for building trust and enhancing access and usage. In order to promote interoperability of platforms run by different governments and diverse entities, an international and multi-stakeholder approach is needed. There are reputable institutions with experience and competency in setting up and supporting the implementation of global principles and best practices relating to the effective and fair use of technology. However, it appears that migration-related tech-platforms are not formally and substantively connected to these institutions. In the context of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), it is important for frameworks like GFMD to engage with bodies such as the International Standards Organization (ISO), as well as global technology governance and citizen privacy organisations, to set up and oversee guiding principles and international standards for migration-related tech-platforms.

**6. Protecting Migrants from the Negative Elements of New Technologies**

In addition to purposefully using technology to provide beneficial services and opportunities to migrants, it is equally important to proactively mitigate technological risks and protect migrants from the real and inherent perils associated with new technologies.

**I. Privacy, Regulations and Compliance:** Bearing in mind the double-edged nature of technology, fair and ethical regulations are needed. These regulations and the monitoring and encouragement of compliance need to be seen as part of a process to empower migrants, as opposed to disadvantaging them, through spying, censorship, undue control and other acts that undermine migrant rights and privacy. Platforms should not be used by governments and other operators as subterfuge for collecting personal and group information for purposes beyond the empowerment of the migrants. This fundamental principle of migrant and user privacy and empowerment does not prevent operators undertaking data analyses aimed at improving the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of services.

**II. Transparency and Technological Bias:** All tech-platforms are prone to algorithmic bias, negative profiling and other discriminatory tendencies. These can be hidden and embedded in machine systems through either the original and updated coding, or through routine machine learning. As such, machine based processing and operations need to be accompanied by ongoing and rigorous checks and corrections, as well as facility and functionality for human intervention and discretionary reviews. One of the most effective ways of ensuring fairness and ongoing improvement is openness and transparency about principles, facts, figures, outputs and challenges of the tech-platform. This enables all stakeholders to provide their experiences and perspectives, providing relevant ‘open-source’ input to complement other analytical and technical tasks linked to the ongoing monitoring and improvement of the platforms.

**III. Fact-Checking and Fake-Checking:** As is common practice, it is important for tech-platforms to undertake structured and ongoing fact-checking to verify the accuracy and relevance of the information and content on platforms. Structured and ongoing fake-checking has now become a necessity for tech-platform operators. This is due to the fact that new technology is versatile, making it relatively easy and cheap for online fraudsters, scammers and chancers to set up fake platforms for fraudulent and nefarious purposes. Fake platforms can be used to steal financial and identity details, and for extortion, blackmail, harassment and trolling. Platform operators need to fake-check to ensure that their platforms are not cloned or infected with malware that steal data and information. In line with multi-stakeholder partnerships, search engines and global social media platforms can cooperate with governments to ban, track, find and take down fake and exploitative platforms that charge extortionate sums for government services such as online visa applications (which the government websites provide at a nominal fee).

**IV. Options, Alternatives and the Digital Divide:** Even though the tech-platforms are capable of providing a wide range of services effectively and efficiently, it is important that face-to-face services remain as options and alternatives for those who cannot use tech-platforms. The reality is that a digital divide exist, with certain groups of citizens having limited capacity and capability to access and use new technology. Although migrants may be more likely to be tech users than the average citizen, nonetheless the population of actual and potential migrants are affected by the digital divide.

**7. Empowering Migrants by Reducing the Cost of Migration**

Given that there are specific SDG targets relating to remittance and recruitment costs, it is not surprising migration-related cost reduction programmes tend to focus on these. However, tech-platforms provide the opportunity for other forms of migration costs to be monitored with the view to reducing them.

**I. Visa and Permit Fees:** Foremost amongst the costs that need to be monitored and lowered are the direct fees and indirect costs charged by governments and public institutions for visas, residence permits, identity cards and other required documentations. These are generally given low prominence despite the fact that in some countries migrant families are prevented from attaining certain status they are otherwise entitled to (including permanent residence and citizenship) due to high and prohibitive fees levied by governments.

**II. Cost Bearing and Fair Fees:** To reduce costs incurred by migrants, tech-platform operators need to adopt the principle that expenditure on the construction and development of the platforms and other infrastructure are treated as social and developmental investments to be borne by the operator. These costs should not be passed on to migrants. The cost bearing principle does not prevent operators charging reasonable fees for their services. Furthermore, where fees are to be levied, they should be open, fair and proportionate, devoid of any element of profiteering and exploitation, so as to genuinely empower migrants – the majority of whom are low and mid income earners. These principles apply to commercial, social enterprise and government platforms.

**III. Monitoring and Promotion of Agreements:** There are SDG targets, GCM commitments, ILO standards, IOM programmes, World Bank and IFAD schemes and other agreements, protocols and frameworks relating to the reduction of the cost of migrant recruitment and remittances. Tech-platforms can provide ongoing monitoring, performance and compliance data and intelligence specific to individual countries and migration corridors. Up to date empirical data from the platforms can inform ever evolving bespoke responses to stimulate, promote and incentivise performance to achieve the target in the existing agreements.

**IV. Cost and Service Comparison and Rating:** Remittance cost comparison websites have been around for about 20 years. New technologies provide the opportunity for comparisons to be corridor specific, more precise, covering both transfer fees and hidden foreign exchange charges, using real-time data. Such enhanced cost comparison can also be applied to recruitment costs. Furthermore, cost comparisons can be complemented by service delivery rating and comparison. This can expose and weed out unethical companies, promote fair business competition, leading to improved services, reduced costs and higher value for money. The tech-platforms can provide the information and functionalities in easy formats for different devices and mobile phones. Key facts, figures and observations can also be provided in text, audio and visual illustrations in different languages.

**V. Linked and Complementary Services:** There are many complementary financial and professional development services that migrants need which, through the use of technology can be provided at minimal marginal cost by the Fintech, remittance and recruitment companies. Remittances can be linked to related services such as: payments for services and goods; health insurance; education payment plans; bank accounts; wage and salary processing; savings, investments and loans; voluntary contribution to pensions and social security schemes. Migrant recruitment can be linked to related services such as: recognition and validation of skills and experiences; skills development and career guidance; training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD); visa, permit and document renewals. Using technology and multi-stakeholder partnerships to develop and offer related services can enable companies to capitalise on operational synergies, whilst expanding service and commercial relationships with their existing client-base.

**8. Improving Migrant Access to Welfare Services**

Beyond improved migration management services, new technologies open up unprecedented ways and means of providing innovative and cost effective welfare services to migrants. New technology can help address some of the most urgent migrant welfare challenges as highlighted below.

**I. Technology as Welfare Right:** Access to technology should be treated as a human and migrant right. This is important not only for people to benefit from the options and opportunities available, but to end current practices whereby migrants are prevented from accessing technology and communication devices. This deprives them access to their families and to information and knowledge relevant to their welfare. In the current cyber-age, access to online information and resources, and the ability to communicate through mobile devices has become a new utility service, comparable to access to electricity and energy. People deprived of it suffer degradation of their welfare. As such, access should be based on affordable costs and minimal bureaucracy. In order to reduce existing digital-divide, governments have a regulatory role to ensure continued affordability, fair pricing and access for all. In some countries, access to social media platforms such as facebook and WhatsApp is free, not requiring usage of paid-for internet service or mobile phone data. Similarly, technology is in operation allowing digital money and mobile wallet transactions, without access to the internet and payment of connectivity costs.

**II. Friendship and Integration Networks:** It is very common for migrants to suffer from unfair negative perceptions and xenophobia. These arise from deliberate onslaughts of negative propaganda and falsehoods, and institutionalised misperceptions and bias, to the detriment of migrant safety and welfare. Rebuttal through hard and dry rational acts such as provision of facts and figures is not enough to counter ingrained perception. Credible facts need to be complemented with soft, emotional, cultural and interpersonal responses. Tech-platforms can play key roles in promoting fair, positive and empathetic perceptions of migrants. These migration-related platforms include: host-migrant befriending and exchange schemes; cultural exchange and solidarity hubs; community, volunteering and integration networks; national and multimedia campaigns. In some cases mobile phone charges for specific country corridors are exceptionally high, thereby creation isolation. Partnerships can be developed with mobile telephone companies to ensure availability of suitable and affordable phone plan packages, given that contact with family and friends is both a social and welfare issue. Special packages can offered to vulnerable migrants and/or key workers.

**III. Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery:** Tech-platforms and apps can be used to monitor, document and warn against entities and outfits involved in human trafficking, modern slavery and other illegal and unethical practices against migrants. A multi-stakeholder approach can ensure that verified data can come from national law enforcement and judicial sources, specialist international and non-governmental organisations, and other reputable sources. Similar to other monitoring platforms, these can be country and corridor specific, with functionalities and information available in different formats and languages.

**IV. Access to Tele-Justice:** The COVID 19 pandemic has highlighted the need and opportunities for online access to justice platforms for migrants. Migrant tele-justice platforms can incorporate the elements, structure and protocols of employment tribunals, arbitration and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) frameworks, addressing claims and grievances relating to migrant wages, charges and deductions, social benefits and other contractual issues. A multi-stakeholder approach can be based on existing ILO and other frameworks, bringing together government agencies, employer federations, employee representatives, international and civil society organisations.

**V. Access to Tele-Medicine:** Tele-medicine platforms can be used to provide medical services to migrants, especially those without regular status or otherwise denied access to general services. Furthermore, migrant and diaspora medical practitioners based in different countries can use these tech-platforms to provide medical support as part of voluntary and social enterprise programmes. A multi-stakeholder approach can bring together tech and medical companies, local hospitals, humanitarian charities, migrant and diaspora organisations to support vulnerable migrants. Partnerships can help ensure that services and practices meet the highest global standards in medicine, patient care and confidentiality, and access to state of the art tele-medicine equipment.

**Appendix: Sample of Migration-Related Tech-Platform Examples**

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| **visadb.io (Poland)** | [**https://visadb.io/about**](https://visadb.io/about) |
| *Internet visa database indexing 300,000 visa, residency and citizenship routes for 200 countries* | |

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| [**e-migrate (UAE/India)**](https://emigrate.gov.in/ext/) | [**www.emigrate.gov.in**](http://www.emigrate.gov.in) |
| *Digital platform used by UAE and Indian governments to manage the deployment of migrant workers, including: job offer reviews; passport checks; employment contract reviews; and visa issuance* | |

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| **SLBFE Portal (Sri Lanka)** | [**http://www.slbfe.lk/**](http://www.slbfe.lk/) |
| *Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment one-stop portal for services to migrants and recruitment agencies – pre, during and after migration* | |

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| **Public Authority of Manpower (Kuwait)** | [**www.manpower.gov.kw/Labor-services.html**](http://www.manpower.gov.kw/Labor-services.html) |
| *Portal for recruitment and deployment of migrant workers, including dispute resolution service* | |

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| **Integreat (Germany)** | [**https://integreat-app.de/en/**](https://integreat-app.de/en/) |
| *Information app for newcomers in Germany, with over 50 governmental partners* | |

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| **CMSC (Singapore)** | [**www.sgmigrant.com**](http://www.sgmigrant.com) |
| *Covid Migrant Support Coalition platform provides language and other courses, recreation, mental health and wellness services to migrants* | |

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| **Remitscope (IFAD)** | [**www.remittancesgateway.org/remitscope/**](https://www.remittancesgateway.org/remitscope/) |
| *Multi-corridor remittance data and market analysis* | |

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| **Saver Asia (South East Asia)** | [**https://saverasia.com/**](https://saverasia.com/) |
| *Comparison of fees and foreign exchange rates for remittances within South East Asian countries* | |

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| **Rise (UAE)** | [**https://www.gorise.co/**](https://www.gorise.co/) |
| *Linked services including migrant remittances, bank account, investment, insurance and shopping* | |

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| **SWADES (India)** | [**http://www.nsdcindia.org/swades/**](http://www.nsdcindia.org/swades/) |
| *Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support – skills platform for migrant workers* | |

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| **MADAD (India)** | [**www.madad.gov.in/AppConsular/welcomeLink**](http://www.madad.gov.in/AppConsular/welcomeLink) |
| *Grievance resolution mechanism for Indian migrant workers* | |

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| **Migport (Turkey)** | [**http://migport.com/**](http://migport.com/) |
| *Enables refugees to connect anonymously with volunteers who are willing to help them with their daily challenges such as education, finance and bureaucratic processes* | |

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| **INMI (Chile)** | [**https://inmi.cl/home/**](https://inmi.cl/home/) |
| *Support for migrant integration and employment; digital matching of migrant workers to employers* | |

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| **Techfugees (France)** | [**www.techfugees.com**](http://www.techfugees.com) |
| *Empower displaced people whilst supporting tech innovations designed by, with and for them* | |