



# Coming Together or Coming Apart?

## A New Phase of International Cooperation on Migration

*Council Statement*

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Migration Policy Institute

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## Executive Summary

The global context for cooperation on migration has shifted in unanticipated ways in the three years after the adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) and in the midst of a historic pandemic. A ripple of new or intensified migration crises—from the exodus from Venezuela, to renewed intense pressure on U.S. and EU borders, to the swinging doors of border closures caused by COVID-19—has revealed the limitations of unilateral border controls and strengthened the case for coordinated action. At the same time, it has also exposed the shortcomings of existing global frameworks to govern mobility in times of systemic stress.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that many migration issues are beyond the ability of an individual state to solve on its own. As nations consider how to safely reopen borders and legal migration channels that were closed en masse in Spring 2020 (and whose cautious reopening was subsequently imperiled by new viral variants), cooperation is key to building the migration management and public-health infrastructure necessary to restart mobility while safeguarding public health. Yet the scale of this transnational challenge has triggered restrictionist impulses, leading countries to turn inward rather than work together to meet the challenge. To date, much of the cooperation on migration has been at the bilateral level and within certain regional or sectoral clusters, typically involving the movement of certain essential workers. Without broader multilateral cooperation, the goals of developing common standards for reopening borders and health-proofing mobility may be out of reach, including helping countries with less-robust capacity for health screening at borders handle this new normal.

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Against this backdrop, it is worth reflecting on the trajectory and implementation of the GCM, the biggest experiment to date in developing a comprehensive global framework on migration. As with any complex international instrument (even a nonbinding one), the GCM has not been without controversy. It faced swift, and some argue unanticipated, backlash among some states in the lead-up to its adoption and uneven implementation in the three years since. Yet it has managed to lay the groundwork for more meaningful international cooperation in three ways:

- ▶ **Creating a common language.** The GCM has articulated a comprehensive framework for migration that, for the first time, establishes a common reference point for states with disparate interests, resources, and priorities.
- ▶ **Creating common infrastructure.** The GCM gave rise not just to a process but to concrete mechanisms embedded within the UN system to facilitate (and periodically evaluate) implementation, including a centralized coordinating body that can provide technical assistance and a financial mechanism to support projects.

- ▶ **Creating a more level playing field.** Having 23 goals enshrined in a common document offers at least the promise of facilitating negotiations between countries of origin and destination and holding countries to common standards, even if this has been slower to materialize in practice.

But questions remain as to whether the process that has been catalyzed can meet the needs of ever-more complex migration challenges. The pandemic has provided such a test. While the GCM has guided certain concrete achievements (notably Objective 15, helping countries make the case to ensure access to health care for migrants during the pandemic, regardless of legal status), cooperation on thornier migration issues has been slower to materialize—particularly when it comes to providing guidance for managing cross-border crises or pandemic-related border closures. The GCM provides guidance on specific themes but less on an overall path forward in crisis. With some exceptions, governments that adopted the GCM have largely opted for a “pick-and-choose” model (implementing the lower-hanging fruit, including things they would have done anyway) or the “quiet implementation” model, choosing to align themselves with GCM objectives without naming it as such for fear of backlash.

This offers a cautionary tale that collective action on migration cannot be taken for granted, even when it seems most necessary. At a time when countries are facing great uncertainty over the near-to-midterm future, the international community could be in danger of repeating the mistakes of 2018. The objections raised by the few countries that opted out of the GCM (concerns that the agreement may blur or even erase the lines of sovereign control and that it ignores the social and cultural costs of migration, to name but a few) have not dissipated. While the pandemic has in some ways crystallized the importance of making individual sacrifices for the common good, negotiations on highly contested issues will continue to face steep battles, and some countries may prioritize having the freedom to chart their own course.

Making the case for international cooperation in the current climate requires persuading national publics of the long-term benefits of well-managed migration *and* multilateralism. To this end, the Transatlantic Council on Migration recommends three principles:

- ▶ **Put national priorities front and center when making the case for new policies or investments.** Policy actors may need to go back to basics and make the broader case to their constituents for why and how cooperation can actually advance national priorities—rather than undermine them—particularly in the context of a historic economic upheaval and pandemic. This involves pointing to easy wins, setting realistic expectations for what collective action can achieve and on what timeframe, and carefully identifying, measuring, and articulating the costs of unilateralism.
- ▶ **Prioritize efforts to rebuild public trust rather than pursue quick fixes.** Governments need to make the political and public policy case for investing in cooperation for the long term in order to get the public on board. This requires establishing a compelling narrative about cooperation, and presenting it in a disciplined and consistent matter. Without this trust, they will not have the political latitude to test and get buy-in for creative immigration and integration ideas and to take calculated and deliberate risks to guide their communities in the long recovery ahead.



- **Acknowledge that there is no perfect or quick solution.** Multilateralism demands continuous engagement and compromise. It is almost always slower, less precise, and imposes many imperfect tradeoffs. Instead of trying to persuade people that, ipso facto, migration will have benefits to all people, leaders should be transparent about the challenges and potential tradeoffs and outline the measures they intend to take to address them. In doing so, they should strive to build confidence that systems are operating fairly, according to clear rules, and consistent with a society's values.

Champions of cooperation will thus need to rewrite not just the rules of the game but also the narrative around it to show that working together can solve common problems and achieve mutual goals.

## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic upended the migration status quo and, in turn, some governments' plans for deeper international cooperation on migration. Beginning in March 2020, every country in the world introduced some type of border closure or restriction that essentially paused most forms of mobility.<sup>1</sup> The result has been a worldwide crisis of immobility, with consequences for migrants and their countries of origin—including those left stranded by these restrictions and communities relying on remittances. Restrictions also left refugees and other populations in need of protection in limbo and made access to asylum and resettlement nearly impossible for a time.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, destination countries have struggled to secure the foreign workers they need to fill essential roles in sectors such as health care, social care, and seasonal agriculture, even as their economies reel from the impact of repeated lockdowns and rising unemployment.

While governments turned inward to address the domestic fallout of the pandemic, the scale of these challenges re-emphasized the difficulty of making lasting progress without some form of coordination. Cooperation between countries was essential both to respond to the pandemic's immediate impacts (for instance, managing the status of migrants who lost jobs or whose permits expired during periods of economic lockdown) and for the longer-term project of forging a path to fully reopening borders and legal migration channels. As COVID-19 is poised to alter the rules of mobility permanently, ushering in an era of vaccine passports and interlocking layers of public-health screening both at departure and entry, cracks in global cooperation will become more consequential. Yet thus far, countries have shown little motivation to invest in developing, agreeing to, and following common rules or standards beyond their immediate geographic neighborhood, and credible global leadership has been slow to emerge.<sup>3</sup>

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*As COVID-19 is poised to alter the rules of mobility permanently ... cracks in global cooperation will become more consequential.*

1 Meghan Benton, Jeanne Batalova, Samuel Davidoff-Gore, and Timo Schmidt, *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2020* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2021).

2 Susan Fratzke, "Restarting Asylum in a Post-Pandemic World" (Transatlantic Council on Migration briefing paper, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, September 2020).

3 Meghan Benton and Demetrios G. Papademetriou, "COVID-19 Is Becoming a '9/11 Moment' for Borders and Health," *Health Affairs* 40, no. 7 (July 2021).

The adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM)<sup>4</sup> in December 2018 marked a new chapter in international cooperation on migration that should theoretically have laid the groundwork for the type of cooperation needed today. On the one hand, the GCM was a historic achievement in forging a common instrument for countries of destination, origin, and transit that have long sung from different hymnals, creating for the first time the outline of a comprehensive international framework designed to help willing states govern migration. On the other hand, the tumultuous negotiation process leading up to its adoption at the intergovernmental conference in Marrakech exposed deep fissures between states and foreshadowed the political challenges some governments now face when making the case for cooperation, particularly under the umbrella of the GCM.<sup>5</sup> Notably, several important players on migration such as Australia, Switzerland, and until December 2021, the United States, had yet to endorse this agreement as of this writing.<sup>6</sup>

*The GCM was a historic achievement in forging a common instrument for countries of destination, origin, and transit that have long sung from different hymnals.*

The context for cooperation has shifted dramatically since COVID-19 outbreaks were first detected in late 2019. The public-health crisis, if anything, has underscored the importance of pursuing greater coordination on migration and mobility at the bilateral, regional, and even multilateral levels. But it has also exposed the limitations of existing global frameworks to govern mobility in times of crisis. Drawing on three meetings of the Transatlantic Council on Migration, an initiative of the Migration Policy Institute, held in

October 2019, October 2020, and November 2020, this Council Statement explores the rationale for deeper cooperation on migration, the obstacles impeding it, and ways forward.

- 4 The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) was formally adopted on December 10, 2018, by 164 countries in Marrakech at the UN Intergovernmental Conference on the GCM. The compact was then endorsed by 152 states during a UN General Assembly meeting on December 19, 2018, with five votes against (Czechia, Hungary, Israel, Poland, and the United States), and 12 abstentions (Algeria, Australia, Austria, Bulgaria, Chile, Italy, Latvia, Libya, Lichtenstein, Romania, Singapore, and Switzerland). See United Nations, “General Assembly Endorses First-Ever Global Compact on Migration, Urging Cooperation among Member States in Protecting Migrants” (meetings coverage, December 19, 2018); International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), “UNGA Votes to Endorse Marrakech Compact on Migration,” IISD, December 20, 2018.
- 5 The lingering political sensitivities surrounding the GCM are exemplified by states’ reluctance to cite and link complementary initiatives to the GCM. For example, the European Union’s Pact on Migration and Asylum, released in September 2020, does not explicitly mention the GCM for fear of reigniting debates from the GCM’s adoption, even though the documents share key priorities. Similarly, following objections from Malaysia and Singapore, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations chose not to cite the GCM in its Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration in November 2019. See Lena Kainz, Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, and Kathleen Newland, *The Divergent Trajectories of the Global Migration and Refugee Compacts: Implementation amid Crisis* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2020).
- 6 Switzerland, for example, has yet to adopt the GCM more than two years after the Marrakech conference, despite its role as a co-chair of the negotiations during the drafting of the GCM and despite being a recognized champion of global cooperation on migration. The country became ensnared in debates over whether the GCM encroaches on national sovereignty and decided to delay adopting the compact until parliament could debate it. It is worth noting that the Federal Council has recommended adoption, calling it both consistent with applicable Swiss law and practice as well as in Switzerland’s national interest. In the United States, the Trump administration took a vocal stand against the GCM (calling it an encroachment on state sovereignty) but in December 2021, the Biden administration reversed this stance and issued a statement of support for the GCM. The Swiss Federal Council, “Federal Council Adopts Dispatch on UN Global Compact for Migration” (press release, February 3, 2021); U.S. State Department, “Revised National Statement of the United States of America on the Adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration” (press release, December 17, 2021).

## 2 Incentives for International Cooperation in the Age of COVID-19

As COVID-19 spread to every corner of the globe, countries realized that halting the spread of disease requires more than just decisive action at borders. In some ways, this shined a spotlight on the GCM even as its implementation receded from the headlines, with most of the work being done behind the scenes to set up the necessary institutional architecture. Certain objectives associated with migrant rights suddenly became vital to public health—such as ensuring that all residents within a territory have access to health care and other basic services, because an outbreak in one part of a community affects the health and well-being of all (see Box 1). Most recently, this has extended to ensuring that migrants and refugees are included in vaccination campaigns. Vaccine equity, which has emerged as a top priority for the UN Network on Migration (see Box 2), is not a question of mere altruism but also has a clear public-health rationale, especially with emerging evidence that unvaccinated populations create fertile ground for more deadly variants to circulate (as is likely to have happened with the Omicron strain detected in November 2021).<sup>7</sup> Other GCM objectives, such as coordination on border operations and return, have gained in relevance but have become even more difficult to implement within the additional constraints imposed by a pandemic.<sup>8</sup>

But finding the political will to cooperate has not been easy. Concerns about vastly differential rates of infection and the proliferation of COVID-19 variants, as well as new influxes of migrants, have led several industrialized nations to embrace more isolationist tendencies and double down on securing borders<sup>9</sup>—despite the fact that no country has yet been able to contain the virus with these measures alone.<sup>10</sup> A likely consequence will be different responses across countries, with legal migration opportunities (and the development benefits they can bring) curtailed in developing nations that lack a robust public-health and border infrastructure.

At the same time, divergent interests risk further undermining efforts at collaboration. Bilateral and regional cooperation on migration has almost always emphasized destination-country priorities (such as meeting labor needs or combating illegal immigration) over other issues (such as opening broader legal migration

7 UN Network on Migration, “UN Network on Migration Briefing” (online briefing, June 24, 2021); Maria Cheng and Lori Hinnant, “Omicron Brings COVID-19 Vaccine Inequity ‘Home to Roost,’” AP News, November 30, 2021.

8 Kathleen Newland, *Will International Migration Governance Survive the COVID-19 Pandemic?* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2020); Camille Le Coz and Kathleen Newland, *Rewiring Migrant Returns and Reintegration after the COVID-19 Shock* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2021); Camille Le Coz, *EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Crafting a Road Map to Better Cooperation with Migrants’ Countries of Origin* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2021).

9 For example, the United States maintained travel restrictions for visitors from 33 countries for more than 18 months, making the long-awaited announcement they would be relaxed in October 2021 only to restrict travel again in November 2021 as Omicron was labeled a variant of concern. Similarly, Australia announced that citizens and residents would finally be allowed to leave and return to Australia without a special exception as of November 2021, only to reverse course the same month due to Omicron. See Meghan Benton, “Can Omicron Finally Get the World to Cooperate on Pandemic Mobility Management?” (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, December 2021).

10 Even the successes of Australia and New Zealand in halting COVID-19 infections—made possible partly by their status as island nations without a shared land border—have relied on strict and costly quarantine measures, as well as deep investments in testing and contact-tracing infrastructure alongside closing their external and, at times, internal borders.



pathways). This has typically come at the expense of fostering more sustainable partnerships.<sup>11</sup> The scale of the domestic pressures governments face could worsen this tendency toward political myopia.

While the GCM offers a framework for action over the long term and a roster of champions willing to push implementation forward,<sup>12</sup> these tools (by their design) are more deliberative and incremental, whereas crises demand swift and decisive leadership. In stark contrast to 9/11, from which the United States emerged as a clear leader on the transformation of border management to reflect national-security considerations, no state has the moral authority and political standing—and hence the “mandate”—to lead on rethinking mobility in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It remains to be seen whether new European or American leadership can take up the mantle, and even more important, how such leadership will play itself out and whether it will be within the rubric of an international agreement. Adding to this challenge, some have lost trust in international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), which has produced slow and sometimes inconsistent messaging during the pandemic,<sup>13</sup> adding to the skepticism (in some quarters) about the very global institutions and frameworks designed to mitigate transnational challenges.<sup>14</sup>

Increased political fragmentation has clearly dealt a blow to traditional vehicles of cooperation, but at the same time, the public-health crisis has made disillusioned publics hungry for leadership, creating a new opening for collective action.

## *Building on the Lessons of Implementing the GCM*

The adoption of the GCM marked an important chapter in international cooperation on migration, creating a comprehensive global framework that could help states manage migration better. But the fallout from the at times tumultuous negotiation and adoption process also exposed deep fissures between and within states: a nonbinding document suddenly became a lightning rod for debates about immigration, national sovereignty, and multilateralism. Some critics of the GCM portrayed it as a dangerous overreach into national sovereignty, even as others complained that its 23 broad objectives did not go far enough. In the

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- 11 Demetrios G. Papademetriou and Kate Hooper, *Building Partnerships to Respond to the Next Decade's Migration Challenges: Council Statement* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2017); Demetrios G. Papademetriou and Kate Hooper, “Reconsidering the Partnership Approach in International Migration Cooperation,” in *Forced Displacement and Migration: Approaches and Programmes of International Cooperation*, eds. Hans-Joachim Preuss, Christoph Beier, and Dirk Messner (New York: Springer, 2022); Le Coz and Newland, *Rewiring Migrant Returns and Reintegration*.
  - 12 As of December 2021, there were 27 champion countries—countries with diverse experiences with and approaches to migration that have agreed to help foster other states’ closer engagement with (and implementation of) the GCM. Champion countries include: in Africa (Chad, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal); the Middle East and North Africa (Egypt, Iraq, and Morocco); Asia (Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines, and Thailand); Latin America (Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico); Western Europe (Luxembourg and Portugal); and North America (Canada). See UN Network on Migration, “*Champion Countries Initiative*,” accessed December 10, 2021; UN Network on Migration, “UN Network on Migration Briefing.”
  - 13 The marginalization of the World Health Organization (WHO) is exemplified by states’ near universal disregard of the WHO’s early recommendations against travel restrictions or border closures to curb the spread of COVID-19. (WHO guidance issued in July 2021 subsequently set out principles for a “risk-based approach” to international travel, and noted that proportionate and time-limited travel restrictions could be appropriate in some circumstances.) WHO, “*Policy Considerations for Implementing a Risk-Based Approach to International Travel in the Context of COVID-19, 2 July 2021*” (policy brief, July 2, 2021); WHO, “*Updated WHO Recommendations for International Traffic in Relation to COVID-19 Outbreak*” (news release, 29 February 2020).
  - 14 Ivan Krastev, “Europe and the Pandemic: Effects on Liberal Democracy, Populism, and European Integration” (paper prepared for virtual meetings of the Transatlantic Council on Migration, “A New Way Forward on International Cooperation on Migration: Implementing the Global Compact for Migration in a Time of Pandemic,” October and November 2020).

end, 17 states chose to abstain or withdraw altogether from the GCM, and even more faced acrimonious debates in their parliaments and lingering negative effects on multilateral negotiations.

Moreover, the transition from adoption to implementation has been understandably criticized as uneven. Some states made slow but steady progress, but others had less to show in the first two years—though this was also a time of heavy “start-up” investments in the infrastructure of the UN Network on Migration, a novel body built from scratch to coordinate UN efforts and support states with GCM implementation.<sup>15</sup>

So far, there have been four predominant models for GCM implementation:

- ▶ **Wholesale adoption.** This category includes states that are fully engaged across all levels of society and government in attempting to implement the entire scaffolding of the agreement (even as they naturally hone in on certain priorities). The government of Ethiopia formally announced its implementation of the compact in October 2019 after an extensive whole-of-society consultation.<sup>16</sup> Portugal approved a national plan for the compact’s implementation in August 2019,<sup>17</sup> and the Philippines added a new chapter on international migration and development (largely based on the GCM) in the Philippine Development Plan 2017–2022.<sup>18</sup> Germany also stands out for its whole-of-government and whole-of-society strategy, exemplified by the development of its 2020 National Action Plan for Integration, which engaged more than 300 stakeholders (including more than 75 migrant groups) and works across ministries to engage sending and transit countries.<sup>19</sup>
- ▶ **The “pick-and-choose” model.** A second group of states is implementing certain objectives that are most relevant to their circumstances and tend to require more modest investments of political capital. Thailand was the first government to change its laws to comply with its commitments under the GCM after the Marrakech conference, in which it pledged to stop holding children in immigration detention following years of pressure from human rights groups.<sup>20</sup> Bilateral labor migration programs have also been an opportunity for states to implement GCM objectives by tailoring partnerships to mitigate

15 Among these key investments, which in fact demonstrate the tangible impact of GCM implementation, is the Network’s Migration Network Hub, launched in March 2021, which serves as a knowledge platform and connection hub to support Member States in implementation as part of the GCM’s capacity-building mechanism. The Hub now hosts more than 950 resources on migration research, services, and best practices. The Network has also grown its number of country networks to 52, established in more than one-third of all UN country teams around the world to facilitate system-wide UN coordination. See UN Network on Migration, “UN Network on Migration Briefing.”

16 International Organization for Migration (IOM), “Ethiopia Embarks on Ambitious Roadmap to Implement Global Compact for Migration” (news release, October 1, 2019).

17 Portugal’s national plan, which involves nearly all of its ministries, lays out five key issue areas that build on longstanding priorities: promoting safe, orderly, and regular migration; improving the processes to organize and manage migratory flows; promoting and qualifying migrant reception and integration mechanisms; supporting connections between migrants and their home countries and projects for return; and enhancing development partnerships with countries of origin and transit. See Country Coordinator Portugal, “Portuguese Government Approves National Plan to Implement Global Compact for Migration” (news release, August 1, 2019).

18 Enrico T. Fos, “Philippine Statement: Asia-Pacific Regional Review of Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration” (statement, March 10, 2021).

19 Federal Republic of Germany, *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration: Regional Review* (Berlin: Federal Republic of Germany, 2020).

20 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, “Signing Ceremony of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Determination of Measures and Approaches Alternative to Detention of Children in Immigration Detention Centers” (press release, January 24, 2019); Vivienne Chew, “How Change Happened in Thailand,” International Detention Coalition, March 20, 2019.

labor shortages. For example, Lithuania (which emphasized its discretion to adopt only certain GCM objectives)<sup>21</sup> piloted a temporary legal labor migration program with Nigerian information and communications technology workers to bridge labor shortages in the sector.<sup>22</sup> Regional implementation efforts have also been targeted to address prevalent challenges. For example, Central American states have established coordination frameworks to combat migrant smuggling and trafficking.<sup>23</sup> Because the GCM leaves implementation entirely up to states' discretion (with no enforcement mechanism and only episodic evaluations of progress via the quadrennial International Migration Review Forum), critics have pointed out correctly that implementation typically amounts to cherry-picking: governments implementing only what is advantageous to them (potentially actions they would have taken anyway) and ignoring the rest.

- ▶ **The “quiet implementation” model.** This third group consists of states—and in Europe's case, the European Union—that have signaled a willingness to put (parts of) the GCM into practice but have so far remained studiously quiet about concrete and public plans for implementation (or, for that matter, to tying migration initiatives directly to the GCM). At the EU level, for example, a lack of unity among Member States inhibits the European Commission's ability to actively promote the implementation of the GCM's objectives or to support the new structures it created, including the Multi-Partner Trust Fund or the UN Network on Migration. Considering the political fallout the GCM generated in Europe, some EU Member States have opted to reference the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development or other existing bilateral or regional agreements rather than the GCM per se,<sup>24</sup> or opted to conduct mapping exercises to explore which of the GCM's objectives already align with those of the 2030 Agenda.<sup>25</sup>
- ▶ **Ground-up mobilization.** The fourth and final group of states consists of those where civil society, the private sector, and local authorities are active in bolstering elements of the GCM, even in places where there is no national implementation plan. For example, countries in Asia with traditionally strong connections between nongovernmental organizations and migration, such as Bangladesh and the Philippines, both held civil-society consultations. Civil-society engagement leveraged toward GCM implementation has also been pursued at the regional level by groups such as the Migrant Forum in Asia, a network of nongovernmental organizations, associations, and trade unions that engages in migrant advocacy and direct services and has held national and subregional consultations

21 United Nations, “General Assembly Endorses First-Ever Global Compact.”

22 Mobility Partnership Facility, “Digital Explorers: Project Implemented in the Framework of the EU Pilot Projects on Legal Migration,” accessed January 20, 2022.

23 William Mejia, *Preliminary Report on the Regional Review of the Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration in Latin American and the Caribbean* (Geneva: UN Network on Migration, UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and IOM, 2021).

24 The GCM is rooted in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and “aims to leverage the potential of migration for the achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals.” The SDGs explicitly mention migration in three of its goals. Target 8.8 under Goal 8, focused on decent work and economic growth, highlights labor rights for all workers, including migrants. Targets 10.7 and 10.c of Goal 10 on inequality promote “orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people” and the reduction of transaction costs of remittances. Target 17.18 of Goal 17 discusses data disaggregation by migratory status. More broadly, all of the SDGs clearly encompass the welfare and empowerment of migrants as part of its mandate to leave no one behind. See Kathleen Newland, *The Global Compact for Migration: How Does Development Fit In?* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2017); United Nations General Assembly, “Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration,” July 30, 2018.

25 Author interviews with senior government officials in Europe and North America, April 2020.

to follow up on relevant objectives for its focus areas.<sup>26</sup> Cities have also stepped up as a driving force for GCM implementation. For example, when the United States announced its withdrawal from the compact in December 2017, a dozen U.S. cities signed a petition to be included in the process,<sup>27</sup> and on the sidelines of the GCM's intergovernmental conference in Marrakech, 150 city leaders endorsed the Marrakech Mayors Declaration, which called for the formal recognition of the role of local governments in the implementation, follow-up, and review of the GCM (and the Global Compact on Refugees).<sup>28</sup> Cities are not formal signatories of the GCM, but they have established forums to engage and elevate cities' role in migration policy.<sup>29</sup> Regional groups have also led key initiatives, such as efforts throughout Western Europe, where multiple conferences have been held to implement the GCM for the greater social inclusion of migrants.

## BOX 1

### The Impact of COVID-19 on GCM Implementation

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic shortly after the one-year anniversary of the GCM pulled implementation in two directions: On the one hand, the public-health emergency created more urgency around certain objectives that might otherwise have remained peripheral (such as access to health care), but on the other hand, it provided cover for states to retreat inward and more fiercely guard national sovereignty (as exemplified by the freezing of most migration routes). Ultimately, however, the recognition that migrant well-being cannot be separated from societal well-being has arguably nudged progress toward GCM objectives in four areas:

**Regularization and Extension of Legal Status (Objectives 4, 6, 7, 15, and 19).** Many states stabilized migrants' legal status to ease access to health care, services, and livelihoods. Early in the pandemic, Portugal ruled that all migrants (including asylum seekers) with pending residence permit applications as of March 18, 2020, would be deemed to be staying legally in the country and have access to public services such as health care and social support until their applications could be processed. Other states, such as Italy, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates, have acted to preserve the legal status of migrants whose statuses would have expired by extending their visas and work permits.

**Alternatives to Detention (Objective 13).** Several states have pursued alternatives to detention, recognizing the public-health risks surrounding detention facilities. For example, Zambia significantly scaled up its use of report orders (which permit migrants to check in with immigration officers for further determinations without being detained), reaching more than 10,000 orders in 2020 (up from 5,000 in 2019) to avoid overcrowding detention facilities. Similarly, Japan expanded its use of provisional release since the onset of the pandemic to promote social distancing.

**Access to Health Care and Vaccination (Objectives 7 and 15).** The public-health imperative to protect the most vulnerable in the interest of keeping entire communities safe has prompted the expansion of access to health care and vaccines in many states. For example, Colombia provides free COVID-19 health

26 UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2020: Assessing Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration* (Bangkok: ESCAP, 2020).

27 Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "U.S. Cities Want to Join U.N. Migration Talks That Trump Boycotted," *Foreign Policy*, December 5, 2017.

28 5th Mayoral Forum on Human Mobility, Migration, and Development, *Marrakech Mayors Declaration: Cities Working Together for Migrants and Refugees* (Marrakech: 5th Mayoral Forum on Human Mobility, Migration, and Development, 2018).

29 The Mayors Migration Council has been a catalytic leader in these efforts. Funded by private foundations and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the Mayors Migration Council supports GCM implementation by serving as a platform for cities to share best practices and engage in migration diplomacy domestically and globally, and by helping local authorities apply international migration and refugee principles as concrete local policies. Laetitia Pettinotti, "Mayors Migration Council Meeting Showcases Mayoral Leadership on Issues of Migration, Inclusivity, and Climate," C40 Cities, August 6, 2019.

**BOX 1 (cont.)****The Impact of COVID-19 on GCM Implementation**

services to refugees and migrants irrespective of their legal status and assures patients that their data will not be shared with immigration services, and the Peruvian government issued new legislation in April 2020 to grant subsidized health care for COVID-19 care to asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants. This approach has also been widely used in the European Union, where 20 Member States guarantee basic or emergency health care for migrant workers regardless of their status. Progress toward full vaccination inclusion, however, has been mixed, driven both by the uneven distribution of vaccines and by some states' hesitancy to put migrants on equal footing with citizens. The World Health Organization (WHO) found that as of August 2021, only 28 percent of vaccination plans submitted to the COVAX Facility explicitly included migrants. Nevertheless, many states have prioritized inclusive approaches. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated in its 2021 midyear report that 99 percent of the 160 countries it monitors had either explicitly included refugees in their vaccination plans or indicated they will do so. However, despite on-paper commitments, many barriers remain in practice, including supply. In low-income countries, only 4 doses per 100 people have been administered, compared to 133 per 100 in high-income countries. Refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers may also lack of access to identification documents and online sign-ups or be reluctant to come forward for vaccination, for example due to fear of arrest or deportation.

**Public Narrative Campaigns (Objectives 16, 17, and 18).** Many states launched public communication campaigns to combat xenophobia and highlight migrants' contributions to society. The United Nations Children's Fund in Guatemala created radio spots designed to address fears about the danger of infection from returned migrants, and a variety of countries from Djibouti to the United Kingdom have promoted media coverage of migrants and refugees volunteering to support vulnerable community members. In addition, some states have recognized the role that foreign-born health workers have played in the COVID-19 emergency response. For instance, Argentina and Peru expedited the process for the recognition of health-care credentials held by Venezuelan refugees and migrants, while France and Spain recognized the credentials of foreign-born doctors (among others), and the United Kingdom launched a fast-track visa to admit health and care workers (with a separate pilot underway to help refugees and asylum seekers access these visas and find employment in the National Health Service).

While it is difficult to disentangle developments that were specifically sparked or guided by the GCM framework from those that might have occurred anyway, it is noteworthy that states have gradually made progress in multiple dimensions of the GCM.

Sources: UN Network on Migration, "[The Global Compact for Migration \(GCM\): Well-Governed Migration as an Essential Element of Effective COVID-19 Response](#)" (policy brief, UN Network on Migration, Geneva, 2020); UN Network on Migration, *GCM Booklet* (Geneva: UN Network on Migration, 2020); International Organization for Migration (IOM), "[COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #62: Migrants' Contributions](#)" (brief, IOM, Geneva, 2020); UN Network on Migration, "[COVID-19 & Immigration Detention: What Can Governments and Other Stakeholders Do?](#)" (annex, UN Network on Migration, Geneva, 2021); WHO, *Refugees and Migrants in Times of COVID-19: Mapping Trends of Public Health and Migration Policies and Practices* (Geneva: WHO, 2021); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "[UNHCR Calls on States to Remove Barriers to Access to COVID-19 Vaccines for Refugees](#)" (news release, June 24, 2021); UNHCR, *Mid-Year Trends 2021* (Copenhagen: UNHCR, 2021); UNHCR, "[Access to National Services for Vulnerable Refugees in Peru](#)," Global Compact on Refugees Digital Platform, June 26, 2021; IOM, "[Migrant Inclusion in COVID-19 Vaccination Campaigns](#)" (presentation, IOM, Geneva, May 2021); UNHCR, "[COVID-19 Multisectoral Monitoring: 2021 Midyear Results](#)" (fact sheet, June 30, 2021); WHO, "[COVID-19 Immunization in Refugees and Migrants: Principles and Key Considerations](#)" (interim guidance, August 2021); IOM, "[Countering Xenophobia and Stigma to Foster Social Cohesion in the COVID-19 Response and Recovery](#)" (issue brief, IOM, Geneva, 2020); Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Ministers for the Interior, Labour, Solidarity, and Social Security and Health, "[Order No 3863-B/2020](#)," *Diário da República* 2nd series, no. 62 (March 27, 2020); Akhenaten Siankam Tankwanchi et al., "[Vaccine Hesitancy in Migrant Communities: A Rapid Review of Latest Evidence](#)," *Current Opinion in Immunology* 71 (August 2021): 62–68; Marina Brizar, "[The UK's Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot](#)," *Talent Beyond Boundaries*, July 19, 2021.



Regardless of what exists on paper, the GCM's contributions have been felt most keenly in three areas:<sup>30</sup>

- ▶ **First, and perhaps most important, it provides a common language to address old and new challenges.** The simple act of articulating a common set of standards may have nudged the field forward, even in places where implementation has been slower than anticipated or in countries already aligned with what the GCM recommends. The text has created a common reference point (the “spine” of the debate) for states with disparate interests, resources, and priorities. Policymakers and other stakeholders have been able to strengthen their case for specific initiatives (for example, on issues such as child detention, return, and reintegration) by referring to language in both the GCM and the Global Compact on Refugees.<sup>31</sup> Even for countries that were already broadly compliant with several of both compacts’ objectives (such as Canada), the adoption of both frameworks triggered formal processes to take stock of existing migration and refugee policies, examine how they fit within the realm of either agreement, and assess what might be missing. Thus, the GCM could have had a salutary effect, even in countries that were already strong champions of the agreement.
- ▶ **It has inspired the global community to coordinate migration and refugee issues more efficiently—though imperfectly.** One of the hopes behind the creation of twin compacts on migration and refugees was to create new and more efficient coordination mechanisms to deal with refugee and migration issues and their intersections across the UN family. Even though the chapter of the GCM that deals with implementation is skeletal in details, it planted a flag for regional and international migration review forums—locking in a process that, over time, could nurture a climate in which it is possible to talk through complex issues more systematically and consequentially than in other forums.<sup>32</sup> The International Organization for Migration (IOM)-led UN Network on Migration, created in parallel to the GCM, is providing a formal support architecture and administers the GCM's start-up fund to provide financial support to projects implementing compact objectives (see Box 2).
- ▶ **It offers at least the promise of additional leverage for countries of origin in negotiations with countries of destination, and momentum to get things done within governments.** In a few cases, governments report that placing new initiatives under the umbrella of the GCM provided extra leverage to get them off the ground—for instance, Canada’s International Migration Capacity Building Program to work with partner countries and international organizations on issues such as promoting safe and dignified returns and facilitating the issuance of travel documents—or to get several government departments on board internally at a time where resources are increasingly under strain. This has not always resulted in new initiatives or policy, though in some cases it provided a route to get others on board for priority initiatives the government wanted to do anyway. It also has the potential to boost fundraising, though so far this has fallen short of expectations, particularly as the pandemic and its economic fallout have commandeered national budgets.

30 Kainz, Banulescu-Bogdan, and Newland, *The Divergent Trajectories*.

31 One example is the guidance in the Refugee Compact on responsibility sharing when supporting refugees and host communities, which has helped move conversations from more abstract discussions on human rights toward more concrete action items.

32 The only other forum that has historically facilitated global conversations about migration is the informal, state-led Global Forum on Migration and Development, which has convened annually since 2007. Over time, the Forum successfully created a venue for sending and receiving countries to discuss migration issues that had previously been considered too contentious to tackle in a global forum. However, while the Forum had some informal support mechanisms (for instance, the leadership troika of past, current, and future government chairs and a small support unit), it lacked permanent infrastructure and a consistent funding source. Notably, it also lacked any follow-up or accountability mechanism.

Nonetheless, challenges remain. They include the difficulty in evaluating progress toward implementation, given the divergence in how different states interpret (and whether they even acknowledge) the GCM's role. Another substantive issue is that while the GCM sets out principles for managing migration more effectively, it does not have a magic wand to resolve some of the most intractable issues, particularly how to respond to and apportion international responsibility for large-scale, spontaneous movements of people where most fall outside the legal definition of a refugee. Because of the different legal authorities in charge of managing economic migration and providing refugee protection, and the institutional maturity and operational strengths of each, it is not surprising that instead of resolving this gray area, the two compacts have reinforced the bright line between migrants and refugees.

An additional practical issue is shortfalls in funding to implement the GCM, which have worsened as governments build up record deficits in response to the pandemic. But this shortfall goes beyond the understandable fiscal belt-tightening and probably reflects a broader reticence among governments to give money to a common fund and cede control over how it is spent.

## BOX 2 GCM Implementation Mechanisms

The UN Network on Migration is the main entity in charge of coordinating GCM implementation. IOM leads the network, which is the coordinator of migration issues within the United Nations. The network drives GCM implementation by supporting Member States with technical assistance through working groups on key issues and resources, such as the Migration Network Hub to connect states and other stakeholders and share research and best practices. The network also helps coordinate the GCM's regional review processes and established the Champion Countries Initiative.

The Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund—the GCM's start-up fund—is the financing mechanism dedicated to supporting Member States in their national implementation plans and is administered by the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, chaired by IOM as the network's coordinator and supported by the network secretariat. There is substantial demand for the fund's support, as shown by the 113 concept notes that have been submitted to date. As of December 2021, ten joint programs have been approved, covering a diverse geographic spread and set of issues. Between 2019 and 2022, the fund amassed contributions totaling USD 28.1 million, but fundraising has fallen short of expectations. In 2021, only USD 13.1 million was raised of the USD 30 million target for that year. In December 2021, the Steering Committee launched a new pledging campaign and set an ambitious goal of growing the fund to USD 70 million before the International Migration Review Forum in May 2022.

Sources: UN Network on Migration, "[Terms of Reference for the United Nations Network on Migration](#)" (terms of reference, UN Network on Migration, Geneva, December 2018); Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund, "[Start-Up Fund for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration Terms of Reference](#)" (terms of reference, Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund, Geneva, April 2020); Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund, "[6th Steering Committee Meeting 14 December 2021 Summary of Decisions](#)" (summary note, Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund, December 2021); Lena Kainz, Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, and Kathleen Newland, *The Divergent Trajectories of the Global Migration and Refugee Compacts: Implementation amid Crisis* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2020); UN Network on Migration, "[UN Network on Migration Briefing](#)" (online briefing, June 24, 2021).

More than two dozen countries around the world have now been designated GCM champions, meaning they are working with the UN Network on Migration to serve as models of GCM implementation to motivate and inspire other countries. But it is unclear whether one or more countries will emerge to steward the

process and catalyze real progress. This is especially needed in the context of COVID-19, where neither states nor multilateral institutions that sit at the nexus of public health and migration (but do not speak authoritatively on both) have been able to step into a practical leadership role quickly or efficiently. The pandemic has exposed many of the underlying weaknesses in the international coordination mechanisms designed to manage travel, migration, and global health—and in the trust required among states to come together in times of crisis. As one example, the infrastructure built around border management (including real-time information-sharing among countries) proved manifestly inadequate to manage an infectious disease, and in the nearly two years since the start of the pandemic, countries have still been unable to coordinate border closures, health screening, or the conditions of reopening.<sup>33</sup>

### 3 A Proactive Vision for Cooperation and Rebuilding Public Trust

Making the case for international cooperation in the current climate requires persuading publics of the long-term benefits of well-managed migration *and* multilateralism at a time when most countries and their citizens are experiencing intense short-to-medium-term challenges and uncertainties (health, economic, jobs, and broader personal and economic security). These challenges and uncertainties make a compelling case for looking inward *first*, hence the essence of both the challenge of and opportunity for thoughtful (rather than reflexive) leadership.

Resolving these challenges requires a more explicit conversation about how international cooperation can usefully amplify unilateral government policies, and where—and how—multilateralism could complement bilateral and regional efforts. Restarting travel, for example, is where most bilateral- and regional-level innovation is happening, but it requires global coordination to make sure different systems are compatible and new requirements are transparent, communicated clearly, and do not contradict those of partner countries. Although countries *can* act unilaterally to close their borders to try to stop the spread of disease, coordination with other countries is critical to avoid outcomes such as stranded populations or significant disruptions to trade and services.

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Some states have argued persuasively that the best way to protect national interests is, in fact, to look outward. For example, overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic will rely on investing in the capacity of countries with less-robust public-health and migration management systems, while effecting returns from destination countries partly relies on the capacity (and political willingness) of countries of origin. Further down the road, if destination countries wish to better anticipate and respond to migration shocks of all kinds, they must factor in the capacity of other countries to manage migration more effectively.<sup>34</sup> Strengthening

<sup>33</sup> Benton, “Can Omicron Finally Get the World to Cooperate.”

<sup>34</sup> Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Doris Meissner, and Eleanor Sohnen, *Thinking Regionally to Compete Globally: Leveraging Migration and Human Capital in the U.S., Mexico, and Central America* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2013).

migration governance in other countries is thus not only compatible with destination-country priorities, but it can even lead to better outcomes by achieving greater sovereign control over migration.<sup>35</sup> This is where the GCM offers a useful playbook.

The backlash against the adoption of the GCM in some countries demonstrates why establishing a compelling narrative around a policy initiative is almost as important as the content of the proposal itself. In this case, most of the GCM's contents were not particularly controversial, reflecting long negotiations and multiple hard-fought compromises. But countries quickly seized upon them for their symbolism, fueling a larger conversation about protecting state sovereignty and countries' ability to choose whom to admit, under what categories and circumstances, and how to respond to "spontaneous" migration that inevitably includes large proportions of unfounded asylum claims—in other words, to manage migration on their own terms.

As societies face another set of crises that could generate deep divisions over how to balance sovereign interests with broader regional and global goals, one lesson from this experience is particularly relevant. Instead of dismissing skeptics' concerns outright, the GCM's defenders would have been better served to engage with these concerns and try to understand the complex set of both legitimate and unfounded anxieties underpinning them. One of the main tactics used to defuse anxiety about the GCM was to rebut the arguments against it, one by one.<sup>36</sup> However, pointing to what the text does or does not say did little to quell anxieties, especially as some governments were reacting to the spirit of the document and what they were reading between the lines. Claims that the GCM creates a "right to migrate" should have triggered efforts to address people's broader concerns about multilateralism and migration, rather than an effort to fact-check that specific point. The real question today is thus as critical as it was during the months before the adoption of the GCM: Why is there so much disillusionment around multilateralism (particularly globalism) that skeptics can so easily seize on, particularly in the context of large-scale and spontaneous immigration?

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*Policy actors thus may need to go back to basics and make the broader case for why and how cooperation can actually advance national priorities—rather than undermine them.*

Policy actors thus may need to go back to basics and make the broader case for why and how cooperation can actually advance national priorities—rather than undermine them—particularly in the context of a historic economic downturn and pandemic. To avoid backsliding into unilateralism (and losing ground on what

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Swiss Federal Council, "Federal Council Adopts Dispatch on UN Global Compact for Migration."

<sup>36</sup> For example, the European External Action Service published a myth-busting document in November 2018, and in December 2018, UN Secretary General António Guterres's remarks in Marrakech began by highlighting four myths about the compact. One challenge with this technique is that each attempt to counter falsehoods through myth busting involves repeating the untrue statement, thereby strengthening it in people's minds. Another challenge is that these speeches and pamphlets typically just preach to the choir, because no one genuinely questioning the information actually reads them. See Adam Berinsky, "Rumors and Health Care Reforms: Experiments in Political Misinformation," *British Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 2 (2017): 241–62; European External Action Service, "Questions and Answers: What Is the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration?" (press release, November 14, 2018); UN Secretary General, "Secretary-General's Remarks at Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact for Migration [as Delivered]," December 10, 2018.

has already been achieved on the compact and Sustainable Development Goals) and instead reinvigorate the value of international cooperation, states should consider three principles:

- ▶ **Start with small forms of cooperation and build from there.** It may be wise to focus on practical ways of working together to achieve small victories that can encourage greater collaboration. Some states have pursued creating networks of stakeholders to focus on specific parts of the problem and make practical improvements for which they can get buy-in—and, crucially, that are seen as being consistent with *and even promoting* domestic priorities. For example, the UN Network on Migration has acted similarly in response to both states’ and civil society’s priorities by establishing a working group on climate change and migration.<sup>37</sup>
- ▶ **Document and build upon successes so far.** Despite the controversy and sluggish progress translating words into action on the ground, the GCM has several achievements under its belt (such as supporting the infrastructure Portugal needed to extend residency permits to hundreds of thousands of migrants during the pandemic). Although COVID-19 may have slowed the GCM’s implementation, it brought some key objectives to the fore that have taken on new urgency (such as the need to expand access to legal status and to basic health care).
- ▶ **Activate whole-of-government approaches to tackle some of the hardest issues.** Countries have begun to think creatively about how to seed new forms of cooperation. The Canadian development minister created a new forum for collaboration, pulling together colleagues from other countries to generate ideas on how to come together to make a difference for the most vulnerable (including impact on women and girls). In Germany, the interior, development, and foreign ministries have established highly productive ways to work together on shared challenges (such as effective returns). Similarly, Portugal established a national plan to implement the GCM that involves nearly all ministries, capitalizing on the opportunity to systematize their migration policy with a whole-of-government approach.<sup>38</sup>

COVID-19 could also create an opportunity to promote sensible reforms to multilateral processes and instruments. Leaders should:

- ▶ **Prepare publics to accept there is no perfect solution.** Multilateralism demands compromise. It is almost always slower, less surgical, and includes a raft of complex and imperfect tradeoffs. The lack of visible, tangible, short-term achievements could accelerate criticism of tools such as the GCM; policymakers must preempt this by prepping their constituents to understand that cooperation will not deliver the policy outcomes a state desires overnight.
- ▶ **Speak to people’s self-interest.** Policymakers will need to make both a short- and long-term case for the relevance of instruments such as the GCM to people’s everyday lives and concerns. This could involve showing how the compact helps all countries achieve some of their own domestic priorities—a goal that requires great care and diligence. It should also involve donor countries making

37 UN Network on Migration, “UN Network on Migration Briefing.”

38 Country Coordinator Portugal, “Portuguese Government Approves National Plan.”



the case that everyone will benefit if developing countries can build capacity around migration management. But the rationale for these grand policies must percolate down from the more lofty conversations to the everyday realities of most people.

In an ever more interconnected world, achieving national goals cannot be accomplished solely through policies within or at one's own borders. Yet laying the groundwork for international cooperation is neither automatic nor without risk. It requires concerted, systematic investments in building mutual trust as much as in the contents of the agreements themselves. Countries must set realistic goals, pursue them in a focused way, and stay the course when, inevitably, they experience some setbacks and failures—not allowing perfect to become the enemy of good. While the age of unilateralism may be waning, challenged from both the inside and outside, building a foundation for international cooperation on the world's most pressing issues will not be automatic or without difficulty. In the realm of migration, leaders must understand other countries' interests in order to best serve their own. The International Migration Review Forum in May 2022 will offer a formal opportunity for states to review progress on GCM implementation and identify next steps. But ahead of this forum, its champions need to continue making a strong case for why the compact can benefit states and societies, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and why countries should invest significant financial and political capital into this process.

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