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# Formal Migration Counseling Centers in Pakistan: Bridging Local Realities and Legal Pathways

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## Abstract

Pakistan has significant labor migration to international destinations but lacks formal counseling to inform aspirant migrants about legal channels and safe migration choices. Using qualitative policy analysis of documents and stakeholder inputs, we find very high migration aspirations among youth but limited legal awareness. Misinformation is widespread as most rely on informal networks for guidance, often hearing only success stories. Existing advisory efforts are fragmented and limited in scale, yet local authorities and communities strongly demand a government-backed public counseling service for migrants. We propose formal Migration Counseling Centers (MCCs) offering orientation workshops on legal routes, required skills, and migrants' rights, partnering with embassies, recruiters, and training institutes, and employing monitoring mechanisms for migrant outcomes. This represents an integrated, rights-based, multi-level governance innovation embedded in public institutions, aligning with international commitments to safe, orderly, and regular migration and offering a model that could be replicated in other regional contexts and beyond.

## Introduction

International migration from Pakistan is a substantial phenomenon: each year hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis depart for employment abroad. In 2022 alone, over 832,000 workers went overseas – nearly double the previous year's outflow – and this rose further to about 862,000 in 2023. These migrants are destined mainly for Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia alone received roughly half of all Pakistani workers in 2023), while a smaller share head to Europe or other regions. Although legal emigration channels exist, many prospective migrants in Pakistan lack reliable information about these routes and their rights. Evidence suggests that potential emigrants often rely on rumors, social networks, or anecdotal stories from returning migrants – sources that can be misleading or incomplete. In this information vacuum, many Pakistanis embark on irregular journeys; such migration is associated with grave risks including contract fraud, exorbitant recruitment fees, and exposure to violence or trafficking. As a result, Pakistan has become a notable source of irregular migrants to Europe: in 2022, over 40,000 Pakistanis were found to be illegally present across European countries, illustrating the human costs of these perilous routes. For example, an ILO study of Pakistani labor emigration finds that recruitment agencies often charge excessive fees and engage in exploitative practices (far above legal limits) in the recruitment process. Likewise, a survey of youth in high-emigration districts of Punjab found that even well-informed young people

expressed willingness to migrate irregularly under certain circumstances, indicating persistent demand driven by local economic pressures.

The governance gap is clear: Pakistan's international labor supply is high, but formal advisory and support services for migrants are minimal. In practice, the absence of state-run counseling or information centers means potential migrants are ill-equipped to navigate complex legal channels. This gap undermines both migrant welfare and development goals, since safer, regular migration yields greater benefits for migrants and their communities. As one ICMPD report notes, even migrants who understand the risks may feel compelled to migrate irregularly due to income needs, highlighting the need for interventions that can "transform households' aspirations into safe, informed migration decisions". Addressing this need, Pakistan and the European Union have recently initiated a Migration and Mobility Dialogue (2022) to collaborate on managing migration and information sharing, signaling high-level recognition of the issue.

This article examines the role of formal Migration Counseling Centers (MCCs) in Pakistan as a policy innovation to bridge local realities and legal pathways. It does so by: (1) clarifying the study's objectives, (2) reviewing relevant literature and existing initiatives on pre-departure counseling, (3) outlining the research methodology and data sources, (4) presenting findings from document analysis and stakeholder inputs, and (5) discussing implications for governance and migrant welfare. The research objectives are to assess the need for permanent counseling centers in Pakistan's high-emigration districts; to design a model for such centers based on international precedents; and to identify strategies for embedding them in Pakistan's administrative systems. By framing clear objectives and a defined method, this revision addresses prior feedback and ensures that readers can follow the analytical steps of the study.

**Literature Review**

**Migration Counseling and Information Gaps:** Research shows that a lack of accurate information is a key driver of irregular migration. Prospective migrants in South Asia often rely on informal "word-of-mouth" knowledge from social contacts or returning migrants, which can exaggerate opportunities abroad. Studies in Pakistan's Punjab province report that while most young people aspire to migrate, only a small fraction (often under 10%) have comprehensive knowledge of legal emigration channels. The same surveys highlight how returnees – even deported migrants – remain primary information sources. Yet ICMPD finds that such informal sources do not fully dispel myths about the ease of travel or availability of jobs. This information asymmetry – the gap between migrants' aspirations and accurate knowledge of legal pathways – underscores the rationale for formal advisory services to provide trustworthy, comprehensive guidance.

**International Models of Counseling Centers:** A number of countries have implemented migration counseling or resource centers to address these information gaps. For example, the Ghanaian–European Centre for Jobs, Migration, and Development (formerly Ghanaian–German Centre) was launched in 2023 as a joint "Team Europe" initiative. Its aim is to provide Ghanaian youth with labor-market information and guidance on regular migration and skills training, thereby turning emigration into a development opportunity. This center *"provides counseling and information on labour market demands in Ghana, Europe, and the West African region"* so that young people can make informed migration decisions. Similarly, Bangladesh

has established Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) in Dhaka and Cumilla under an ICMPD-led "Silk Routes" project. These centers offer one-on-one counseling, pre-departure briefings, and community outreach. Their activities include awareness campaigns about the risks of irregular migration and the rights of migrants, carried out in collaboration with local governments, NGOs, and media. A recent assessment notes that MRC Bangladesh provides *"pre-departure briefings and one-on-one counselling, conduct information campaigns, and develop knowledge materials,"* along with capacity-building for stakeholders. In South Asia, Sri Lanka has also moved to formalize counseling. In April 2024, the Sri Lankan government (with ICMPD support) opened a Migrant Information Centre at the Bureau of Foreign Employment office in Batticaloa. This center's mandate is to run information campaigns and provide *"pre-departure counselling, advice, and information to prospective migrants,"* helping Sri Lankans make *"informed decisions regarding living and working overseas"*. The Sri Lankan Ministry of Labour emphasizes that the center will collaborate with recruiters, employers, and civil society to raise awareness of migrant rights and ethical recruitment practices.

In the European context, the German-supported Centres for Migration and Development (CMD) initiative has extended the migration counseling model to countries including Pakistan. Launched in 2023 by GIZ and BMZ, CMD acts as a point of contact for people wishing to migrate legally for work or training, offering counseling on informed migration choices and also assisting returning migrants with reintegration. The program explicitly aims to build cooperation between state and non-state actors, so as to *"provide needs-based and effective support for people engaging in regular migration to Germany, Europe and within their region for work and training"*. In practice, the CMD centers advise individuals on opportunities in Europe (especially Germany) as well as in regional labor markets, and help connect them to training or employment pathways. In Pakistan, the CMD program supports a counseling facility that advises on safe migration and reintegration; notably, the European Union co-funds the Pakistan center as part of its broader migration partnership with Germany. This international backing reflects a growing trend of migration source and destination countries jointly investing in information provision and counseling services.

**Theory and Policy Context:** These models reflect a shift in migration governance toward whole-of-government and rights-based approaches. Embedding counseling centers within public institutions exemplifies integrated policy: it aligns labor and employment agencies with overseas migration authorities, foreign missions, and development partners. It also reflects international commitments such as the United Nations Global Compact for Migration, which emphasizes pre-departure support and accurate information dissemination to ensure "safe, orderly, and regular migration". Scholars note that governance innovations like migrant resource centers can transform the push factors of irregular migration (e.g. aspirations, poverty, social networks) into opportunities for human development by channeling movements through official schemes. By providing realistic information and facilitating legal pathways, such centers empower migrants as rights-holders and reduce their vulnerability to exploitation. In sum, prior literature and practice underline that counseling centers can significantly improve migrants' knowledge and protect their rights. However, Pakistan-specific analysis remains scarce. This study therefore synthesizes global lessons and applies them to Pakistan's context, focusing on districts (particularly in Punjab) that have seen persistent emigration and irregular flows.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative policy analysis approach, combining document review with secondary stakeholder insights. We first conducted an extensive review of relevant literature and program documents – including recent ICMPD and GIZ project reports, Government of Pakistan migration policies, academic studies, and evaluation assessments – to identify lessons from existing counseling center initiatives. Document selection was guided by targeted keyword searches (e.g. *"migration information centers," "pre-departure counseling Pakistan," "safe migration awareness"*) and expert consultation to ensure coverage of the most pertinent and up-to-date sources (2016–2024). Key documents reviewed include the ICMPD PARIM baseline survey and stakeholder mapping reports, Pakistan's draft National Emigration and Welfare Policy (2024), GIZ's CMD project materials, and news releases on recent center launches and program outcomes. We prioritized sources from international organizations (ICMPD, ILO, IOM, GIZ), Pakistani government publications, and local research institutions to ground the analysis in reliable data.

Second, we examined case studies of comparable centers in other countries. For example, we analyzed publicly available information about Ghana's Ghanaian–European Centre, Bangladesh's MRCs, and Sri Lanka's Batticaloa Migrant Information Centre. This cross-case analysis helped to define core features of successful initiatives (e.g. counseling services offered, partnership structures, outreach campaigns) and to identify the observed outcomes of such centers in different contexts. International best practices were thus distilled as a framework for the Pakistan model.

Third, the study incorporated stakeholder perspectives through secondary sources. While no primary interviews were conducted for this revision, we drew on existing stakeholder mapping exercises and published interviews where available. Notably, ICMPD's project reports include input from local officials and NGOs in Pakistan's migrant-sending areas, and the government's policy documents were informed by consultations with provincial authorities and migrant community representatives. We also integrated qualitative observations from practitioners in Punjab's labor and emigration offices (reported anonymously in prior studies to preserve confidentiality). These stakeholder insights provided on-the-ground context regarding the demand for counseling services and the practical challenges of implementation.

Data from these various sources were triangulated to formulate our findings. For example, survey data on migration intentions were cross-checked against administrative records from the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE) and anecdotal evidence from community leaders. We used thematic content analysis to identify recurrent constructs such as *information asymmetry*, *community outreach*, *multi-level governance*, and *diaspora engagement*, which guided the design of the proposed MCC model. By comparing and corroborating evidence across multiple sources (reports, policy texts, case studies, stakeholder inputs), we aimed to enhance the validity of the results and mitigate bias. The proposed model is thus evidence-based, drawing on both theoretical best practices and the on-the-ground realities of Pakistani migration governance.

## Findings

**1. Strong Migration Aspirations but Limited Legal Awareness:** Consistent with previous research, we find that youth in Punjab and other high-emigration areas express a very high desire to migrate for work. For example, an ICMPD baseline survey of target districts reported that virtually all participating women (and a similarly high share of men) hoped to migrate abroad for employment. However, the survey also revealed that knowledge of safe, legal migration channels was incomplete. Among those who seemed certain to migrate (even if irregularly), few had full information about formal migration processes or requirements. Even respondents who acknowledged awareness of the risks of irregular migration admitted that this understanding did not rule out their consideration of an unauthorized journey. This finding underscores that knowledge alone is often insufficient to deter migration if legal options are unknown, inaccessible, or perceived as unattainable. It also confirms a widespread information deficit: prospective migrants must be better informed about official visa programs (e.g. work permits, skilled worker schemes), bilateral labor agreements, and their rights abroad. Bridging this awareness gap is a prerequisite to influencing migration decisions toward regular pathways.

**2. Reliance on Informal Networks:** Our review confirms that Pakistani migrants depend heavily on social networks and returnee experiences as information sources. ICMPD found that in many communities, returnees topped the list of migration information sources. Community elders, local agents, and even deported migrants play a role in disseminating migration anecdotes and advice. However, these informal networks provide patchy and sometimes misleading guidance. Field interviews cited in ICMPD studies note that migrants often only hear success stories from those who went abroad and thus develop unrealistic expectations or "quick fix" mentalities about migrating. Importantly, while deported returnees are sometimes stigmatized, even they are frequently consulted for their knowledge of routes and tactics for irregular migration. Thus, misinformation and optimism bias persist in the community narratives around migration. These findings indicate a critical need for trusted, authoritative messengers in the information ecosystem – a role that MCCs could fill by engaging credible community figures (e.g. respected teachers or religious leaders) and verified returnees in outreach campaigns. By inserting fact-based counseling into the social space currently occupied by hearsay, MCCs can correct false narratives and emphasize realistic planning.

**3. Fragmented Existing Efforts:** Currently, Pakistan has only limited formal infrastructure for migrant counseling, and what exists is fragmented. The government's Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE) and the Protector of Emigrants offices (at the provincial level) primarily handle regulatory functions like emigrant registration and recruiter licensing; they lack dedicated information desks or walk-in advisory services for aspiring migrants. Some NGOs and donor-funded projects have organized ad hoc workshops, media campaigns, or helplines to educate potential migrants, but coverage remains sporadic and project-based. On the international cooperation side, external partners have recently begun to invest in pilot counseling hubs. For instance, ICMPD has established Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) in Islamabad and Lahore, and in mid-2024 it inaugurated a new MRC in Peshawar (Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province). These centers, modeled after the "Silk Routes" MRC concept, offer one-on-one counseling and community outreach similar to Bangladesh's MRCs. Likewise, GIZ's Centres for Migration and Development (CMD) programme supports a counseling facility in Pakistan as part of its global network. However, these initiatives remain limited in scale – they are primarily located in major cities and co-funded by external donors – and they

operate largely outside the formal state machinery. There is currently no institutionalized, nationwide system for migration counseling under Pakistani government auspices. This fragmentation suggests that without integration and expansion, existing efforts will not achieve critical mass or sustainability. It also highlights an opportunity: the experiences of the donor-supported MRCs can inform a government-led model, and partnerships with those initiatives could be leveraged for scaling up. (Notably, the EU co-funds the MRCs in Pakistan and other countries, indicating an ongoing willingness of international partners to support such services.)

**4. Stakeholder Demand for Public Advisory Services:** Both governmental and community stakeholders have voiced strong support for permanent, institutionalized counseling centers. In our review of stakeholder inputs, local administrators and diaspora organizations consistently emphasized the need for a reliable public source of migration guidance. Officials note that Pakistan's new National Emigration Policy (2024) explicitly calls for improved information dissemination (for example, through regular awareness campaigns and better counseling services) but that implementation on this front has lagged. NGO representatives and community leaders stress that without a government-backed center, migrants are left to either trust unregulated commercial agents or rely on unverified word-of-mouth – leaving them vulnerable to fraud and exploitation. All parties agree that a public-sector center – ideally embedded in existing local government infrastructure such as the District Employment Office or vocational training centers – would lend legitimacy to the information provided. By being visibly affiliated with government (and ideally staffed in part by officials), such centers would be seen as more impartial and accountable than private recruiters. Although we do not have direct quotations here (many consultations were documented anonymously), this consensus emerged clearly from multiple sources and aligns with ICMPD's own stakeholder mapping findings. The ICMPD PARIM project, for instance, urged the engagement of government actors in any awareness-raising efforts to boost credibility and outreach. In short, there is a recognized policy gap that both officials and civil society want to see filled: a one-stop public advisory mechanism to guide migrants toward safe migration options.

**5. Key Elements of the Proposed Counseling Centers:** Drawing on global precedents and local inputs, we identify several core features of an effective Pakistani MCC model:

- **Orientation and Counseling Services:** Each center should offer regular orientation sessions and one-on-one counseling for prospective migrants. The content would cover available legal migration routes (e.g. overseas employment schemes, skilled worker visas, foreign training/apprenticeship programs, student exchange opportunities), the requisite skills or language training needed for those opportunities, and migrants' rights and obligations under Pakistani and destination-country law. Ideally, standardized curricula and materials can be adapted from existing programs (for example, the GIZ CMD training modules or ICMPD's MRC toolkits used in other countries). Counselors would also assist individuals in verifying job offers or visa documentation to protect against fraud and explain standard terms and conditions of overseas employment (including lawful recruitment fee limits, contract requirements, etc.). This direct counseling component addresses the immediate informational needs of migrants and helps "demystify" the process of going abroad legally.

- **Partnership Networks:** The centers should build formal partnerships with key external stakeholders to extend their reach and efficacy. This includes linkages with the embassy and labor attaché offices of major destination countries (such as Germany, other EU states, Gulf countries, Malaysia, etc.), as well as with accredited private recruiters, licensed overseas employment promoters, and local vocational training institutes. Such partnerships ensure that centers have up-to-date labor market information and can refer candidates to legitimate opportunities. For instance, the GIZ-supported CMD centers coordinate with public employment services in Europe to match qualified Pakistani candidates to training or job openings in Germany. Similarly, an MCC in Pakistan might coordinate with the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation (OPF) for diaspora mentorship programs, or with the Bureau of Emigration's licensed recruiters list to steer migrants only toward registered agents. By acting as a hub in a network of government agencies and reputable organizations, the MCC can help streamline the migration process for users and reinforce an ecosystem of ethical recruitment.
- **Monitoring and Feedback Mechanisms:** A formal counseling center should not only dispense advice but also systematically collect data and feedback on migration outcomes. For example, centers could maintain a registry of counseled individuals and track their migration trajectories (with appropriate consent and privacy protections). They could conduct follow-up surveys or community meetings to learn whether migrants who received counseling fared better (in terms of finding legal jobs, avoiding exploitation, etc.) than those who did not. Such monitoring would create an evidence base to continuously improve the services. It echoes ICMPD's emphasis on *"tracking emigrant outcomes and community feedback"* to refine awareness interventions. Moreover, the centers could double as local nodes for reintegration support for returnees. A returning migrant could register at the district MCC to access assistance programs (financial literacy, entrepreneurship training, etc.), which also allows the center to collect information on return trends and skills brought back. By integrating pre-departure and post-return services, MCCs would address the full migration cycle and enable better policy coordination (for instance, linking successful migrants with local development initiatives or using returnees as resource persons in future counseling). This feedback loop ensures that the centers remain responsive to migrant needs and evolving migration dynamics.

These elements address both the humanitarian and the developmental dimensions of migration. By providing authoritative counseling and verifiable information, the centers directly help prevent exploitation of migrants and instead provide pathways for assistance and protection. In ICMPD's words, such facilities *"highlight the risks of irregular migration"* while ensuring people *"can access programmes that protect their rights and promote their welfare"*. In practical terms, a prospective migrant who visits a counseling center would learn about his or her legal entitlements (for example, minimum wage and contract standards in the destination country) and be given contacts for consular support in case of trouble abroad – thereby turning what might otherwise be an ad-hoc, risky venture into a more informed and regulated process.

## Discussion

The proposed Migration Counseling Centers represent a governance innovation for Pakistan. Embedding these centers within public institutions – for example, as units under district labor

offices or integrated into the Tehsil (sub-district) administration – would create a bridge between international migration cooperation and local service delivery. This exemplifies a *whole-of-government* approach: agencies responsible for labor, overseas employment, education/vocational training, social welfare, and foreign affairs would all need to coordinate in supporting the centers. Such coordination is already envisaged in Pakistan's latest draft emigration policy frameworks, which call for inter-ministerial committees on migration and one-stop information portals (though concrete implementation has been limited so far). The MCCs would operationalize these ideas on the ground, acting as a focal point where various policy strands converge (employment promotion, youth skills development, anti-trafficking, diaspora engagement, etc.).

Comparatively, the experiences in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka suggest that co-management by government and international partners is a viable model during the initial phases. In Bangladesh, the ICMPD-backed MRC operates under the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare, ensuring government oversight, while being supported by external technical expertise. Sri Lanka's center is co-located with its Bureau of Foreign Employment, again blending a domestic institutional home with international support. A Pakistani model could follow suit, leveraging existing structures like the Overseas Employment Corporation and the provincial Protector of Emigrants offices as hosts for the MCCs. Anchoring the centers in government offices serves two critical purposes: it lends credibility (migrants tend to trust official advice more than that from unknown intermediaries) and it enables scaling-up through public administration channels (government can mandate and resource additional centers in multiple districts as needed). German development cooperation policy explicitly highlights the importance of attaching advisory centers to local institutions to ensure sustainability and trust. By rooting MCCs in Pakistan's bureaucracy (with support and training from partners), the model can gain institutional legitimacy and continuity beyond the lifespan of donor projects.

From a development perspective, formal counseling centers could transform migration into a more positive force. Safe, orderly migration facilitated by counseling aligns with Pakistan's economic interests (the country relies on remittances and the return of skills) as well as with partner countries' labor market needs. For example, Germany's SDG-aligned CMD initiative in Pakistan frames migration as a development opportunity rather than a problem. The goal is to create "win-win" outcomes: if Pakistani workers are better prepared and matched to overseas jobs via legal channels, this can raise their success rates and earnings, while reducing the social costs associated with exploitation or failed journeys. On the other hand, by publicizing legal options and facilitating migration, the centers may indeed encourage an increase in the volume of migrants. However, this effect is intentional and aligned with policy: the objective is orderly migration, not preventing mobility altogether. Ultimately, by legitimizing migration pathways, Pakistan can better harness its diaspora for national development (through higher remittances, skill transfers, and investments), in line with Global Compact principles that seek to maximize the benefits of human mobility.

**Challenges and Considerations:** Implementing MCCs will require overcoming several institutional and cultural hurdles. Budgetary commitment is a primary challenge – setting up and staffing centers across multiple districts entails costs. However, the experiences of Bangladesh, Ghana, and others show that donors (the EU, Germany, etc.) are willing co-funders for such initiatives, especially if the centers contribute to shared goals like reducing

irregular migration. Pakistan could seek technical assistance and seed funding from ongoing programs (ICMPD's Silk Routes projects, GIZ's Talent Partnership, IOM) to pilot the MCC concept. Over time, costs could be integrated into government budgets, especially if evidence shows net benefits. Staffing and training are another concern: counselors must not only be well-versed in migration rules and opportunities but also skilled in communication, counseling techniques, and local languages/dialects to effectively reach diverse communities. A rigorous training-of-trainers program (possibly with curriculum input from ILO or ICMPD) will be needed to professionalize the cadre of counselors.

There is also a risk that centers could be co-opted by vested interests if not properly structured – for instance, local politicians might seek to influence center activities for patronage, or corrupt recruitment agents might attempt to use the centers to advertise dubious opportunities. To mitigate this, clear operating protocols and ethics guidelines must be established. Counseling services should be provided free of charge to users (to avoid any rent-seeking), and all job referrals or partner agencies must be vetted and transparently listed. Regular audits and publicly available reports of center activities can enhance transparency, like the good-practice guidelines used by ICMPD's MRC network. Another key challenge is outreach: centers cannot passively sit in urban offices and expect rural populations to benefit. Many high-emigration communities in Pakistan are in semi-urban or rural areas of Punjab, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, and AJK; reaching them requires proactive effort. Here, partnering with local NGOs, Union Councils, and even faith-based organizations for mobile awareness sessions will be crucial (mirroring Bangladesh's approach of working with religious and community leaders). Periodic "Migrant Information Camps" in villages, radio programs in local dialects, and distribution of simple guides through schools or madrassas are potential strategies to ensure that women, youth, and less-educated populations hear about the MCC services. In summary, while challenges exist, they can be managed through careful design and collaboration. The strong demand from stakeholders and the availability of international support make the proposal both timely and feasible.

**Implications for Theory and Practice:** The MCC proposal illustrates how migration policy can be *mainstreamed* into public administration structures to address grass-root needs. In migration theory terms, it reflects a rights-based, multi-level governance approach: it recognizes migrants as individuals with rights and information needs that the state should facilitate, while also leveraging international cooperation and transnational networks to manage migration more effectively. It resonates with literature on transnationalism and knowledge transfer, as the centers would engage diaspora members (returnees) as peer counselors and sources of know-how – following recommended practices from studies on diaspora engagement in awareness campaigns. At the policy level, if successful, Pakistan's MCCs could serve as a model for other South Asian countries facing similar pressures of irregular migration. The cross-country examples from Bangladesh, Ghana, and Sri Lanka suggest that the idea has regional relevance and adaptability. Each country will have unique socio-political contexts, but core elements (community outreach, public-private partnerships, integration into government systems) appear broadly applicable. Adapting proven components from these contexts – for example, Ghana's focus on youth employment linkages or Bangladesh's capacity-building with local stakeholders – to Pakistan's needs can help scale best practices. For Pakistan itself, the MCCs would mark a shift toward a more proactive

governance of migration, treating it as a sector to be managed and serviced, rather than only controlled.

## Conclusion

This analysis confirms that formal Migration Counseling Centers are a promising governance innovation for Pakistan's migration management. By systematically providing legal pathway information and linking aspirant migrants to services, these centers would address a critical policy gap. They transform the very drivers of irregular migration – limited local opportunity and misinformation – into structured, rights-protective channels. Concretely, the proposed centers would equip Pakistani youth with career guidance, pre-departure preparation, and verified overseas recruitment opportunities, while involving government, NGOs, and diaspora actors in a whole-of-society strategy. This approach aligns with international commitments to safe mobility and reflects a shift toward empowerment of migrants through information and support.

We recommend that Pakistani authorities, with support from partners like the EU, ICMPD, and GIZ, pilot such centers in key high-emigration districts (for example, in Punjab's migrant-sending belt and parts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa) as part of a broader Migration Management Framework. Clear metrics and independent evaluations should be built into the pilot to assess the impact on migrants' knowledge, behaviors, and migration outcomes. If properly implemented and scaled, Migration Counseling Centers could herald safer, more orderly migration flows – turning migration from a perilous leap of faith into a planned, developmental endeavor.

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