Committee: Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)
Topic: Addressing Labor Shortages Through Migration, Automation, and Workforce Reskilling in Aging Societies
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Overview of the Problem|

To this day aging populations are shrinking the workforce, and countries are turning to migration, automation, and reskilling, and it can lead to an economy that is slow and strain public services. Addressing these challenges requires cooperation from the global intergovernmental and policy organizations, in which they design international frameworks and advise governments on labor policies. However, the main challenges remain, which present severe structural, economic, and social hurdles. (2026) Throughout the world, workforce challenges bother us as societies age, the need for care workers grows greater, and the attainable supply decreases. This is not unique to one country or region; the social care workforce is global. Therefore, the solutions must be as well; it is this fact that has pushed the Global Aging Network and its members around the world to range and prioritize solutions to ensure that older people can enter the services they need and deserve. These challenges raise important questions that the delegates will debate about: orderly migration programs using technology and automation, retraining workers for new jobs, and helping older people stay active in the workforce.
(Moret, 2023).

Introduction

Population aging is one of the defining demographic changes of the twenty-first century. Improvements in healthcare and living conditions have contributed to longer lives, while lower fertility rates have reduced the proportion of the young people in many societies. Population aging refers to the gradual increase in the proportion of older people within a population, mainly due to declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy. Although longer life expectancy represents an important social achievement, these demographic changes require governments to reconsider employment, retirement, healthcare, education, and economic development policies (UN DESA, 2024).

The term "labor shortage" refers to a situation in which employers have difficulty finding enough workers with the necessary qualifications, availability, or experience to fill existing positions. A shortage does not always mean that a country has too few people willing to work. Vacancies may also result from low wages, poor working conditions, geographical barriers, skill mismatches, or insufficient investment in training. Therefore, effective policies must address both the number of available workers and the quality of employment opportunities (OECD, 2024a).

Three concepts are particularly important to this topic:

- Labor migration: The movement of people across national borders for employment. When properly managed, migration can connect workers with labor demand while creating economic opportunities in the destination and origin countries.
- Automation: The use of technology, machinery, robotics, or artificial intelligence (AI) to perform or assist with tasks previously completed by people. Automation can increase productivity, but it may also change job requirements or displace workers in some occupations.
- Workforce reskilling: The process of learning new skills to move into a different role or occupation. It differs from upskilling, which improves skills needed for a person's current role or profession.
- Old-age dependency ratio: A demographic indicator that compares the number of people, generally aged 65 and above, with the working age population. It is commonly expressed as the number of older people per 100 working age individuals and helps governments understand potential economic and social support pressures (UN DESA, 2024)

These approaches are interconnected. For example, a country experiencing a shortage of healthcare workers might recruit qualified professionals from abroad, use digital systems to reduce administrative workloads, and fund training programs to prepare additional nurses and care workers. The effectiveness of this approach would depend on funding, professional standards, working conditions, and access to technology.

The issue matters internationally because labor shortages can affect economic growth, access to healthcare, public services, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) , particularly SDG 4 on quality education, SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, and SDG 17 on partnerships. ECOSOC provides a forum for countries to coordinate policy recommendations and exchange experiences on these interconnected challenges (United Nations, 2015; United Nations, n.d.-a).

By examining demographic trends, previous international agreements, stakeholder positions, and policy challenges, delegates should be able to develop practical proposals that balance labor-market needs with human rights, national development, and social inclusion.

Historical Background

The problem developed over decades as birth rates declined and people began living longer. The demographic trigger: Following the post-WWII “Baby Boom," global fertility rates dropped significantly below the replacement level across advanced economies during the early 2000s.

Eventually the oldest baby boomers began reaching retirement age, causing old age dependency ratios to soar. (O'Heir, 2022) As generations became smaller and highly educated, severe labor gaps opened up middle-skilled and manual industries (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2021).

The financial crisis and stagnant wages and economic instability forced companies to cut costs, making entry-level positions less attractive and driving structural underinvestment in domestic vocational training. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the "Great Resignation," pushing millions of older, vulnerable workers into early retirement. It exposed severe frailties in global health sectors and simultaneously locked down national borders, choking off traditional migration flows right when they were needed most.

Over the years, nations and international organizations have developed a series of policy experiments to address labor shortages in aging societies. These include traditional guestworker programs, such as Germany's Gastarbeiter system, which recruited foreign workers on temporary visas to load labor shortages under the assumption that they would someday return home. Another approach was unilateral "tech-first" substitution, which attempted to solve labor shortages by investing heavily in machinery and industrial robots. More recently, the Global Skills Partnership (GSP), developed by the Center for Global Development (CGD) in 2012, introduced a model that trains potential migrants in their home countries before they move. Participants can choose an "away track" to migrate legally or a "home track" to stay in their country and strengthen the local economy through foreign-funded training. (Dempster et al., 2022)

These approaches had different levels of success, revealing both the benefits and limitations of migration and automation as solutions to labor shortages. Traditional guest worker programs often stumbled because governments did not provide enough support for language learning, social integration, or long-term residency. As a result, some migrant workers faced social exclusion while tensions over immigration contributed to political opposition (Acosta et al., 2025).

At the same time, aging populations changed the types of workers countries needed. As the number of older people increased, so did the demand for healthcare professionals and long-term workers. This created a double challenge: while the working age population was shrinking, more workers were needed to care for the growing elderly population. The OECD estimates that population aging alone could increase the demand for long-term health workers by approximately 22% over the next decade (OECD, 2023). This showed that population aging was not only reducing the number of available workers—it was also increasing the demand for essential services.

The Situation Today

According to the ManpowerGroup's 2026 survey, 72% of employers worldwide struggle to find skilled workers. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that 408 million people face barriers to employment despite wanting to work. Additionally, 20% of young people worldwide are not in education, employment, or training. These statistics highlight the global skills mismatch and the need for solutions such as migration, automation, and workforce reskilling (OECD, 2025).

The biggest issues include helping older workers adapt to AI and digital technologies, overcoming immigration barriers that limit access to foreign workers and addressing global inequality. While aging countries struggle with labor shortages, many developing countries face youth unemployment and limited access to job training. These challenges show why migration, automation, and the workforce must work together to create a more balanced labor market. (ManpowerGroup 2025).

The situation differs significantly by region. In Japan, one of the world's fastest-aging societies, the growing number of elderly people has increased the demand for caregivers. Japan's Ministry of Health estimated that approximately 2.45 million care workers would be needed by the end of 2025, demonstrating how population aging can create serious shortages in essential services (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan 2025).

Germany has responded differently by making it easier to attract skilled workers from abroad. Its skilled immigration reforms aim to help employers fill vacancies by creating more flexible pathways for qualified foreign workers. This shows how migration is becoming an increasingly important strategy for countries with aging populations and shrinking workforces.

South Korea gives another example of a country using organized labor migration. Since 2004, its Employment Permit System (EPS) has allowed small and medium-sized companies that cannot find Korean workers to legally hire foreign workers. The system is designed to fill labor shortages while regulating migration and protecting workers' rights (Ministry of Employment and Labor, Republic of Korea, n.d.).

Migration also affects the countries that send workers abroad, and the Philippines is one of the world's major sources of migrant labor, with approximately 2.19 million Overseas Filipino Workers recorded in 2024. These workers help fill labor shortages in other countries while ending money back to support the Philippine economy. However, this also raises concerns about "brain drain," especially when skilled professionals such as healthcare workers leave their home country (Philippine Statistics Authority 2025).

Key Stakeholders and Their Positions

The key stakeholders have different goals when addressing labor shortages in aging societies. Countries such as Japan, Germany, South Korea, and Italy want to fill job vacancies and maintain economic growth, while countries such as India, the Philippines, Morocco, and Nigeria want to create jobs for young people, protect migrant workers, and benefit from remittances sent home (Clemens, 2014). International organizations promote workers' rights, safe migration, job training, and cooperation between countries. Non-profit organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch work to protect migrants from exploitation, while think tanks like The Central For Global Development research policies that benefit both destination and origin countries. Businesses want enough workers to operate successfully, so large companies may invest in automation and recruit skilled migrants, while smaller businesses often depend on human workers.

Regular people are also affected; older workers need job security and technology training; migrants need fair treatment; and local communities need sufficient housing, schools, and healthcare services. Each group has these concerns because labor shortages affect the economy, workers' rights, job opportunities, and the quality of life in their communities.

Past Attempts and Existing Frameworks

1. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,

Adopted in 2015, it established a shared international framework for inclusive economic growth, education, decent work, and reduced inequalities. SDG 4 promotes lifelong learning, SD8 addresses decent work and productive employment, and SDG 10 includes commitments related to safe and responsible migration (United Nations, 2015).

Strengths: The agenda connects employment, education, migration, and inequality within a common framework and is applied to countries at different development levels.

Limitations: The SDGs do not automatically provide national funding, enforce uniform labor policies, or ensure that governments achieve their targets. Implementation depends on domestic priorities, resources, institutions, and monitoring.

Adopted in 2019, the ILO Centenary Declaration emphasizes a human-centered approach to the future of work and the need to respond to technological and demographic changes (ILO, 2019)

2. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration

Endorsed by the General Assembly in 2018, the Global Compact for Migration establishes 23 objectives for international cooperation on migration. Relevant objectives include fair and ethical recruitment, decent work, skills development, recognition of qualifications, and the portability of social security benefits (United Nations General Assembly, 2018).

Strengths: The Compact addresses migration as a shared international responsibility and recognizes both migrants' rights and the development benefits of migration.

Limitations: It is non-legally binding. National implementation varies, and practical barriers such as inconsistent credential recognition, recruitment costs, and differences in immigration systems remain.

3. International labor standards

ILO conventions and recommendations establish principles for protecting workers and promoting decent employment. Convention No. 97 concerns migration for employment, while Convention No. 143 addresses migrant workers and issues related to irregular migration and equality of opportunity and treatment (ILO, 1949, 1975).

Strengths: International labor standards provide established principles for fair treatment and protection against exploitation.

Limitations: Ratification and enforcement vary. Informal employment, limited labor inspection, and unequal access to legal assistance can prevent workers from receiving the protections intended by these frameworks.

4. The WHO Global Strategy on Human Resources for Health: Workforce 2030

Adopted in 2016, the WHOLE strategy supports stronger health workforce planning, education, employment, and retention. It is relevant because aging societies face increasing demand for healthcare and long-term care, while some lower-income countries continue to experience major workforce shortages (WHO, 2016).

Strengths: The strategy recognizes that healthcare shortages require long-term planning rather than recruitment alone.

Limitations: Education takes time, funding is uneven, and trained health workers may move to countries offering better wages and working conditions. The strategy therefore requires sustained domestic investment and international cooperation.

5. The ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work.

Adopted in 2019, the ILO Centenary Declaration emphasizes a human-centered approach to the future of work, including lifelong learning, decent work, and the need to respond to technological and demographic changes.

Strengths: It connects technological innovation with workers' rights and the need for policies that help people adapt.

Limitations: A declaration alone cannot ensure that employers finance training, that displaced workers find new jobs, or that all countries have access to advanced technologies.

6. National approaches to labor shortages

Countries have also introduced national initiatives, including vocational education systems, programs to attract skilled migrants, incentives for older people to remain employed, and investment in industrial automation. These approaches demonstrate how governments can combine different labor-market policies to address workforce shortages (Klein & Smith, 2024)

These approaches offer useful lessons, but results depend on national circumstances. Recruitment alone cannot solve poor working conditions, training alone cannot create jobs where labor demands are weak, and automation alone cannot provide the human interaction required in many healthcare and care occupations.

The remaining challenge is to combine these approaches into coherent policies with measurable outcomes, sustainable funding, and protection for workers.

Challenges and Complications

1. National sovereignty versus international cooperation

Governments have different views on immigration, labor-market regulation, and the role of international institutions. Some countries may favor expanding legal pathways for workers, while others may prioritize stricter admission requirements or domestic workforce development. ECOSOC must seek areas of cooperation without assuming that all states will adopt identical migration policies. (OECD, 2024)

2. Unequal financial and technological resources

Automation, digital infrastructure, and workforce training require investment. Wealthier economies may have more resources to adopt advanced technology, while lower-income countries may struggle to finance training facilities, equipment, and reliable internet access.

International funding and technical assistance could help reduce these gaps. Nevertheless, delegates must determine how programs would be financed, which countries would qualify, and how results would be evaluated. (World Bank, 2024)

3. The risk of worsening inequalities

Automation can improve productivity, but workers who lack digital skills or access to training may find it harder to adapt. Older workers, people with disabilities, low-income households, and workers in informal employment may face additional barriers. (ILO, 2026)

Likewise, migration policies that prioritize highly qualified workers may leave shortages in other occupations unresolved. Delegates should consider how policies can support different skills levels without creating discriminatory employment systems.

4. Brain drain and unequal development

Recruitment from countries with limited numbers of trained professionals can weaken essential services in those countries. This is particularly concerning in healthcare, where shortages can affect entire communities.

One possible response is to develop bilateral training partnerships that expand the number of qualified professionals, support employment in countries of origin, and establish fair recruitment practices. However, these partnerships require financing, effective implementation, and respect for workers' freedom to choose where they work. (WHO, 2023)

5. Recognition of qualifications and professional standards

Migrants may possess valuable qualifications that destination countries do not automatically recognize. Different licensing rules, language requirements, and education systems can delay employment even when vacancies exist.

International cooperation could support transparent qualification assessments, common competency frameworks, and agreements for recognizing selected professional credentials. However, such measures must maintain appropriate safety and professional standards. (OECD, 2023)

6. Automation, job displacement, and worker protection

Introducing new technology may reduce demand for certain tasks while increasing demand for others. Workers cannot always move directly from an affected occupation into a new role, particularly when retraining is expensive or employment opportunities are geographically distant. (ILO, 2026)

Delegates should examine whether governments and employers should provide training grants, transition assistance, career counseling, or other support for workers affected by technological change.

The Committee's Role and Powers

ECOSOC's mandate

The Economic and Social Council is one of the six principal organs of the United Nations. Under the UN Charter, it addresses international economic, social, educational, health, and related issues, promotes cooperation, and makes policy recommendations to Member States and relevant UN bodies.

For this topic, ECOSOC can facilitate dialogue between countries, encourage the sharing of effective practices, promote coordination among relevant UN entities, and support recommendations on employment, migration, education, and sustainable development.

What ECOSOC cannot do

ECOSOC does not have the authority to directly impose national immigration laws, require businesses to purchase automation technologies, or independently compel countries to finance particular training programs.

Its recommendations and coordination activities must respect the mandates of other UN bodies and the responsibilities of Member States. The committee should therefore focus on realistic cooperation, voluntary commitments, policy guidance, technical assistance, and monitoring.

ECOSOC has 54 member states.

Potential areas for committee action

Delegates may consider negotiating recommendations that:

- Encourage voluntary, intentional partnerships for skills training and fair labor recruitment.
- Promote accessible reskilling and lifelong learning programs, particularly for workers affected by technological change.
- Support the responsible adoption of automation, including worker consultation and safeguards against discrimination.
- Encourage ethical recruitment practices and stronger protections for migrant workers.
- Improve labor market data collection to identify shortages and measure the effectiveness of national policies.
- Expand technical assistance for countries with limited resources for workforce development.

- Encourage cooperation among governments, employers, educational institutions, and trade unions.
- Promote the exchange of best practices on older workers' employment, workplace accessibility, and lifelong learning.

Guiding Questions for Debate

1. How can countries experiencing population aging address labor shortages while respecting national sovereignty and the rights of migrant workers?
2. What international mechanisms could help destination countries recruit qualified workers without worsening shortages of essential professionals in countries of origin?
3. Should international organizations encourage countries to prioritize domestic workforce training, international labor migration, automation, or a combination of all three? How should national circumstances influence this decision?
4. How can ECOSOC encourage fair distribution of the economic benefits of automation while protecting workers whose jobs or responsibilities change because of new technologies?
5. What funding mechanisms could make vocational education, digital training, and lifelong learning accessible to older workers, low-income communities, and developing countries?
6. How could countries improve the recognition of foreign qualifications while maintaining professional standards and public safety?
7. What responsibilities should governments and employers share when workers require reskilling because of automation or changes in labor demand?
8. How can international recruitment agreements protect workers from exploitation while addressing the development needs of countries that lose trained professionals?
9. What policies could increase participation in the workforce among older people, women, and other underrepresented groups without creating discrimination or undermining workers' rights?
10. How can governments address the effects of migration on housing, healthcare, education, and other local public services while recognizing the economic contributions of migrant workers?

Conclusion and Call to Action

Labor shortages in aging societies represent a long-term economic and social challenge that cannot be solved through a single policy. Demographic change, technological innovation, international migration, and evolving skill requirements are reshaping the relationship between workers, employers, and governments. The effects are different across countries, making international cooperation essential but also complex.

Migration can connect workers with employment opportunities and help countries maintain essential services. Automation can improve productivity and reduce the burden of certain tasks. Reskilling can help

workers adapt to your changing industries and access new opportunities. However, these approaches require investment, effective governance, and protections against inequality, exploration, and exclusion.

ECOSOC offers delegates an opportunity to bring these priorities together. By encouraging fair recruitment, accessible education, responsible technological development, and cooperation between countries at different stages of demographic and economic development, delegates can help identify policies that address immediate labor shortages while preparing societies for the future.

The central challenge is not simply to find more workers or introduce more technology. It is to build labor markets that remain productive, inclusive, and resilient as populations and economies change. Delegates should approach negotiations with a commitment to evidence-based policymaking, practical cooperation, and respect for the dignity and rights of every worker.

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