



Cooperation on employability, skills mapping and skills development

Technical paper prepared on Priority 3 for the 2nd meeting of the Employment Working Group under India's presidency

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1. Introduction

The labour markets in BRICS countries are being reshaped by various drives of change, such as technological change, green transition and demographic shifts. In this rapidly changing labour market context, BRICS countries are facing the challenge of ensuring employability across multi-dimensional labour market transitions, from school-to-work, work-to-work, informal-to-formal, a just transition towards environmental sustainability, as well as human-centred digital transition.

To ensure employability in rapidly changing labour markets, policies and programmes need to be informed by robust evidence-base not only on employment trends, but also on occupational trends and the jobs contents of occupations, such as tasks and skills requirements. BRICS countries already have a number of initiatives to generate skills intelligence and deliver demand-driven skills development policies and programmes and intermediation services. These initiatives include the design and implementation of occupational classifications, occupational standards, qualification frameworks, labour market observatories, recognition of prior learning, work-based learning, short-term training programmes and stackable microcredentials, career guidance and matching services, among others.

The diversity of BRICS labour marker contexts and initiatives suggest that there is an opportunity for cooperation. BRICS brings together countries with different economic and labour market structures, demographic profiles and institutional mechanisms. This means that the group is well placed to exchange practical experience across a wide range of policy context with a common goal to support the employability of workers, promote productivity of enterprises and achieve inclusive and sustainable growth.

To facilitate the BRICS 2nd Employment Working Group's discussion on the Priority 3 "Cooperation on Employability, Skills Mapping and Skills Development" under India's presidency, the current paper presents analysis on BRICS labour markets and implications for skills development (Section 2), and illustrative examples of BRICS countries' initiatives in the area of skills intelligence, demand-driven skills development programmes, and other supporting measures (Section 3). The paper concludes with options for potential areas of BRICS cooperation (Section 4).

2. BRICS labour market landscape and its implications for skills systems

2.1 BRICS skills and employability challenges and opportunities

Across BRICS countries, the employability challenge stems from the co-existence of multiple challenges, including insufficient decent jobs creation, the weak alignment between training and industry needs, and the difficulty to support school-to-work and work-to-work transitions, to name a few. In 7 BRICS countries for which the comparable data are available, the unemployment rate for the overall working-age population stood at 8.2 per cent, a much higher rate than the global average at 4.8 per cent, as of 2024 (ILOSTAT¹). The difficulty in finding a job is felt strongly by young people (ages 15-24) in those BRICS countries, as can be seen in the youth unemployment rate at 19.4 per cent, a rate higher than the overall unemployment rate by more than two-fold. Persistently high youth unemployment rate can have far-reaching consequences into the future both at the individual and societal levels, as unemployment early in one's career can have a "scarring" effect, negatively impacting labour market outcome throughout one's life and thus social cohesion. Furthermore, the high prevalence of youth Not in Employment, Education Training (NEET) in BRICS points to an even deeper youth exclusion than unemployment alone. In BRICS², despite some progress in recent years, more than one in five youth, or 21.5 per cent, were not in employment, education or training as of

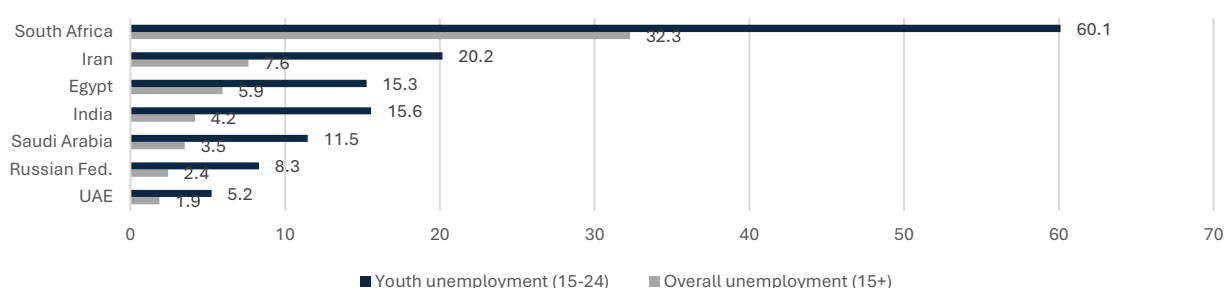
¹ Based ILOSTAT data for South Africa, Iran, India, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Russian Federation and UAE as of 2024.

² Based ILOSTAT data for Brazil, Egypt, India, Iran, Russian Federation, and South Africa as of 2024.

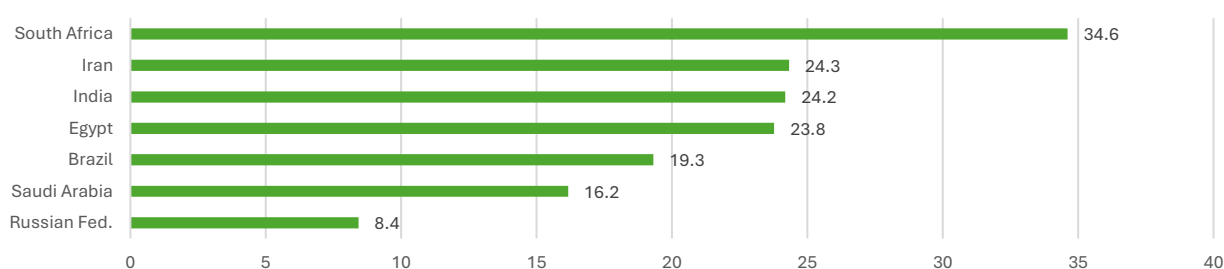
2024. Moreover, the labour market challenge is also felt by the employed. In BRICS countries, more than half, or 51.6 per cent, of workers suffer from either overqualification or underqualification. The composition of qualification mismatches varies, suggesting that BRICS countries face a different mix of skills challenges. While undereducation is relatively more prominent in Brazil, India, Indonesia and the Russian Federation, overeducation is more pronounced in Iran and Ethiopia. Undereducation points to gaps in access to education and training opportunities, while overeducation points to underutilization of skills and insufficient creation of decent jobs on the one hand, and supply-driven provision of education and training without effective assessment of job opportunities on the other hand. Both types of mismatches can have negative consequences for workers, enterprises and economies, such as lower productivity, lower return on investment in education and training, hard-to-fill vacancies, wage penalty, absenteeism and low satisfaction at work.

Figure 1: BRICS labour market landscape: Persistent transitions and skills mismatch challenges

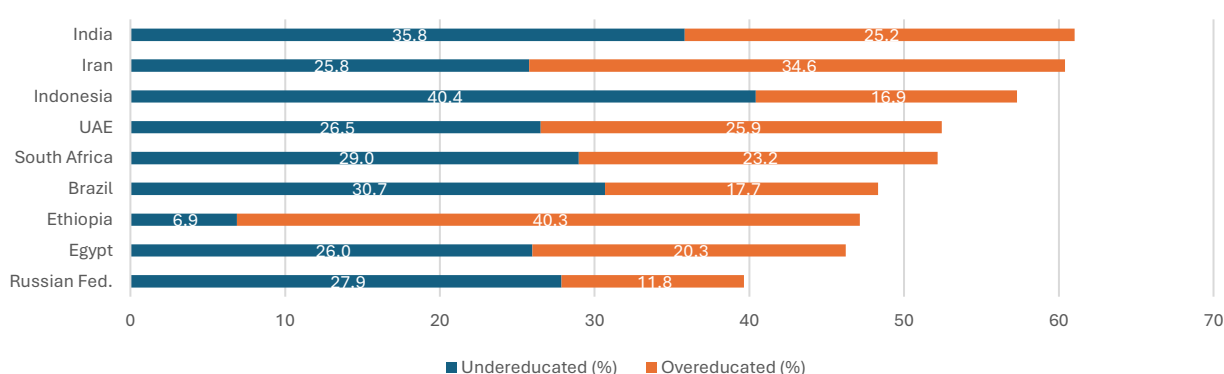
Panel A: Youth unemployment (15-24) and Overall unemployment (15+) rates, 2024



Panel B: NEET rates, 2024



Panel C: Qualification mismatches, latest years available



Source: ILOSTAT

Though challenges are substantial, so are the opportunities. The high unemployment, NEET and qualification mismatch all point towards the large size of untapped workforce that exist in the BRICS countries. With effective skills mapping and demand-responsive skills development and measures to support labour market transitions, the potential for growth in BRICS countries is enormous.

2.2 Green and digital transitions reshaping job contents and skills demand

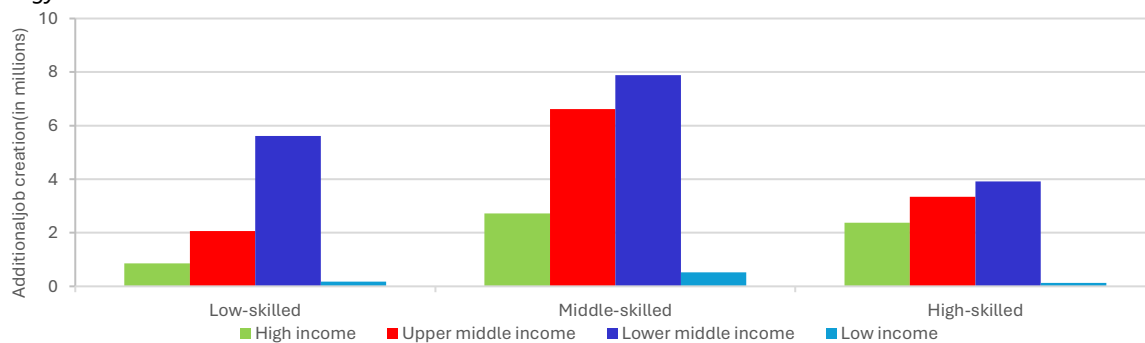
The misalignment between the skills offered by individuals and those demanded by enterprises is increasingly challenging to tackle. The drivers of changes, such as green and digital transitions, are changing the demand for not only the job roles that are driving these transitions, but also the roles in a wide range of economic sectors that are impacted by the changes in products and consumer behaviour. The expansion of environmentally sustainable goods and services, as well as the digitalization of work and life are altering the task contents of existing jobs, while creating new job roles with new tasks, and even giving rise to “hybrid roles” that combine traditional jobs roles that used to be distinctive but now are increasingly becoming integrated.

The impact of green and digital transitions on occupations and skills demand unfolds differently across income groups and regions, driven by production structures, levels of digital connectivity, and investments required to achieve the environmental targets and rules set by policies and regulations. The ILO analysis shows that the employment gains from the investment to achieve net zero carbon emission through energy transition scenario are expected to be around 37.2 million more jobs than the baseline scenario by 2030. The gains are expected at all skill levels, with the largest gains in medium-skill occupations, in sectors such as construction and manufacturing, while substantial losses are expected in the extractive sector (ILO 2025a).

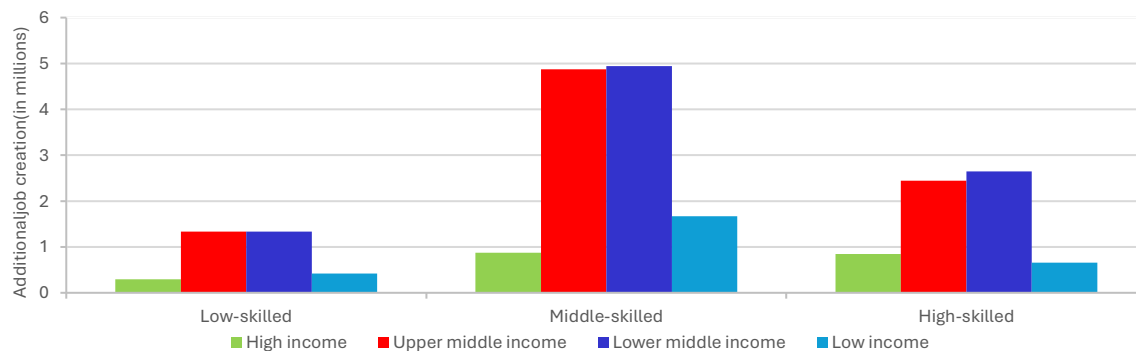
The implication of digital transition is equally widespread. The ILO finds that the investment to achieve near-universal broadband coverage can expand employment by 23.5 million jobs more than the baseline by 2030, and that the impact extends far beyond the ICT sector, to sectors such as construction, as well as services sectors as connectivity expands its activities. (ILO, 2025a). The implication of digitalization, however, is becoming increasingly nuanced since the advent of Generative AI in late 2022, with both the automation risks and augmentation potential of AI. The ILO’s 2025 update on generative AI suggests that one in four workers globally is in an occupation with some degree of GenAI exposure and that most jobs are more likely to be transformed than be replaced (ILO, 2025b).

Figure 2: Employment gains under green and digital scenarios, by skill level

Energy transition scenario



Near universal broadband scenario



Source: ILO 2025a, based on E3ME model of Cambridge Econometrics.

Skills systems must combine broad-based digital, green and transversal skills with deeper technical skills, and they must do so in a wide range of occupations at all skills levels, but with strong focus on mid-skill level occupations that are likely to see employment gains, such as technicians, construction trades, service occupations, logistics and care roles.

2.3 Diverging demographic trajectories

Another major driver of change impacting the labour markets in BRICS is the demographic shifts, with divergent trajectories within the group. Population projections (UNDESA, 2024) indicates that the BRICS include some of the world's largest and youngest labour forces, alongside countries where working-age populations are ageing or already beginning to plateau or decline. China and the Russian Federation are already experiencing shrinking population and workforce, while Brazil and the Islamic Republic of Iran are projected to peak population growth by 2054 (UNDESA, 2024). On the other hand, India, Indonesia, Egypt, Ethiopia, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates are projected to continue growing through at least 2054 (UNDESA, 2024). Thus, policy discussions in BRICS as a group must consider simultaneously ageing workforces, approaching labour-supply plateaus, and large inflows of first-time labour-market entrants.

For countries with post-peak and aging population (e.g. China, the Russian Federation), the priority may include raising productivity with a fewer and more mature workforce, thus strengthening adult learning and mid-career upskilling and reskilling, while strengthening recognition of prior learning and putting in place supporting measures for longer working lives and a workforce strategy for health and care occupations as demand for healthcare services increase. For counties with growing population (e.g. Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, South Africa), the emphasis may be on harnessing the demographic dividend by establishing effective school-to-work transition pathways through competency-based TVET, apprenticeships, and career guidance. For countries approaching the population growth peak, the need is to manage both young labour market entrants and slowing labour force growth by simultaneously improving the labour market relevance of the initial training and strengthening labour market intermediation for the new entrants and existing workers.

3. BRICS countries' on-going initiatives and potential areas of cooperation

Section 2 provided a snapshot of BRICS labour market challenges and opportunities and their implications for skills systems. The high unemployment, youth unemployment, NEET and qualification mismatches are acute challenges for BRICS countries, but they are also at the same time an indication of large size of untapped workforce potential that could be harnessed if effective demand-driven skills development and supporting mechanisms are in place. The potential employment gains are millions under green and digital transitions, with the largest gains expected in mid-skill level occupations in a wide range of economic sectors. Finally, the BRICS is characterised by divergent demographic trajectories encompassing countries that are past peak, towards peak and growing working age populations. Together, these snapshots imply the need for a wide range of policy options to promote employability and the opportunity for cooperation among BRICS countries.

As pillars for cooperation, three areas warrant consideration: (1) strengthened skill intelligence for jobs-skills mapping, (2) demand-responsive skills development for employability and (3) supporting mechanisms for flexible learning, career pathways and skills mobility. BRICS countries already have numerous initiatives in these areas. Thus, this section presents some of the illustrative initiatives to explore concrete actions to be taken to deepen cooperation BRICS countries.

3.1 Strengthened skills intelligence for jobs-skills mapping

To improve employability through effective skills development policies and programmes, policymakers, jobseekers, employers, training providers and other stakeholders need up-to-date and high-quality skills intelligence for jobs-skills mapping. Skills intelligence is a set of quantitative and qualitative information on skills demand, supply and mismatches, generated through skills needs anticipation and matching exercise. Skills needs anticipation and matching is a set of activities to assess current and future skills needs in the labour market in a strategic way, using consistent and systemic methods, and based on social dialogue. As such, skills needs anticipation and matching exercise and skills intelligence generated by it are an integral part of the labour market information system, which generates, integrates and translates information on occupations, skills, qualifications and learning pathways into practical outputs and signals for policymakers, public employment services, enterprises, training providers and individuals. The value of skills intelligence lies in its usefulness to support preparedness, flexibility and effectiveness of skills development as the key enabler of human development, full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent work for all. The robustness of skills intelligence, the functionality of labour market information system and skills governance, and the institutional capacity determine whether jobs-skills mapping inform policy decision or remains a purely statistical exercise.

For BRICS countries, like other countries, skills intelligence for jobs-skills mapping is becoming increasingly strategic. Several BRICS countries already possess important building blocks of such systems. Brazil uses the Classificação Brasileira de Ocupações (CBO) to identify occupations in administrative and household data, while the Quadro Brasileiro de Qualificações (QBQ) and the Guia Brasileiro de Ocupações (GBO) add information on competencies, knowledge, skills and attitudes (Brazil MTE, n.d.a, n.d.b, 2023). Similarly, India's National Classification of Occupations (NCO-2015) provides the occupational code structure and descriptions used across employment services, and National Occupational Standards specify the standards of performance and knowledge requirements (NSDC, n.d.).

Indonesia combines KBJI (Indonesian Standard Occupational Classification), SKKNI (Indonesian National Work Competency Standards) and KKNI (Indonesian National Qualification Framework) to link occupation classification, competency standards and qualification levels (BPS 2014; Kemnaker n.d.a, n.d.b). For example, Indonesia has established dedicated National Occupational Skill Standards, and National Qualification framework for green jobs for acknowledging that the transitional tool for a low carbon economy with specialised workforce. Similarly, South Africa uses the Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO) as a common language for labour-market dialogue on occupations and the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) to register occupational qualifications (DHET, 2013; QCTO, 2020).

Other countries are also strengthening the reference classifications that underpin jobs-skills mapping. Egypt's Occupational Outlook seek to improve the visibility of occupational requirements by updating the occupational classification guide based on skills and linking it with labour market demands, incorporating new developments in emerging fields such as AI and related technologies (MPED, 2025). Saudi Arabia presents an insightful case, where a country heavily invests in the establishment of sector skills councils to produce sector specific skill intelligence, through sectoral studies, which combines surveys and stakeholder consultations. Importantly, skills intelligence is utilized to produce sector-level practical outputs, such as job families and pathways and skills dictionaries, and skills repository, which lists priority occupations and skills (MHRSD 2024; Wholesale and Retail Sector Skills Council 2025).

These initiatives in BRICS countries suggest that the group already has a solid foundation to build upon as a starting point. However, they also point out the need for interoperability. National systems differ in the end-use (measurement, trends analysis, regulation, funding decisions, job matching or training design), in the units of classifications (occupations, tasks, skills, competencies or qualifications) and in the way skills are expressed. International practice suggests the need for interoperability, without replacing national systems. For instance, the recent establishment of a crosswalk between skills taxonomies in the United States (i.e. O*NET) and the European Union (i.e. ESCO) demonstrate the value of reference classifications that link existing systems. In particular, the O*NET-ESCO crosswalk shows that artificial intelligence and natural language processing can reduce the cost of mapping across systems when combined with human validation and clear governance.

Given the diverse initiatives on skills intelligence in BRICS countries, a cooperation in working towards a common language on skills would allow BRICS member countries to move from isolated good practices to a more coherent cooperative framework for jobs–skills mapping that strengthens employability, supports more demand-responsive skills development and creates a stronger evidence base for skills recognition and mobility.

3.2 Demand-responsive skills development for employability

As the previous section discussed, the value of skills intelligence lies in its usefulness to support preparedness, flexibility and effectiveness of skills development as the key enabler of human development, full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent work for all. In other words, demand-responsive skills development policies and programmes are the bridge between skills intelligence and better employability outcomes.

For BRICS countries, this translation challenge is central. Many countries simultaneously need to meet immediate hiring needs, support structural transformation in the digital and green transitions, and widen access to quality employment for youth and other workers with weaker links to formal labour markets. Such efforts require skills ecosystems that can update standards and curriculum, engage social partners and training institutions, support trainers, and adapt training delivery.

Illustrative BRICS practice shows that skills intelligence can be translated into demand-responsive skills development through a combination of occupational standards and competency standards updates, employer engagement, flexible delivery, work-based learning. India's Sector Skill Councils, Indonesia's SKKNI and Egypt's on-gong work on updating occupational classification guide point to the importance of updating competency standards and curricula so that training reflects changing occupational requirements. Public-private delivery partnerships, such as Brazil's SENAI, help bring equipment, workplace practice and employer input into programme design and implementation. Short-cycle and blended provision is also expanding access and responsiveness, as seen in India's PMKVY 4.0 (MSDE 2024a) and Skill India Digital Hub (MSDE, n.d.). At the same time, apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning are central to promoting employability. South Africa's Centres of Specialisation, supported by Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) shows how apprenticeships and practical training can strengthen school-to-work transition, with strong emphasis on skills for green, digital and care economies. These initiatives suggest that BRICS countries already have numerous entry points for cooperation on translating skills intelligence into demand-responsive skills development for employability.

3.3 Supporting mechanisms for flexible learning, career pathways and skills mobility

In today's labour markets which require “multiple” transitions, employability can no longer be understood as the outcome of initial education or a single training programme. The paths to employability must be supported by various supporting measures, such as (1) evidence-based career guidance and matching services, (2) recognition of prior learning, and (3) modular learning and stackable micro credentials, among others. These supporting mechanisms are critical bridge when workers navigate transitions between learning, work, unemployment, informality and where relevant cross-border mobility.

Evidence-based career guidance and matching support involves activities such as assessment, profiling of job seekers, coaching, job-search assistance, referrals to job or training opportunities. Public employment services are increasingly expected to guide young people before labour market entry and to help adults navigate repeated upskilling and reskilling decisions. Effective systems combine vacancy data, job applicants' profiles, occupational information in terms of skills and qualification requirements, training offers, and counselling support. In India, the National Career Service (NCS) combines job-matching and counselling

functions, interlinked with digital platforms such as e-Shram, eMigrate, Udyam Registration, DigiLocker, and Bhashini, as a “Platform convergence”. Official guidelines for Model Career Centres explicitly position them to undertake job-skill mapping through skill assessment and psychometric tools (MOLE 2022). Skill India Digital Hub (SIDH), launched as a digital public infrastructure for skilling, education, employment and entrepreneurship, provides a digital tool for learning discovery and career progression (MSDE 2024b). Brazil's Caminho Digital and Escola do Trabalhador 4.0 show how digital learning, career tests and AI-enabled assistance can be combined to orient workers towards labour market-relevant digital skills (MTE n.d.c, 2025).

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) also serves as one of the most powerful tool for supporting multiple paths to employability, especially in the countries with large informal economy. RPL can help workers without formal qualifications obtain certification that matches their knowledge and skills, thereby improving employability, mobility, lifelong learning and ultimately social inclusion. RPL can support the transition from informality to formality by making skills visible to employers, regulators and training providers. It can also shorten reskilling and upskilling pathways when workers shift from declining to expanding sectors and occupations. South Africa offers an instructive example of embedding RPL within its national qualification framework. The Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) recognises multiple routes, including apprenticeship, learnership, internship and RPL, towards occupational qualifications (QCTO 2020), while the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) maintains national policy criteria for RPL (SAQA 2019). RPL can especially be relevant for care and other service sectors where workers often enter with practical experience. Entry-level healthcare occupations highlight the importance of modular entry routes and mechanisms that recognise existing experience, including for long-term care and community-based workers (OECD 2026).

Lastly, modular and stackable learning pathways supported by microcredentials can help workers acquire relevant skills in smaller units while remaining attached to the labour market. However, their successful use depends on quality assurance (OECD 2023). In the United Arab Emirates, Credit Bearing Microcredentials (CBMCs) are being integrated into the national qualification framework (QFEmirates) by developing quality assured standards and aligning short and stackable learning programme with framework levels (MoHESR n.d.). India's National Credit Framework (NCrF) is another notable example, that gives credits to academic, vocational or skills-based and experiential learning and provides for accumulation, storage, transfer and redemption of credits (MoE 2022). Microcredentials can promote career progression by enabling stackable credentials, rather than leaving learners with isolated certificates with no recognised pathway. However, some caution is warranted, as microcredentials are not meant to be a substitute for full qualifications in occupations, where public safety and thus professional licensing are particularly important. The most promising use cases for microcredentials therefore targeted upskilling, bridge programmes, adult re-entry and modular progression into larger qualifications, especially some occupations in rapidly changing in green and digital economies, and some entry-level care occupations

4. Towards a collaborative framework for employability, skills mapping and skills development

The evidence and initiatives reviewed in the previous sections confirm the strategic relevance of the Priority III “Cooperation on employability, skills mapping and skills development”. The diversity of BRICS labour market landscape and its implications for skills systems does not motivate a one-size-fits-all reform. Rather, what BRICS countries need is a practical cooperation framework, where the countries can work together, while taking into account their respective national circumstances, to make skills intelligence more transparent and comparable, training systems more demand-responsive, and supporting measures more effective to facilitate multiple transitions of workers and jobs seekers in green, digital and care economies. Moving forward, there are at least three key policy options for which BRICS countries can join forces: (1) establishing a common language on skills, (2) strengthening skills intelligence by improving the availability

of key indicators and (3) engaging in South-South and Triangular Cooperation exchange of good practices, innovation and lessons learned, focusing on the initiatives that translate skills intelligence into actions.

4.1 Establishing a common language on skills for better interoperability

To anticipate skills needs and match them to education, training and occupations, policymakers and practitioners need to use a common language. The establishment of a transparent and comparable categorization of skills is, therefore, essential. Without a shared language on skills, countries can exchange example policies and programmes, but they cannot easily compare occupational demand signals and skills and qualifications requirements of jobs across systems. The need is especially acute in the green, digital and care economies, where job contents are evolving rapidly, terminology differs across national systems, and the industry increasingly demand blended bundles of technical, digital and transversal skills. Existing national frameworks across BRICS already provide a strong foundation, but currently the interoperability among those frameworks is limited. As a result, skills intelligence is fragmented and the translation of national evidence into comparable regional dialogue and mutual recognition and portability of skills and qualifications across the bloc remains difficult.

BRICS countries could therefore consider working towards establishing an international reference classification of occupation by skill and qualification requirements, on a voluntary basis and with full respect for national systems, in line with the on-going efforts by the ILO in collaboration with the OECD. Interested BRICS countries and their institutions could support the review of existing frameworks, and design and piloting of prototype reference classification for selected occupations in the digital, green and care economies.

4.2 Strengthening skills intelligence by improving the availability of key indicators

A common language on skills will only become meaningful if BRICS countries can link it to comparative evidence on changing skills demand and supply. Most countries already collect relevant data from surveys, administrative records or online job boards. The constraint is that data differ in definitions, periodicity, granularity. This makes it difficult to compare occupations and skills surplus and shortage signals, identify common pressure points and assess whether employability challenges reflect weak employment creation, transitions, or qualification and skills mismatches. Building on the data collection efforts that are already on-going in many of BRICS countries, once possible practical step is to agree on a set of minimum comparable indicators that countries can produce through labour force surveys.

BRICS countries can strengthen their skills intelligence by working towards improving the availability, granularity, timeliness and international comparability of data on skills demand, supply and mismatches. In particular, BRICS countries could consider, with support from the ILO and in collaboration with the OECD, to extend the coverage of the ILO and OECD Skills for Jobs database.

4.3 South-South and triangular exchange of good practices and innovation: From skills intelligence to action

A comparable language and skills intelligence will still have limited value unless they are translated into demand-driven training and more effective career guidance and matching services. The evidence reviewed in Section 3 shows that many BRICS countries already have many elements of good practice: competency-

based standards, apprenticeships and work-based learning, public-private delivery partnerships, labour-market observatories, public employment services, digital career guidance, recognition of prior learning and modular learning pathways. The challenge is that these good practices and innovations remain local and are not widespread enough due to lack of peer learning and adaption across different countries. This is where South-South and triangular cooperation can add practical value.

BRICS countries can explore South-South and triangular exchange of good practices and innovation: From skills intelligence to action. The purpose of this exchange should be implementation-oriented, rather than broad exchange. A series of knowledge exchange events, in person and virtual, could be structured around selected operational themes where the bridge from intelligence to action is most important, including translating occupational signals into standards and curricula; improving work-based learning and apprenticeships systems; linking public employment services to training and incentive mechanisms; scaling recognition of prior learning; and using digital platforms to support matching, guidance and modular learning, among others. Among others, sectoral approaches could be considered useful, consistent with BRICS countries' emphasis on digital, green and care economies. The ILO's on-going initiatives on South-South and triangular cooperation, including the ILO South-South Meeting Point, and existing bilateral partnerships provide an operational basis for the SSTC knowledge exchange.

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