



MY SKILLS, OUR CITY: Skills development and recognition of qualifications for migrants – meeting report

On 27-29 June 2023, WG Migration & Integration and WG Employment came to Madrid for a mutual learning meeting to discuss initiatives and services to support migrants' skills development. This meeting report gives an overview of the different discussions and issues raised during the meeting.

Background to the meeting & situation in Madrid

Europe is looking for new ways to fill positions across sectors that are changing and emerging through the green and digital transitions. At the same time, concurrent societal challenges need to be met: a skills shortage that hinders timely economic development; new vulnerabilities among workers in declining industries; and ageing societies that, more than ever, will need to rely on robust welfare systems. These challenges are felt most acutely at the local level, and cities' policy choices on these matters can have profound impacts on social cohesion and the local labour market.

Migrants and people with a migration background play a crucial role in advancing the economic and social development of our cities. However, studies show that migrants are vulnerable to being employed below their skill level or in positions that are a mismatch to their skill set. Frequently, this is linked to problems recognising qualifications, including foreign diplomas or specific skills sets that may not correspond to European qualification systems. To counter this, migrants and people with a migration background need specific support to develop their existing skill set or benefit from additional training. This holds true for inclusion in more traditional sectors of the labour market, but also for their equal participation in emerging and transforming industries. Moreover, the recognition of qualifications needs to be improved to enable migrants to access jobs in line with their skills and expertise.

Local initiatives: The case of Madrid

Like other cities in Europe, Madrid recognises the evolution of its industries and local labour market, which require new skills and training for workers. In this context, Madrid's Employment Agency (AE) offers employment services to all citizens, but places particular emphasis on especially vulnerable groups, such as people with a migrant background. The city recognises that its migrant population faces additional difficulties in accessing decent employment based on their aspirations and qualifications. These difficulties include mistrust of employers, lack of language skills or non-recognition of their qualifications. The city also works with public-private partnerships and entrepreneurs to develop training pathways and generate jobs that make the city more sustainable.

Madrid has a long history of projects aimed at addressing this dilemma, including skills development to meet the needs of the changing labour market, supporting migrant entrepreneurship, and providing accessible information and resources on skills and employment. The AE, together with the Community

of Madrid (CAM), offers training and employment workshops in high demand sectors, as well as programmes that combine training and employment.

Since 2021, an agreement has been in place with the CAM for the implementation of a new project. The objective: attaining equity for vulnerable groups, within the framework of the Spanish [Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan](#). Individualised and personalised insertion itineraries are implemented, which lead to a professional qualification for young people without qualifications who are registered as job seekers in Madrid. It is also worth mentioning the 'Journey to Employment' programme, which is implemented both in-person and online. It is a resource of the AE through which people who are in the process of seeking employment go through different key work areas to promote the development of skills necessary to access the labour market.

A key initiative of the city is the 'Municipal Office of Information, Guidance and Support for the Social Integration of the Immigrant Population'. Founded in 2006, this municipal service provides all the information needed to help migrants, especially newcomers, settle in the city. Although the office adopts a holistic approach and provides information on healthcare, registration and residence, education, and housing, the promotion of employment opportunities is especially important. Madrid aims to facilitate access to employment and a favourable career path for migrants, through a system of comprehensive social support, labour intermediation, training and personalised guidance. Thereby helping migrants to develop soft skills, specific skills needed for their job search, and digital and technical/professional skills.

In 2023, a coordination procedure was developed, as part of a European initiative, between the AE and the Municipal Office for Information, Guidance and Support for the Social Integration of the Immigrant Population. It is currently in the implementation phase and is facilitating the optimisation of municipal resources used to support migrants.

Cities play an important role in developing their local qualifications profiles and enabling more inclusive pathways to skilled jobs for migrants and people with a migrant background. Therefore, this meeting brought together different cities to learn from Madrid, and one another, about innovative ways to improve the development of skills and the recognition of migrants' qualifications.

Day 1:

Participants in the room agreed on a clear consensus: we need more skilled individuals to run our economies and plug the gaps in our local labour markets. Migrants coming to our city are a great opportunity to meet this challenge, but we need to ensure that they are employed according to their skills profile, qualifications, and aspirations. In this way, **Niels Tubbing**, Chair of the Eurocities Working Group Migration & Integration, mentioned that these positive factors can help counter a narrative around migration that is all too often negative. He reminded participants that migration was a fact and that we needed to choose how to respond to it.

José María Meneses Castillo, General Manager of the AE, underlined the city's responsibility in facilitating access to skilled employment and support migrants in going for jobs that match their skillset. This is especially important in a city like Madrid, where approximately 10% of the population has a migration background.

Initiatives at the EU level

Tiina Polo of the European Commission's Directorate General for Employment presented the European Year of Skills (EYoS). In relation to migration, the EYoS has four objectives:

- Investment: increased, more effective and inclusive investment
- Skills relevance: Strengthening skills relevance by close cooperation and joined-up approaches
- Matching aspirations: Matching people's aspirations and skills-set with labour market opportunities
- Attracting third country talent: Attracting people from third countries with the skills needed by the Union

She encouraged the participants to contact the national coordinators for the EYoS to engage in national opportunities. Polo also presented the EU Skills Profile Tool which helps to describe an individual's skills and qualifications through a mapping tool, with the aim of recognising skills and qualifications and finding work according to one's competencies.

These tools that can help migrants find employment according to their skill set and preferences are related to the wider context of developing migration policies at the EU level. **Etienne de Perrier** from the Commission's Directorate General for Home Affairs underlined how regular migration to the EU plays a key role in filling what are unprecedented skills gaps in European economies. Currently, the EU is experiencing significant structural labour shortages that cannot be filled by national candidates or intra-EU movement, resulting in over 6m vacancies across the EU. To tackle this, the EU's Skills and Talents Package comprises three pillars:

- Legislative pillar: recast of the Long-term Residents Directive and Recast of the Single Permit Directive to simplify admission conditions and improve the rights of long-term residents and their families
- Operational pillar: Tailor-made Talent Partnerships with third countries¹, EU Talent Pool and its pilot initiative for Ukrainians², and the Labour Migration Platform
- Forward-looking pillar: care, youth and innovation as three priority areas for action

In terms of a more operational approach, **Michela Meghnagi** from the OECD focused on the importance of job-related language learning as a way to encourage participation and increase learners' motivation. To make language training successful, several factors need to be considered, such as a

¹ Partner countries include Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

² The EU Talent Pool will match skilled third-country nationals with interested EU employers.

good degree of flexibility in terms of time and location, staff that speak the language of the students or the possibility of following online courses, among other things. Meghnagi also highlighted that women need targeted support to access the labour market, as they often face family responsibilities and cultural barriers or can rely on a less developed network.

Paola Alvarez from the IOM provided an overview of the different projects and initiatives conducted together with cities:

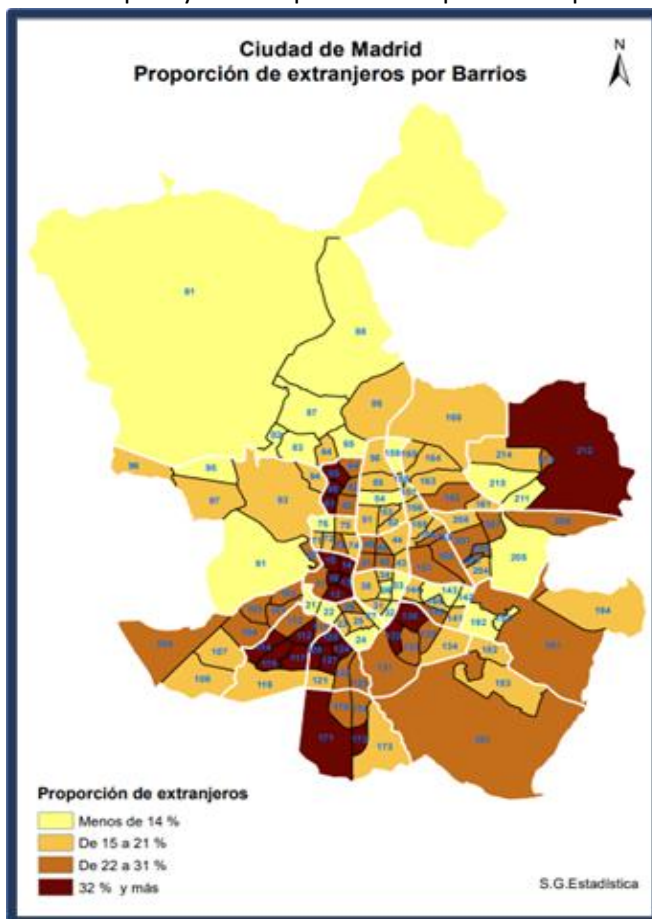
- Admin4All: a project aiming to enhance the capacity of European municipalities to provide more inclusive and accessible social services
- Include-EU: a project aiming towards more inclusive and cohesive European societies by enhancing transnational knowledge and experience sharing, cooperation and partnerships
- Migrant Information Centres that provide comprehensive services to foreign nationals in one place. Services include legal, social and vocational counselling, retraining and further education, inclusion in the labour market and support of community life of foreigners.

In all this, IOM sees integrations as a continuous two-way process in which migrants are incorporated into the social, economic, cultural and political life of the receiving community.

In the ensuing discussion, cities raised the issue of different visions between the national level and local governments for labour market development, especially when it comes to restrictive frameworks that actually impede the attraction of skilled workers needed in industries at the local level. Moreover, the European Commission representatives stressed that cities can influence EU funding priorities through consultations and evaluations, for instance by highlighting their local skills needs. The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) is the most relevant funding stream in this respect.

The case of Madrid

Zooming in on the local level, **Angel Luis Maroto**, Head of the Department of Coexistence and Integration, Area of Social Policies, Family and Equality, introduced the general situation in Madrid in terms of providing services to an increasingly diverse population. Most of the city's migrant population is focused on areas in the southeastern districts, with the majority of non-EU migrants coming from Latin America and the Caribbean islands. The city pursues a rights-based approach when registering people for legal residence in the city and accessing public services and aims to remove barriers that can make registration difficult. In providing services, the local administration wants to create services that cater to everybody, including migrant communities, rather than developing specialised services



Source: Presentation of Madrid's approach by Angel Luis Maroto

that might create stigma. Where needed, these can be buffered by additional support, such as for instance, support centres for specific profiles like women with children or single men.

Building on this general outlook, **Miguel Angel Alemany Haro**, Deputy Director of Active Employment Policies, further detailed the work of Madrid's employment agency. The AE receives around 50.000 people annually, a majority of whom have a migration background, and supports them in finding work according to their skills and profiles. In doing so, the agency provides continuous accompaniment and counselling to the job seeker, who is assessed and supported according to three routes: Route 0, where social services need to be involved to provide support and overcome barriers to employment; Route 1, where the agency supports someone through reskilling towards sectors experiencing labour shortages; and Route 2, where a job seeker is ready to enter the job market.

As a specialised division of its employment services, Madrid's employment agency has a training and talent service and an annual training programme based on a needs assessment of the local labour market and the city's citizens. **Virtudes Laguna De Lamo**, the agency's Head of Training Management, stated that while the AE can provide professional certification for certain job profiles, there are also offers to enhance cross-cutting skills through the city's digital talent school or language skills school. Equally, people without prior certifications can attain a professional degree or certificate of



performance. There are also subsidized projects for personalised employment itineraries in strategic sectors such as digital, green, healthcare and construction. As with other services in Madrid, there are no courses that exclusively address migrants, however, the city does acknowledge their specific needs and challenges, for instance, by providing support for the recognition of their qualifications or through co-validation, which involves specific training for a prior certification to be recognised.

Naturally, Madrid's approach is set against the Spanish national context, which was further explained by **Luis Rodríguez Calles**, of the Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia (OBERAXE) at the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration. Calles presented data that showed a worse employment situation for migrants than for Spanish nationals and a higher percentage of foreign workers in basic employment than in other employment types, as well as an overrepresentation in (involuntary) part-time employment. Moreover, migrants are also exposed to disproportionately worse working conditions, including insecure or short-term contracts, verbal agreements and effectively longer hours. Calles concluded with two poignant insights: migrants experience a degree of inequality that is essential to explain a lack of integration, and there is a lack of integration that can only be described as discrimination.

Site visits day 1

In the afternoon of the first day, participants got an impression of how Madrid's services work through two site visits: To the city's municipal office for information and orientation for migrants and to the Employment Agency's Training Centre in Los Cármenes. In the municipal office, one of two for the city of Madrid, case workers shared that they supported around 30.000 individuals of 82 nationalities each year and that most queries related to immigration procedures, housing or work. The office provides specialised language training to help people in their job search but also to improve their conversational

skills, their alphabetisation or literacy. Moreover, the office regularly organises cultural outings and specific guidance for youth. In doing so, the services are open to everyone, including asylum seekers or undocumented people.

The Los Cármenes Training Centre is an interesting example of how urban buildings can be repurposed. Originally built as a prison for families and women with children, it has been used as a primary school and now as a centre where individuals can receive job counselling. This has also helped with the overall development of the neighbourhood. Nowadays, the centre welcomes more than 2500 people per year and provides specialised training according to labour market needs, such as on audiovisual skills.

Day 2:

The second day started with a deep dive into two distinct topics: the labour market integration and skills development for refugees, with a particular focus on Ukrainians in Madrid; and the recognition of qualifications at the local level.

The first workshop, led by **Luis Miguel González Durán** of the Employment Agency, focused on the importance of addressing language barriers, managing expectations, and aligning job opportunities with the skills and qualifications of Ukrainian refugees in Madrid. It emphasized the need for collaboration among various stakeholders to facilitate labour market integration and skills development for this community. To adapt services more effectively to the needs of Ukrainians, the city established a special office to provide them with information on social services and labour market counselling, while registering them at the same time. During the intake screening, participants benefitted from face-to-face appointments and evaluations of their CVs, and further on in the employment search, participants in the programme received language classes and conversational practice with volunteers. Next to searching for vacancies via more traditional channels, the AE also works with partner companies directly to match Ukrainians with open positions. One of the challenges was the overqualification of individuals in relation to the training or skills needed for job positions. In order to increase individuals' trust in the system, a counsellor fluent in both Spanish and Ukrainian was hired.

With respect to the recognition of qualifications, **Beatriz Canal** of NARIC, the National Academic Recognition Information Centre, laid out the context in Spain and Madrid. NARIC constitutes a network of centres that provide information about academic recognition of foreign university qualifications, with the aim to improve academic and professional recognition of qualifications to facilitate both mobility and job opportunities. It brings together different processes to recognise foreign higher education qualifications and provides verification for both Spanish and foreign qualifications. For regulated professions, this mainly concerns teaching, law, architecture engineering and health sciences.

Working with partners in Madrid

In providing these different services related to labour market integration, job counselling and skills development, Madrid builds on cooperation with a variety of stakeholders from the private and public sectors, including various NGOs. In a dedicated session on working with partners in Madrid, participants could get a better insight into this ecosystem of organisations.

Francisco Castrillo introduced the work of Fundación Laboral de la Construcción, an organisation whose objective is to promote the employability and professionalisation of construction professionals and to attract new workers to the sector in order to boost the competitiveness of companies. More specifically, this also means improving the safety and health of employees in building sites, supporting their continued qualification and skills development through very practical formative training, and cooperating with companies looking for skilled individuals. This is much needed: the sector faces grave difficulties to find the workforce needed for very specialised profiles, as well as challenges in adapting to the demographic, ecological and digital transition. In general, the majority of their participants have a migration background. This also came through in EmpleaT, a programme run together with La Caixa, which had the aim of improving the employability of people at risk of social and labour inclusion.

Other organisations also see and tackle the challenges arising out of the digital transition. Fundación Tomillo, represented by **Marta Martínez**, provides training courses to support young people in vulnerable situations, enhancing their strengths and helping them develop skills in demand in the labour market. Through an alliance for harnessing digital talent together with Madrid's Employment Agency and other stakeholders, the organisation provides a two-year intensive course on cybersecurity, immersive technologies and full stack web development that is very employment

oriented. In addition, a big focus is put on developing social skills through in-person training. In doing so, the programme relies on active pedagogy that places the students as protagonists at the heart of their training and employment trajectory.



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Similarly, Opción 3 focuses on supporting teenagers and young adults in socially vulnerable situations and has worked with the city administration for more than 30 years already. The project supports more than 3000 young people every year, of which 30% have a migration background. **Alfredo López Muñoz** further described how many of them find themselves in irregular situations after coming to Spain, and that some of them did not finish school, nor have professional training or work experience during a crucial time period in their adolescent years. To support them, Opción 3 implements a holistic approach

that includes educational and training support as well as violence prevention in schools, families and gender-based violence. As a second chance school, their students can benefit from professional certification as well as non-certifiable adapted training models. In supporting their transition to adulthood, the organisation's main objective is to provide a place where young people feel welcome, grow confident and learn more about the socio-cultural environment where they will build their adult life.

Site visits day 2:

During the site visits on the second day, participants immersed themselves in digital and social training programmes at the actual venue of the meeting: the San Blas Digital School. In several rooms, smaller groups participated in different workshops. In one of them, they could play video games together that relied on effective cooperation and teamwork to solve issues. In another, different social games helped participants connect with their own bodies and the people in the room. And in a third, Lego games were used to communicate across language barriers and to visualise good moments the participants had experienced in Madrid.

Following this, the group moved to visit La Quinta Cocina, a training and integration project aimed at young people between the ages of 16 and 23 who are at risk of social exclusion. The project is located in a community centre and creative space open to everyone and provides meeting rooms, childcare facilities, a theatre, reading spaces and workshops in an open and welcoming environment. Inside a professional kitchen setting, project participants are trained as kitchen and waiter staff to support their professional and social integration. Following the training curriculum, they then continue their trajectory in actual restaurants and other businesses in the hospitality industry, receiving further practical paid training. In addition, La Quinta Cocina also provides workshops on other relevant skills, such as first aid and fire safety. One of the major obstacles faced by young people in the project is the regularisation of their migration statuses and homelessness. More information on how



Madrid provides social training programmes, particularly for young people with a migration background, can be found [here](#).

Day 3:

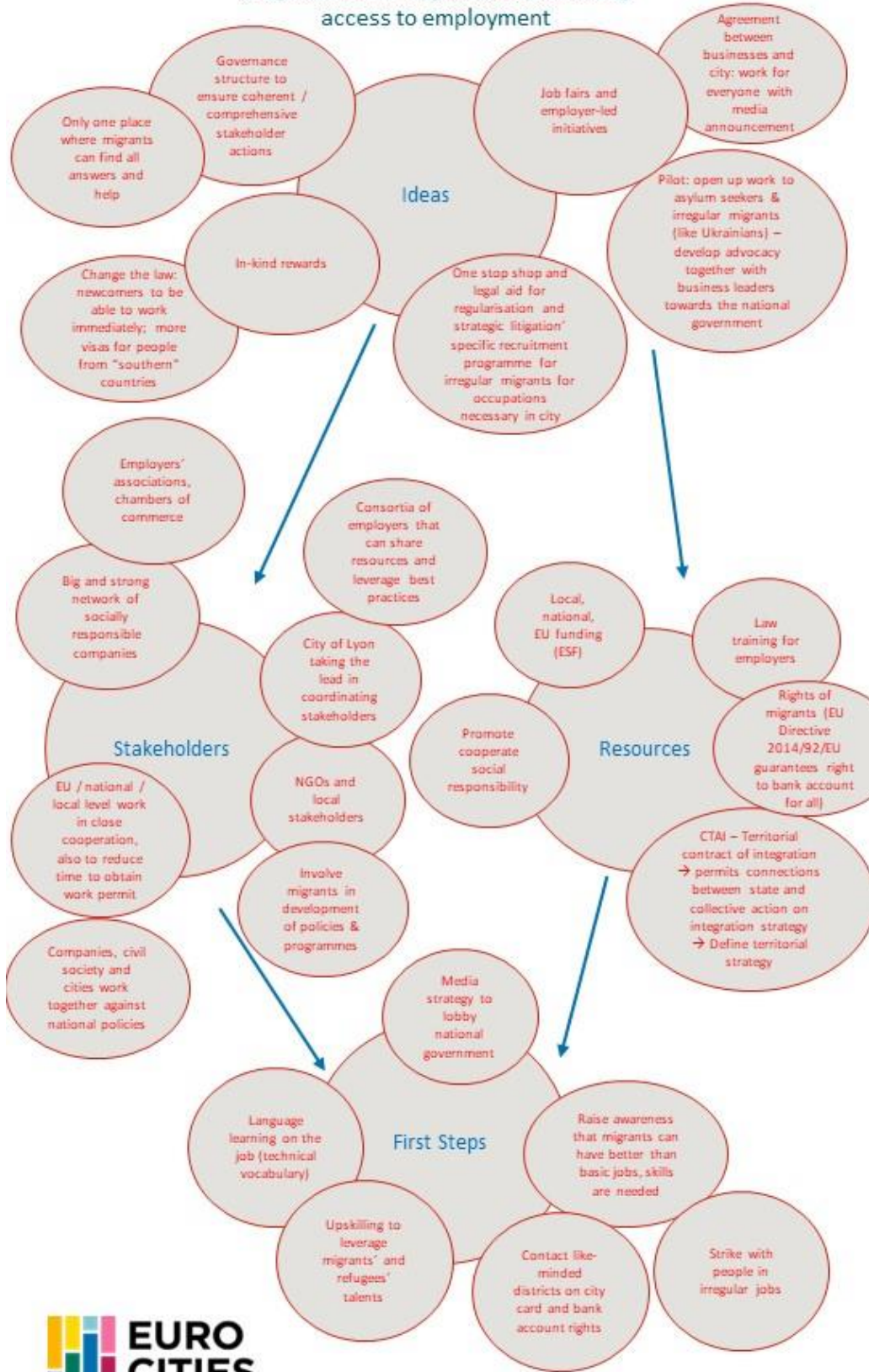
On the third and final day of the mutual learning meeting, participants were divided into three groups for the transfer city challenges.

The following challenges were discussed:

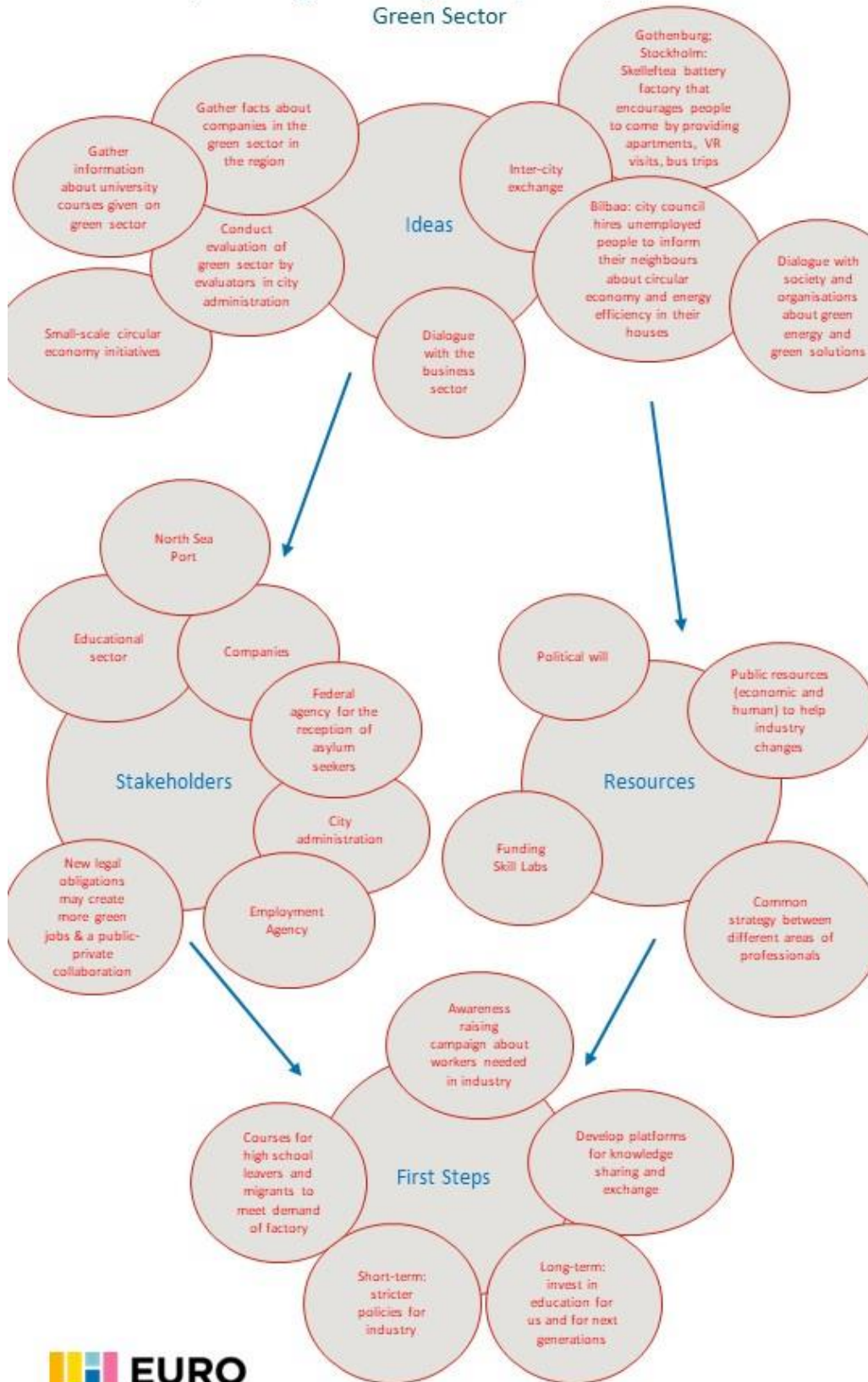
- Lyon: Developing a targeted and tailored support programme for migrants and promoting access to employment
- Coventry: Providing pathways to employment in the green sector
- Amsterdam & Tilburg: When and where to start the skills development and recognition of qualifications for migrants?

Below are the summaries of the discussions in the groups. In a guided conversation, participants were encouraged to draw from their learnings from Madrid and to bring in their own local backgrounds. In a brainstorming exercise, they provided ideas to tackle the challenges presented by the cities and then traced different stakeholders and resources available to design a response. These different points of discussion were then distilled into potential first steps that could very practically help the respective cities start tackling their challenges.

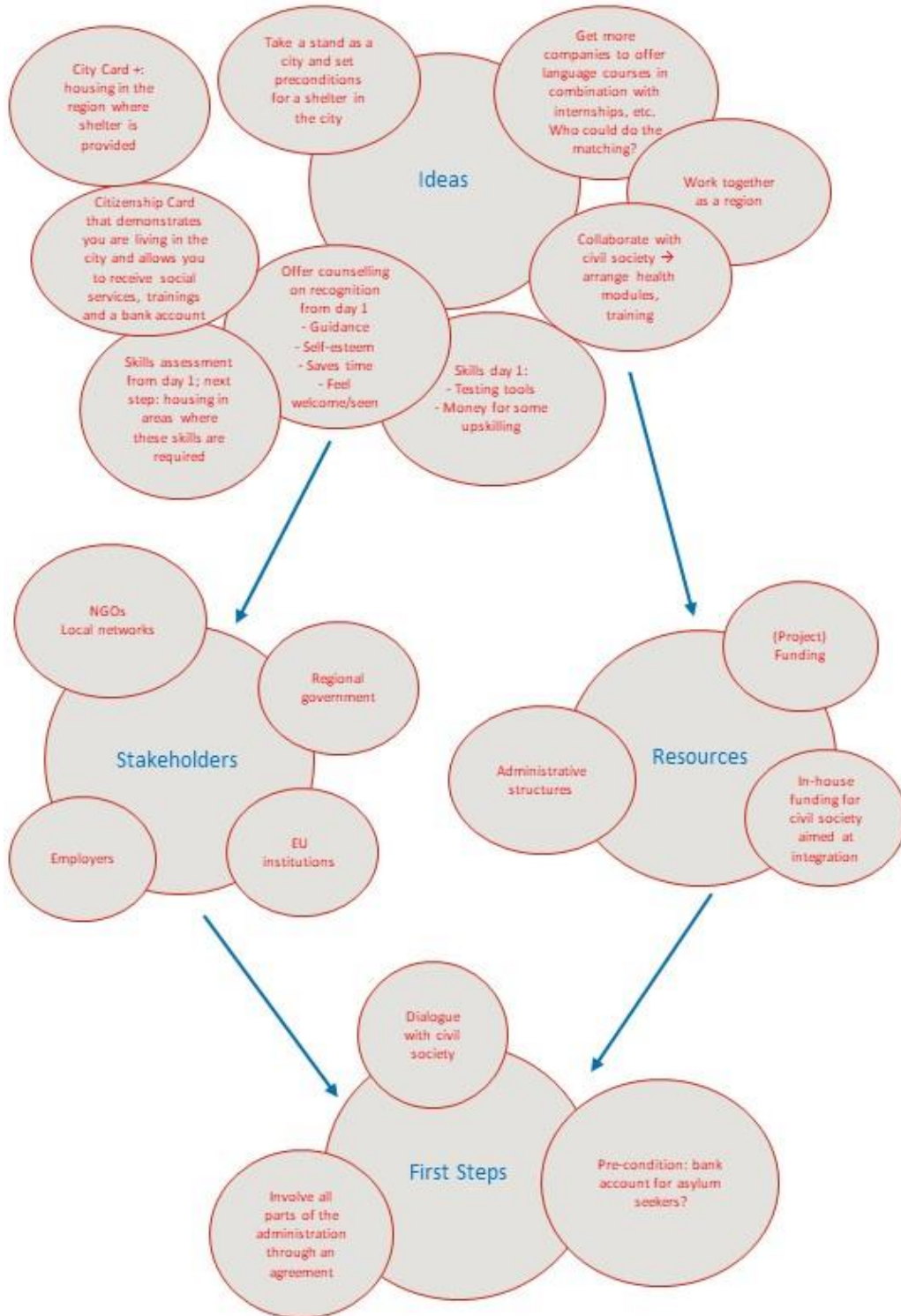
Lyon's challenge: Developing a targeted and tailored support programme for migrants & promoting access to employment



Coventry's challenge: Providing pathways to employment in the Green Sector



Amsterdam & Tilburg's challenge: Skills development & recognition of qualifications for migrants: Where & when do we start?





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