AFRICA LABOUR MIGRATION OUTLOOK IN THE POST COVID-19 ERA

POLICY BRIEF I
NOVEMBER 2020

The policy brief is part of the series titled 'Impact of COVID-19 on Africa's Labour Migration Landscape' developed by the AU Labour Migration Advisory Committee (AU-LMAC) in the framework of the AU-ILO-IOM-ECA Joint Programme on Labour Migration Governance for Development and Integration in Africa (JLMP), with support from the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

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The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) poses a more pervasive mobility crisis for Africa than any other pandemic-induced crisis, and on a level unprecedented since World War II. According to the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), by the end of November 2020 Africa stood at 2,184,209 confirmed cases and 52,231 lives lost. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated global job losses of about 195 million, with 20 million in Africa alone (ILO, 2020). No conflict or economic crisis in history has ever produced such large-scale border closures and restrictions on movement. As the world begins to adjust to the recurring waves and devastating effects of the virus, 271.6 million global migrants are amongst those most vulnerable (UN World Migration Report, 2020). In the African context, the pandemic continues to reveal migrants' lack of social protection[1] on many fronts, likely projecting long-lasting social and economic impacts.

With due consideration to public health and safety, a coherent and coordinated policy response is critical to reduce the negative impact of the pandemic. For sending countries, there are new challenges to face: job losses, a decline in remittances, and returning migrants who need to be reintegrated, all of which add to the already high rates of unemployment especially amongst the youth. On the other side, destination countries are grappling with how to ensure that workforce gaps in critical sectors are quickly filled, to prevent further economic recession. Migrant workers continue to seek ways to improve their livelihoods and work opportunities, including the right policy framework for portability of their social security contributions.

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1   The AU defines social protections as 'a "mix" of policies / programmes that promote efficient labour markets, reduce people's exposure to risks, and contribute to enhancing their capacity to protect and cover themselves against lack of or loss of adequate income, and basic social services'.

Labour Migration in and from Africa during COVID-19

The pandemic has brought to the fore the critical role of migrants in the global workforce through their contribution in many sectors including healthcare (Freier, 2020). Many migrant workers have also lost livelihoods, support networks and housing options as a result of COVID-19. With mass unemployment and job insecurity, COVID-19 has implications on labour migrants' legal status, the sending of remittances to their countries of origin, and access to health care, safety and social services. For example, the World Bank estimates that remittances to Africa will drop by almost 25 per cent (World Bank, 2020). As global lockdowns and social distancing measures are enforced, closure of borders and travel bans have greatly limited mobility, significantly affecting cross border movement and informal trade, and putting a further spotlight on discriminatory policies and outbreaks of xenophobia.

The pandemic has long-term implications for African economies. As unemployment rates skyrocket, government-supported social safety nets for citizens are coming under even more strain. However, opportunities to review current policies and agreements on migrant access to social protection and equal treatment exist, as many policies created and implemented during the pandemic exclude migrants, leaving them vulnerable. Policies must, therefore, incorporate migrants' needs through extending work permits and providing access to healthcare and other social services, regardless of immigration or visa status. Bilateral and multilateral agreements must be revisited, and policies implemented to mitigate the COVID-19-induced challenges that labour migrants face.

Understanding the Context: Migration Trends (2010-2020)

Migration trends over the last decade reveal that migration both within and from the African continent has steadily increased, with 15 to 22 million people migrating within Africa alone (IOM, 2019). This uptick in intra-regional mobility is partly due to factors such as demographic pressure, the seeking of work and education opportunities and increased efforts by Regional Economic Communities (RECs)[2] to enhance regional integration by abolishing visa requirements and residents permits (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Though migration is overwhelmingly intra-continental, migration outside Africa has also seen a growing diversification in destination, including the Middle East/Gulf States, North America, Europe, and Asia. With limited access to regular migration pathways migrants resort to irregular, precarious, informal routes and are thus at high risk of exposure to various forms of trafficking and exploitation.

In response, over the years, numerous agreements aimed at regulating migration flows have been signed between sending and receiving countries, including those promoting regular pathways for work and social protection. A total of 23 Bilateral Labour Migration Agreements (BLMAs) have been signed by several African countries, to address issues such as the admission of workers, assisted voluntary return, integration, migration and development, combatting irregular migration, readmission, and regulating labour migration flows (ILO, 2020). However, many of these agreements are not comprehensive and are not enforced, putting many migrants in precarious situations. For example, some African migrants were recently stranded in Lebanon without pay or a means to return home, opening up room for exploitation and abuse (AU, 2020).

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2 The African Union recognises eight RECs, these are: Arab Maghreb Union (UMA); Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA); Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN–SAD); East African Community (EAC); Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD); Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Table 1: The main intra and inter-regional agreements focusing on irregular migration

EURO-AFRICAN BILATERAL DIALOGUES & PARTNERSHIPS	INTRA-REGIONAL LABOUR AGREEMENTS	MULTILATERAL FRAMEWORKS
▪ Rabat Process ▪ Khartoum Process/ Rome Declaration ▪ The Mobility Partnership with Cape Verde	▪ The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Zimbabwe and South Africa on Cooperation in the Fields of Employment and Labour ▪ Regional Economic Communities (RECs) – Work on the Free Movement of Persons and Labour Migration ▪ Southern, Eastern and Western Africa partnerships.	▪ International Labour Organization (ILO) Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration ▪ Resolution concerning a fair deal for migrant workers (i.e. Fair Migration Agenda) in a global economy ▪ ILC 2017 Fair and Effective Labor Migration Governance conclusions ▪ Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration (GCM), 2018 ▪ Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment, 2018

Ensuring Protection for all Migrants The categorization of labour migrants according to skill – e.g. skilled and unskilled – gives governments grounds for codifying unequal treatment in immigration policies. Thus, so-called unskilled migrant workers are left vulnerable, with little social protection. As industry focus shifts towards high-technology fields, low skilled migrants are further marginalized by their inability to upgrade their level of skills.

Low-skilled migrants account for most intra-regional African labour migration. However, it is noteworthy that there are growing inter-regional migration corridors to enter markets in other regions, by way of South-South migration (ILO, 2020). Since the 1980s, trends show consistent migration of domestic workers from East Africa to the Middle East and Gulf states. Though workers pass through both vetted and informal recruitment agencies, once they reach their destination, reports of abuse and wage exploitation often follow. Regarding decent working conditions, domestic work has long been one of the areas of concern, as indicated by its inclusion in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Indeed, governments have negotiated numerous agreements aimed at safeguarding migrant's social protection and to protect women in precarious employment, and to curb trafficking in persons, human smuggling and the abuse of workers. Despite such agreements there is, however, little to show in terms of practical application, as reports from human rights organizations reveal continued abuse and exploitation of workers, such as the killing of seven Ethiopian domestic workers in Lebanon by their employer in 2019 (Zelalem, 2019). These are not isolated incidents, and continually show the lack of implementation of existing frameworks and inadequate upholding of the rights of migrant workers. This example further attests to the need to ensure that labour migration policies both outline and implement decent working conditions for migrants.

Current Developments: Economic and Social Impact of COVID-19 on African Migrants and Diasporas

The global lockdown implemented in response to COVID-19 poses a tremendous threat to migration and mobility. It has already proven to have devastating impacts on many people's health, wellbeing and financial security. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is observed that African regional economic growth has declined by 5.1 per cent (KNOMAD, 2020). This decline does not exist in isolation; it takes place in tandem with the loss of employment, which has direct implications on the informal economy, migrant access to social protection, and the flow of remittances.

||| ECONOMIC IMPACT

The informal economy in Africa has been among the sectors hardest hit by COVID-19. The disruption to the informal economy has left many migrants in dire conditions, as they live in overcrowded, precarious housing and are unable to return home due to border closures and travel restrictions. As workers in the informal economy do not have access to

social security benefits, these migrants are left to face the impact of COVID-19 alone. In countries such as Kenya, data suggests that the informal economy accounts for 83.6 per cent of total employment. Informal workers generally rely on day-to-day, cash-based commerce for survival and are thus ineligible for the economic packages and social protections provided by governments (Research and Evidence Facility, 2020). Informal workers are amongst the most vulnerable, as they often lack basic needs such as water, sanitation, adequate housing and overall social safety nets, leaving them facing a greater risk of exposure to the virus. With mass job loses, the effects can be felt in both the migrants' own lives and of those they support in the periphery.

The disruption to the informal economy also disproportionately affects women, as they comprise the largest group of workers within this sector. UN figures show that 92 per cent of women in low-income countries work in the informal economy (UN Women, 2020). Due to the loss of employment and mobility, women are increasingly expected to perform unpaid household work, and are placed at increased risk of gender-based violence. For many, compliance with COVID-19 restrictions is not an option, as their households are dependent on daily earnings for survival. In these conditions, the lack social safety nets places migrants at increased risk of contracting the virus, human trafficking, and labour exploitation, as migrants try to find ways to continue making a living (UNODC, 2020).

▌▌▌REMITTANCES

In 2019, global diaspora remittances – from both inside and outside the continent – surpassed Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) (KNOMAD, 2020). Remittances have proven to be a vital source of income for developing countries, as they are shown to reduce child labour and alleviate poverty in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) (ATM, 2020). The phenomenon of 'counter cyclicality' shows that migrants tend to increase remittances to their countries of origin during times of crisis. Remittances to Sub-Saharan Africa decreased slightly, by 0.5 per cent, between 2018 and 2019 to remain close to $48 billion (World Bank, 2020). However, due to COVID-19 many migrants are losing their jobs due to an almost complete shutdown of economic activities mostly in the construction, hospitality, and other service sectors. It is predicted that remittances will drop significantly in 2020; the World Bank predicts a decline of 23.1 per cent, from $48 billion in 2019 to $37 billion in 2020, while recovery of 4.0 per cent is expected in 2021 (KNOMAD, 2020).

Not only are remittance figures predicted to decline, but those still able to send money also face increased obstacles. Limited access, reduced working hours, and limited staff brought on by the pandemic make it more difficult for migrants to use brick and mortar remittance service providers (RSPs) (World Bank, 2020). Though electronic transfers have increased, online and digital payment tools are not necessarily always accessible for low paid, irregular workers who are either unbanked or under-banked. The high cost of sending remittances is another hurdle to accessibility. Though the SDG 2030 and the global compact for migration advocate for access to safer, faster and cheaper remittances, the continent's average transfer rate currently stands at 8.9 per cent but can reach as high as 20 per cent (World Bank, 2020). While the 8.9 per cent is a decline from the 2019 average of 9.25 per cent, this is still significantly higher than the SDG 2030's goal of 3 per cent. Reducing the cost of remitting will help sustain and aid in the aftershocks of COVID-19.

However, this may not present the full picture as remittances can take different forms. For example, diasporas are already adapting their engagements with origin countries, such as using online platforms to share knowledge and experience, for example, the Sudan Doctors Union- UK hosted several webinars to share their experiences of the pandemic with their colleagues in Sudan[3]. Groups, networks, and individuals are mobilizing to provide advice to local communities in affected areas on how to protect themselves and providing access to networks of health experts and other professionals in origin countries. They are also mobilizing financial and material resources and conducting lobbying and advocacy. The African Union Citizens and Diaspora Directorate (CIDO) has also held several joint events with Africa-Europe Diaspora Development Platform (ADEPT)and Africa Foundation For Development (AFFORD), diaspora organizations in Europe, which discussed the innovative ways diasporas are using to assist in responding to COVID-19 in both settlement and origin countries[4].

To curb the effects of COVID-19, some countries have promoted the use of mobile money. The Central Bank of Kenya announced emergency measures to encourage the use of mobile money wherever possible and waived all charges for mobile transactions (World Bank, 2020). Uganda also joined in waiving fees for mobile money transfers. However, are such government subsidies sustainable? Remittances must be recognized as an essential financial service, and further support for migrant rights must be promoted to help reduce vulnerabilities and to foster financial inclusion.

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3   https://www.sdu.org.uk/news/invitation-to-join-a-webinar-on-corona-virus-disease-in-sudan-11-april-2020
4   https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20200723/leveraging-diasporas-public-health-emergencies

SOCIAL IMPACT: AFRICAN MIGRANTS AND DIASPORAS[5]

▌▌▌ GULF COUNTRIES

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region - Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar - is the second-largest destination for African migrants. Despite being some of the wealthiest nations, reports of abuse and exploitation of migrants in this region are rife and there is increased vulnerability of migrants working under the Kafala system[6]. When COVID-19 restrictions came into force, many were left stranded, and if they sought to leave without their employer's permission, they risked imprisonment and deportation (IOM, 2020a). This highlighted the need for robust measures to protect vulnerable migrants, regardless of their legal status.

▌▌▌ THE UK

People of Colour (PoC), Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background, including those of Africa heritage, are more likely to be on the frontline of the fight against the pandemic and, thus, at increased risk of exposure to the virus. Ninety per cent of National Health Service (NHS) workers are from these communities.[7] A recent report reveals that BAME NHS staff are less likely to complain about the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) because the majority have experienced workplace racism and fear losing their jobs. The treatment of BAME communities neglect and undermine their contribution and this includes NHS staff and essential workers across different sectors.

▌▌▌ CHINA

Discrimination against African migrant workers is also apparent in other parts of the world. For example, African migrants in China faced discrimination since the start of the pandemic consisting of forced and unannounced COVID-19 testing, isolation under surveillance, eviction and refusal of services. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), over 14,000 Africans reside in Guangzhou, many of whom are labour migrants and international students. Due to virus-related mistreatment, such migrants have urged their governments to step in to protect them.[8] This xenophobic and discriminatory treatment is not new for African migrants in China, but the pandemic has escalated such mistreatment.

Although COVID-19 poses many threats to Africa and its labour migrants – e.g. mass unemployment, lack of social protection and restrictions on mobility – there are also a few potential opportunities. This pandemic has revealed the gross mismanagement of healthcare and mobility in both sending and receiving countries, which is a clear instigator of the brain drain from the region. However, by recognizing this gap in health-care infrastructure and the need to improve, the brain drain can perhaps be reversed. There are several steps available to achieve this, including investment in, development and training of health-care workers; and support for the Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want goals - which includes putting migration and mobility at the centre of the integration agenda. The continental blueprint is an opportunity for African governments to work together for Africa's socio-economic transformation and the domestication of policy frameworks.

▌▌ RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of COVID-19, it is clear that a labour migration resilience guideline is crucial, as Africa needs a plan to regulate future mobility. The African Union has appealed to its Member States to adhere to international commitments and to respect the rights and welfare of migrants in the wake of COVID-19[9]. Looking towards the future we proffer some recommendations to further support African labour migrants.

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5   Intra-continental Africa Diaspora are not recognised under African Union definition

6   The Kafala (Sponsorship) System regulates the relationship between employers and migrant workers in many countries in West Asia. migrant worker's immigration status is legally bound to an individual employer or sponsor (kafeel) for their contract period. https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/docs/132/PB2.pdf

7   Royal African Society. 2020. Webinar: COVID-19'S Impact On BAME And African Diaspora Communities: Why Is It So Disproportionate? | Royal African Society.

8   Human Rights Watch. 2020. China: Covid-19 Discrimination Against Africans.

9   https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20200410/migration-mobility-contexts-covid-19

SHORT-TERM

MAINTAIN UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION ON MIGRATION WITHIN AND FROM THE CONTINENT

More effort needs to be leveraged into capacity development and cooperation on migration issues, and labour migration statistics development to help in monitoring BLMAs and labour migration policies. This includes Labour Market Information Systems (LMIS). In addition, the data must be used to assist Member States to identify skills gaps and areas for upskilling. The First (2015) and Second (2017) editions of the Labour Migration Statistics reports developed through the JLMP framework provide starting points for insights on labour migration statistics in Africa. The AU and Intra-African organizations must publish and disseminate quarterly reports highlighting current data. Member States need to boost the collection, analysis, and dissemination of administrative data on labour migration, including through inter-agency collaboration.

CREATE SOCIAL PROTECTION MECHANISMS FOR MIGRANTS IN DESTINATION AND TRANSIT COUNTRIES, AND RETURNEES

African governments need to guarantee unemployment insurance plans and make sure social security benefits are accessible to the most vulnerable and marginalized, particularly those in the informal economy. Governments of migrant-sending countries should also consider putting in place measures to safeguard their migrants working aboard. As unemployment is on the rise, safety nets should aid in helping migrants to sustain themselves in times of crisis. Governments need to consider better regulation of the informal economy to serve and support migrants. Additionally, The AU should engage with other bodies, such as the European Union (EU), to move discussions on migration from being a security concern to a development and socio-economic integration issue.

MEDIUM AND LONG-TERM

POLICY REVIEW AND HARMONIZATION

Policies and agreements must be reviewed to ensure migrants are included in existing programmes for social protection and governments must integrate the mobility perspective into development frameworks and policies. Current COVID-19 responses in both sending and receiving countries do not give due consideration to the rights and social protection of migrants. Social protection mechanisms must be included and implemented with regards to safeguarding migrant access to healthcare and other essential services in host countries, regardless of immigration status. BLMAs should emphasise zero tolerance for discrimination and ensure that African governments have appropriate mechanisms to protect their citizens.

Similarly, explicit provisions should be made in BLMAs to provide for consular assistance during crisis, including return and reintegration support. Frameworks such as the Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) Initiative offer principles and guidelines for the protection of migrants, as well as effective practices to improve responses before, during and after crises.[10] Governments should ultimately strengthen avenues for legal pathways to migration not only as a public health precaution but as a means to protect migrants' rights and promote their socio-economic integration.

EXPAND RELATIONS WITH DIASPORA COMMUNITIES

African governments should extend existing partnerships with diaspora communities and consider further collaborations in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts, and emphasizing more sustainable modes of engaging the African diaspora in development. Governments need to invest in building skills and knowledge transfer mechanisms, for instance through government programmes or diaspora fellowships for capacity building and training in health and entrepreneurship.

Remittances must be recognized as an essential financial service. Although some states have temporarily scrapped or lowered remittance charges, there is a need for a long-term, sustainable response. Further support for the development and scaling up of digital remittance channels is necessary for migrants and their families. Governments need to conduct research and engage in partnerships with telecommunication services companies to make international cash transfers easier.

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10   MICIC, a government-led effort, was developed after numerous humanitarian crises, including conflict and environmental disasters, aiming to improve the protection of migrants when the countries in which they live, work, study, transit, or travel experience a conflict or natural disaster

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ABOUT LMAC

The Labour Migration Advisory Committee (LMAC) was established in 2015 to facilitate on-going structured dialogue, exchange and technical consultations among social partners and relevant government entities, to monitor and promote better governance of labour migration as well as encourage regional migration and mobility regimes. LMAC is composed of various stakeholders including Regional Economic Communities (RECs), social partners namely Business Africa, OATUU and ITUC-Africa, representative of Diaspora organizations and cross border women organizations as well as relevant AU organs such as Pan African Parliament, Pan African University and ECOSOCC.

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PREPARING AFRICA FOR POST COVID-19 LABOUR MIGRATION

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