

Assessing the Impact of Regional Migration Policies on Uganda's Labor Migration Patterns to the Middle East

- A Case Study of IGAD Migration Action Plan (2015-2020)



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INTRODUCTION

Global migration has evolved, driven by the liberalization of trade, internationalization of production and growing regional disparities. However, contemporary migration policies are shaped by human rights concerns, regional security priorities and humanitarian considerations that influence policy formulation and implementation. Uganda is a member of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which comprises eight member states, hosting an estimated population of 230 million people that play a pivotal role in regional migration dynamics.

According to the African Guiding Principles on the Human Rights of Migrants, a migrant can be classified as a “person outside of a state of which they are citizens or their state of birth or habitual residence”. Globally, an estimated 281 million people are classified as migrants, accounting for 3.60% of the global population. However, labour migration remains a critical aspect of globalization, representing 62% of international migrants. Labor migration is governed by global migration policy instruments that aim to enhance legal protections and the welfare of migrant workers to create more just and equitable global labour markets that benefit both migrants and their host communities. According to the IOM “The Global Compact for Migration (2018), emphasises a rights-based approach to migration, promoting managed migration as beneficial for development and encouraging coordinated governance among states.”

Established in 1986, IGAD aims to facilitate the free movement of people, in turn enhancing access to employment opportunities and trade

within the region. The labour force within the IGAD region grew from approximately 93.3 million in 2010 to 118.6 million in 2019. However, even with comprehensive regional migration policy frameworks like the IGAD Migration Action Plan (MAP) (2015-2020) designed to operationalize the IGAD Migration Policy Framework (MPF), an estimated 63% of IGAD migrants travel towards the Arab Peninsula. The Human rights violations affecting IGAD migrant workers in the Middle East are pervasive and multifaceted, often resembling modern-day slavery. Ethiopian migrants constitute a significant portion of the workforce in this region and face severe abuses, including exploitation, wage reductions and violations of contractual agreements, which are exacerbated by their legal and economic vulnerabilities (**Endiro, 2019; Sinha, 2021**)

Uganda has experienced a surge in the number of skilled and unskilled citizens going abroad in search of employment, with an estimated 92,658 Ugandan migrant workers being deployed to Middle Eastern Countries like Saudi Arabia (85,240), Qatar (3,634) and UAE (2,037) according to the Ministry of Local Government (MoLG) Statistical Abstract 2021/22. This equally translates into an annual increase in Uganda’s labour exports to the Middle East, which rose sharply from 9,000 in 2010 to 21,000 in 2018, significantly contributing to remittances of \$51.4 million in 2010 to \$309.2 million in 2018.

However, Ugandan migrant workers in the Middle East face significant human rights violations, primarily characterized by exploitation, abuse and inadequate legal protections. This underscores the importance of aligning Uganda’s labour

migration policy framework to global and regional migration policies, including the IGAD MAP, to ensure safe, orderly and dignified labour migration patterns.

This research aims to evaluate the impact of the IGAD MAP on the implementation of Uganda's labour externalization strategies from the initial period of 2015-2020, offering a pathway for informed policy reforms that safeguard the rights of Ugandan migrant workers while harnessing the economic potential labour migration has on Uganda's economy.

Problem Statement

The ineffective implementation of the IGAD MAP is worsened by systemic policy gaps and weak governance structures, that hinder safe and orderly labour externalisation practices and the protection of Ugandan migrant labourers to the Middle East.

Research Objectives

1. To assess the effectiveness of the IGAD MAP in streamlining procedures for labour externalization in Uganda from (2015-2020)
2. To analyze the impact of IGAD's MAP on Uganda's regional collaboration with IGAD member states regarding labour mobility
3. To evaluate policy gaps and propose actionable recommendations for improving labour migration governance

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach to comprehensively explore the experiences of Ugandan labour migrants to the Middle East from 2015 to 2020, while also addressing systemic issues in labour migration governance. The study combined quantitative data from key informant interviews with stakeholders, and qualitative desk research on existing case studies, migration governance frameworks and regional labour migration policies.

FINDINGS

The IGAD Migration Action Plan 2015-2020

The IGAD Regional Migration Policy Framework was developed in response to the AU Banjul Decision and focuses on regional-specific interlinkages to migration, such as pastoralism, human security and internal displacement. However, even with the establishment of the IGAD MPF, irregular migration from the IGAD region accounted for 10.2% of fatalities in the Mediterranean according to the IOM in October 2015”.

Establishing a significant gap between norms established in IGAD migration policies and implementation within IGAD member states

In 2013, IGAD held a meeting to identify the migration priorities in the IGAD region, as well as the action areas and recommendations for effective implementation. The IGAD MAP was formulated from the meeting recommendations, prioritizing 12 strategic issues. The study established that the Ugandan Government has reformed and strengthened its labour migration policy landscape with the introduction of the Externalisation of Labour Programme (2005), whose main aim is to provide safe, orderly and regular channels for an estimated 10,000 (2015) to 20,000 (2020) Ugandan migrants that left Uganda to the Middle East during the period under study.

However, a study by the United States Department of Labor that assessed the working and living conditions of 843 Ugandan labour migrants in

the Middle East over five years revealed that 87% of the migrants who participated in the survey experienced forced labour and 82% reported having their wages or other promised benefits withheld.

The reported human rights violations highlight a significant gap between Uganda’s legal frameworks for labour migration and the actual rights afforded to Ugandan migrant workers. In order to establish the policy implementation gaps between IGAD MAP and the experiences of Ugandan labour migrants employed in the Middle East, the study analyzed the alignment between the IGAD MAP strategic priorities on labour migration and Uganda’s migration policy landscape from 2015-2020.

Building Effective National Migration Architecture

The Government of Uganda has taken a positive step towards building institutional frameworks to support the implementation of migration policies, by drafting a National Migration Policy (NMP) that is in alignment with the IGAD MAP strategic priority. It is aimed at building member states’ capacity in migration governance, standardization, and harmonization of national migration architecture.

The key priority of the NMP in Uganda, is to review the existing migration laws and regulations within the first three years of implementation and increase compliance with national migration laws by 90% within three years through e-migration, enhanced inspections and investigations.

However, the implementation of this NMP, which was first drafted in 2016, is impeded by limited inter-agency collaboration, fragmented migration laws and data limitations that hinder informed policy decisions.

The IGAD MAP explicitly recommends that member states establish a strong National Coordination Mechanism (NCM) on migration. The Ugandan Government established a NCM in 2015 to strengthen the coordination of migration actors, led by the Office of the Prime Minister in Uganda. The NCM members were part of the consultations in drafting the NMP and were supported by IGAD to hold coordination meetings to enhance migration policy development at national level.

The protection of the human rights of migrants within and outside of the IGAD Region, is a key priority of the IGAD MAP. In line with this priority, the study established a contradiction in Uganda's Employment Act (2006), which failed to substantively address the rights of Ugandan domestic workers. The absence of national permits to recruit domestic workers, limits enforcement of the Employment Act under private households, which has relegated domestic workers to the informal sector with limited legal safeguards, consequently contributing to an increase in labour migration to the Middle East for better wage jobs. Migrants brave the economic and human rights challenges associated with legal and illegal migration routes.

One of the key informants of the study said that, "The rights of unskilled workers were not adequately addressed in the initial drafting of global labour migration policies," explaining that these policies were initially designed to regulate skilled and not unskilled labour, such

as domestic workers and agricultural labourers. The respondent then drew comparisons on how this oversight has been translated into the Ugandan labour policy frameworks, which lack a comprehensive minimum wage bill to protect the rights of unskilled labour (Respondent 3).

The IGAD-RMPF at National Level

The study found that IGAD has indeed cascaded the IGAD-Regional Migration Policy Framework to the national level, through initiatives such as the first IGAD Ministerial Meeting on Migration that established the sectoral ministerial committee on migration in Uganda. This aligns with IGAD's strategic priority to build the effectiveness of national migration governance, strengthen border management and enhance national migration data systems.

However, IGAD faces significant challenges in monitoring the implementation of migration policies, due to limited institutional capacity and reliance on informal cooperation among member states. One key respondent highlighted that "Even with the ongoing collaboration between the IGAD secretariat and various Ugandan stakeholders, the full implementation of IGAD MAP is hindered by lack of political will by member states," citing that some of them have not drafted national migration policies (Key respondent 2). "While IGAD has been recognised as a political player in regional migration governance, its effectiveness is hampered by a lack of formal powers compared to other regional organisations like ECOWAS, which has a more established legal framework for enforcing policies.

The study established that strengthening the political will of IGAD member states in implementing the IGAD MAP has been

compromised by a siloed approach to negotiating Bilateral Labor Agreements (BLA) with key destination countries within the Middle East. A background report on the IGAD Regional Guidelines on Rights Based Bilateral Labor Agreements, stated that “Most actors interviewed supported the notion of a common IGAD approach to BLAs, and most were adamant about giving explicit attention in BLAs to decent work protection and human welfare for Ugandan workers.”

Countering Transnational Threats and International Crime in IGAD

In the Horn of Africa, trafficking and smuggling have often happened within countries, with workers moving from rural to urban areas and in recent years, moving across international borders through routes from Djibouti into Yemen and onward to Saudi Arabia and other GCC destinations. In order to curb trafficking in persons and human smuggling, IGAD member states have put in place efforts like the Trafficking Act in Kenya, the Anti-Trafficking Task Force in Uganda, Sudan, and Djibouti, and the regulation of private employment agencies in Ethiopia and Uganda.

This aligns with the IGAD MAP strategic priority five that aims to ensure effective migration governance to counter transnational traffic while facilitating safe mobility. Uganda’s ability to counter transnational threats and international crime is linked to effective border governance of a total boundary area of 2,698km and maritime border governance on Lake Victoria. “Uganda’s borders are characterised by ‘Illegal border crossing points, usually called ‘mice or rat routes,’ used by smugglers who charge about \$15”. (Okumu.W 2019) These routes are exploited by human traffickers, smugglers and terrorists

to infiltrate different countries within the IGAD region, transiting through Uganda.

Outdated infrastructure, surveillance systems and data technology exacerbate these outlined issues. A 2021 World Bank study found that only 40% of Uganda’s one-stop border points (OSBPs) are equipped with modern technology for data sharing, hindering effective cross-border management. Despite various efforts of strategic policy measures by IGAD, implementation challenges persist. A key respondent (2) cited that local government officials and border personnel were largely unaware of the IGAD MAP. The respondent drew comparison to the general public’s understanding of the East African community because of a comprehensive public sensitization program that is absent in the implementation strategy of the IGAD MAP. However, even with interventions like the IGAD regional assessment study on the vulnerabilities and threats of transnational organized crime, deterring illicit cross-border activities during the study period was not fully realized. The Annual Crime Report from the Uganda Police Force, cited more than 600 people reported as victims of trafficking in persons, with 497 being victims of transnational trafficking that took advantage of the South Western border to access Burundi and Tanzania.

Labor Migration and Protection of Human Rights of Migrants Within and Outside the IGAD Region

Uganda has aligned its labour migration policies at a global level with the International Labor Organisation conventions that include the revised Migration for Employment Convention (1949), The Abolition of Forced Labor Convention (1957), and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation)

Convention (1958). This global alignment meets its strategic commitment to the IGAD MAP Strategic priority three (Action 18).

National frameworks governing employment in Uganda, such as the Employment Act (2006, amended 2022), the Equal Opportunities Act and the Employment (Recruitment of Uganda Migrant Workers) Regulations 2021, incorporate an inclusive approach to labour migration governance and reflect commitment to ethical recruitment, worker protection and gender equality.

The Local Governments Act of 1997 (Chapter 243) is a key piece of legislation in Uganda that supports the central government decentralizing labour administration in 146 districts while maintaining central government oversight for effective labour market coordination. The study found that this administration system aligns with strategic priority number two of the IGAD MAP, which aims to enhance National Migration Governance. However, key respondents from the study revealed that migration policies were not effectively translated to local government officials who play a key role in governing the recruitment of migrant workers.

A study by the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (2022) on Ugandan migrant workers who worked in the Middle East between 2018 and 2021 found that 39% of respondents experienced deceptive recruitment regarding working and living conditions, and 29% experienced recruitment linked to debt from advanced loans paid to recruiters. This highlights a contradiction of the stipulations outlined in The Employment (Recruitment of Migrant Workers) Regulations 2021, especially Section 66 enacted to protect the rights of Ugandan migrant workers, ensure

ethical recruitment practices and promote safe and fair working conditions.

“Labour Attaches are instrumental in ‘navigating regional and multilateral agreements’ (**Bukanda & Walusumbi-Mpanga, 2011.**) One of the key respondents (4) from the study cited the need to enhance evaluation of compliance to bilateral labour agreements, by increasing the number of labour attaches in Ugandan embassies in key labour migration destination countries like Saudi Arabia (31,980), UAE (16,009) and Jordan (4,198), which received the highest number of Ugandan labour migrants from 2016 to 2020.

According to the Draft National Migration Policy (2023), there are eight immigration attaches in Ugandan missions abroad. Following the recommendations of a benchmarking trip to Malaysia and Ghana in 2012, there is a long-term plan to increase the number of immigration officers in Ugandan missions abroad, cities, municipalities and districts in Uganda to above 1,600 to enhance immigration service delivery.

According to the IOM, “Assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programs provide administrative, logistical and financial support, including reintegration assistance, to migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host/transit country and who decide to return to their country of origin.” However, the study established a gap in the implementation of IGAD MAP, specifically the recommendation for member states to develop a mechanism for assisted voluntary return and reintegration. The Ugandan Government has collaborated with development partners like IOM and ILO Fairway project to assist in the voluntary return and reintegration of labour migrants from the Middle East, providing psycho-social counselling, grievance handling and the

establishment of a workers' union. The lack of a national strategy study for the return and reintegration of migrant workers in Uganda is limiting the coordination of stakeholders working on AVRR at community level, hindering resource efficiency and undermining the economic potential the reintegration of skilled migrant workers has on Uganda's economy.

Building the Capacity of the National Migration Data System

The IGAD MAP (2015-2020) highlights the significant challenges in collecting migrant data, emphasizing that migrants are always on the move, necessitating regular updates on their data. Informed policy decisions are based on accurate data and the IGAD MAP strategic priority seven aims to support member states in building robust national migration data systems to enhance policy coherence.

The Government of Uganda, under the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development has strengthened efforts towards migration data collection through the External Employment Management Information System (EEMIS). While EEMIS does capture vital information on migrant workers recruited and deployed for work abroad through licensed companies, unfortunately, data on labour migrant returnees is not captured and according to ILO, this further increases fragmentation of migration data among CSO and UN Agencies.

According to an IGAD analytical framework analysis on labour migration trends in the region, most member states lack comprehensive skills inventories to systematically compile data on the skills available in the country. Uganda uses the

EAC workforce survey to identify skill gaps and facilitate migrant employment to IGAD member states committed to collecting international migration data. However, according to an ILO report on the assessment of sources of data on international labour migration in Uganda, the Ugandan National Census Survey (2014) published reports did not articulate labour migration statistics, despite collecting migration and socioeconomic data.

Uganda has further made progress in aligning with IGAD's strategic priorities. This is evidenced by the National Labor Force Surveys (NLFS) in 2011/12. The NLFS align with the resolutions of the 20th International Conference of Labor Statisticians (ICLS) providing comprehensive labour market indicators that included employment dynamics, socio-demographic characteristics of the population in employment, unpaid work, labour underutilization and labour force characteristics among youth. However, the study found that the analysis of international labour migrants' data in NLFS and the UNBS manpower survey was inadequate and lacked periodic analysis of the number of Ugandan labour migrants leaving the country, repatriated, working conditions in destination countries, duration of employment, social security entitlements, remittances sent and employment-related income.

CONCLUSION

The Ugandan Government has made significant progress in aligning its national labour migration policies with regional and international frameworks like the IGAD MAP and the Global Compact for Migration. The findings of the study reveal an urgent need to address systemic implementation gaps and bridge the gap between migration policy and the reality of Ugandan migration patterns to the Middle East. The draft National Migration Policy (2023), has the

potential to harmonize Uganda's existing labour migration policies, strengthen data systems, ensure effective decentralization of migration policy and realign Bilateral Labor Agreements to address the persistently complex human rights concerns faced by Ugandan migrant workers in the Middle East, enforcing labour externalization practices that ensure safe, orderly and dignified migration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Harmonization of Uganda's Migration Policy Frameworks

The National Migration Plan has an implementation plan of five years that aims to review existing national laws and establish a semi-autonomous body. Once the NMP is adopted, there is need for a comprehensive coordination and communication strategy that builds the capacity of all stakeholders involved in migration governance to understand the reformed regulations around labour migration, most importantly, impose strict repercussions for non-compliance to realize the strategic targets of the NMP.

One of the key respondents to the study highlighted the positive contribution MCN has had on incorporating migration stakeholder perspectives into the NMP. The study recommends, under the continued guidance of IGAD MAP (2024-2028) and development partners like IOM, that the full implementation of district level MCNs should be cascaded to strengthen

district level coordination of government entities, building the capacity of district officials on migration and getting the perspectives of rural communities in shaping labour migration policies in Uganda.

MGLSD should expedite the adoption of the draft Employment (Domestic Workers) Regulations 2020. It should be revised and re-tabled before Parliament to meet current labour market conditions, incorporating recommendations by the minimum wage advisory board set up in 2015 and aligning it to the strategic priorities of IGAD MAP (2024-2028). Additionally, the government of Uganda should ratify ILO Convention No.189, the Domestic Workers Convention 2011, aiming to give domestic workers the same labour protection as other workers. Additionally, adopting the minimum wage bill that recognizes the rights of domestic workers in Uganda will absorb a significant percentage of Ugandan labour migrants seeking better pay in the Middle East.

Uganda has bilateral labour agreements with Saudi Arabia (2015 amended in 2016), and Jordan (2016), and an MOU with UAE (2019) aimed at establishing effective mechanisms for placing Ugandan domestic workers and ensuring their welfare and rights. However, these agreements are not actively enforced on both sides, creating policy gaps that exploit an estimated 17,597 (Saudi Arabia) and 4,119 (Jordan) Ugandan domestic workers (2016-2019) [31]. The study recommends that the Ministry of Internal Affairs (COPTIP), in collaboration with the Ugandan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, develop formal cooperation agreements to prevent/counter the smuggling of migrants, trace and identify missing migrants within the national territory, addressed explicitly under the National Action Plan for the Prevention of trafficking in persons.

MGLSD should incorporate recommendations of the IGAD Regional Guidelines on Rights-Based Bilateral Labor Agreements into Ugandan BLAs and enhance assessment mechanisms for the implementation of BLAs. The draft National Migration Policy (2023) elaborately describes plans to increase the ratio of immigration officers and labour attaches in ratio to the Ugandan population. In collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance needs to restructure the budget allocated to labour attaches in diplomatic missions in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to fund assessment mechanisms on BLA and support repatriation missions. Additionally, the establishment of missions in key destination countries like Iraq (3,590), Afghanistan (1,404) and Jordan (4,198) should be considered.

2. Enhancing Border Governance

The Uganda Police Force documented a rise in human trafficking cases, with reported incidents increasing from 252 in 2019 to 1,200 cases in 2022, underscoring gaps in the implementation of the National Action Plan on Trafficking in Persons (2019-2024). Border Governance in Uganda is characterized by significant inadequacies hindering the effective management of legal and illegal labour migration patterns across Uganda's borders. There is a need to introduce more one-stop border points and personnel with advanced technological solutions like drones, service robots and surveillance systems that streamline cross border management and effectively integrate border management services.

In May 2024, Uganda signed the IGAD Free Movement of Persons Protocol, which should be ratified to enhance the free movement of persons within the region, facilitate visa-free travel, ease the right to work and secure residence, and simplify border procedures. Articles 9 &10 of the IGAD Free Movement of Persons Protocol reiterates the commitment towards the harmonization of labour policies and recognition of academic accreditation, directly aligning with the IGAD RMPF strategy aimed at facilitating the integration of migrants into labour markets, including the education and training sector.

“IGAD should negotiate for Bilateral Labor Agreements as a regional bloc, to overcome the siloed competitive approach to labour migration among IGAD member states,” Respondent (3). Based on Article 9 & 10 of the IGAD Free Movement of Persons Protocol, an IGAD-led regional approach to Bilateral Labor Agreements has the potential to harmonize member states' migration

policies, and improve worker protections with major Middle Eastern labour destination countries, leveraging collective bargaining to negotiate better wages and working conditions.

3. Introduction of Electronic Innovation in Migration Management

“The Draft NMP (2023) aims to increase enforcement and compliance with migration laws to 90% within three years of implementation, through integrated e-migration system with prompt alerts, enhanced inspections and investigations,” (Draft NMP 2023). The Directorate of Citizenship, in coordination with the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Uganda, should establish a National Migration Information Management System, enhance citizenship integration, information sharing, integration for migration systems, and centralize inter-agency cooperation. Amending Section 50 of The Uganda Citizenship and Immigration Control Act (CAP66) will allow officers to collect biometric data from a broader group of international labour migrants and in turn build comprehensive national migration databases. The Uganda migration governance frameworks need to be transformed from analogue systems of governance into digitalized systems that centralize coordination of different government entities and overcome fragmented institutional arrangements, inefficient e-government systems and non-integrated databases.

The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) is setting up an automated system to harmonize migration data with global indicators on international migration data and additionally

incorporate the findings into the National Population Census and Labor Force Surveys. This aligns the national migration data to ILO’s 20th International Conference of Labor Statisticians (2018) which emphasized standardized labour migration metrics. MGLSD is developing a labour market information system that will harmonize migration data. This innovation aligns with the strategic priorities of IGAD RMPF. Based on the findings of the study, MGLSD should incorporate recommendations of the NCM -Technical Working Group on migration data and the 20th International Conference of Labor Statisticians (ICLS), to ensure an inclusive and internationally aligned approach in capturing data on international labour.

4. Funding Social Protection Floors for Migrants

In 2024, an estimated, 1,000 Ugandan migrant workers were detained in Saudi Arabia (720), Dubai (180) and Qatar (62), with 146 repatriated from Saudi Arabian prisons according to print media outlet Daily Monitor. These figures highlight the urgent need for a formal government program to reintegrate Ugandan labour migrants, by prioritizing strategic funding for social protection floors in line with ILO’s Recommendation No.202. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should lead efforts to negotiate for the portability of social security benefits. Additionally, the implementation of the proposed Ugandan Social Security Bill, aligns with Article 9 of the IGAD Free Movement of Persons Protocol, enabling migrants to access social security benefits in host countries.

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