

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Assessment on the Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Workers in and from the
IGAD Region**

**for the
Project on Free Movement of Persons and Transhumance in the IGAD Region:
Improving Opportunities for Regular Labour Mobility**

by

Emmerentia Erasmus

The Assessment on the Impact of COVID 19 on Migrant Workers in and from the IGAD Region, is a product of the Project Free Movement of Persons and Transhumance in the IGAD Region: Improving Opportunities for Regular Labour Mobility (FMPT). The International Labour Organization (ILO) is implementing the FMPT project in collaboration with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The project is a key component of the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) financed programme “Towards Free Movement of Persons and Transhumance in the IGAD Region”.

COVID-19 has massively affected the working and living conditions as well as prospects of migrant workers. This report captures major trends and findings on the impact of COVID 19 on migrant workers in and from the IGAD region, to determine how migrant workers need to be supported by states and other actors in this new context, and in preparation of possible future crises. Data for this assessment was collected between May and September 2020 and therefore captures trends and policy responses over this period. Due to the pandemic all data was collected remotely through online research; semi-structured interviews; and an online survey. Key informants that contributed inputs include IGAD Member States’ (MSs) ministries; International Organizations (IOs); social partners; civil society organizations (CSOs), associations of private employment agencies (PEAs); and diaspora organizations.

The report commences with an overview of *COVID-19 in the IGAD region*, which describes the socio-economic repercussions of the pandemic, as well as the context in which it unfolded. Next a synopsis of *Regional Responses by IGAD, the EAC and the AU to the pandemic* is provided. This is followed by the *Impact of COVID-19 on Migration and Migrant Workers in and from the IGAD region*. This section details the consequences of the pandemic for migrant workers, refugees and other migrants in the region and travelling from the region. It also captures the experiences of migrant workers from the IGAD region in the Middle East, which is a major labour migration destination for them. The subsequent section, *Analytical Framework analysis of COVID-19 related responses to migrant workers in the IGAD region and Middle East countries of destination*, examines the responses of governments in the IGAD region and Middle East that affected migrant workers during the pandemic, as well as support rendered by other actors to migrant workers, such as IOs and CSOs. The next section delineates *Aspects to be considered in the implementation of the IGAD Free Movement of Persons Protocol during an international health emergency*. It proposes measures to be included in the roadmap of the IGAD Free Movement of Persons (FMP) Protocol, which would boost a regional response to a possible future international health crisis and the protection of migrant workers in such a crisis. The report concludes with short, medium and long term recommended actions for the FMPT project, the IGAD MSs, the IGAD Secretariat and other partners to strengthen the protection of migrant workers.

COVID-19 in the IGAD region and regional responses:

On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. The same month all IGAD MSs reported positive COVID-19 cases. It was feared that the pandemic could have devastating consequences for the region, as it easily spread and the region faced weak health infrastructure and numerous socio-economic challenges. The IGAD MSs introduced varying degrees of lockdowns to curtail the spread of the virus, which involved reducing social and economic activity and closing borders. These measures resulted in economic decline; job losses; supply chain challenges and migrants being stranded across the

region. IGAD, the EAC and AU adopted strategies to support their member states to prevent the spread of the virus and address the health and socio-economic repercussions of the pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on migrants were noted by these organisations. In August IGAD convened the Regional Experts and Ministerial Meeting on the Impact of COVID-19 on the People on the Move through which it promoted measures to enhance the protection of people on the move, such as equal and non-discriminatory treatment regardless of migration and citizenship status (IGAD, 2020g).

The Impact of COVID-19 on Migration and Migrant Workers in and from the IGAD region:

Migration continued in and from the IGAD region, despite border closures. Migrants who chose to move through the region's porous borders often paid higher prices to smugglers who took them on more perilous journeys (Mbiyozo, 2020). Repatriation activities fell sharply - IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programme was suspended, which left hundreds of Somalis and Ethiopians in packed detention facilities in Yemen, where the virus could also spread (MMC, 2020b). Mobility restrictions led to diminished access to asylum procedures in East Africa over the second quarter of 2020, as well as durable solutions for refugees. Funding for refugee programmes was cut, while their income opportunities declined and their needs increased.

COVID-19 restrictions and border closures reduced livelihood opportunities in the region and in countries of destination (CoDs), which caused IGAD MSs' remittances to fall. Migrant workers in and from the region faced job losses, pay cuts, economic hardship as well as discrimination due to COVID-19 related fears. Migrant workers in the informal economy were especially vulnerable to the economic consequences and health risks of the pandemic, as they often lack financial reserves and may not be able to afford PPE and other measures, such as staying at home and social distancing, to protect themselves from contracting the virus. Some migrant workers were able to develop alternate livelihoods, such as migrant workers in Kenya that started producing face masks. IGAD MSs started lifting COVID-19 restrictions from May 2020 and facilitating the return of their citizens. Some migrants remained stranded, partly due to the requirement to have a COVID-19 negative test certificate to cross borders, which they could not afford or because they lacked access to health facilities where the tests are taken.

Regular labour migration to the Middle East ceased and PEAs faced economic challenges as they could no longer deploy migrant workers. Migrant workers in the Middle East experienced hardship and exploitation, including reduced wages; wage abuse; forced labour; job losses and homelessness. Returnees reportedly returned home empty handed, including to Ethiopia, and required extensive support to reintegrate into weakened labour markets. Despite the hardships faced by many, demand for labour migration opportunities remain high due to a shortfall in income opportunities in the IGAD MSs.

COVID-19 responses in the IGAD region and Middle East that affected migrant workers:

COVID-19 work place prevention measures were put in place in all IGAD MSs, but limited labour inspection capacities impeded enforcement of these measures. It is recommended that MSs strengthen labour inspection to ensure decent working conditions and adequate COVID-19 prevention measures in the work place.

In Kenya and Uganda legal mechanisms were introduced to protect workers against COVID-19 related discrimination and unsafe working conditions. Migrant workers in a regular situation have access to legal remedies in MSs, but it is not clear to which extent this was sought or enforced during the pandemic. In CoDs avenues for appeal often fall short and have been operating at reduced capacity during the pandemic.

MSs lacked sufficient PPE for health care workers which multiple actors addressed, including the Somali Diaspora in Finland who donated medical supplies and PPE to health facilities in Somalia. Numerous MSs and CoDs provided free of charge or partially funded COVID-19 testing and health care for migrant workers, including Djibouti; Ethiopia; Kenya; Uganda; Sudan; South Sudan; Bahrain; the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA); Kuwait; and Qatar.

In CoDs the Kafala system, whereby migrant workers require the consent of their employers to leave or change their employer, is associated with exploitation. While steps have been taken to dismantle it more are needed. It is recommended that IGAD MSs increase awareness raising of the labour migration system to prevent exploitation of migrant workers during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. They should also bolster labour migration statistics of migrant workers in CoDs to strengthen migrant workers' protection during a crisis.

Migrant workers in crowded and unsanitary working and living conditions were vulnerable to contracting COVID-19, such as migrant workers in labour camps in CoDs. Some efforts are ongoing to enhance the protection of migrant workers - In Qatar the ILO is training labour inspectors on identifying forced labour and human trafficking (ILO, 2020d). Reportedly more than 8,000 inspections of work and accommodation sites were conducted in Qatar during the pandemic (Al Thani, 2020). On the other hand, Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs) and PEAs appear to have failed to offer much protection to migrant workers in CoDs. It is recommended that IGAD develops a common position for BLAs that are rights based and that it employs to strategically work towards better working and living conditions for migrant workers in CoDs. MSs should also specify and enforce the roles and responsibilities of PEAs during a crisis.

Various entities implemented awareness raising campaigns on COVID-19 for migrants in the IGAD MSs and CoDs. In Somalia UNICEF implemented a media awareness raising and SMS campaign on COVID-19, which also targeted Ethiopian pastoralists.¹ However, no public education and awareness-raising campaigns regarding the contributions migrant workers make, nor current initiatives on the integration of migrant workers and countering xenophobia were identified. Moreover, migrant workers in the IGAD region and from the region in the Middle East do not have basic social security guarantees. The portability of social security benefits is also lacking. Djibouti is the only IGAD MS that has introduced some portability of social security benefits.

Some MSs and CoDs have extended migrants' and migrant workers' visas to prevent them from falling into an irregular status, or allowed them to legally remain in their countries during the pandemic, including Ethiopia; Kenya; Uganda; the KSA; Kuwait; and Qatar. Some CoDs also tried to connect migrant workers to employment opportunities. The UAE launched a Virtual Labour Market (<https://careers.mohre.gov.ae>) where migrant workers

¹ Interview with UNICEF Somalia

could register and apply for jobs (Ministry of Human Resources & Emiratization, 2020). Migrant workers also received some socio-economic assistance from MSs; CODs; aid agencies, CSOs and diaspora organizations. For example in Cairo the Sudanese embassy provided Sudanese migrants with accommodation, food and cash.² It is recommended that IGAD MSs provide targeted socio-economic assistance to migrant workers during the pandemic, including migrant workers in the informal economy that are especially impacted by the consequences of the pandemic. Moreover, MSs should promote the use of digital technologies and mobile payment platforms to reduce the cost of remittances and enhance the accessibility of safe and secure means of remitting.

In CoDs MSs' embassies have provided some information and services to migrant workers, which should be further bolstered. It is recommended that MSs expand the scope of consular services to cover unexpected emergencies and establish contingency measures for crises, including evacuation measures and cooperation measures between the consulates of IGAD MSs during a crisis.

Return processes varied among MSs and CoDs. Uncoordinated returns, detention and deportation were reported and the reintegration of returnees is inadequate. It is recommended that standards for return and coordination between MSs and with CoDs are strengthened to ensure safe, orderly and dignified returns, while reintegration support should also be shored up. Labour Market Information Systems should also be bolstered to enhance opportunities for regular labour migration for migrant workers that face diminished income opportunities at home and to support the recovery of economies in the region from the pandemic. Immigration information and visa processing systems should be simplified and made easily accessible through the development of functional immigration web portals with up to date information on immigration procedures and rules and migrant workers' rights and opportunities in MSs.

Aspects to be considered in the implementation of the IGAD Free Movement of Persons Protocol during an international health emergency:

On 26 February 2020 IGAD MSs endorsed the FMP Protocol (IGAD, 2020i). Its free movement regime can be suspended on the grounds of public health and MSs should specify procedures for such a suspension, as well as measures to effectively deal with a future international health crisis and the protection of migrant workers during such a crisis. The roadmap for the implementation of the Protocol could incorporate these specifications, which should include equal health care and socio-economic assistance for migrants and citizens alike. Moreover, it is recommended that the roles and responsibilities of MSs towards stranded migrants during a crisis should be defined and captured in the roadmap or alternative IGAD cooperation framework.

² Interview with ILO Sudan