

**Remarks on the Official Opening of the 1st
Regional Review meeting on the Global
Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular
migration in Africa**

Vera Songwe

Under-Secretary-General

and

**Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for
Africa**

Wednesday, 1st September 2021

Excellences, Distinguished representatives,

All protocols observed

I would like to express Dr Vera Songwe UN USG and the ECA Executive Secretary's profound regrets as she is unfortunately facing connectivity issues. I am literally going to read her speech.

Excellencies,

I am delighted to welcome you to the first regional review meeting of the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) in Africa adopted in 2018.

At the outset, I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to the Kingdom of Morocco for officially hosting this meeting, and to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the African Union Commission (AUC), and the United Nation's Network on Migration (UNNM) for their support in preparing for this meeting in the challenging circumstances occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Excellences, ladies, and gentlemen, migration has played a pivotal role in shaping the world as we know it today. Migrants have been essential in the development of many modern states, have

shaped labour dynamics across countries, and are a cornerstone for the global economy.

Yet, any discussion on migration, especially in recent times, is dominated by a particular narrative that often confuses the sometimes irregular nature of migration with its magnitude and serves to only obfuscate the real issues surrounding migration.

Let me highlight two such issues as they relate to Africa.

One, the stock of international migrants in Africa increased by 76 per cent from 15 million in 2000 to 26.5 million in 2019. However, the stock of international migrants in Africa represented only 2 per cent of the total population of the continent in 2019, with most of these migrants (79 per cent) migrated only within the continent itself.

Two, migration streams within Africa are much larger than those out of Africa – more than half of those migrating internationally (52 per cent) do so within Africa, with only about 27 per cent of migrants from Africa going to Europe while Asia absorbed 12 per cent and North America 7 per cent.

As we discuss the progress on implementation of the Global Compact on the continent, I wish to share my observations on two processes that seem to be working against each other. These may help frame the discussions.

Migration and human mobility are closely linked with the opening up of trade. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) came into force on 1 January 2021 and marks a significant milestone in realising the free movement of people, goods, and capital on the continent.

Excessive border controls and immigration restrictions increase the costs and risks of migration and often come in conflict between individual motivation to migrate and state restrictions on mobility.

This conflict facilitates the demand for private, and non-state, entrepreneurs, including smugglers, to facilitate movement, often with disastrous consequences.

The AfCFTA is indeed a key plank in achieving progress towards enhanced availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration.

Member states recognise that irregular migration can be reduced by easing restrictive immigration and visa practices to boost circular migration for trade and thereby unlock economic opportunities for millions of African nationals.

Progress in regional integration through Regional Economic Communities, improved cross-border transport options and infrastructure, and growing opportunities in circular cross border trade are positive developments.

Many African countries are also easing visa restrictions that is in line with the proposed free movement protocol. So this is a positive development.

But the restrictions on mobility imposed by the recent and still on-going COVID-19 pandemic pose a huge challenge for the implementation of the Global Compact.

Measures taken by governments in response to the pandemic have included movement restrictions affecting international and domestic travel which have led to arbitrary screening procedures at

points of entry thereby worsening existing vulnerabilities of migrants and unfair denial of passage.

In host countries, migrants were excluded from stimulus packages and welfare systems which, when combined with lockdowns and curfews, led to bankruptcies of businesses that employ most of them. This was especially the case among female migrants who are often self-employed in the informal sector.

The problem is aggravated by the low vaccine coverage on the continent – only a little more than 2 per cent of the African population have completed the required doses so far.

The slow progress on vaccination has a direct impact on the movement of people and slows down migration, which has a huge development impact by limiting the flow of remittances.

Remittances have long surpassed Foreign Direct Investment as the largest source of foreign financial inflows in Africa and today constitute 4.6 per cent of GDP in 2019. In absolute terms remittances are in excess of US\$ 75 billion.

Remittances hold the greatest potential for reducing poverty and household vulnerability while contributing to better housing, improved access to services, local construction sector and improved food security because they are sent directly to family members of migrants.

For many member States, remittances have declined last year (as much as 5.4 per cent) as a result of COVID-19, which only serves to slow the pace of recovery from the crisis and subsequently reduce the potential of migration in boosting development.

So, the faster we vaccinate our people on the continent, the faster we will be able to ensure that cross-border movement restrictions come down and economies dependent upon remittances are able to recover.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to draw attention to the several obstacles that continue to impede the recognition of education, skills and qualifications across national borders.

A major concern in Africa and more specifically within the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) is with the non-recognition and non-compatibility of skills and qualifications across national borders. This contributes to poor utilisation of skills, reduced productivity and skill shortages.

Non-recognition or comparability of skills is a major impediment to good governance of labour mobility and hinders individuals from moving between jobs, which is a key element of worker employability and increased productivity.

In addition, migrants face significant challenges accessing social protection benefits, because of which they risk the loss of entitlement to social security benefits in their country of origin due to their absence, and may at the same time encounter restrictive conditions under the social protection system of the host country.

Several African countries have established mechanisms for the portability of social entitlements and earned benefits through the re-examination of BLAs and MoUs with destination countries to reflect the protection of the rights to repatriate social entitlements and earned benefits.

A lot more needs to be done.

These are some of the important issues that have been raised in the continental report to be tabled at the meeting and need our collective attention.

At ECA we are committed and determined to further strengthen our collaboration with member states and sub-regional bodies in support of migration policy frameworks.

At the same time, ECA's Sub-regional offices continue to work closely with Regional Economic Communities to support and strengthen migration policies and actions as well as regional programmes in migration governance in line with GCM objectives.

For Africa, international migration plays a critical role in the continent's struggle to develop and improve welfare, peace and stability and provide jobs for its growing population.

The key challenge is to find the right policies and processes to facilitate migration and protect the rights of migrants, irrespective of their status, and transform migration into a win-win situation for the African member states.

This requires policy dialogue and partnership among all stakeholders.

With these observations, I wish you all fruitful discussions and hope that we will continue to cooperate closely in ensuring that GCM objectives are implemented successfully for the benefit of Africa's population.

I believe more than 700 people registered for this meeting which is a strong indicator of the relevance of the issue of safe, orderly and regular migration in Africa.

Before I end, I would like to acknowledge the immense contribution of the many teams that have worked behind the scenes in great camaraderie and partnership and have been instrumental in the success of this meeting.

These teams and task forces were led by our new ex-Director, Thokozile Ruzvidzo. Today is her first day of retirement but I hope she is here to enjoy the fruition of her effort.

THANK YOU