

Session 3: Protecting and Empowering Migrant Workers and Operationalizing their Role in the Sustainable Development Process in Countries of Origin and Destination

Background note

Introduction

This session of the Regional Review will offer space for discussion of progress made in the implementation of objectives 2, 4, 6, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20, 22 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). This background note provides examples of progress and challenges in regional, sub-regional and intraregional collaboration towards the implementation of the GCM by 22 Arab States. These inputs are drawn from the Regional Network on Migration; voluntary GCM reports and pledges submitted to the International Migration Review Forum (IMRF); the IMRF Progress Declaration; consultations with stakeholders; and practices and information available on the Migration Network Hub.

Recognizing the contributions and protecting the rights of migrants in the Arab States region is crucial for harnessing the full potential of migration for sustainable development. Despite existing challenges, with the enabling policies in place, migrants can contribute to sustainable development in both communities of origin and destination through various means, including productive means i.e., labor, and economic investment, remittances, and cultural enrichment amongst others. Ahead of the upcoming regional GCM review process in the Arab States, this background paper aims to shift the narrative from focusing on migration as adverse phenomenon towards emphasizing its benefits in supporting development efforts in the region. By addressing existing challenges, creating enabling environments, and empowering migrants to fulfill their development potential, the region can ensure that migration can effectively contribute to sustainable development.

Overview of progress

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the GCM recognize that there are many examples of people on the move making positive contributions to inclusive growth and sustainable development.¹ By situating migration within the broader context of sustainable development, these frameworks encourage member states to adopt inclusive policies that leverage the multifaceted benefits migrants bring into host, transit, and home societies. Existing programmatic learning and research evidence the multifaceted contributions of migrants to both their countries and communities of origin, transit, and destination, for instance in terms of economic, social, and cultural contributions, particularly in cases where robust policies are in place. Conversely, if migration is poorly governed, it may have a negative impact on development. Throughout, special attention must be given to protection of the rights of migrant workers, and an intersectional approach to vulnerable groups among migrant populations, such as women, who often face additional challenges based on their gender and migrant status.²

Economic and decent work dimensions: The pursuit of economic opportunities represents the main reason for inter-regional migration in the Arab States region. Migrants, including members of diaspora communities, play an important role in stimulating the economies of their

¹ See for example: Solano, Giacomo and Thomas Huddleston. 2020. Migrant Integration Policy Index. Barcelona; Brussels: Barcelona Center for International Affairs; Migration Policy Group, OECD/ILO (2018), How Immigrants Contribute to Developing Countries' Economies, OECD Publishing, Paris.

² In relation to GCM objective 6 and decent work, please see paragraphs 10, 25, 63 and 66 of the Progress Declaration of the First International Migration Review Forum (IMRF).

communities of transit or destination by contributing to their labour force and filling gaps in industries that would otherwise face labour shortages or skills gaps. In some cases, migrant workers may be predominant in certain countries and sectors, providing disproportionate contributions to economies of the region. This is the case, for example, of migrant workers employed in the construction sector in the GCC or Asian or African migrants working as domestic workers across the region.

In many instances, people on the move have established new businesses which in turn created new employment opportunities not only for migrants but also for host communities. At the same time, with the proper channels in place, people living in host countries can acquire new skills, experiences, networks, and knowledge, during their tenure abroad and bring them back to and use them in their countries of origin. Programs like the Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) have further facilitated the exchange of skills and knowledge, benefiting countries like Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia, among others.³ A key aspect to be considered in this regard is the existence of effective skills recognition programs to support migrants' qualifications and professional experiences being accurately assessed and facilitating smoother inclusion into the workforce.

Key to sustainable and meaningful economic contributions are conducive and rights-based legal and policy frameworks, that ensures that migration policies are not only harnessing the economic benefits of migration but also protecting the human and labour rights, and dignity of migrants. Many migrants workers in the region are low-skilled workers in sectors such as construction, hospitality, and domestic care, who face structural obstacles to decent work, such as poor labour protections and challenges under the Kafala system.⁴ This system represents a prevalent practice across the Arab States (common in all GCC countries, Jordan, and Lebanon) in which the employer holds significant power within the employment relationship, even extending to the worker's migration status. While some reforms have been observed in the region, challenges continue to persist.

While there has been notable progress in the region to address decent work challenges faced by migrant workers, such as reform of sponsorship systems also known as "Kafala system", including 'absconding' (worker absenteeism) frameworks;⁵ prohibition on the payment of recruitment fees and related costs by workers; and introduction of enhanced wage protection systems and access to justice mechanisms, particularly in the GCC, several key protection gaps remain. The latter relate to, for example, unpaid wages or refusal of end of service benefits and lack of comprehensive national labor laws. In that regard, the role of trade unions is crucial in effectively addressing and advocating for issues faced by migrant workers.

Domestic work, performed largely by women migrant workers in many countries in the region, is generally not covered by the labor law, with the result that domestic workers enjoy lesser labor protections than other workers in the private sector,⁶ access to social protection is limited in law and practice,⁷ and there continue to be restrictions on freedom of association and organization of migrant workers. In the Arab States region, migrant women often face wage disparities compared

³ UNDP. 2013. [Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals \(TOKTEN\) project evaluation](#).

⁴ Ryszard Cholewinski. 2023. [Understanding the Kafala Migrant Labor System in Qatar and the Middle East at Large with ILO Senior Migration Specialist in Georgetown Journal of International Affairs](#).

⁵ ILO, IOM, OHCHR, UN Women. 2024 (forthcoming). Abolishing 'absconding': Towards a rights-based approach to employment contract termination in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

⁶ ILO. 2012. [Making decent work a reality for domestic workers in the Middle East: Progress and prospects ten years after the adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 \(No. 189\)](#).

⁷ ILO. 2023. Social protection for migrant workers in countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC): [A regional mapping of provisions on paper and in practice](#).

to their male counterparts and encounter barriers in accessing essential resources, emphasizing the importance of actively ensuring women's rights and entitlements.⁸

Support for migrant entrepreneurship can also serve as a powerful tool for economic inclusion and development, benefiting both migrants, their families, and their host communities. Additionally, and equally important, is the operationalization of these frameworks in mitigating any potential tensions or competitions in the labour market and access to services among others, or other opportunities. Ensuring that migrants have rights-based regular pathways to employment and are not subjected to discriminatory practices remains a key point of advocacy with key stakeholders.

Migrants also make significant contributions to economic development in their home countries by means of remittances.⁹ At present, remittance flows represent around three times the volume of official aid received by lower and middle income countries (LMICs).¹⁰ While remittance flows to the Arab States have fallen slightly, mainly due to a sharp drop in flows to Egypt, they remain highly critical for the region,¹¹ as outlined in a recent report published on the role of remittances in Lebanon, acknowledging the important role Lebanese diaspora can play to support Lebanon's quick recovery, minimize development losses, and put Lebanon back on a healthy, sustainable and inclusive development pathway.¹² Additionally, by contributing to tax revenues and consumption, migrants who are able to find decent, formal employment can also contribute to boosting the economy of their communities in countries of destination. While outflows of migrants are valuable in terms of remittances, it is important to acknowledge the phenomenon of 'brain drain', which can create further challenges to economic development. The outflow of skills and talent can limit economic growth, hamper structural transformation in the local economy, and perpetuate a persistent shortage of decent and productive employment opportunities.¹³

Contributions to the health, services and other sectors: In the Arab States region, migrants have made indispensable contributions to the health sector, playing critical roles as healthcare professionals, support staff, and innovators in medical services. Notably, in countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, where the demand for healthcare services has surged alongside rapid economic development, migrant doctors, nurses, and technicians have been pivotal in bolstering the healthcare workforce, ensuring the continuity and expansion of health services.

Moreover, in the face of global health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants in the health sector have been at the forefront. Their contributions have not only been vital in addressing immediate healthcare needs but have also played a significant role in the cross-border exchange of knowledge and practices in public health, enhancing the region's capacity to manage health emergencies and improve overall health outcomes.¹⁴ Migrant workers in the region also contribute significantly to other sectors, namely services, including domestic and care work, construction, agriculture, and comprise key workers in such occupations as transport, security, cleaning and sanitation.¹⁵

⁸ See for example: UN Women. 2015. [Progress of the World's Women: Transforming economies, realizing rights.](#)

⁹ ILO. [Labour Migration.](#)

¹⁰ Dilip Ratha, Vandana Chandra, Eung Ju Kim, Sonia Plaza, and William Shaw. 2023. [Migration and Development Brief 39: Leveraging Diaspora Finances for Private Capital Mobilization.](#) World Bank, Washington, DC.

¹¹ For instance, Egypt represents the country with the fifth highest received remittances inflows globally (at USD \$24 billion) World Bank. 2023. [Remittance Flows Continue to Grow in 2023 Albeit at Slower Pace.](#)

¹² UNDP. 2023. [The increasing role and importance of remittances in Lebanon.](#)

¹³ See for example: ILO. 2024. [Arab States Employment and Social Outlook – Trends 2024.](#)

¹⁴ ESCWA, UNHCR and ILO. 2020. [Impact of COVID-19 on Migrants and Refugees in the Arab Region Technical Paper,](#) 2020. See also: UNDP. 2021. [Lives versus livelihoods: the COVID-19 pandemic and labour markets in Arab States,](#) and Al-Salem, K., & Al-Abdulrazzaq, D. (2021). "Migrant Contributions to the Healthcare Sector in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries." *Middle Eastern Health Journal*, 27(3), 165-177.

¹⁵ ILO 2023. *World Employment and Social Outlook 2023: [The value of essential work.](#)* Geneva: International Labour Office.

Socio-cultural contributions against the backdrop of anti-migrant sentiment in some contexts: People on the move enrich the cultural fabric of their countries and communities of destination through new languages, traditions, cuisines and artistic expressions. For example, before the outbreak of the conflict in Sudan, Sudanese migrants in Egypt established cultural centers and art galleries in Cairo, showcasing traditional and contemporary Sudanese art, music, and literature, which served as cultural hubs and spaces for cultural exchange in Egypt.¹⁶ In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the myriad cultural festivals and culinary traditions introduced by its diverse expatriate population have become central to the country's identity, promoting cross-cultural understanding and contributing to the enrichment of the local culture.¹⁷ Migrants in the Arab States region can act as catalysts for cultural diversity and innovation, enhancing the vibrancy and dynamism of their host societies. Yet, it is important to note that migrants often face barriers to inclusion and their socio-cultural contributions, including due to anti-migrant sentiment and discrimination. Encouraging and supporting rights-based advocacy, for instance through the enabling policy environment for the formation of migrant organizations and civil society groups, is crucial.

Guiding questions

- What are some examples of promising practices and lessons learned that relate to protecting and empowering migrant workers and enhancing their role in the development pathways?
- What are the main gaps and challenges to enhancing decent work for migrant workers, including domestic workers, labour and social protections, and empowerment of migrants and leveraging their role in sustainable development?
- Considering the diverse skill sets and potential migrants bring to their host communities/ countries and countries/ communities of origin, how can we elevate migrants' socio-economic contributions and upskilling (as relevant), ensuring benefits for both migrants and their host and home countries/ communities?
- How can policies and initiatives in the Arab States region better address gender inequalities and support the empowerment, rights, and protection of female migrants in recipient countries?
- How can the Arab States region most benefit from strengthened cooperation in terms of finance, capacity-building, policy advice, data gathering and analysis, technology, and multi-stakeholder partnerships, to support migrants' role in sustainable development?

¹⁶ Ahmed, F. (2019). "Cultural Crossroads: Sudanese Art and Education in Egypt." *African Cultural Studies*, 33(4), 456-474.

¹⁷ Jones, C. (2018). "Cultural Festivals and Economic Diversity in the UAE: A Study of the Socio-economic Impact of Expatriates." *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 11(3), 237-254.