

# Africa – Arab States Tripartite Interregional Meeting on Labour Migration

Virtual event, 15-16 November 2021

## Concept note

### Introduction and Context

Building on the growing political momentum to strengthen dialogue on labour migration across regions and to seek coordinated responses to the challenges and opportunities it poses, including in the context of the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on labour mobility, the African Union Commission (AUC) and the ILO, with support of the Government of Switzerland, are jointly organizing an inter-regional meeting engaging labour migration stakeholders from Africa and the Arab States.<sup>1</sup>

Currently, several million of African migrant workers are employed in the Arab states<sup>2</sup> across a number of sectors, including construction, manufacturing, agriculture, food services, retail trade, hospitality, and domestic and care work.<sup>3</sup> Demand for foreign labour in the Arab States creates opportunities for African workers to access more and better employment opportunities, earn higher wages, and learn new skills. At the same time, migrant workers play an essential role in the Arab States by filling labour market gaps driven by economic growth as well as changing demographics and lifestyles.

Despite the drop in migration flows over the past year linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, labour migration from Africa to the Arab States is projected to continue in years to come, along with a number of risks and challenges associated with it. In particular, serious challenges to the protection of human and labour rights of migrant workers remain across the labour migration cycle. Furthermore, little investment has been made in skills development, training or

---

<sup>1</sup> ILO defines the Africa region as encompassing the 54 North African and Sub-Saharan African countries.

<sup>2</sup> According to UN DESA's *International Migration Report 2020 (Highlights)*, the stock of African migrants in Western Asia (including the Arab states) is 4.1 million, of which 3.4 million are from North Africa.

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy, A., et al. (2018). *Africa Labour Migration to the GCC States: the Case of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda*, ITUC Africa.

recognition, which would contribute to better job matching and improved working conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed the significant social protection gaps faced by migrant workers. These factors effectively limit the development benefits of migration.

Aware of these common challenges to labour migration, and convinced of the importance of enhancing international cooperation to address them, in recent years, the African Union has facilitated engagement and consultations among key African countries of origin and Middle Eastern-GCC destination countries, in line with the objectives of the First Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2014-2023) of its Agenda 2063<sup>4</sup>. Among other initiatives, in 2019, the AUC organized a High level meeting of African Ambassadors in the Middle East and GCC, which was preceded by study visits to Kuwait and United Arab Emirates, under the auspices of the Joint Labour Migration Programme (JLMP)<sup>5</sup>. At the global level, the AUC has been an active participant in the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). The AUC has also spearheaded a number of recent regional initiatives aimed at strengthening the protection of migrant workers, including the forthcoming AU guidelines on bilateral labour migration agreements, and the AU Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of Migrant Workers, both set to be adopted by AU Member States by the end of 2021.

The Arab States have also indicated openness for greater collaboration across the Africa-Arab States migration corridors, notably through the invitation of the AUC and selected Regional Economic Communities and AU Member States to recent meetings of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD). The ADD has also provided space to develop initiatives to improve the labour migration experience for workers, such as the Comprehensive Information and Orientation Programme (CIOP)<sup>6</sup>. The Arab Regional Consultative Process on Migration and Refugees' Affairs, established in 2015, which includes selected origin countries in North Africa and the Horn of Africa, also provides a platform for discussion of migration issues in the Arab region.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Implementation Plan refers to the goal of achieving “a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development” through strategies such as implementing frameworks on labour migration governance, promoting policies leading to more responsible labour migration flows including adequate protection of the rights of migrant workers and their families, and reviewing bilateral labour agreements.

<sup>5</sup> The Joint Labour Migration Programme for Africa (JLMP) is an AU-led initiative supported by the ILO, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA).

<sup>6</sup> <http://abudhabidialogue.org.ae/projects/comprehensive-information-and-orientation-programmes-ciop>

For its part, the ILO, the UN specialized agency for the world of work, has in recent years organized a number interregional meetings specifically on labour migration between Arab States and Asia, which also provided for participation from African states in an observer capacity. These meetings ensured inclusive dialogue by bringing together governments, social partners and civil society organizations.<sup>7</sup>

Switzerland is a long term and trusted partner of the African Union, the ILO and of the Africa and Arab States region in the field of safe labour migration and fair recruitment.

In light of the current context and of the increasing commitment to multilateral exchanges on labour migration, a consultative meeting between African and Arab States will be convened by the African Union Commission. The meeting will be technically supported by the ILO FAIRWAY Programme, funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Additional technical support will be provided by the JLMP Priority and JLMP Action projects.

## Objective and areas for discussion

The purpose of the meeting is for governments, trade unions and employers' organizations, and other labour migration stakeholders, including civil society organizations, from key countries of origin and destination in Africa and the Arab States to **share knowledge and experiences on fair labour migration with specific attention to the impact of COVID-19 and how to 'build forward better'**. The meeting will take stock of progress and good practices, and identify key actions to achieve decent work and fair migration outcomes for both regions and through inter-regional cooperation.

By building on previous bilateral and multilateral dialogue between the two regions, the meeting is also intended to create further momentum for the establishment of a regular mechanism for multilateral cooperation and dialogue

---

<sup>7</sup> See respectively: [ILO Inter-regional Meeting on Labour Mobility between Asia and the Arab States: Sharing of experiences and progress under the Bali Declaration with specific focus on women migrant workers](#), Bangkok, Thailand, 3-4 December 2019. The [ILO Interregional Consultation on Labour Migration and Mobility from Asia and Africa to the Middle East](#), Beirut, Lebanon, 4-5 October 2017; [Inter-Regional Knowledge Sharing Forum on Realizing a Fair Migration Agenda for Migrant Domestic Workers in Africa, the Arab States and Asia](#), Madagascar, 5-7 May 2016.

There have also been efforts to harmonize approaches to labour migration within African origin countries, including the process of harmonizing labour migration policies in 10 countries in the East and Horn of Africa, led by Kenya.

between governments of African Union countries and the Arab States, as well as other relevant stakeholders, in the coming years<sup>8</sup>.

A rights-based approach, based on the principles of equal treatment and non-discrimination as enshrined in international labour standards and the ILO Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration, and other ILO tools and guidance, as well as international and regional human rights instruments will provide the foundation for the meeting. The role of social dialogue in promoting safe and fair migration and the gender dimensions of migration will be cross-cutting issues.

The meeting will explore issues and proposals around five key areas, in addition to an introductory session on labour migration trends and patterns. The theme of partnerships will be cross-cutting to take actions forward.

- a. **Skills development, recognition and mobility:** The meeting will provide an opportunity to review the changing employment landscape as a result of COVID-19 as well as the diversifying skills profiles of workers from African countries with an aim to (i) identify the skills and competency gaps in sectors and anticipate skills needs at all levels (low-, medium- and high-skilled) in a recovery scenario; (ii) explore the role that national governments, as well as social partners can play in facilitating skills development, jobs and skills matching; and (iii) foster partnerships to promote fair recruitment processes that effectively match workers' skills to employers' needs.
  
- b. **Fair recruitment.** Following on from the 2021 Global Forum for Responsible Recruitment<sup>9</sup>, the meeting will enable participants to (i) identify recent measures that have been undertaken to promote fair recruitment;<sup>10</sup> (ii) explore new mechanisms to ensure better oversight

---

<sup>8</sup> Under the forthcoming SDC funded JLMP Action development cooperation project, the AUC intends to support the establishment and regular meetings of a Continental Labour Migration Multilateral Cooperation Mechanism, as well as facilitate engagement between AUC and the Middle East and GCC for coordination of diplomatic missions.

<sup>9</sup> Organised by the ILO, IOM and the Institute for Human Rights and Business, with support of the European Union and the Government of Switzerland, among other development partners.  
<https://www.ihrb.org/employerpays/global-forum-for-responsible-recruitment>

<sup>10</sup> In particular, that recruitment fees and related costs are not charged to workers in line with the ILO General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment (2016) and the Definition of Recruitment Fees and Related Costs (2019), and that travel and identity documents are not retained by labour recruiters or employers.

of private recruitment agencies, including the role of technology in making recruitment practices more transparent and effective; (iii) ensure gender-responsive recruitment practices that recognize specific needs of women migrant workers, as well as the limited opportunities they often face in accessing recruitment processes that enable them to obtain regular migration status and enjoy a decent wage and working conditions.

- c. Social protection.** The critical role of social protection as a social and economic stabilizer has become all the more visible by the COVID-19 pandemic, yet coverage remains elusive for many migrant workers and their families. The meeting will allow for the presentation of recent research and exchanges on experiences in extending social protection access to migrant workers and ensuring the portability of benefits to protect against risks throughout the life cycle.
- d. Bilateral labour migration agreements (BLMAs).** A number of bilateral labour agreements and Memoranda of Understandings have been concluded between countries in Africa and the Arab States to better govern labour migration flows on the basis of shared responsibility. The AUC as well as the IGAD Secretariat have each taken initiatives to develop rights-based guidelines on BLAs for their member states, echoing the UN Network on Migration's ongoing work in this area. The discussion would enable: (i) exchange on challenges and good practices in operationalizing BLAs, especially in the context of COVID-19; (ii) presentation of recently developed rights-based guidance on BLAs.
- e. Promoting internal labour market mobility.** This session will discuss recent laws, regulations and policies and reflect on progress made, including in respect of measures which impede workers' freedom of movement, their right to terminate employment or change employers, taking into account any contractual obligations that may apply, and their right to return freely to their countries of origin.

## Expected outcomes and outputs

The interregional conference aims to contribute to building high-level and technical dialogue among policymakers and practitioners on both sides of the Africa-Arab States migration corridor, with the following **expected outcomes**:

1. Stock-taking of the current labour migration governance situation, recent trends, and persistent gaps in migrant workers' protection.
2. Identification of good practices and lessons learned and possible areas for further research as well as opportunities for further interregional collaboration.

The inter-regional meeting is also expected to pave the way for future inter-regional collaboration between Africa and the Arab States, including through the forthcoming JLMP Action Programme.

The meeting's **main outputs** will include:

- **Thematic briefs** for technical areas covered during the meeting, which will provide a synthesis of key issues, challenges, opportunities and recent practices. The briefs will be developed by the ILO in close consultation with the AUC and circulated in advance of the meeting to participants. They are intended to inform and guide discussions during the meeting.
- A **meeting report** summarizing interventions, discussions and key recommendations formulated by experts and participants;
- A series of **highlights videos** capturing key moments of each technical session of the meeting;
- An **online platform** with relevant meeting documents and a content library with publications, tools, videos, and other resources.

## Meeting Convener and Participants

The meeting will be **convened by the African Union Commission and the ILO**.

The meeting will be on invitation only, and open to senior technical staff from **Ministries of Labour and representatives from workers' and employers' organizations** from African Union Member States, Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), Lebanon and Jordan, with a specific focus on countries with significant

This activity is supported by the Government of Switzerland

labour migration flows across the Africa-Arab States corridor. Representatives from **regional economic communities** including COMESA, EAC, ECCAS, ECOWAS, IGAD, UMA and the League of Arab States, and regional workers' and employers' organizations will also be invited, including ITUC Africa, OATUU, SATUCC, ETUCS, OTUWA and OSTAC as well as representatives from several regional civil society organizations and private recruitment agency associations.

Relevant **UN agencies, donor representatives, researchers and academics** will provide technical inputs as observers. Delegations from Asian countries and other regions will also be invited as observers and resource persons.

## Dates and format

The interregional meeting is proposed to be held virtually over **two days on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2021**. The meeting will consist of a series of plenary sessions and thematic sessions. Preparatory meetings will be held in advance with workers' and employers' organizations on November 11<sup>th</sup>. Interpretation will be provided in 3 languages (English, French, and Arabic).

## Annex : List of participant countries<sup>11</sup> and institutions

### African Union Member States:

Algeria  
Burkina Faso  
Cameroon  
Cote D'Ivoire  
Democratic Republic of Congo  
Egypt  
Ethiopia  
Ghana  
Kenya  
Madagascar  
Morocco  
Nigeria  
Senegal  
Sudan  
Somalia  
Tanzania  
Tunisia  
Uganda

### Middle East - GCC countries:

Bahrain  
Jordan  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  
Kuwait  
Lebanon  
Oman  
Qatar  
United Arab Emirates

---

<sup>11</sup> Tripartite delegations will be invited from each country, composed of Government delegates, Employers' delegates and Workers' delegates. Other institutions including UN agencies, development partner agencies, civil society organizations, and research institutions will be invited as observers.

## Regional Economic Communities, intergovernmental organisations and social partner institutions:

African Union Commission (AUC)  
Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)  
East African Community (EAC)  
Economic Community of Central Africa States (ECCAS)  
Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)  
Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD)  
Union du Maghreb Arabe (UMA)  
GCC Executive Bureau  
League of Arab States (LAS)  
Africa-League of Arab States Secretariat  
Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC)  
Business Africa  
International Organization of Employers (IOE)  
International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)  
ITUC Africa  
OATUU  
SATUCC  
OTUWA  
EATUC  
OSTAC

## Donors

Government of Switzerland (SDC and SECO)  
Government of Sweden  
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)

## International Organizations

International Labour Organization (ILO)  
International Organization for Migration (IOM)