

Knowledge Platform for Migration Governance in Africa

Platform Policy Brief 06

Implications of Covid-19 on migration governance: The case of Ghana

This is the sixth policy brief by the Knowledge Platform (KP) for Migration Governance in Africa¹ coordinated by the African Diaspora Policy Centre. The platform is devoted to strengthening the interface between research, policy, and practice in the area of migration governance at continental, regional, national, and local levels. The motto of the platform is: organizing a knowledge network for better migration governance in Africa. It contributes to the migration and mobility dialogue from the perspective of Africa. Additionally, the platform is committed to contributing to a better migration governance system that works for the benefit of all. The platform organized its sixth webinar in February 2021 to reflect on the Covid-19 implications on migration governance. Ghana is taken as a case study in this regard. The webinars also provide an opportunity for the platform's network to convene virtually, since they cannot meet face-to-face as long as the Covid-19 pandemic rages across countries.

Introduction

This policy brief is the product of a webinar organized by the Platform in February 2021 to reflect on the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on migration governance. The webinar takes Ghana as a case study. The pandemic has negatively affected all countries around the globe in many and diverse ways. It has taken a heavy economic, social, and human toll on society, although the experience differs depending on the country and the continent it is located in. The impact of the pandemic has also been felt in the realm of migration, as many governments closed their borders to limit the flow of people coming into their countries. We have also witnessed a rise in hostility and xenophobia towards migrants since the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus. This policy brief describes the implications of the pandemic on migration governance using Ghana as a case study. Even before the Covid-19 outbreak, our ECOWAS webinar in 2020 highlighted sporadic flare-ups and tensions directed towards migrants in Ghana. Cases were cited in which Nigerian migrants in the country were frequently confronted with hostilities from local communities and even from the authorities in some instances.

The webinar reflected on the current state of migration governance in Ghana, specifically in relation to the policy and practical implications arising from the pandemic. It also examined how Covid-19 has affected those policy processes instituted by Ghana's government to achieve the development goals of the Global Migration Compact (GCM) and Sustainable

¹ A project assisted by the German Government via the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. The content reflects the author's views and the GIZ is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information in this document.

Development Goals (SDGs) in the short-, medium-, and long-terms. The webinar concluded by highlighting general lessons learned with respect to the implications of the pandemic on migration governance in the case of Ghana.²

Migration Dynamics in Ghana

Ghana's external migration streams come mainly from countries in the region. However, most migrants in Ghana are internal migrants moving from one place to another in search of better livelihoods. For instance, in 2015, the Ghana Statistical Service reported 6,488,064 internal migrants³ and this number has continued to increase. Local experts have reported that the Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected the livelihoods of millions of internal migrants in Ghana, using the female head porters, known as *kayayei*, as an example. It is clear that the pandemic is exacerbating the already precarious conditions of migrants in the country. In particular, as the local experts noted, it is creating a situation where those affected by the loss of their livelihood or who are faced with limited employment opportunities may be forced to decide to move from rural areas to urban centres like Accra, or even from Ghana to the sub-region and beyond.

Ghana is a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which has had maintained a free movement of persons protocol since 1979. According to the United Nations International Migrant Stock 2019, the number of migrants in the ECOWAS region in general is estimated to be around 7,224,959 million. The real number could be much higher, however, as many migrants fall under the radar of official national statistics. In the case of Ghana, the number of international migrants in the country is estimated at around 466,780 persons, many of whom arrive from other ECOWAS states.⁴ Again, this number is likely to be much higher. Most of these migrants in Ghana are active in the agriculture and trade sectors, which are now struggling with the impact of the pandemic and have lost their jobs as a result. In turn, the pandemic exacerbates the precarious conditions of these migrants who are extremely vulnerable in times of crisis.

Cross-border circular mobility is common in Ghana, with merchants, farmers, and itinerant traders drawn to cross-border markets, such as those in Aflao, Elubo, and Sampa. The halting of these lifeline trading activities due to border closures is not only negatively impacting the economies of vibrant frontier communities but has also led to many migrants becoming stranded. Indeed, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there are now around over 20,000 migrants in the region stranded at various borders in the West and Central African regions, including 1,800 Ghanaian migrants waiting in transit centres in countries such as Niger. If mobility restrictions persist, it is likely that these numbers will rise, increasing pressure on consular assistance and border management systems. Ghana is also currently hosting 12,024 refugees from neighbouring countries in conflict, including Côte

² The Platform is grateful to guest speaker, Mr. David Tette, for his very informative presentation on the implications of Covid-19 on migration governance in Ghana. Mr. Tette is the Senior National Program Coordinator for the Ghanaian-German Centre for Jobs, Migration and Reintegration, Program Migration for Development (PME).

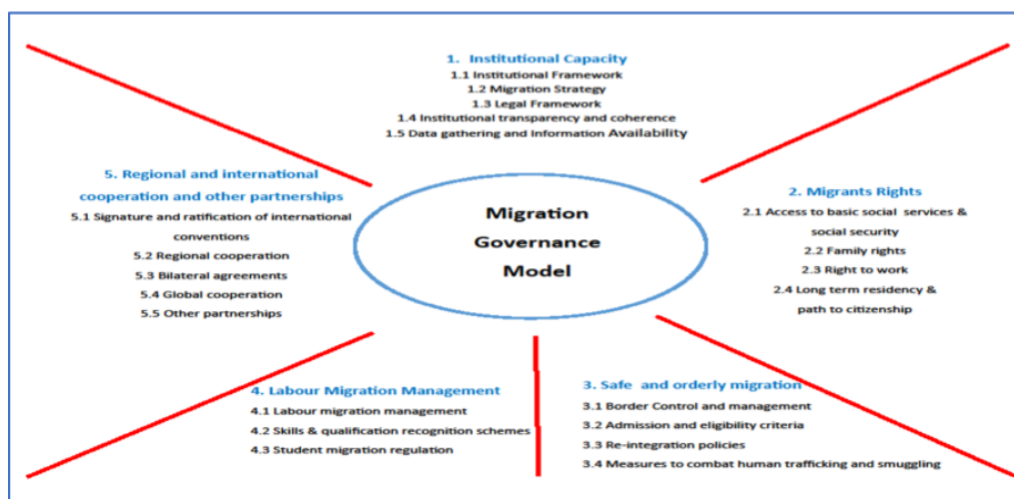
³ See also the Ghana Statistical Service Labour Force Report 2015 at www2.statsghana.gov.gh

⁴ This is according to the United Nations International Migrant Stock 2019.

d'Ivoire, Togo, and Liberia. In short, this is the context in which the current migration dynamics, negatively affected by the pandemic, are playing out in Ghana.

Ghanaian Migration Governance System Revisited

The government of Ghana has been trying to establish a workable migration governance system in the country since 2010. Essentially, it aims to have a migration governance system that effectively addresses the different facets of migration and mobility dynamics. Ghana has long been an origin, transit, and host country simultaneously. To this end, the government reached out to various national institutions, such as the Centre for Migration Studies (CMS) in Accra, for technical support and expert input in the formulation of its migration policy. In addition, the African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC) provided a training workshop on migration issues to the government of Ghana in 2011 and 2012.⁵ Along the way, the government also turned to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for technical assistance. This was at a time when the IOM was developing its migration governance model, which the experts reflected on in the fourth policy brief produced by the Platform in October 2020. The fundamental components addressed by the IOM migration governance model are: institutional capacity; migrants' rights; safe and orderly migration; labour migration management; and regional and international cooperation and other partnerships.⁶ According to the IOM, a good migration model requires the existence of significant institutional capacity, which makes it possible to develop an effective institutional framework, migration strategy, and legal framework. The model also guides governments to establish a framework for institutional transparency and coherence, as well as data-gathering systems and mechanisms that make information available to all stakeholders. For more insight, see the table below which details the good migration governance model developed by IOM in 2015.



⁵ The reports of both training workshops can be found on the ADPC website at www.diaspora-centre.org

⁶ Source: IOM 2015.

Hence, from 2015, the IOM offered technical assistance to the government of Ghana to improve its existing migration governance system. IOM experts coached and instructed the government of Ghana to adopt the migration governance model outlined above, which defines what a comprehensive migration policy system ought to be in each country. As a result, with the IOM's guidance, the government of Ghana modified its migration governance system and created a new National Migration Policy (NMP) in 2016. It should be noted here that, in addition to the IOM, the Swiss Secretariat for Migration (SEM) and others have supported the Ghanaian government in the formulation of this new migration policy.

Today, the key state institutions in charge of implementing this new policy in the country are: the Ministry of the Interior, which is tasked with the overall coordination of the national migration policy; the Ghana Refugee Board (GRB), responsible for managing refugees and asylum applications; and the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations (MELR). As labour migration is the dominant stream of migration within and from Ghana to elsewhere, the MELR oversees the NMP. Its goal is to improve labour migration governance in order to harness the benefits of labour migration for socio-economic development in Ghana. The Ministry of the Interior is the custodian of the NMP and, together with the National Commission for Development, it jointly organizes sessions to discuss policy matters, stakeholder partnerships, and roles and responsibilities for effective policymaking processes. The government of Ghana is currently planning to establish the Ghana National Commission on Migration (GNCM) to support its aims. The GNCM will be tasked with coordinating, centralising, and managing all matters related to migration in Ghana and beyond.

In sum, Ghana is a good example of a government committed to implementing a workable migration governance system, as will be elaborated in the section below. The pandemic has had a huge impact on the Ghanaian government's response to Ghanaian migrants both inside and outside the country who have been severely affected by the virus. In this regard, Ghana provides important insights into how the government used the machinery of its migration policy to react to this moment of crisis. It also provides a good example to other countries in the region grappling with the challenges of addressing migration dynamics in this pandemic period. In terms of an action, the case of Ghana clearly provides several policy lessons worth replicating elsewhere.

Migration Governance System in Practice

As will be explained in this section, the case of Ghana demonstrates a working migration governance system despite its imperfections. Clearly, the current migration governance system in Ghana is a work in progress and can be improved, however, the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic forced the government of Ghana to activate its migration governance policy to respond to the plight of migrants within and beyond its borders who had been neglected before the crisis. Two crucial developments must be noted here with respect to the labour rights of migrants, an issue that perhaps would not have been a policy matter prior to the pandemic.

The first is the development of a new policy on domestic work. This is a landmark achievement for the regulation of domestic work and will ensure full labour protection for

domestic workers. The policy attempts to improve the working conditions of an estimated six million plus internal migrants in the country, many of which are domestic workers. Often, they are women and local newspapers regularly report on their mistreatment, exploitation, and abuse by employers. This new policy obliges the employer and the domestic worker to sign a written contract, in a bid to avoid domestic worker abuse and unacceptable conditions of service. The lack of labour rights protection for domestic workers in Ghana has been a concern for many years yet was neglected by the government until the pandemic erupted. The government of Ghana finally responded to this problem by developing the policy on domestic work in 2020. The local experts see this new domestic work policy, dubbed the Labour (Domestic Workers') Regulations, as a milestone in addressing the vulnerability of internal migrants in the country.

The second development is the enacting of a policy for labour regulations that restricts the export of Ghanaian labour abroad without proper government oversight. This new government policy has temporarily suspended employment agencies in the country from recruiting Ghanaians for domestic work abroad due to reported human rights abuses. It is specifically aimed at the Gulf States where many incidents of abuse and inhuman living conditions of Ghanaian migrant workers have been reported. Indeed, it has become clear that Ghanaian migrant labourers in the Gulf States are vulnerable to regular mistreatment, exploitation, and human rights abuses. Ghanaian newspapers have reported that some of those who were badly mistreated wanted to return home immediately. Local experts cited cases in which Ghanaian labour migrants returning from the Gulf States are now receiving support from the Program Migration for Development (PME) in Ghana. The PME supports returning labour migrants as they settle back into the community and start earning a livelihood once again. It is noteworthy that the newly enacted labour regulation policy forbids the Labour Department from issuing any licences to employment agencies engaged in recruiting labour for the Gulf States without proper government scrutiny. The government is not opposed to Ghanaians wanting to work abroad, but it is concerned about protecting their labour rights through bilateral agreements and clear regulations. Moreover, the government wants to make sure that the Gulf States and other countries respect and uphold the labour rights of Ghanaian migrants and improve their living conditions. According to the government, this is in line with Ghana's international migration commitment as a signatory to the Global Compact on Migration (GCM) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Conclusion

We can draw several lessons from the implications of Covid-19 on migration governance in the case of Ghana. Firstly, the current migration governance policy in Ghana provides an example of a system working (despite its imperfections) to improve the labour conditions of migrants. It is important to state here that this applies to Ghanaian migrants and not migrants from other nationalities residing in the country.

The second lesson is that the Ghanaian government is committed to making sure that its migration governance system works better in times of crisis. Arguably, it has demonstrated during the current pandemic that this is indeed the case. The third lesson is the landmark policy attention that the government of Ghana has given to the working conditions of Ghanaian migrants both within the country and abroad. This new policy attention may not

have been possible without the pandemic, which vividly magnified the enduring mistreatment and exploitation of mostly female domestic migrants and Ghanaian migrant workers in the Gulf States in particular. The fourth lesson is the importance of pre-emptive action in terms of creating a social safety net for the poor in times of crisis. In response to the pandemic, the government of Ghana established a Covid-19 Trust Fund to support those hit hardest by the virus. The Fund has provided significant assistance in the form of food, medicine, and hygiene kits, to the poor, internally stranded migrants, and the most vulnerable of society in response to the negative impact of the lockdown. A key lesson is the importance of developing a permanent social safety net for the poor, not only in Ghana but also in other countries in Africa that can be called upon in the event of calamities such as droughts, disasters, and diseases.⁷ The fifth lesson highlights that the government of Ghana has responded poorly to the needs of migrants from other West African countries within its borders. It is clear that the government adopted an “our nationals first” stance, a position taken by many other countries in response to the pandemic crisis. The UN has called for the protection of the fundamental rights of migrants and points to the economic contributions they make to their communities of origin and destination in the short- and long-terms. With this in mind, it is crucial that migrants, both international and internal, are included in Ghana’s Covid-19 response and recovery plans.⁸

In sum, it is worth illuminating that the new landmark policy actions instituted by the government of Ghana uses the resources at its disposal to ensure that the migration governance system works in times of crisis. This policy brief also offers general lessons for other governments in the region and beyond who are also grappling with the impact of the pandemic. As the local experts so fittingly expressed, Ghana, just like other countries, needs to do more for *all* migrants.

The analysis in this policy brief is informed by the knowledge, experience, and expertise of the African migration policy experts who participated in the sixth webinar organized by the Knowledge Platform for Migration Governance in Africa. The added value of the African migration policy experts in the policy discussion, devoted to strengthening the institutional capacity of migration governance, is tremendous. The experts articulate a less familiar African narrative in the discussion, closely informed by insider observation, local perspective, specific country experience, and deeper understanding about the complexity and challenges of the multi-facets of migration and mobility dynamics on the continent, which receive little policy attention. The experts who participated in the sixth webinar of the Platform represented different partner countries in Africa, namely: Ghana, Ethiopia, Tunisia, Nigeria, and Senegal.

⁷ Thomas Piketty proposed instituting a permanent social safety net and called on developing countries to seize the opportunity presented by the Covid-19 pandemic to improve the living conditions of the poor once and for all in a meaningful manner. Piketty is a French economist and author of the 2014 book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, which explored increasing economic inequality and the need for wealth taxes. Piketty’s interview on this topic was published in early 2020 in Democracy Now. www.democracynow.org

⁸ Briefing Note #6, June 2020. In this briefing note the UN succinctly describes the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on migrants in Ghana.