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ACROSS ARTIFICIAL BORDERS: *An assessment of labour migration in the ECOWAS region*

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Migration and mobility issues have dominated the global discourse in recent years. Governments and development agencies are increasingly recognizing the potential of migration in contributing to socioeconomic and human development of migrants and their families. In West Africa, attention at the national level has often been placed on South–North migration. However, contemporary mobility patterns indicate that only a small share of West African migrants actually moves to the global North and that internal and inter-country movements within the region are a central feature of peoples' livelihood strategies. Indeed, internal migration alone is almost four times greater than international migration in the West Africa region.

The lack of reliable data on these major South–South labour migration patterns in the region and their links to development impedes the current efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) governments to design relevant evidence-based policies. This study aims to address the need for data on intraregional labour migration and improve the evidence base for programmes and policies seeking to facilitate mobility for development within the ECOWAS region.

Methodology

The methodology of the study is based on secondary data collected from available administrative data sources, surveys and censuses in all 15 ECOWAS countries and is complemented by interviews with key informants, including policymakers, immigration officials and statistical offices. Surveyed countries include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

Key findings

Institutional frameworks on labour migration and labour markets in West Africa are complex, with a wide range of government departments, agencies and private recruitment institutions involved.

Data collection systems

The study highlights the **absence of comprehensive, reliable and accurate data on migration and labour markets** as a major obstacle to the facilitation of labour mobility. This is partly due to a variety of different migration contexts and a multiplicity of institutions in charge of migration data collection systems, all of which work with different interests and priorities.

In many ECOWAS countries data are often outdated and not disaggregated, and comparability of migration data is hindered by **lack of harmonization of definitions**, particularly with reference to the duration required to be abroad to be considered migrants.

Although labour migration between countries in the ECOWAS region has been and still is the dominant form of migration flows, and many of the countries recognize the need for a formal framework guiding labour market information systems, **none of the 15 countries covered in this study have functional labour market information systems (LMIS).** Only Senegal, the Gambia and Ghana have made some efforts towards establishing such systems. Given the lack of data collection and dissemination, institutions are missing out on the opportunity to monitor and evaluate the structure of their labour markets for policymaking and programming.

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Labour migration flows and migrants' profiles

Although today almost all West African countries both send and receive migrants, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, the Gambia Ghana and Guinea are the most popular destination countries, with Côte d'Ivoire having the highest number of nationals of other ECOWAS member countries in absolute terms.

Although the direction of flows has been changing over time in response to political and economic factors, in general, **intraregional labour migration has been dominated by a North–South movement from countries of Sahel West Africa** (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) **to the mineral- and plantation-rich coastal countries**, notably Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia and Senegal. More recently, conflict situations have also made Liberia, Sierra Leone, and to some extent Côte d'Ivoire, migrant source countries.

The majority of West African migrants in the region are not highly educated and tend to work in the informal sector as traders, artisans, and farmers. Supply of labour is outstripping demand in the region.

Legal and policy framework

Despite ratification of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment, in practice there are still **restrictive policies by Member States to protect certain sectors of their economies for their nationals**. National laws and regulations often do not allow ECOWAS nationals equal opportunities for employment in all sectors.

Although measures such as the ECOWAS passport, abolition of visas and residence permits have preceded the adoption of the Common Approach, there are **few deliberate policies or programmes at the national level geared towards meeting the objectives of the ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration.** Gradual implementation of the Free Movement Protocol in ECOWAS countries have not yet led to free rights of residence at the national level.

Recommendations

Legislative, regulatory and practical measures should be adopted at the national level to implement the strategic priorities and action plans of the ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration. Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are made to facilitate intraregional labour mobility in the region:

a) ***Enhance migration data collection capacities*** **-** the study calls for the **adoption of common migration data collection methods**, including harmonization of migration and labour market related concepts and definitions, to promote effective collaboration among main stakeholders charged with migration and labour mobility data collection. Governments are encouraged to take steps to enhance the capacity of national statistical offices, immigration departments and labour institutions at local, district and regional levels in **collecting and exchanging labour market and migration information** among MDAs, civil society groups as well as research and training institutions, thus allowing the comparing of migration statistics among member countries, research and informed decision-making.

b) ***Build comprehensive data on labour markets and mobility*** **–** the study recommends that governments **conduct periodic labour market and migration surveys** to ascertain labour needs and supply as wells as **studies on intraregional migration and the implementation of ECOWAS protocols.**

c) In order to harness labour migration potentials, governments should work to ensure the integration of labour migration and migration issues in general into national development planning agendas and regional frameworks. Governments should **prioritize the harmonization of travel documents and migration policies in the region**. The achieve this, efforts should be made to **build the capacities of government officials, including customs and immigration officers, police and security, in migration governance** and to **institutionalize training initiatives**, exchange of information and networks replacing ongoing ad hoc arrangements.

See study for detailed references

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