



Migrant workers and remittances in the context of COVID-19 in sub-Saharan Africa

MAIN MESSAGES

- **African migrants¹ stimulate economic growth and development** in areas of destination, transit and origin through their labour, skills transfer, consumption and investments. Their remittances also make significant contributions to food security, human capital, rural development and overall Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in areas of origin.
- **The impact of COVID-19 affects migrant workers disproportionately.** Often precarious working conditions and overcrowded living and transport arrangements increase their vulnerability to contagion and loss of employment, threatening their health and livelihoods. Those working under informal arrangements, commonly in the agriculture sector, are largely excluded from accessing real-time reliable information, social protection, healthcare and government response measures.
- **Urban-to-rural return migration increases due to lockdowns and job losses in cities.** This context poses challenges and opportunities in rural sectors, while many return migrants face stigmatization as potential carriers of the virus.
- **A 23 percent decline in remittances flow into sub-Saharan Africa (SSA),** as a result of economic downturns, restrictions in movement and challenges sending transfers to SSA, is expected to heavily impact the livelihoods of households and countries that rely on them for food and other basic expenditures, such as health and education.
- **The safe movement of workers in the agrifood system within and between countries should be facilitated, recognizing their vital contribution to food security.** To this end, occupational safety and health measures should be put in place in the workplace, housing and transportation means, working visas extended, and temporary work permits conceded.
- **The inclusion of migrants, regardless of their work or migratory status, in COVID-19 socio-economic impact assessments, response and recovery plans (including social protection programmes) will reduce the risk of transmission** for the entire population while safeguarding the livelihoods of many households falling into poverty as a result of the pandemic. The “leave no one behind” approach takes a public-health dimension in addition to a human-rights one.
- **Coordinated, multisectoral and multilevel responses that are migrant-sensitive in their design and include the perspective of migrant associations and diaspora,** in addition to responses from governments, the private sector and producer organizations, should be developed in the region to ensure sustainable policies that go beyond the crisis and build back better. Such

¹ A migrant is any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from their habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is (IOM, 2011).

interventions should be gender-sensitive and tailored to specific country contexts (For a global analysis see: FAO. 2020. *Migrant workers and the COVID-19 pandemic*.)

MAIN POLICY ISSUES

Context in the African region

Labour migration² in Africa is predominantly intraregional with nearly 80 percent occurring within the boundaries of the continent (ILO, 2020a). In 2017, SSA countries hosted approximately 11.9 million migrant workers, of which 8.3 million are males and 3.6 million are females (ILO, 2018). Other noteworthy destination areas for African migrants include the conventional migration patterns to Europe and North America, as well as growing migration flows to the Middle East and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Although official statistics largely underestimate migrants' **contribution to the economy** due to informal employment arrangements in sectors such as agriculture, where many migrants work as seasonal labourers, significant drivers of migrant labour within the continent have been identified in the agriculture, fishing, mining, construction as well as the service sectors. In countries such as **Côte d'Ivoire**, it is estimated that immigrants' contribution to the GDP reached up to 19 percent, with the agricultural sector representing the main employer, while in **South Africa**, it is estimated that immigrants may increase per capita income by 5 percent (OECD/ILO, 2018).

In areas of origin, remittances represent an important source of income for many rural and urban households who rely on them mostly to cover basic domestic expenditures such as food, housing, education and health. They represent the main source of foreign exchange income in SSA and account for significant shares of countries' GDP. In 2019, remittances accounted for up to 34.4 percent of the national GDP in **South Sudan**, 21.3 percent of the national GDP in **Lesotho** and 15.5 percent of the GDP in the **Gambia**. **Nigeria**, the largest recipient of remittances in SSA, received approximately USD 23.8 billion; while countries such as **Ghana**, **Kenya** and the **Senegal** received USD 3.5 billion, USD 2.8 billion and USD 2.5 billion, respectively (World Bank, 2020a).

Internal remittances have historically been harder to track and, therefore, receive less attention than international transfers. However, it is understood that in SSA internal migrants³ tend to be poorer than those migrating internationally, that they originate mostly from rural areas, and that large amounts of poor rural households depend on these transfers for their livelihoods. Estimates suggest that in 2005, there may have been up to 113 million internal migrants in the continent, including Northern Africa (Adhikari, 2020). Young people⁴ are particularly prone to migrate in search of better opportunities and the fulfilment of their personal goals and aspirations. Youths in Africa are currently facing high unemployment and underemployment rates, and many are moving away from rural areas.

² Labour migration is defined as the movement of persons from one State to another, or within their own country of residence, for the purpose of employment (IOM, 2011).

³ Internal migration is defined as a movement of people from one area of a country to another area of the same country for the purpose, or with the effect, of establishing a new residence. This migration may be temporary or permanent. Internal migrants move but remain within their country of origin (such as rural to urban migration) (IOM, 2011).

⁴ There is no universally agreed international definition of the youth age group. For statistical purposes, the UN defines 'youth', as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years while, according to the African Union (AU), young people are aged between the ages of 15 and 35 years.

COVID-19 affects migrant workers and their families disproportionately

In the context of COVID-19, measures put in place within and between countries to contain the health crisis, including restrictions of movement such as lockdowns, travel bans, and physical distancing measures, are affecting international and internal African migrants in areas of origin, transit and destination, resulting in major impacts on economic activities and employment availability. In addition to challenges in the health sector, many countries have started to face difficulties in other sectors. Agriculture faces difficulties, especially as farming seasons begin with labour shortages, due to restrictions in agricultural workers' movements.

Although many migrant workers continue to provide indispensable services during the crisis, such as those in the agrifood sector, they are generally among the most **vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic** and to falling into poverty. A large share of African migrants, in particular those under seasonal, informal or casual working arrangements, face disproportional challenges: being highly exposed to contagion given their often precarious working conditions and overcrowded living and transport arrangements; having a limited or a lack of access to preventive information and healthcare; often losing their sources of income due to travel restrictions and business closures; often lacking access to social protection; and being excluded from most government response plans.

In SSA, large numbers of households have at least one internal migrant, many of whom are rural youths employed in urban areas (such as 42 percent of households in Uganda and 35 percent of households in Kenya) (World Bank, 2020b). As many poor wage workers in cities lose their jobs due to the effects of the pandemic, **urban to rural migration gathers pace**, putting immediate pressure on food security, family resources, and overall livelihoods in rural areas, despite potential advantages inherent to the inflow of skilled and semi-skilled labour. Return migrants, in some cases, face **stigmatization** and discrimination, perceived as potential carriers of the virus and as increasing the risk of exposure to COVID-19.

Moreover, restrictions in movement and border closures challenge the livelihoods of large numbers of migrants typically employed as **seasonal labourers** in agriculture, fisheries and mining in neighbouring countries. **Pastoralists**, among the most vulnerable people in the region, are also prevented from moving with their animals in search of water and pasture, or to trade, with potential consequences on their food security and livelihoods. In the **Sahel**, nomadic pastoralists who have been moving across borders for centuries in search of pasture for their animals, in particular during the months of April and May, are no longer able to do so. In **Kenya**, COVID-19 is posing additional challenges to pastoralists already suffering from the severe desert locust invasion that has limited forage available for livestock. The dire situation has the potential to intensify resource-based conflict in the region.

Movement restrictions in the context of the pandemic have also led to a sudden increase in **stranded migrants** in transit. In countries such as the **Niger**, at the end of March 2020, the International Organization for Migration assisted over 2 000 stranded migrants of various nationalities, with concerns over the significant number of migrant flows despite lockdown (IOM, 2020). In **Libya**, one of the main transit areas for African migrants trying to reach Europe, restrictions have prevented humanitarian boats from rescuing migrants stranded at sea, forcing them to return to Libya (Einasse, 2020). Other countries, such as **Ethiopia**, have received thousands of irregular Ethiopian migrants back into the country, mostly expelled from the Saudi Arabia and Djibouti. Returning migrants enter through different points in the country amid risks of cross-border transmission in quarantine centres (OCHA, 2020). The mobility of migrants and the high density of quarantine centres, informal settlements and managed camps — hosting

millions of displaced populations in the continent⁵ — make them particularly vulnerable to contagion.

Significant decline in remittances to severely impact African households

Challenges faced by migrant workers amid the pandemic are already impacting the flow of remittances into the region. The World Bank projects a **decline of total remittance flows** into SSA of approximately 23 percent in 2020, decreasing from an estimated USD 48 billion in 2019 to a forecasted USD 37 billion in 2020 (World Bank, 2020a). The decline is expected to exacerbate poverty in the region and hit households that rely on them, some of which might resort to negative coping strategies, such as distress selling of assets or child labour. Economic downturns are already visible in migrant destination areas (the European Union, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America, the Middle East and China) that account for nearly 25 percent of all remittances sent to the region. This dramatic reduction in remittances is expected to severely impact SSA economies.

The crisis has also made sending remittances to SSA countries challenging since most payments are still cash-based and some money transfer operators (MTOs) have closed or reduced their working hours during lockdowns. On the other hand, the use of digital technology to send remittances is currently on the rise, despite many migrants and their families' limited financial inclusion or limited access to digital services. The **persistently high cost of sending remittances**, at about 9 percent in SSA (considerably above the SDG target of less than 3 percent), does little to help.

The Southern African subregion generally represents the most expensive corridor in remittance transfers, excluding the Ghana-to-Nigeria corridor that hit the record high of over 20 percent of the value sent, during the last quarter of 2019 (World Bank, 2020a).

In **Somalia**, where remittances reached a total of USD 1.4 billion, (representing a significant 23 percent of the country's GDP) in 2015 (World Bank, 2016), the decline in transfers, compounded by other ongoing crises (such as desert locust infestation, droughts, floods and conflicts), may have impacts on hunger and poverty. Somali MTOs have already reported substantial drops in transfers during the pandemic, due to loss of income by Somali diaspora, financial system barriers and physical distancing measures. In addition, Somali MTOs reported their inability to reach remote communities, including internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugee settlements, where the most vulnerable live (Nexus, 2020).

Although the economic impact of lost remittances in the region could eventually be reversed if transfers bounce back, lost investments on food security, nutrition, education and health, especially for children, risk having more permanent consequences and pose additional challenges to poor households' ability to escape cyclical patterns of poverty.

CURRENT MEASURES AND PRACTICES

Several countries have started to take specific steps to ease some of the constraints faced by migrants and their families due to COVID-19. Many states have **extended migrant workers' visas and work permits**: **Kenya's** Ministry of Labour and Social Protection indicated that regular migrant workers who lose their jobs as a result of COVID-19 shall not be regarded as irregular migrants

⁵ Africa has registered more than 25 million forcibly displaced people who are either IDPs or refugees. The majority of these displaced people originate from the following countries: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan (Africa Center, 2020).

and that their residence or work permits will remain valid for the time period stipulated previously (ILO, 2020b). **Tunisia** suspended the expiration of visas from March 2020 until the end of the crisis, declared that migrants are now eligible to receive financial or in-kind support, and called on landlords to postpone the rents for the months of March and April 2020 (Wirtz, 2020). **South Africa's** Department of Home Affairs announced that clients of Refugee Reception Centres whose visas expired would not be penalized provided they legalized their visas once the lockdown is lifted.

Some destination countries to which African workers migrate have tried to ensure that migrants have access to some [social protection measures and public services](#). **Portugal**, for example, has decided to temporarily grant full citizenship rights to all migrants and asylum seekers currently in the country, allowing them to have access to public services such as healthcare (ILO, 2020b). **Saudi Arabia** announced it will cover testing and subsequent medical expenses of all residents, including expats and those in violation of residency laws (ILO, 2020b). **Qatar** declared that migrant workers who are in quarantine or undergoing treatment will receive full salaries. **China** announced an accelerated disbursement of unemployment insurance and extension to migrant workers. **Senegal** revealed a XOF 12.5 billion support to its diaspora, as part of key fiscal policy responses to COVID-19 (IMF, 2020). **Nigeria** announced the inclusion of internally displaced persons (IDP) in a two-month government response plan covering food rations for vulnerable segments of society (Ailemen, 2020). **Madagascar** is currently in the process of reviewing its labour code to ensure the protection of migrant workers, following the recent repatriation of hundreds of female workers from Kuwait (Randriatsoa, 2020).

Seasonal, migrant and casual workers are being recognized as [essential frontline workers](#) in agriculture and food security in some migrant destination countries. **Spain**, for example, announced it will authorize temporary recruitments of tens of thousands of immigrants or jobless persons to address labour shortages in agriculture (InfoMigrants, 2020). Spain also issued Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) guidelines, adapted to the workplace in the context of COVID-19, for the agriculture, fisheries and food industry. Other countries, including the **France** and the **United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland**, issued specific OSH guidelines for seasonal workers in agriculture (EU-OSHA, 2020). The **Portuguese** municipality of Odemeira is preparing 500 quarantine places for foreign agricultural workers who often live in close quarters, to prevent transmission within this population (European Commission, 2020). The **United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland** also amended its COVID-19 Health Protection Regulations to include [remittance service providers as essential services](#), exempting them from lockdown restrictions (AFFORD, 2020).

With the urban-to-rural return migration of poor-wage workers, producer organizations, often serving as main rural employers, are engaging with these returnees to assist them meet their needs. The crises might prove to be an opportunity to capitalize on the [skills and value-added](#) of youths and other former urban workers, including on digital technologies linked to agrifood systems. On the other hand, in some countries and regions, unions are focusing their efforts on [protecting migrant workers' rights](#). For example, the **Southern African Trade Union Coordination Council (SATUCC)** addressed the situation of migrant workers, with considerations for their safe return to their habitual workplaces and access to public health measures for themselves and their families; and the **Réseau Syndical Migrations Méditerranéennes Subsahariennes (RSMMS)** — in the name of its 30 member organizations from Western Africa, Northern Africa and Southern Europe — called for a range of protection measures for migrant workers and those in transit, including access to national health systems in destination countries and access to the same rights and services as national workers (ILO, 2020b).

The **African Union (AU)** Labour Migration Advisory Committee, in a recent statement on COVID-19, addressed the well-being of African migrant workers, who are mostly found in the informal economy. The committee has called on Member States to review their labour migration agreements, and encouraged governments to create unemployment insurance plans and extend social security to workers in the informal economy and rural sectors (AU, 2020).

The **Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)** works with its Members to support initiatives that address the specific challenges and opportunities of migrants, integrating them into the range of response and recovery measures within specific country contexts.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Recognize agricultural workers — including casual, seasonal, and permanent migrant workers — as essential service providers during the crisis.** In recognition of agricultural workers' vital contribution to food security, their safe movement within and across countries should be facilitated, protecting their health and avoiding the risk of contagion for the entire population. Occupational safety and health measures must be ensured. This includes: providing adequate access to information on prevention and treatment; providing and ensuring the use of appropriate protective gear; implementing physical distancing measures at the workplace; improving transportation and housing; providing access to water and sanitation, and ensuring access to healthcare and health insurance.
- **Regularize migrants' presence in destination countries to meet labour demands in the agrifood system.** The duration of visas can be extended for existing workers, and temporary permits can be granted to seasonal and casual workers, in particular during labour shortages caused by border closures and restrictions in movement, as well as upcoming farming seasons in many countries.
- **Promote labour-matching platforms in agrifood systems.** Promote platforms that facilitate matching of supply and demand in skills and labour to overcome labour disruptions in agricultural value chains. This would promote employment opportunities for migrants returning to rural areas. Producer organizations, migration associations and diaspora, including youth groups, as well as the private sector, should be included in the design and implementation of such initiatives.
- **Expand social protection programmes to migrant workers** in areas of origin, transit and destination, including social assistance (such as cash or in-kind transfers and public works), social insurance, and employment promotion programmes. Existing programmes could be expanded to cover internal and international migrants who have lost their sources of income due to the pandemic, as well as households in areas of origin affected by the decline in remittances.
- **Design inclusive COVID-19 response programmes, tailored to country contexts, that are migrant-sensitive,** ensuring considerations that facilitate migrants' inclusion. For example: communicate using appropriate languages and means; ensure coverage in programmes, regardless of migrants' legal status; leverage humanitarian databases for registration; and use multiple targeting approaches to reach informal or irregular migrants, such as collaboration with money transfer operators and self-enrolment.
- **Monitor remittance flows and their impact on livelihoods,** contributing to wider COVID-19 socio-economic impact assessments, and informing the appropriate design of response and recovery interventions. During the crisis, money transfer operators should be considered

essential service providers and remain open despite lockdowns, while regulated digital remittance channels, currently on the rise, should be encouraged to facilitate transfers.

- **Support efforts to reduce remittance costs**, from a current average of 8.9 percent, towards the SDG 10.c target of less than 3 percent by 2030. To this end, it is important to increase financial inclusion in the region, promote emerging remittance models that use digital technology, and improve the regulatory environment to encourage market competition.

REFERENCES

Adhikari, S. 2020. COVID-19 is reducing domestic remittances in Africa: What does it mean for poor households? In: *World Bank Blogs* [online]. Washington, DC. [Cited 9 June 2020]. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/african/covid-19-reducing-domestic-remittances-africa-what-does-it-mean-poor-households>

AFFORD. 2020. UK government classifies remittances as essential service. In: *Afford* [online]. London. [Cited 1 June 2020]. <https://www.afford-uk.org/uk-govt-classifies-remittances-as-essential-service/>

Ailemen, A. 2020. Full text of President Buhari's broadcast. In: *Business Day* [online]. Lagos, Nigeria. [Cited 27 May 2020]. <https://businessday.ng/lead-story/article/full-text-of-president-buharis-broadcast/>

AU. 2020. Statement of the African Union (AU) Labour Migration Advisory Committee (LMAC) on the novel Coronavirus Disease COVID-19 and the condition of African Migrant Workers. In: *African Union* [online]. Addis Ababa. [Cited 1 June 2020]. <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20200414/statement-lmac-condition-african-migrant-workers-covid-19>

Einashe, I. 2020. Letter from Africa: Spare a thought for stranded migrants. In: *BBC News*. [online.] London. [Cited 27 May 2020]. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52645702>

EU-OSHA. 2020. COVID-19: Back to the workplace – Adapting workplaces and protecting workers. In: *OSHWiki* [online]. Bilbao, Spain, and Brussels, Belgium. [Cited 9 June 2020]. https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/COVID-19:_Back_to_the_workplace_Adapting_workplaces_and_protecting_workers

European Commission. 2020. Portuguese municipality prepares 500 quarantine places for foreign agricultural workers. In: *European website on integration* [online]. Brussels. [Cited 27 May 2020]. <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/portuguese-municipality-prepares-500-quarantine-places-for-foreign-agricultural-workers>

FAO. 2020. *Migrant workers and the COVID-19 pandemic*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca8559en>

ILO. 2018. *ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers – Results and Methodology*. 2nd ed. Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_652001.pdf

ILO. 2020a. Labour Migration in Africa. In: *International Labour Organization* [online]. Geneva. [Cited 1 June 2020]. https://www.ilo.org/africa/areas-of-work/labour-migration/WCMS_670561/lang--en/index.htm

ILO. 2020b. *Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Policy brief [online]. Geneva. [Cited 1 June 2020]. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms_743268.pdf

IMF. 2020. Policy responses to COVID-19. In: *International Monetary Fund* [online]. Washington, DC. [Cited 1 June 2020]. <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#T>

InfoMigrants. 2020. Spain to hire foreign workers to cover agriculture shortfall. In: *InfoMigrants* [online]. [Cited 27 May 2020]. <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/23946/spain-to-hire-foreign-workers-to-cover-agriculture-shortfall>

IOM. 2020. IOM Steps Up Response for Migrants Stranded in Niger Amidst COVID-19 Lockdown. In: *International Organization for Migration* [online]. Geneva. [Cited 1 June 2020]. <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-steps-response-migrants-stranded-niger-amidst-covid-19-lockdown>

Nexus. 2020. Somali communities face dropping remittances and wider economic impact amid COVID-19 crisis. A warning from activists, aid workers & academia. In: *Nexusom* [online]. [Cited 1 June 2020]. http://nexusom.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Warning-Remittances-Lifeline_final.pdf

OCHA. 2020. *ETHIOPIA: COVID-19 Humanitarian impact. Situation Update No. 2* [online]. Addis Ababa. [Cited 27 May 2020]. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ethiopia_covid-19_humanitarian_impact_sitrep_02.pdf

OECD/ILO. 2018. *How Immigrants Contribute to Developing Countries' Economies*. OECD Publishing. Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264288737-en>

Perruchoud, R. & Redpath-Cross, J., eds. 2011. *Glossary on Migration. 2nd Edition*. IOM. Geneva. https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml25_1.pdf

Randriatsoa, D. 2020. Modification du code de travail – La protection des travailleurs migrants mise en avant. In: *L'Express de Madagascar* [online]. Antananarivo. [Cited 25 June 2020]. <https://lexpress.mg/19/06/2020/modification-du-code-de-travail-la-protection-des-travailleurs-migrants-mise-en-avant/>

Wirtz, M. 2020. Tunisia makes the first step towards helping migrants in the context of COVID-19. In: *Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA)* [online]. Brussels. [Cited 27 May 2020]. <https://www.eepa.be/?p=3757%20https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Society/12550208-call-to-step-up>

World Bank. 2016. World Bank Makes Progress to Support Remittance Flows to Somalia. In: *The World Bank* [online]. Washington, DC. [Cited 27 May 2020]. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2016/06/10/world-bank-makes-progress-to-support-remittance-flows-to-somalia>

World Bank. 2020a. *COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens. Migration and Development Brief 32* [online]. Washington, DC. [Cited 1 June 2020]. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33634/COVID-19-Crisis-Through-a-Migration-Lens.pdf?sequence=5>

World Bank. 2020b. *Potential Responses to the COVID-19 Outbreak in Support of Migrant Workers*. World Bank “Living Paper” Version 3, (April 21, 2020) [online]. Washington, DC. [Cited 1 June 2020]. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33625/Potential-Responses-to-the-COVID-19-Outbreak-in-Support-of-Migrant-Workers-April-21-2020.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

AKNOWLEDGMENTS

The lead author of this brief is Melisa Aytekin, Policy Officer in the FAO Regional Office for Africa (RAF). Pamela Pozarny (from RAF), and Jacqueline Demeranville, Cristina Rapone, Giulia Castro and Regina Kistler (from FAO Economic and Social Development Department [ESP]) reviewed this brief.



Some rights reserved. This work is available under a [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) licence

Recommended citation: **FAO**. 2020. *Migrant workers and remittances in the context of COVID-19 in sub-Saharan Africa*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb0184en>