



► ILO Brief

March 2024

Return and reintegration in Uganda: Lessons from the FAIRWAY programme¹

► Introduction

Migration flows from Uganda are fuelled by many factors, including the demographic characteristics of the country, the social, economic, and (geo-)political context, and environmental pressures. Like elsewhere, the majority of migrants are driven by the search for better job opportunities. In practice, however, large numbers of migrant workers face decent work deficits during their stay abroad and return with significant vulnerabilities. Returned migrant workers may have health and psychosocial challenges related to their migration journeys, and some may have experienced abuse and/or exploitation. On the other hand, returned migrant workers may also bring positive migration experiences, new skills, new networks and opportunities to improve their livelihoods and that of their families and communities. In all cases, it is important to note that sustainable reintegration plays a key role in enhancing migrants' contribution to development.

While there is no international legal definition of sustainable reintegration, according to the UN Network on Migration-working group on return and reintegration, sustainable reintegration can be understood as a process which enables individuals to secure and sustain the political, economic, social and psychosocial conditions needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity in the country and community they return or are returned to, in full respect of their civil, political, economic, social and

cultural rights. This should include targeted measures that enable returning migrants to have access to justice, social protection, financial services, health-care, education, family life, an adequate standard of living, decent work, and protection against discrimination, stigma, arbitrary detention and all forms of violence, and that allows returnees to consider that they are in an environment of personal safety, economic empowerment, inclusion and social cohesion upon return.²

ILO provided reintegration support to returning migrant workers in the context of the FAIRWAY programme in Uganda, which ran from December 2019 to March 2024, in partnership with Government, workers' and employers' organizations and other stakeholders. FAIRWAY is an inter-regional programme, funded by the Swiss Development Cooperation, that aims to enhance capacities for improved conditions of labour migration across migration pathways from Africa to Arab States and better protection of all migrant workers in vulnerable situations within the Arab states' region.

This brief summarizes the ILO FAIRWAY programme support and highlights some of the lessons learned, in the context of the reintegration landscape in Uganda. It ends with recommendations for future interventions, for improved social and economic reintegration outcomes for migrant workers.

¹ This brief was prepared by Jesca Angida, National Programme Coordinator, with inputs from Theodoor Sparreboom, Grace Sebageni and HQ Colleagues from the Labour Migration Branch (MIGRANT).

² United Nations Network on Migration, March 2021. Position Paper on Ensuring Safe and Dignified Return and Sustainable Reintegration. Accessed at: https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1416/files/docs/position_paper_-_ensuring_safe_and_dignified_return_and_sustainable_reintegration.pdf

► 1. Overview of labour migration in Uganda

The Government of Uganda considers labour migration ('externalization of labour') as a short-term avenue to easing domestic unemployment.³ With unemployment at 16.5% among the youth in 2020⁴ and the local labour market not able to absorb all new entrants, coupled with a youth population that continues to grow against few employment opportunities, migrant work provides an immediate alternative. Uganda is also a country of destination for many migrant workers from East Africa, from elsewhere in Africa and from other regions of the world. Furthermore, Uganda is the largest refugee hosting country in Africa.⁵ Refugees in Uganda have the right to work and to set up businesses.⁶

In 2005, the Government rolled out the externalisation of labour programme whose main objective is to provide safe, orderly, and regular channels for Ugandans who choose to seek employment abroad. Since the inception of the programme, the number of Ugandans seeking and travelling for work abroad, particularly to the Arab States, has been growing. Between 2016 and Oct 2023, nearly 270,000 Ugandan migrant workers were placed for work abroad, mainly in the Arab states, many of whom placed for work in the care sector. It is important to note that there are also many Ugandans who are migrating for work abroad outside of the official established channels and are not captured in the Government External Employment Management Information System (EEMIS). This means that the numbers of Ugandans migrating for work abroad may be higher than the officially recorded figures.

The numbers of Ugandan migrant workers seeking work abroad have been steadily increasing except in 2020, due to the stringent COVID-19 containment measures. A decline was also recorded in 2023, mainly due to a reduction in the number of job orders⁷ and partly because

the numbers for the full year are not yet available (see table 1).

► **Table 1: Ugandan migrant workers placed for work between 2016 and October 2023**

Year	Female	Male	Total
2016	504	2,035	2,539
2017	2,991	2,126	5,117
2018	14,982	6,630	21,612
2019	17,605	7,758	25,363
2020	5,449	3,577	9,026
2021	77,606	10,947	88,553
2022	84,623	8,773	93,396
2023(Oct)	21,933	1,913	23,846
Total	225,693	43,759	269,452

(Data from the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD))

In terms of benefits, labour migration is contributing to human capital development, skills development and diversification of livelihoods. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, remittances contributed 2.8% of Uganda's GDP in 2020.⁸ Remittances have become a social safety net for receiving households by enabling them to meet some of their basic needs such as food, educational and health needs; and by supplementing funding for small business investments that accelerate socio-economic development.

Despite these benefits, Ugandan migrant workers continue to encounter numerous challenges throughout

³ <https://ugandamediacentreblog.wordpress.com/2022/09/08/statement-externalization-of-labour-betty-amongi-ongom/>

⁴ National Labour Force Survey 2021. https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/11_2022NLFS_2021_main_report.pdf

⁵ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/102633#:~:text=Home%20to%201.56%20million%20refugees,fourth%20largest%20in%20the%20world.>

⁶ <http://www.judiciary.go.ug/files/downloads/Act%20No.%2021of%202006%20Refugees%20Act2006.pdf>. The Refugees Act of 2006.

⁷ According to the Uganda Association of External Recruitment Agencies (UAERA), in an interview with ILO, there was a significant loss in job orders received by PEAs in 2023 because of the lengthy processes to have Ugandan migrant workers cleared for work placement. The low numbers were also reported by the media. See: <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/govt-loses-billions-as-labour-exports-drop-4502390>

⁸ Uganda Bureau of Statistics. 2022 Statistical Abstract. https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/05_20232022_Statistical_Abstract.pdf

the labour migration cycle. According to a study by Uganda Hotels, Food, Tourism, Supermarkets and Allied Workers' Union (HTS-Union), the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) and the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) in 2019, Ugandan migrant workers, and female migrant workers in particular, continue to experience exploitation by unscrupulous recruitment agencies who charge high recruitment fees and sometimes fail to deploy migrant workers; physical and sexual abuse especially by domestic workers; long working hours, confiscation of passports by some recruitment agencies and employers; withholding of salaries/wages by employers compounded by limited avenues for dispute resolution; limited information to facilitated informed decision making prior to departure and upon return, existence of human traffickers who exploit vulnerable individuals.⁹

Furthermore, the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) noted that inadequate consular services in the countries of destination pose a challenge in providing assistance especially for migrant workers in distress.¹⁰ Returning migrant workers also often find it difficult to reintegrate back into the labour market and society generally due to lack of support. Women are usually the most affected as they often face additional gender-specific challenges.

To address these challenges, several measures have been put in place by Government and partners including:

- Laws to regulate recruitment and placement of migrant workers (see Box A).
- Development of a predeparture training curriculum and provision of pre-departure training, to orient migrant workers and provide practical knowledge about their jobs and prepare them for cross-cultural adjustment.
- Development of the External Employment Management Information System (EEMIS), which has digitalized processes including license application for

private employment agencies and clearance of migrant workers to travel for work abroad.

- Awareness creation on safe, orderly, and regular labour migration.
- Government has also taken disciplinary and legal action against recruitment agencies that breach the relevant laws and operational guidelines on labour externalization.
- Negotiation, signing and implementation of bilateral labour migration agreements.¹¹
- Direct assistance to migrant workers in distress including provision of return assistance.
- Provision of support services to facilitate socio-economic reintegration of migrant workers, such as information services and referral to social and protection services, business start-up funds, financial literacy and skills training, legal services, among others.

► **Box A: Relevant national legal framework governing labour migration in Uganda**

- Employment (Recruitment of Ugandan Migrant Workers Abroad) Regulations, 2021. The legislation aims at upholding the dignity and rights of migrant workers by prescribing the appropriate terms and conditions of their employment and providing mechanisms for regulating activities of private employment agencies and their agents.
- The Employment Act No. 6, 2006. Provides for laws governing individual employment relationships. Sec. 37 relates to migrant workers, Sec. 38 to recruitment permits, Sec. 39 to repatriation among other related issues.
- Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2009. The Act provides for the prohibition of trafficking in persons, creation of offences, prosecution and punishment of offenders, prevention of trafficking in persons, and protection and compensation of victims of trafficking in persons.

⁹ See: https://gaatw.org/publications/Uganda_Country_Report.pdf

¹⁰ See: <https://mglsd.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Statement-to-Parliament-on-Externalisation-of-Labour-Issues-16th-May-2019.pdf>

¹¹ As of December 2023, Uganda had signed three Bilateral Labour Agreements with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and a Memorandum of Understanding with United Arab Emirates.

► 2. The socio-economic reintegration landscape in Uganda

Systematic return and socio-economic reintegration support for migrant workers is limited, as there is currently no policy or strategy on return and reintegration of migrant workers in place. The government's externalization programme is focused on recruitment and placement of workers abroad and not on return and post return of migrant workers. Whereas the draft national migration policy provides for development of programmes to reintegrate and facilitate skills transfer, support returning nationals and provide a conducive environment for investment, the policy is yet to be adopted.¹²

Currently, reintegration assistance to returnee migrant workers is mostly provided by non-Governmental actors including workers' and employers' organizations with support from ILO, civil society organizations (CSOs) and other UN agencies (e.g., IOM), through different projects. However, the support is limited. Moreover, most of the support provided targets migrant workers in distress and victims of trafficking. Those who have had positive labour migration experiences are in most cases not targeted by projects/interventions, yet they may also need support to smoothly reintegrate. For example, some migrant workers return with their savings but may not know where and how to invest their money or how to formalize their businesses. Furthermore, there is a need to better engage families and local communities on their role in supporting the reintegration of migrant workers into the communities and on managing expectations to avoid misuse and diversion of remittances by relatives, among other issues.

2.1 Main challenges

The Main challenges in supporting socio-economic reintegration of migrant workers in Uganda can be summarized as follows:

- **Need for a policy or national strategy on return and reintegration.** Having a policy and/or strategy in place

will foster a coherent approach in addressing the needs of migrant workers and returning migrant workers and encourage resource allocation.

- **More and better data.** Information on returning migrant workers regarding numbers, profiles, needs, skills, expertise, etc., is limited. There is need for a well-developed and operational labour market information system to facilitate smooth reintegration of returnee migrant workers into the local labour market.

The EEMIS captures information on migrant workers recruited and deployed for work abroad through licensed companies. However, it does not capture information of those that have returned. The limited data available is scattered among a few CSOs and UN agencies, who only capture data of migrant workers assisted directly by their respective institutions. Limited availability of data poses a challenge in planning and targeting support to returning migrant workers.

- **Enhanced Coordination.** The approach to return and reintegration of migrant workers could benefit from improved coordination among the various stakeholders, to allow for efficient use of limited resources. The Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MGLSD) recently set up a coordination and learning platform, which will be soon operational.
- **Capacity development.** There is a need for capacity building for key stakeholders. Furthermore, limited staffing in some of the institutions implies that existing staff may need to cover additional tasks in order to provide support to migrant workers and returnee migrant workers.
- **Sufficient funding.** Funding limitations constrain the scope of support and geographical coverage of interventions. Project-based initiatives tend to be of limited in duration, yet there is a need for continuous support.

¹² Draft National Migration policy. Reviewed on March 2022.

► 3. Overview of FAIRWAY implementation in Uganda

FAIRWAY is an interregional programme that aims to improve conditions for migrant work across migration pathways from Africa to Arab States. The program focuses on the following objectives: 1) Private sector, employers' and workers' organizations are engaged for decent work for migrant workers; 2) Gender-responsive policy frameworks are developed or strengthened for fair recruitment and regulatory compliance; 3) Discriminatory attitudes towards women and men migrant workers are diminished; and 4) Migrant workers have improved access to information and support services throughout the migration cycle.

In Uganda, the programme was implemented in partnership with the Government - MGLSD, workers' and employers' organizations - National Organization of Trade Unions (NOTU) and its affiliate - Uganda Hotels Food Tourism Supermarkets and Allied Workers Union (HTS-Union), Federation of Uganda Employers (FUE) and the Uganda Association of External Recruitment Agencies (UAERA), to provide information and support services to migrant workers and returnee migrant workers, review of regulatory framework, and address technical capacity and information gaps.

3.1 Key programme interventions and achievements in Uganda

The programme supported the following interventions and achievements:

Information and support services for migrant workers

- A migrant workers' resource center (MRC) was established to provide pre-departure and post return support services to migrant workers and their families. The services currently provided by the MRC include information and referral services; psycho-social counseling, grievance handling, and supporting organizing of migrant workers into union representation.
- An online job portal. In partnership with FUE FAIRWAY supported the development of an online job portal, to provide access to information on

available jobs in Uganda while leveraging on FUE's wide network of employers, to facilitate reintegration of migrant workers into the local labour market.

- A case management tool developed to enhance NOTU's capacity to collect and manage information and assist migrant workers; FAIRWAY also supported NOTU to conduct profiling of returnee migrant workers, to document experiences of returning migrant workers, identify needs and generate evidence to inform programming.
- Pre-decision and pre-departure information campaigns and messaging on safe labour migration were conducted through mass media, stakeholder workshops and the MRC.

Capacity development

- Media professionals from Central, Eastern and South-Western regions of Uganda and journalism students from three universities trained on reporting and effective engagement on labour migration issues including in the use of the ILO toolkit for journalists on reporting on forced labour and fair recruitment and the media friendly glossary on Migration, fair recruitment and Forced labour to strengthen capacities for improved reportage.
- In partnership with the MGLSD, labour administrators and district local government authorities were capacitated to deliver information and assistance to migrant workers and promote safe labour migration. FAIRWAY supported sensitization of district local government leaders on relevant international labour standards including the private employment agencies and employment service conventions, and national regulatory framework on labour migration, EEMIS, and assistance mechanisms available for migrant workers.

- Officials from relevant Government ministries trained on effective negotiation, implementation and monitoring of bilateral labour agreements.
- With support from the FAIRWAY programme, private employment agencies have taken steps to strengthen protection of the rights of migrant workers in the recruitment processes. FAIRWAY supported and provided technical guidance in the development of UAERA's inaugural strategic plan which aims to promote compliance of private employment agencies (PEAs) to statutory requirements and advocate for the rights of migrant workers. ILO further provided training to PEAs and predeparture training companies on fair recruitment and Business and Human rights which increased knowledge among PEAs on

human rights-based approaches in the conduct of business and promotion of fair recruitment practices.

Regulatory frameworks

- ILO supported technical review of the guidelines on recruitment and placement of Uganda migrant workers abroad. The revised guidelines are awaiting adoption.

Data and information

- A study on returnee migrant workers. The study, conducted by NOTU, established the profiles of returnee migrant workers, documented their experiences, and needs. Thereby contributing to evidence for programming.

► 4. Lessons learnt

4.1 MRC establishment and operation

- The MRC in Uganda is set up within the HTS-Union owned premises. The fact that the MRC is institutionalized and situated within the premise owned by the trade union significantly contributes to sustainability, as it reduces operational expenditure on office space, among other benefits.
- The interregional symposium on MRCs organized by the project facilitated learning for the MRC staff, as it exposed them to experiences of other countries and good practices on effective management of MRCs. This was particularly useful because the concept of MRCs is new in Uganda and there was need for capacity building of HTS-Union staff and the institution.
- However, full implementation of the ILO guidance on establishment and operation of MRCs,¹³ which was also informed by the experience with MRCs in Uganda and elsewhere, is critical for effective operation and functioning of the MRC. Further training of the MRC

staff including on gender responsive services and other relevant topics, development of tools to guide day-to-day operations and mapping of other relevant service providers to facilitate referrals, will enable the MRC to effectively respond to the diverse needs of migrant workers and returnee migrant workers.

4.2 Stakeholders capacity in use of digital solutions

- Enhancing capacities of ILO constituents in the use of digital solutions to facilitate socio-economic and labour market reintegration of migrant workers is essential.
- The online tools, including the job portal¹⁴ and the case management tool¹⁵ that were developed to facilitate assistance and reintegration support to migrant workers, were important. However, enhancing IT and technical skills of the constituents hosting these platforms, in the use of digital solutions will enable better utilization these tools.

¹³ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms_907976.pdf

¹⁴ <https://jobs.fuemployers.org/#/>

¹⁵ The NOTU case management tool was developed in February 2024 and was yet to go live online at the time of preparing this brief.

4.3 Information dissemination

- TV and radio messaging were the main channels used to raise public awareness on different topics including on safe labour migration, the MRC, among others. This helped in reaching large numbers of people in a short period. A drawback of this method of awareness raising is that it is difficult to assess effectiveness of the messages and report on the number of migrant workers reached besides estimates provided by the

media houses based on projected listenership.

- Therefore, the use of mass media should be combined with targeted participatory and interactive methods, at community level such as community outreach programmes, community dialogue meeting (seminars, workshops, conferences), focus group discussion, call back radio talk shows, among others, to allow for assessment of the effectiveness of the messages and number of target people reached.

► 5. Recommendations for future interventions

a) Support development of a national strategy on return and reintegration of migrant workers.

Future interventions should support the development of a national strategy on return and reintegration of migrant workers, with provisions for monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. This will promote a coordinated approach, facilitate resource mobilization, and enhance efficient use of resources.

b) Enhance stakeholder capacities for improved support to migrant workers and returnee migrant workers.

In particular, training of MRC staff including on MRC management and provision of gender and disability responsive services and ensuring standard operating procedures (SOPs) and monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms are in place prior to full operationalization of the MRC.

Furthermore, strengthen capacities of social partners in the use of digital solutions to support return and reintegration of migrant workers.

c) Strengthen referral mechanisms for the MRC.

Develop a referral network for the MRC, through mapping of the different services and providers available at community level, to widen the scope of services that migrant workers can receive including services to facilitate labour market reintegration. The MRC should be supported to set up satellite units or outreach programmes at community level and strengthen collaboration with private recruitment agencies. This will bring the services closer to communities and increase access to information and support services to migrant workers and returnee migrant workers.

d) Use of combined approaches to disseminate information.

Use of mass media together with interactive methods at community level, to deliver information to target populations. This will enable achievement of greater impact.