

## Interregional Consultative Migration Dialogues and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue in the GCC-Asia Migration Corridor

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### Executive Summary

Over the past half century, the GCC-Asia has become the largest interregional migration corridor in the Global South. However, despite increasing interstate diplomatic engagements and cross-border mobility flows at the interregional level, the GCC host and Asian sending states have yet to fully synchronize their interregional migration policies, directly affecting current and prospective migrants' labor rights and welfare. This GLMM policy brief analyzes the complex roles and contributions of interregional consultative migration dialogues (ICMDs) operating within the GCC-Asia migration corridor. Using the case of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD), I offer two arguments: firstly, the states' positionalities (sending, host) in the interregional migration system influences their direct capacity to effectively facilitate or implement bilateral and multilateral migration reforms. Secondly, existing power asymmetries between GCC host and Asian sending states, combined with competing national interests and strong domestic sovereignty tensions, often impact interregional collaboration processes, thus producing diverging (or converging) outcomes for ADD member states. Overall, this study emphasizes the complex yet understudied roles of ICMDs in regional and global migration governance systems.

### Introduction

Labor migration is a crucial component of regional and global migration governance and diplomacy in the Global South, largely governed through either top-down (regional or national government-led) or bottom-up (dialogues, consultative forums, or meetings) approaches (Betts 2011; Newland 2005). Although states have the ability to initiate laws and policies to design and implement bilateral or multilateral migration policies, they contend that the concept of 'global governance' represents a direct intrusion into their national sovereignty and control (Zolberg, 1994; Martin et al., 2006; Newland, 2005; Betts, 2011). In particular, due to host states' strong reluctance to recognize and incorporate global migration governance into domestic law (i.e., concerning irregular immigration within their territories) this top-down approach has, by and large, become an ineffective state mechanism. As a result, many sending and host states have strategically mobilized bottom-up informal interregional consultations on migration dialogues (ICMDs) (i.e., the Abu Dhabi Dialogue and the Colombo Process), engaging in a *non-binding* interregional migration governance system to limit the potential impact of global migration governance (i.e. international labor laws) on their domestic migration processes (see ILO, Hansen, 2010; Harns, 2013; ICMPD, 2016).

As the GCC region is the world's largest host of migrants in the Global South, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD) (2008) is an excellent case study of a state-led ICMD that is presently being managed by the Emirati state in collaboration with a number of GCC host and Asian sending states in GCC-Asia migration. While the ADD offers a significant informal, non-binding, and voluntary mechanism, its primary function is to create *an interregional diplomatic space and harmonize regional cooperation and migration policies* for ADD state members. At the same time, the ADD intends to address the multiple and complex migration policy challenges and links between migration, development, and governance by developing more action-oriented cooperation, policies, and programs (i.e., via 'regional pilot initiatives') (see Babar, 2014; Malit & Tsourapas, 2021). While the ADD has historically garnered a strong interregional presence in identifying, setting, and implementing new interregional migration agendas in the GCC-Asia corridor, its overall interregional contributions and impacts on host and sending states' migration policy processes, as well as various migration stakeholders (i.e., migrants and their families, employers, private sector) have yet to be critically analyzed.

This paper examines the complex roles and contributions of ICMDs in interregional migration governance debates. Using the case of the ADD, I offer two arguments: firstly, the states' positionality (sending, host) in the global migration system influences their diplomatic capacity to implement bilateral and multilateral migration reforms. Secondly, existing power asymmetries between GCC host and Asian sending states, combined with competing national interests and strong domestic sovereignty tensions, often impact interregional collaboration processes, thus producing diverging (or converging) outcomes for ADD member states. Overall, this study emphasizes the complex yet understudied roles of ICMDs in regional and global migration governance systems. I structure the paper into the following sections: firstly, I examine the vital importance of ICMDs in interregional migration debates. Secondly, I situate the ADD and its primary institutional structure, agendas, and processes within the GCC-Asia migration corridor. Thirdly, I analyze the degree of effectiveness and limitations of the ADD in the GCC-Asia migration corridor. Lastly, I conclude by examining the future dimension of the ADD in future interregional migration debates in the GCC-Asia migration corridor and beyond.

### ICMDs in Interregional Migration Debates

ICMDs are vital instruments in interregional migration diplomacy in the interregional and global migration governance processes (Hansen, 2010; Harns, 2013; ICMPD, 2016). While ICMD's informal, state-led approach does not explicitly constitute official interregional migration policy-making, it provides an open platform for host and sending states, as well as international organizations and non-state actors, to increase bilateral and multilateral dialogues between and among all member states while simultaneously addressing institutional policy gaps on inter-regional migration issues. Through these ICMD processes, Slaughter (2004) argues that such member states' 'policy networks' not only build from these bottom-up consultative processes but also serve as the building blocks of the global order in the age of globalization. She further contends that these same officials who are judging, regulating, and legislating domestically are also reaching out to their foreign counterparts to assist in addressing the governance issues that arise when national actors and issues spread across borders (also cited in Newland, 2005). In other words, the interregional mi-

gration governance environment, along with its embedded states' social networks, could not only help deepen and expose relevant decision-makers and officials to broader interregional migration governance challenges but also socialize them with other states, which are crucial in developing a robust interregional diplomacy process. Thus, ICMDs serve as tools for states to develop long-term strategic policy responses and diplomatic linkages to interregional migration governance and diplomacy challenges.

Moreover, state-led social networks like ICMDs could serve as 'seeds' for socially connected government entities (commissions, agencies, and secretariats) that will likely implement local, national, regional, and supranational policies and facilitate coordinated government networks. As further emphasized by Newland (2005), "there is value in dialogue for its own sake—for the role it plays in tying together the policy networks that are the building blocks of global governance." Nonetheless, some scholars view these ICMDs as ineffective diplomatic mechanisms because they are not only non-binding but also appear to benefit the absolute interests of host states, thereby reinforcing the existing power asymmetry between host and sending states in the Global South and beyond (see Irissa, 2019). Some contend, however, that many states use ICMDs as an alternative method to prevent being constrained by UN-negotiated goals, thus giving strong preference to interstate-level negotiations and agreements (known as government-to-government or G-to-G level agreements) (Malit & Tsourapas, 2021; Martin, 2005). As a result, ICMDs have increasingly become a vital foreign policy tool for host states to defend their national interests and policy preferences and perceptions while simultaneously enabling them to develop counterpolicy strategies on migration to challenge the prevailing sending states' interregional migration agendas (i.e., postpone, delay, and not commit) within the ICMD setting.

### Contextualizing the Abu Dhabi Dialogue on Migration

Founded, financed, and chaired by the UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization (MOHRE) in 2008, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD) Permanent Secretariat was conceived as an interstate, interregional forum for dialogue and cooperation between Asian sending and GCC host states with the goal of facilitating "safe, orderly, and regular labor migration in some of the world's largest temporary labor migration corridors." ADD member states are included in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: ADD Membership Struc**

ADD States (2008—present)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Colombo Process</b> member states (including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam);</li> <li>▪ <b>GCC states</b> (including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates)</li> <li>▪ <b>Ad-hoc state observers</b> (including Malaysia, South Korea, China, Switzerland, EU, Canada, Switzerland and Singapore)</li> <li>▪ <b>Non-state international organization observers</b> (i.e. the International Organization for Migration, the International Labor Organization)</li> <li>▪ <b>Ad-hoc non-state migrant advocacy groups</b> (i.e. Migrant Forum Asia) and other private sector entities</li> </ul>
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The ADD has declared three guiding principles for its interregional consultative operations, including “ensuring the protection of migrant workers; empowering workers to fulfill their goals and aspirations; and affording workers the opportunity to benefit equitably from the outcome of labor migration (see ADD 2024).” In collaboration with other Colombo Process members, the ADD has also launched a number of regional programs and initiatives, including ongoing ADD projects to include technology in labor migration governance, comprehensive information and orientation programs (pre-departure, post-arrival), recruitment, certification, mutual skills and recognition, labour mobility in the context of the future of work, and the future of domestic work in the Gulf (see ADD 2024). While these ADD interregional pilot projects have significantly implemented and elevated important interregional migration issues between GCC host and Asian sending states in the Asia-GCC migration corridor, they have yet to fully develop coherent interregional migration policies (except some bilateral initiatives such as Saudi Arabia’s Skills Verification agreements with South Asian countries) that specifically tackle these issues (Malit, 2024). These ADD-led projects reflect not only the collaborative, interstate, interregional diplomatic interests of host and sending ADD member states, but also form the critical ongoing interregional issues that are currently being addressed by ADD member states until the present period within the GCC-Asia migration corridor.

The ADD has also extensively facilitated and deepened interstate ICMDs over nearly two decades. In fact, the ADD has held over 30 Senior Officials Meetings (annually), seven Ministerial Meetings in Kuwait, the UAE, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, and other special ADD meetings (i.e., inter-regional workshops) to examine, discuss, and identify interregional migration corridor-specific challenges and solutions to interregional migration governance issues. The active participation of ADD sending and host state senior officials and ministers has allowed them to not only strategically develop interstate diplomatic networks and relationships but also to identify new areas of bilateral or multilateral common interest, cooperation, and policy ideas necessary to modernize their existing institutions, bureaucracies, and programs in their respective countries. For example, the establishment of the 2014 UAE-led “Pilot Project on Skill Development, Certification, Upgrading, and Recognition” is a prime example, where the GCC hosts (UAE and Kuwait) and Asian sending countries (India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) have participated with the interregional intent to align, identify, and develop interregional labor mobility solutions linked to certification, skills training, and upgrading for migrant workers in the GCC-Asia construction corridor (IOM, 2014). Thus, the ADD has become not only a transformative interregional consultative space for diplomatic partnerships and project collaborations but also a crucial source of cooperation and conflicts (i.e., perceived overrepresentation of GCC host states’ interests) in regulating and managing interregional migration flows in the GCC-Asia migration corridor (Malit & Tsourapas, 2021).

In addition, the ADD highlights the emerging interregional roles and contributions of Asian sending and GCC host states in the regulation, implementation, and control of interregional migration flows in the GCC-Asia migration corridor. While the establishment of such ICMDs has, to some extent, formalized state obligations to commit and protect migrants at interregional levels, it is also important that strong international advocacy and reporting from international labor and human rights groups, combined with academic and think-tank publications highlighting migrants’ vulnerabilities and deaths, have, in effect, played a crucial role in the institutional development of the ADD (Jureidini, 2019). More specifically, Asian sending states’—specifically the Philippines—

bilateral partnerships forged during the development of these projects with participating member states under the ADD. While these projects have not been fully adopted or implemented by member states in either the ADD or the Colombo Process, they are indicative of the future types of interregional migration governance tools that could be deployed in the host and sending states to govern interregional migration in the GCC-Asia migration corridor.

ICMDs are *a growing source of diplomatic connectivity between ADD sending and host state* and will become a crucial venue for addressing critical interregional migration policy gaps in the long run. In fact, the social network and side meeting interactions (i.e., both during meeting receptions, hotel accommodations, and side meetings during breakfast and special dinners) between senior officials and ministers among the ADD have allowed them to share best policy practices and insights, develop new innovative pilot initiatives, programs, and projects, and foster a deeper understanding of their governing policy approaches, institutions, and cultural expertise in managing international affairs. The implementation of special workshops, joint collaborative pilot projects, and policy dialogues on labor migration highlight not only the proactive approach to strengthening state ties and networks between labor-sending and receiving countries but also the need for future state engagement to build a robust regional consultative migration dialogue.

### Constraints

While ICMDs have made substantial contributions to interregional migration policymaking in the GCC-Asia migration corridor, these interstate instruments are also subject to a number of restrictions and limitations. Despite the fact that these initiatives address significant gaps in regional migration debates, the ADD has steadfastly remained *non-binding and voluntary* and is largely influenced by GCC host states. Given the power disparity between sending and host states, it is unclear whether the concerns and interests of sending and host states are equally addressed or emphasized at these interregional consultative forums. The agenda-setting procedure, for instance, is mainly compromised by the existing ADD chair's immediate issues, priorities, or concerns, thereby diminishing the full potential and efficacy of the consultative procedure. Consequently, the absence of legal 'teeth' in ADD interregional policymaking and its declaration materials seems to undermine its overall credibility in addressing interregional migration issues.

*The lack of comprehensive interregional migration policies and data within the ADD presents serious challenges to the ADD member states.* While the ADD has consistently highlighted the critical importance of harmonizing GCC host and Asian sending states' migration policies at the interregional level, the ADD has yet to comprehensively compile, analyze, or develop coherent interregional migration policies, which are vital for achieving the ADD's key pillars. For example, the ADD has not developed important interregional migration policies, specifically on skilling practices across the GCC-Asia migration corridor, which are very important for GCC host and Asian sending states to determine the future demand and supply of migrant labor in the GCC.

More importantly, the ADD has yet to also develop a robust interregional database on migration statistics. While each GCC and Asian state maintains its own national database of migration statistics, the ADD has yet to harmonize and compile such a migration database. These are crucial for ADD member states' bilateral, multilateral, and interregional migration policy dialogues and



direct interventions during the ADD senior officials and ministerial meetings have helped raise critical concerns related to migrant labor rights at the interregional levels. Thus, the increasing interregional migration pressures and investigations from international and labor rights groups—amplified by global social media—have influenced—directly or indirectly—the Asian sending and GCC host states’ actions to address interregional labor migration issues within their borders through ICMDs.

### Effectiveness and Constraints of Regional Consultative Dialogue Processes

While ICMDs like the ADD have enabled Asian sending and GCC host states to strengthen their institutional and interregional diplomatic linkages, more in-depth policy research is critically necessary to determine their long-term efficacy in governing and regulating interregional labor migration. In fact, despite the high proportion of low-skilled and low-income migrant workers in the GCC-Asia migration corridor, the ADD has yet to fully resolve interregional issues linked to access to legal justice for migrant workers, although some interregional developments have recently proposed and implemented tackling electronic dispute resolution, wage protection systems, and other social protection issues (i.e., unemployment insurance etc) in the GCC. This section focuses on the ADD’s roles, effectiveness, and challenges operating in the GCC-Asia migration corridor.

#### Effectiveness

The ICMD process has significantly ***strengthened interstate diplomatic and policy interactions and partnerships*** in addressing interregional migration issues in the GCC-Asia migration corridor (see Babar, 2014). The institutionalization of the ADD has directly strengthened interstate and interregional cooperation and engagement between GCC host and Asian sending states, carving a vital diplomatic space where ADD member states can articulate their critical migration concerns through senior official and ministerial meetings codified in various consultative declarations, such as the Dubai Declarations in 2019 and 2021, the Colombo Declaration 2016, the Dhaka Declaration 2011, etc. These biennial ministerial and annual senior officials’ meetings have also allowed ADD member states to establish interregional migration agendas and official/unofficial diplomatic linkages to assist other states in identifying and prioritizing interregional issues and solutions related to migration, as well as in building stronger regional coalitions and partnerships to create a safe migration corridor for all.

ICMDs have also become ***an effective venue for the ADD member states to introduce new modalities for addressing strategic issues***, such as unfair or unlawful recruitment practices, contract substitution, domestic work, access to justice, and upskilling programs. For example, the ADD facilitated a special workshop for both Asian labor-sending and GCC receiving countries in 2016 on how to develop a regional digital recruitment system, and manage their governing labor ministry data system on recruitment (ADD website, 2018). Other projects have been introduced and developed in the areas of technology in the governance of labor migration, the future of work, comprehensive information and orientation programs (pre-departure, post-arrival programs, etc.), certification, and mutual recognition of skills through collaboration and strategic design partnerships between sending and host states (see ADD, 2019). The long-term transformation of state visions into actionable policy initiatives and projects is facilitated by ICMDs, as evidenced by the

decision-making processes, as well as for migration policy researchers seeking to examine the interregional evolution of migration policies in the GCC-Asia migration corridor via the ADD.

The *partial focus or coverage of host states* in addressing interregional labor migration issues in the GCC-Asia migration corridor contributes to the ongoing limitations of the regional consultative dialogue process in the GCC-Asia migration corridor. Currently, the ADD focuses solely on Asian migrant populations in the GCC, excluding other vulnerable migrant populations, such as those from African countries, which frequently have less regulated migration policies regarding recruitment, skills recognition, pre-departure programs, etc (see ILO, 2020). In fact, the ADD has previously invited several African sending states as state observers to a Senior Officials' Meeting in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 2018, while the African Union officials took part in the 2019 Ministerial Consultation, at which there was a special session on inter-regional cooperation and an opening address by the AUC Commissioner for Social Affairs (ADD, 2019). However, there do not appear to be any moves to expand the ADD to African sending states, hence the initiative of Qatar to hold a “Doha Dialogue” between Arab countries of the Middle East (i.e. GCC countries, Jordan and Lebanon) and Africa, which has not yet taken place this year (in 2023). The lack of focus on such a highly precarious population underscores the need for the ADD and other regional or interregional consultative dialogue processes to consider the unique and complex issues faced by growing diverse migrant populations who reside and work in their respective national territories. The future of ICMD processes in the GCC-Asian migration corridor must therefore not only encompass emerging, vulnerable migrant populations, but also diversify its interstate engagements with certain sending states that have less extensive effects on the GCC host states' labor markets.

Moreover, while the ADD has placed a heavy emphasis on labor market regulation, *future migration policy agendas must further emphasize access to justice initiatives*. Beyond the existing ADD member states' interregional migration policy projects that address access to justice components (i.e. pre-departure, post-arrival, and recruitment), the GCC states must further address foreign workers' institutional access to justice, particularly strengthening national/regional dispute resolution in the GCC, where foreign workers have reportedly faced significant legal challenges. Recently, the ADD member states have prioritized the access to justice agenda, specifically effective electronic dispute-resolution systems) in its first priority theme, yet more systematic, independent analyses are much needed to analyze the actual implications of these access to justice initiatives on migrant workers in the GCC (ADD, 2022). In other words, given the increasing GCC-Asia migration flows, the ADD member states, specifically GCC states, need to further institutionalize the issue of interregional access to justice for all migrant workers in order to realize a key ADD pillar: the protection and promotion of the rights and welfare of migrant workers in the long term.

## Conclusion

ICMDs are crucial tools for states in developing robust regional or interregional migration policies in the Global South and beyond. Using the case of the ADD, I argued that the ADD has continued to play a crucial role for Asian sending and GCC host states in shaping future interregional migration agendas in the Middle East. As GCC migration flows are expected to intensify in a post-COVID-19 recovery period, the informal, state-led tool of the ADD remains an important diplomatic space

for engagement and collaboration between states and other migration stakeholders in the Middle East. However, by and large, the ADD has continued to be a state-led process, and arguably there is no systematic engagement of non-state stakeholders (with the exception of non-ADD governments and international organizations as observers), as civil society organizations, private sector representatives, and other stakeholders are largely integrated on an adhoc basis within the ADD Secretariat structure.

Despite these challenges, the following conclusions can be made related to the vital role of ADD in ICMDs in the GCC-Asia migration corridor. Firstly, while the ADD assumes that GCC states anticipate future migration flows within their territories to increase, the reality is that some GCC states, such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Bahrain, wish to either reduce migration flows (i.e., via localization, deportation, and other amnesty-related initiatives) or impose a more restrictive or selective form of migration based on certification or training. Given their limited populations and expanding infrastructure and industries, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait require more immigration. These divergent national interests, preferences, and priorities may impact not only the level, quality, contribution, and scope of intra-cooperation among GCC states but also their future leadership participation in the ADD dialogue.

Secondly, the weak bargaining position of sending states and their divergent policy approaches and priorities (i.e., Asian rights-based vs. GCC efficiency-based labor policy negotiations) will continue to produce unequal power relations within the GCC-Asia migration corridor, thereby affecting the development of coherent interregional migration policy in the long run. In order to develop robust, proactive, and migrant-centered consultative dialogue processes, more political commitment and genuine partnerships will be required in the future. Thirdly, as the international community reinforces higher global standards and expectations (i.e., the Global Compact on Migration, etc.) on labor migration for ADD member states, it is likely GCC host states will continue to utilize ICMDs as a more preferred interregional approach to addressing these labor migration issues rather than ratifying international labor conventions due to the relatively limited legal pressures and commitments.<sup>1</sup> This particular projection suggests that, with the existing power asymmetry between ADD host and sending states, migrant precarity will inevitably continue to be a critical feature of the GCC-Asia migration corridor, thus interregionally reinforcing the *shared responsibility* for *all* member states to address interregional migration through ICMD spaces in the long run

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<sup>1</sup> In some recent exceptions, some GCC states have increasingly adopted various international labor conventions. For example, since 2020, Saudi Arabia has ratified four ILO Conventions and one Protocol, including the 2014 Protocol to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), and the Protection of Wages Convention, 1949 (No. 95). See [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11200:0::NO:11200:P11200\\_COUNTRY\\_ID:103208](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11200:0::NO:11200:P11200_COUNTRY_ID:103208); Oman also ratified the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (of relevance to seafarers, many of whom are migrants) in March 2022.



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## About the author



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