



Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population (GLMM) Programme

Gulf Research Center (GRC)

Workshop

Africa-Gulf Migration, Mobility and Trade: Past and Present, Policy and Prospects

Nairobi, 10-11 September 2026

Call for Papers

Deadline for Applications 26 February 2026

The Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) is workshop partner

1. Directors

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2. Abstract

The Africa-Gulf Migration and Mobility Corridor is becoming an important destination for many young Africans in search of livelihood opportunities (as workers) and regular traders (connecting the two regions). While it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of African workers in the Gulf, the following is obvious: Africans have played a pivotal role in the labour markets and societies of countries in the Gulf, both historically and more recently. The labour force is highly gendered with the predominance of women employed as domestic workers and in the hospitality industry. Proximity and historical connections have meant that the labour demands of the relatively sparsely populated Gulf countries are met by populations from Africa. The workshop will focus on highlighting the history of deep and contradictory connections to understand the contemporary dimensions of the encounters between Africa and the Gulf today. It also identifies the emerging issues that shape and dominate discourse on Africa-Gulf migration and the mobility corridor such as livelihood opportunities, trade, working, living conditions, and general wellbeing of African

migrants. The workshop also aims to unpack the policy regime and legal frameworks that govern mobility within the corridor. In doing so, the session will explore the prospects for the future in terms of the likely direction of mobility and migration in the corridor and what it means for trade, as well as socio-economic development in Africa and the global standing of the Gulf states. It will also investigate the political economic options for both regions and the implications of that migration on global human flows.

3. Context

Africa has become a significant hub of investment interests to countries in the Gulf particularly due to its ample natural resources, whereas the Gulf has been a key migration and mobility corridor for young Africans in search of employment due to the large demand for labour in the region. “The demographic dynamics of the African continent present a significant advantage as it is characterised by a youthful and expanding populace that not only forms a substantial consumer base but also promises a dynamic labour market” (Afremexbank, 2024:5). In terms of trade, Africa and the Gulf countries are exploring investment pathways in various sectors including agriculture, which creates job opportunities and addresses unemployment gaps as well as enhances economic development (Afremexbank, 2024). While the Africa-Gulf Migration and Mobility Corridor is an important destination for many young Africans in search of livelihood opportunities as workers, it is also attractive to regular traders as it connects the two regions. While it is difficult to know the exact number of African workers or traders in the Gulf, they play important roles in the labour markets and the society of the countries across the region. Narratives on labour migration experience highlight that upon arrival at any of the major airports in the GCC, one is met by security guards, porters, check in agents, and other categories of workers from the continent. The same is visible in certain living quarters, restaurants, markets, and trading spots. Although female domestic workers make up the majority of African workers in the Gulf (and have been the subject of a great deal of media reports and investigations concerning labour conditions carried out the international bodies¹), there are other migration narratives of Africans in the Gulf. In an era where there is a visible economic and resource scramble for Africa (Afremexbank, 2024), there is a need to understand the historical grounding that situates the long interaction between Africa and the Arab world mediated by trade, the search for knowledge, state formation, and controversial encounters, such as the history of slavery, as well as common instances of solidarity between the two regions.

Building on this historical experience allows us to understand the present context in a rounded way. Africa, as the continent with the youngest population in the world, is becoming one of the major sources of labour for countries that are either facing demographic crises (such as the Global North) and those with relatively small populations (such as the Gulf). Proximity and historical connections mean that East and Horn of African (EHOA) countries tend to provide the relatively sparsely populated Gulf countries with a significant part of its labour demands. Thus, countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania are well-represented among the African labour force in the Gulf. West African countries may be down the list by numbers, but Ghanaian and Nigerian workers are an integral part of the African labour force in the region as well (Atong, Mayah, and Odigie 2018).

What does this mean for policy? The demonisation of the migration and mobility of ordinary people from certain parts of the world by powerful political and social actors has cast a normal human activity under a loathsome, fear-inducing light. Meanwhile, from the African continent to Europe

and the Gulf, African migrants link societies, provide livelihoods, sustain healthcare systems in ageing societies facing demographic crises, and provide labour in sparsely populated but wealthy countries that have outsourced labour. The growing hegemony of anti-migrant mobilisation in the Global North and the demand for African labour by countries such as those in the Gulf raises several challenges. Many African countries are developing reactive policies on migration to the Gulf. There is little systematic attempt at the national, sub-regional, and continental levels to harmonise policies that ensure protection of the welfare of African migrant workers and create safe and regular pathways for resource mobilisation that is centred on the wellbeing of the workers.

The policy imperatives of Global North countries, especially countries of the EU, have overdetermined the way African states view migration, and policy on African labour migration to the Gulf, where it exists, is generic and free of contextualisation. Given the history of the contradictory entanglements between the Gulf and Africa, policy making would have to be grounded on careful and alternative appreciation of the migration and mobility matrix that connects Africa to the broader Arab world. Such a nuanced policy outlook will have to also take seriously the prospects of the Gulf - Africa migration, which is most likely going to increase as Africans come to dominate the global labour force (Adaramola, 2025), given that the field (of migration and mobility studies) is largely driven not only by varied policies adopted by Gulf countries to attract labour but also to soft power policies aimed at supporting development projects in source countries. One clear prospect beyond just labour market domination is that mobile entrepreneurial young Africans are projected to become key actors in the global economy.²

4. Workshop Focus / Objectives

Africa has a close ongoing interaction with the Gulf and other parts of the Arab world in as deep and intense of a way as it has with the rest of Africa, especially the East and Horn of Africa (EHOA). The EHOA was politically, economically, and socially even closer to societies in the Gulf than to neighbouring African countries. The history of the relationship between Zanzibar and Oman is a good example of this—where for a time, the Omani Sultanate moved its capital from Muscat to Zanzibar and physically ruled from there (Shariff and Hurst 2014). Similar encounters are visible in the history of various polities in Central and West Africa. The trans-Saharan trade was a far-flung connection that linked Africa and the Arab world in such a way that a neat distinction became impossible.

This workshop aims to:

- a. Unpack the history of the deep and contradictory connection to understand the contemporary dimensions of the encounters between Africa and the Gulf today.
 - b. Discuss emerging issues in Africa – the historical and contemporary factors of Gulf migration and mobility that shape the migration corridor such as livelihood opportunities, search for knowledge, trade, and religion.
 - c. Map out the policy regime and legal framework, focused on working and living conditions as well as the general wellbeing of African migrant workers.
 - d. Prospects for the future in terms of the likely direction of the mobility and migration in the corridor, what it means for trade, socio-economic development in Africa and the global standing of the Gulf states, political economic options for both regions, and what that migration means for global human flows.
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5. Paper Focus / Topics

Papers on any of the following topics are welcomed for the workshop.

Session 1: Historical Mobility between Africa and the Gulf

The papers in this session should focus on highlighting historical connections between Africa and the Gulf showcasing that migration and mobility has been a mix of trade of goods, services, and knowledge among others. Submissions can focus on some of the following areas of interest:

- The historical entanglement between Africa and the Gulf/Arab world to understand contemporary migration and mobility.
- Migration, mobility, and trade routes between Africa and the Gulf/Arab states.
- The political economy of the connections between the two regions.

Session 2: Contemporary Migration and Mobility between Africa and the Gulf

The papers under this sub-theme will focus on the state of migration and mobility between Africa and the Gulf and how trade and mobility has dominated much of the research focus and narratives. Submissions can focus on some of the following areas of interest:

2.1. Patterns of Africa – Gulf migration and mobility

- Reasons for migration and mobility focused on the socio-demographic profile; economic, political, and social factors that intersect with the migration and mobility.
- Investing in migration: the role of development initiatives in facilitating labour migration to the Gulf/Arab states.
- Migration and trade relations between Africa and the Gulf.

2.2. Enablers of the movement and trade

- The migration and mobility infrastructures and networks that facilitate the movement of people, goods, and ideas in the corridor.
- Role of technology/social media on migration and mobility between Africa and the Gulf.
- Facilitating trade relations while negotiating labour migration between Africa and the Gulf.

2.3. Work and working arrangements

- Forms of work, living and working conditions, protection, housing, skills development.
- From skills to opportunities: Understanding employment patterns of Africans in the Gulf.
- Gender and labour migration in the Gulf.
- Impact and role of African labour migrants in the economic development of the Gulf.
- Welfare of African labour migrants in the Gulf.

2.4. Trade and traders in Gulf-Africa Mobility

- Volume of trade mediated by mobile traders.
- Impact of trade in the corridor for livelihoods.

2.5. Educational mobility in the corridor

- Knowledge and skills transfer between Africa and the Gulf.
- Student mobility and its intersection with livelihood, labour, and trade.

2.6. Everyday lives of Africans in the Gulf

- Narratives of African migrants in the Gulf.
- Realities of African migrant engagement in public spaces in the Gulf.
- Interactions between African migrants with the state and nationals.

2.7. Gulf interests in Africa and its link to Africans in the Gulf

- Contemporary presence of the Gulf states in Africa and implications.

Session 3: Migration/Mobility Policy and Programming between Africa and the Gulf

The papers in this session will be focused on understanding migration, mobility, and trade governance between Africa and the Gulf. Participants are invited to critically engage with the policies, agreements, and programmes that shape movement of people, skills, and trade across regions. Participants can contribute to discussions related to bilateral and multilateral frameworks, recruitment and labour mobility schemes, development cooperations, and trade investments. Submissions can focus on some of the following areas of interest:

- The policy and legal regime in African countries governing the mobility and labour of African and/or trade relations in the Gulf.
- Role of intermediaries in shaping labour mobility pathways.
- Policy coherence between migration, trade, and development agendas.
- Frameworks for ethical recruitment, skills recognition, and social protection between Africa and the Gulf.
- African regional responses to Gulf labour markets and trade demands.

Session 4: Future Migration/Mobility and Trade Prospects

This session will explore the evolving nexus of migration, mobility, and trade between Africa and the Gulf situating these dynamics within the global labour market and geopolitical relations among others. This is a forward-looking session where participants can share how both regions are navigating the shifting economic priorities, demographic pressures and exploring various partnerships on mobility, migration, and trade and how it will shape the future of Africa-Gulf engagement. Directions of the future encounter between the two regions:

- The future of migration and mobility in Africa – Gulf relations
- Leveraging Africa-Gulf relations for equitable labour and development outcomes
- From labour migration to development partnership: Realigning Africa's engagement with the Gulf
- Gulf - Africa mobility in global human migration and mobility
- Policy proposals for equitable engagement around labour in the corridor

6. Paper Structure, Referencing, and Format

The workshop welcomes contributions from all disciplines of the social sciences, theoretically grounded and empirically based (on interviews, field surveys, statistical datasets, policy analysis, etc.).

Authors should make sure that their submitted paper is clearly structured and is as close to being ready for publication as possible. An abstract (approx. 250 words) with keywords must be provided.

Papers should clearly state the methodology applied in their research and indicate preliminary results.

In terms of referencing, authors should follow as closely as possible the indications given in the GLMM Paper Guidelines available at the GLMM website - <https://gulfmigration.grc.net>.

7. Publication Plans

The workshop directors will work with conference participants towards a publication that aims to fill the knowledge gap in the area. This could take the form of a special issue in a reputable journal or a book with an established outlet.

8. References

Adaramola, Z. (2025). "Africa's Young Workforce to Dominate Global Economies by 2050 – PMI." 9 April 2025, *Daily Trust*. <https://dailytrust.com/africas-young-workforce-to-dominate-global-economies-by-2050-pmi-2/>

Afremexbank (2024). *Rising Gulf Investments in Africa: Unlocking opportunities and navigating challenges*. Available at: <https://media.afreximbank.com/afrexim/Rising-Gulf-Investments-in-Africa-Unlocking-Opportunities-and-Navigating-Challenges.pdf>

Amnesty International (2025). "Saudi Arabia: Migrant Domestic Workers Face Severe Exploitation, Racism and Exclusion from Labour Protections." 13 May 2025. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/saudi-arabia-migrant-domestic-workers-face-severe-exploitation-racism-and-exclusion-from-labour-protections/>.

Atong, K. Mayah, E. and Odigie, A. (2018). *African Labour Migration to the GCC States: The Case of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda*. Lome: Africa Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC – Africa). Available at: https://www.ituc-africa.org/IMG/pdf/ituc-africa_study-africa_labour_migration_to_the_gcc_states.pdf.

Sheriff, A, Ho, E. (2014). *The Indian Ocean: Oceanic Connections and the Creation of New Societies*. London: Hurst and Company.

9. Workshop Directors

Dr. Faisal Garba

Faisal Garba is an Associate Professor of Sociology, Migration and Mobility, at the Africa Institute, Global Studies University, and Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Cape Town. He works on African mobility, political economy, inequality and working-class forms of organising and social theory. He leads the Migration and Mobility Hub at the University of Cape Town.

Dr. Linda Adhiambo Oucho

Professor Linda Adhiambo Oucho is Executive Director of the African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC) in Nairobi and part-time professor at the European University Institute's Migration Policy Centre in Florence. She recently served as Scholar of Excellence under Canada's CERC program at Toronto Metropolitan University (April - June 2025). She holds a PhD in Ethnic Relations from the University of Warwick where she focused on African women's migration agency. Professor Oucho's research spans migration governance, labour migration, regional integration, free movement in Africa, irregular migration, and forced displacement. She collaborates with organizations like IOM, UNDP, IDRC, and GIZ, working closely with African governments and the African Union Commission, Regional Economic Communities, and academic institutions in Africa, Europe, and Canada to develop evidence-based migration policy solutions.

10. Applications

Applications should be submitted through the online application form available at the GLMM website. **Deadline is 26 February 2026.** Late applications may be accepted. Complete papers need to be submitted by 31 July 2026. Failing to do so generally implies withdrawal of the invitation to participate in the workshop.

11. Travel and Accommodation Support

The organizers are seeking support for travel and accommodation, especially for Africa-based authors. More information will be provided to selected participants in March 2026.