

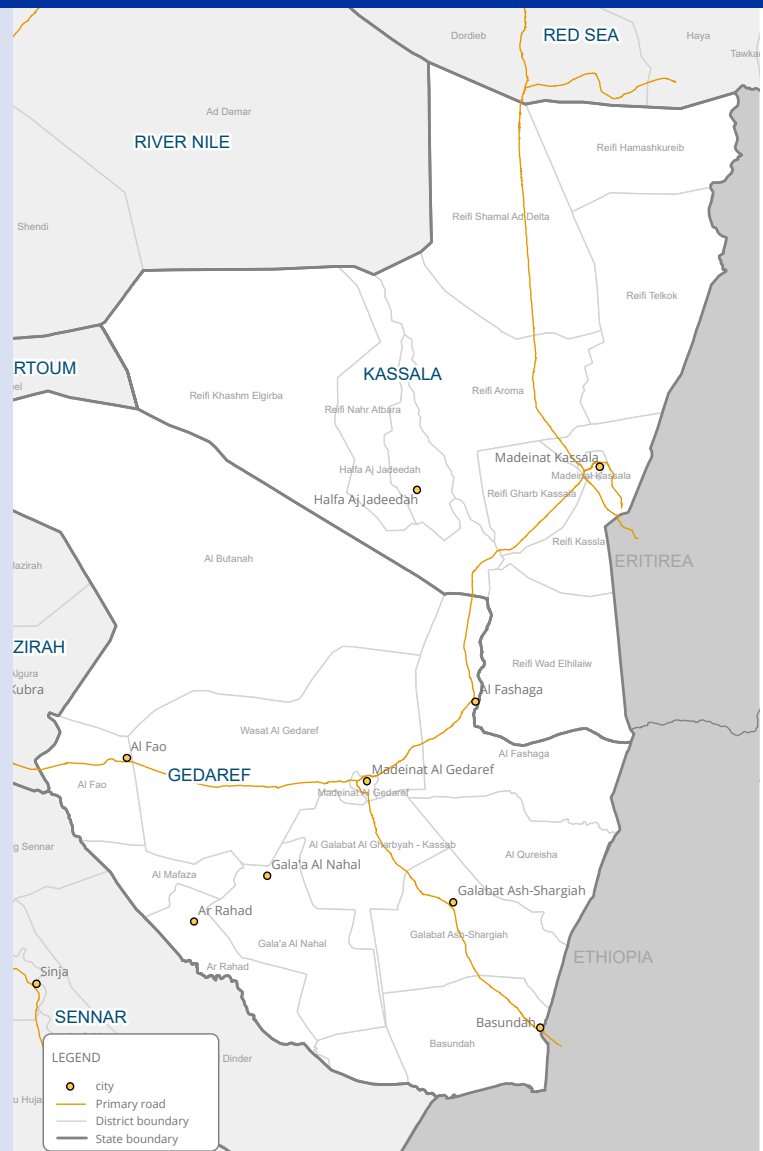
# NAVIGATING A PANDEMIC AMID POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC INSTABILITY: EXPERIENCES OF MIGRANTS IN EASTERN SUDAN IN THE MIDST OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Product jointly drafted by the IOM Middle East and North Africa Regional Office and DTM Sudan

DATA COLLECTED IN JUNE–JULY 2021

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Difficulties accessing health care represented the most cited consequence of the pandemic. For respondents, affordability is the greatest barrier to health care access.
- **More than three-quarters** of respondents indicated a willingness to be vaccinated against COVID-19.
- Among the migrant groups under consideration, seasonal migrant workers appear to be the most vulnerable to exploitation. Working without receiving the expected payment was the most frequently cited form of exploitation.
- Employment among migrants fell **17 percentage points** compared to pre-pandemic levels, as of July 2021. As a result, more than half of migrants are resorting to emergency coping strategies, such as borrowing from friends and family and reducing essential expenses.
- The COVID-19 pandemic does not appear to have impacted social cohesion between migrant and host communities. However, seasonal migrant workers and migrants in transit were more likely to report increases in stigmatization or discrimination as a result of the pandemic than long-term migrants. Additionally, respondents note an increase in domestic violence since the outbreak of the pandemic.
- Internal and international mobility restrictions have reportedly prompted migrants to travel along irregular or riskier routes.



This policy brief summarizes key findings from a 2022 report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on the socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants in Gedara and Kassala states in eastern Sudan.<sup>1</sup> In line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Group's framework for evaluating the immediate socioeconomic impact of the health emergency,<sup>2</sup> the report analyses the effects of the pandemic along six pillars:

1. Health first – Protecting Health Services and Systems during the crisis,
2. Protecting People: Social Protection and Basic Services,
3. Economic Response and Recovery,
4. Macroeconomic Response and Multilateral Collaboration,
5. Social Cohesion and Community Resilience and
6. Mobility.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, the recommendations of this policy brief refer to the key objectives of the **Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)**.<sup>4</sup>



Beginning in March 2020, the Government of Sudan introduced a range of mobility restrictions to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic across the country, impeding movement at the local, inter-state and international levels.<sup>5</sup> The following month, the Government imposed a total lockdown that remained in place until September 2020, after which time containment measures were gradually eased.<sup>6</sup> While the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sudan mirrors the trends observed elsewhere, distinct economic and political challenges in the country and measures aimed at reducing the virus' spread have compounded the impact of the health emergency. Beyond COVID-19, the states of Gedaref and Kassala have faced difficulties stemming from the post-2018 transition of power, rising inflation, instability related to the conflict in Tigray, climate change and environmental degradation.<sup>7</sup>

Data collection for this report consisted of a quantitative survey administered to 937 adult migrants (56% male, 44% female), of which roughly half were between the ages of 25 and 40. In addition, 30 key informants were interviewed, including government officials, humanitarian practitioners and health care workers. Data collection took place between June and July 2021. Given that the two eastern states border Ethiopia and Eritrea, virtually all migrants surveyed were citizens of these two countries (64% from the former and 35% from the latter). Considering the diversity of migratory patterns and complex mixed migration flows to these states, the report disaggregates findings along three categories of international migrants: 1) long-term migrants,<sup>8</sup> meaning those who have resided in Sudan for at least one year;<sup>9</sup> 2) migrants in transit, who intend to settle in a third country; and 3) seasonal migrant workers who engage in circular migration between Sudan and their country of origin for part of the year. Asylum seekers and refugees registered with UNHCR were excluded from the sample, although migrants with the intention of seeking international protection may feature among respondents.



**937**  
Adult Migrants



**56%**  
Male



**44%**  
Female



**47%**  
Between ages  
25-40

## FINDING I



### THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS MADE ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES FOR MIGRANTS EVEN MORE CHALLENGING.

Sudan's 2016 Health Insurance Act provides insurance coverage to Sudanese citizens, migrants and refugees.<sup>10</sup> In practice, however, even the insured may pay as much as 30 per cent of health care costs out-of-pocket, creating financial obstacles to health care.<sup>11</sup> These difficulties are compounded by other structural problems such as limited access to health centres, lack of medicine and medical supplies, a shortage of medical staff and a disproportionate concentration of services in urban settings.<sup>12</sup> In the wake of the pandemic, migrants indicated affordability as the greatest challenge to accessing health care, followed by COVID-19-related closures of health facilities. Other challenges included fear of apprehension in cases of irregular status, lack of legal documentation and language barriers.

#### Recommendations

To address affordability concerns, organizations assisting migrants in Sudan should advocate for greater subsidization of health-care costs. This aligns with **GCM Objective 15**, which commits to ensuring access to basic services for all migrants, regardless of legal status.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, in light of the Government's limited resources, data collection and analysis on health indicators should be enhanced in order to prioritize areas with the greatest need for funding, redistribution of medical supplies and secondment of health-care personnel.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, given the migration of Sudanese health-care professionals overseas, scaled-up diasporic engagement can be used to further develop the technical skills of personnel in-country and fill critical labour market gaps.<sup>15</sup>

## FINDING 2



### VACCINE HESITANCY AMONGST MIGRANTS EXISTS, BUT IT REMAINS MARGINAL.

Proof of vaccination against COVID-19 is currently not required to enter Sudan.<sup>16</sup> As of July 2021, when data collection took place, COVID vaccinations were only available to Sudanese nationals.<sup>17</sup> Despite this, **more than three-quarters** of migrants surveyed indicated a willingness to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Because of the social values surrounding vaccination, social desirability bias may influence these responses.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, survey findings reveal a certain degree of vaccine hesitancy among migrants, with **more than a fifth** of respondents stating they would not agree to be vaccinated, largely due to concerns over side effects and vaccine effectiveness.

#### *Recommendations*

To reduce the spread of COVID-19 and promote the physical wellbeing of migrants, the Government should take steps to improve access to health care and vaccines for migrants.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the Government, in partnership with health and migrant advocacy organizations, should continue to conduct information campaigns to combat misinformation related to the vaccine's side effects in languages commonly spoken by migrants in Sudan.

## FINDING 3



### COMPARED TO LONG-TERM MIGRANTS, SEASONAL MIGRANT WORKERS AND MIGRANTS IN TRANSIT HAVE BEEN MORE IMPACTED BY THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC, EXPERIENCING AN INCREASE IN ABUSIVE WORKING CONDITIONS AND EXPLOITATION.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing economic problems in Sudan and heightened the precarity of vulnerable migrant groups. Seasonal migrant workers were the most likely to report an increase in forced labour and other forms of exploitation since the beginning of the pandemic, followed by migrants in transit. The difficult economic situation in Sudan, as reflected in rising unemployment and resource scarcity, was cited as the main driver of the increase in exploitation. These findings are confirmed by qualitative interviews with migrants, who point to the limited job opportunities in the wake of the pandemic as contributors to labour-related exploitation. The most commonly indicated form of exploitation by migrants was working extra hours without being paid, selected by **nearly half of seasonal migrant workers**. Working in dangerous conditions for migrants' health and life was the second most common, as reported by slightly under half of migrants in transit.

#### *Recommendations*

In the short-term, humanitarian and development organizations should provide unconditional, multipurpose direct assistance and individual livelihoods support for vulnerable groups of migrants can enable them to leave exploitative jobs and identify new livelihoods opportunities. This individual-level support can be paired with community-based economic revitalization projects to stimulate the local economy and create job opportunities for both migrant and host communities. As short-term funding schemes may fail to reach seasonal migrant workers, due to their brief stay in Sudan, labour regulations and enforcement mechanisms for this category of worker should be developed to promote adequate working conditions.

In parallel, the Government should continue to invest the resources necessary to meet the goals outlined in its 2021–2023 National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking, such as enhanced law enforcement training on trafficking to support apprehension and prosecution of perpetrators. Continued labour inspections during the pandemic by government officials will also be critical to protect the rights of migrant workers.<sup>20, 21</sup> These inspections should be further expanded to informal and seasonal work, considering the prominence of the grey labour market within Sudan.

Additionally, organizations assisting migrants should develop know-your-rights trainings and campaigns raising awareness of exploitation. Moreover, the Government should establish amnesty measures to protect irregular migrants reporting exploitation from deportation. Availability of specialized victim assistance services, including shelter and legal aid, will contribute to effective reporting of abusive employers.<sup>22</sup> In the longer-term, organizations should push for the inclusion of migrants, regardless of their legal status or the formality of their employment, within existing social protection schemes. Additionally, enforcement of migrants' rights should be strengthened and further legislation should be developed where necessary.<sup>23</sup>

## FINDING 4



### ALTHOUGH MOBILITY RESTRICTIONS WERE LIFTED AFTER THE FIRST WAVE OF THE PANDEMIC, NOT ALL MIGRANTS WERE ABLE TO RESUME INCOME GENERATING ACTIVITIES.

As of July 2021, more than a year into the pandemic, a **17-percentage point drop** in employment among migrants compared to the pre-COVID-19 period was recorded. While the majority of both male and female respondents engaged in paid employment prior to the pandemic, men experienced a slightly larger drop in paid employment, although this difference was minor (3 percentage points). Nonetheless, the negative consequences of the pandemic on the informal sector may have a greater impact on female migrants, as most women in Sudan work in low-paying, informal jobs.<sup>24</sup>

In response to the economic difficulties engendered by loss of employment or reduction in income, **more than half** of migrants interviewed relied on emergency coping mechanisms, with negative, longer-term consequences. Borrowing from friends and family is the most common strategy for overcoming this hardship, cited more than half of respondents. Reducing essential expenses and accepting work under exploitative conditions also constituted important coping mechanisms. Certain coping strategies may be effective in the short-term, but undermine economic security in the longer-term. For instance, several small to medium enterprises owners reported that during the pandemic, they sold key assets to be able to afford essential expenses at the beginning of the lockdown, which significantly limited the productivity of their business.

#### Recommendations

In the long-term, organizations should establish business support packages for industries which both employed a significant proportion of migrants pre-pandemic and were particularly hard-hit by mobility restrictions, such as the hospitality, transportation and tourism industries. Considering the importance of these service sector industries to the overall economy in Sudan, support measures should positively impact the employment of nationals and non-nationals alike. Additionally, in line with **GCM Objective 18: Skills Development and Recognition**, training programmes focused on migrant populations should provide them with the skills to fill in gaps in the labour market.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the development of public works projects engaging both migrants and members of the local community has the dual benefit of increasing temporary employment while improving infrastructure and living conditions in local communities.<sup>26</sup> Given the immediate needs of migrants and the slow pace of recovery in highly impacted industries, however, these longer-term proposals will need to be supplemented by direct assistance in the short to medium term.

## FINDING 5



### COVID-19 HAD ONLY A MARGINAL EFFECT ON SOCIAL COHESION BETWEEN MIGRANTS AND HOST COMMUNITIES, GIVEN LONG-STANDING MIGRATION BETWEEN EASTERN SUDAN AND ERITREA AND ETHIOPIA.<sup>27</sup> NONETHELESS, THE PANDEMIC APPEARS TO HAVE EXACERBATED TENSIONS WITHIN HOUSEHOLDS, WITH INCREASING LEVELS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE BEING REPORTED.

**Nearly two-thirds** of respondents indicated no change in the level of stigmatization or discrimination towards migrants since the start of the pandemic. Interviews with key informants point to the long-standing presence of particular migrant groups in Gedaref and Kassala and shared ethnic and family ties with the host community as mitigating factors against xenophobia. Nonetheless, greater shares of seasonal migrant workers and migrants in transit than long-term migrants report increases in stigmatization and discrimination. Key informants suggest that this increase in hostility may be related to the perception of temporary migrants as transmitters of the virus.

At the household level, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have aggravated the problem of gender-based violence (GBV) in Sudan, with **a fifth** of respondents thought that domestic violence increased within their community since the start of the pandemic. Roughly similar proportions of male and female respondents flagged an increase in domestic violence in their area. Respondents primarily cite economic factors such resource scarcity and rising unemployment as drivers of this uptick in violence.

#### Recommendations

With respect to COVID-19-related xenophobia, information campaigns can be developed to counter stereotypes of migrants as carriers of disease.<sup>28</sup> To improve the success of such campaigns, representatives from communities should be involved from the design stage onwards, offering insight into the perspectives of host communities and preferred platforms for dialogue between stakeholders. Such campaigns should highlight migrants' contributions to the local economy and introduce their cultures to nurture a sense of mutual respect. On a material level, directing funds to support equitable service provision for both migrant and host communities can reduce tensions that may arise surrounding service delivery and resource access.<sup>29, 30</sup>

To promote greater focus on gender-sensitive issues in the humanitarian and development sectors, organizations should continue to mainstream gender considerations into programming, while also maintaining gender-focused assessments and programming. Furthermore, humanitarian and development actors should reinforce their efforts to combat root causes, mitigate the risk of and respond to GBV. Initiatives to prioritize include community-based prevention interventions, reinforcement of capacities to appropriately respond to disclosure and continued availability of specialized support services throughout the pandemic, including hotlines, shelters and gender-specific health centres.<sup>31</sup> Given the linkages between economic security and violence, organizations and authorities should in parallel invest in economic empowerment and financial literacy interventions.

## FINDING 6



### RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC RESULTED IN INTERNAL AND INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY RESTRICTIONS. THESE RESTRICTIONS, IN TANDEM WITH WORSENING ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN SUDAN AND COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN, HAVE ENCOURAGED MIGRATION ALONG IRREGULAR OR RISKIER ROUTES.

**Nearly half** of survey respondents reported that COVID-19 containment measures impeded their ability to migrate to a third country. To a lesser extent, migrants also indicate that pandemic restrictions prevented them from returning to their country of origin or engaging in circular migration. Worsening security along the border of Eastern Sudan has contributed to restricted movement in Gedaref and Kassala. Despite this, IOM's voluntary return assistance enabled 135 migrants hosted in Sudan to return to their countries of origin in 2020.<sup>32</sup> However, IOM does not provide Assisted and Voluntary Return and Reintegration support for Eritreans and has suspended all returns to Ethiopia.

Formal curbs on mobility have not necessarily reduced the desire to migrate, according to interviews with key informants. Because migrants are no longer able to travel along regular routes, they may be more likely to take a riskier or irregular route. Survey findings reveal that **38 per cent** of those who changed their migratory routes in response to pandemic restrictions took a riskier route, while **26 per cent** took an irregular route over a regular route.

#### *Recommendations*

Travel bans may result in unintended consequences if migrants continue to move irregularly. Additionally, complete restrictions on cross-border movement disrupt important livelihood activities, such as pastoralism, herding and seasonal migration. Therefore, to balance the importance of mobility against the imperatives of viral containment, the Government should continue to regulate, rather than ban, migration by introducing scientifically supported measures designed to reduce spread between countries. In response to the outbreak of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, the World Health Organization stated that “blanket travel bans will not prevent the international spread [of the variant], and they place a heavy burden on lives and livelihoods.” The organization instead called for containment measures to be “commensurate with the risk, time-limited and applied with respect to travellers' dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms, as outlined in the IHR [International Health Regulations, 2005].”<sup>33</sup> It is important that the health measures be realistic and not overly burdensome to those seeking to migrate, as such an approach may also increase irregular migration. For example, rapid antigen tests at border crossing points would represent a low-cost, practical solution for migrants who are unable to access vaccines or more accurate but higher cost tests such as polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests in their countries of origin. This recommendation would support the **GCM Objective 5** to promote regular pathways for migration.<sup>34</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Further research should be conducted on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on particularly vulnerable migrant subgroups, a task which is facilitated by disaggregation of data along demographic characteristics and sharing of datasets.

This report focused on the socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant populations in eastern Sudan. At the time of writing, Sudan was simultaneously experiencing an economic crisis and political instability, the effects of which cannot be disentangled from those of the pandemic. It is therefore recommended that monitoring of migrants' socioeconomic outcomes continue to note any post-pandemic shifts in trends. Additionally, given the multifaceted consequences of the pandemic, further research should be conducted on marginalized migrant subgroups believed to be disproportionately impacted by the spread of the virus and related mobility restrictions.<sup>35</sup> This may include a comparative analysis between male and female migrants as well as the inclusion of additional migrant categories in assessments (i.e. internally displaced people (IDPs), daily labourers, domestic workers and informal workers), as they are likely to face heightened risks of exploitation as a result of the pandemic. Disaggregation of data by characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, migrant category and sector of employment can shed light on intra-group differences and highlight areas for further study.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the sharing of datasets for humanitarian purposes can encourage reuse of data with attention towards marginalized groups.

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9. Many migrants in this category were in fact born in Sudan or lived there since their early childhood. The full report provides more information on how we define each of these categories.
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## SERVICES & CONTACTS

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