Ethiopia's Overseas Labor Recruitment: Challenges, Opportunities, and the Way Forward

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Mission: The policy workshop aimed to evaluate the evolving landscape of Ethiopia's overseas recruitment policy and practices. It focused on best practices, challenges, and necessary reforms in the training, certification, and deployment of Ethiopian migrant workers to countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Bringing together a diverse group of carefully selected stakeholders, the workshop included policy experts from the Ministry of Labor and Skills (MoLS) and the Ethiopian Policy Studies Institute (PSI); practitioners and frontline officers from regional and local labor and training departments; representatives from civil society organizations and NGOs; directors of public and private training centers; licensed recruitment agencies; and university-based researchers. Participants brought with them years of experience and a profound understanding of Ethiopia's overseas recruitment system.

The program included thematic presentations on the institutional dynamics of overseas recruitment, the training and certification processes, and the policy environment surrounding transnational labour recruitment in Ethiopia. The workshop also entailed a panel discussion on the perspectives and needs of migrant workers and how both returnees and prospective migrants can themselves be meaningfully integrated into the recruitment system. In the second half of the day, participants engaged in group discussions to identify key challenges, highlight best practices, and jointly develop recommendations. Notably, the workshop was held in Dessie, Amhara State—rather than the capital, Addis Ababa—as part of a deliberate strategy to decentralize the policy conversation and promote a bottom-up approach. This regional setting allowed for broader participation from local actors and ensured a stronger representation of on-the-ground realities.

Key Findings

1. **Challenges**

- *Limited integration of returnees in recruitment policy and practice*: Returnee migrants, despite having practical experiences and linguistic skills, are excluded from training and deployment programs.
- *Low level of soft skills in training modules*: Training programs emphasize technical and domestic skills but fail to adequately prepare migrants with communication, negotiation, and interpersonal competencies.
- *Absence of digital literacy in training curricula*: Despite the critical role of social media and mobile applications in the migration process, digital literacy is not incorporated into pre-departure training. This leaves migrants vulnerable to misinformation and fraud.
- *Lack of transparency and coordination among stakeholders*: A lack of well-coordinated communication between federal and regional departments, as well as with prospective migrants, weakens trust in formal recruitment channels.

- *Weak enforcement and legal response mechanisms***:** Informal and illegal brokers continue to operate due to limited legal oversight and delayed accountability processes.
- *Centralized recruitment system:* The current digital system is not decentralized due to its development stage and the government-mandated recruitment process for federal institutions.

2. Best Practices

- *Existing biometric decentralization efforts***:** The expansion of biometric registration to regional branches has increased the accessibility and efficiency of migrant registration.
- *Growing recognition of the need for reform***:** Policy discussions increasingly acknowledge the importance of returnee engagement and soft skills training for migrant workers.
- *Active engagement from civil society and researchers***:** Collaborative forums and workshops, such as the one underpinning this policy brief, have successfully brought together diverse stakeholders to identify and address critical gaps.

3. Way Forward

A. Center Returnees in the Recruitment Process
- Involve returnees in policy dialogues, pre-departure trainings, and outreach campaigns.
- Recognize returnees' language skills and migration experience via certification.

B. Improve Training Curriculum
- Incorporate soft skills modules, including communication, conflict resolution, and employer relations.
- Include a dedicated digital literacy module that educates migrants on safe social media use, identifying scams, and connecting with verified sources of support and employment.

C. Enhance Communication and Transparency
- Develop accessible and multilingual information-sharing strategies, including the use of social media platforms, hotlines, and call centers to reach prospective migrants.
- Institutionalize monthly or bi-monthly feedback sessions between federal and regional departments to harmonize information flow and operational priorities.

D. Strengthen Certification and Legal Protection
- Align certification procedures with practical skill assessments and destination country requirements.
- Ensure enforcement of recruitment laws through more responsive and efficient legal mechanisms.

E. Decentralize the Recruitment process
- Provide regional labor offices with full access to the online system and capacity-building trainings to better equip them to serve the need of labour migrants.
- Decentralize medical examinations following the successful decentralization of biometric enrollment.