

Towards a Community of Practice on the recognition of migrant workers' qualifications in the SADC region

Final Report
June 2022 to October 2024

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April 2024

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Introduction

The **Southern African Migration Management (SAMM)** project is a four-year project (2020-2023) that is supported by the European Union and is designed to improve migration management in the Southern Africa and Indian Ocean region. The SAMM Project is a UN Multi-Agency programme composed of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). SAMM's **overall objective** is to improve migration management in the Southern Africa and Indian Ocean region guided by, and contributing to, the realisation of the 2030 Development Agenda (goals 8 and 10).

The Community of Practice (CoP) specifically takes forward the work being undertaken to both assist in and facilitate the development and/or strengthening of skills systems to facilitate the recognition and verification of migrant workers' skills and qualifications in the SADC region. The CoP process was proposed as part of an intervention to create a space for key role players to exchange learning and improve practices related to the recognition of individual migrants' skills, qualifications and diplomas.

This report is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the context in which the SADC-level CoP's took place taking into account related and relevant research¹ which has sought to deepen our understanding of systems and mechanisms to support the recognition of migrants' skills in the SADC region and which has influenced the structure of the CoP process. The second section provides an overview of what emerged from the three CoP's which were held with practitioners, trade unionists and employers across the SADC region. The final section explores some recommendations in taking forward the CoP process.

2.Context

This section covers the process which took place in laying the groundwork for the CoP process. This included a series of interviews conducted amongst a range of stakeholders from representatives from the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) as well as various stakeholders in the 7 SADC main destination countries of migrant workers (Seychelles, South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Eswatini, Zimbabwe, and Mauritius). The thinking around the CoP process was also influenced by research conducted by the REAL Centre at the University of Witwatersrand together with Singizi Consulting Africa which explored the extent to which the recognition systems in place were benefitting migrants

¹ Allais, S and Marock, C: Mechanisms to support the recognition of migrants' skills in Southern Africa.

and employers and its implications for how we think about the recognition of skills and qualifications to enhance mobility.

2.1 Preparatory work towards a CoP

As part of the scoping CoP process, two inter-related initiatives were embarked upon to firstly, understand the landscape in terms of which institutions and individuals were enabling, implementing or benefitting from interventions to support the recognition of the skills and qualifications of migrants; and, secondly, we explored the topics that key stakeholders and those involved in implementation of interventions wished to explore further in order to deepen their practice.

To address these questions, we conducted interviews with individuals in the SADC, COMESA and IOC secretariats as well as the ILO officials responsible for the three REC's. Based on these interviews it was evident that different REC's face similar and different challenges. For example, input from COMESA suggested that until fairly recently the issue of skills and the recognition of skills was not a key focus of the bloc.

For the IOC, the issue of the recognition of skills is still not seen to be the current priority and interviewees explained that the extent to which recognition is an issue primarily relates to the type of migration and the migrants' level of skills. That is, the recognition of skills and qualifications are dependent on the level of qualification that the migrant worker has and the level at which they are operating in the labour market. Respondents also expressed some uncertainty as to the extent to which recognition is a problem and stated that in order to get a real idea as to the extent to which migrants face challenges there is a need for proper data. The respondents also indicated that there are tensions in terms of the work relating to the recognition of skills and qualifications of migrants. For example, there is a perception that foreigners with skills get more recognition than locals and that there are issues with unregistered agents who recruit migrants at lower levels. The IOC respondents suggested that this requires a review of migration policies to ensure they impact on development strategies around the recognition of qualifications/skills.

In terms of the SADC, respondents indicated that there has been a lot of focus on the recognition of skills and qualifications and that progress has been made towards an increase in the mobility of skills in the region. They specifically pointed to the establishment of NQF's stating that countries in the region are either already aligned to the SADCQF or are working towards this alignment. In addition, respondents indicated that the region has been reviewing the status of RPL and plans are underway to look at a competency framework around skills to support these efforts. However, officials indicated that they still have a long way to go and observe that there is a need for the capacity to continually review NQF's as qualifications cannot be static given the changing nature of the labour market. They also indicate that in this regard they are exploring micro credentials and the extent that these enable recognition in a more responsive manner and in turn whether these hold value in the labour market.

In addition, we interviewed individuals in the 7 SADC countries that are the main destination of migrant workers. These include: Seychelles, South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Eswatini, Zimbabwe, and Mauritius. Based on these engagements, all respondents agreed that a COP process would be useful and that it should take into account the differences across the region for example, between the IOC states and the rest of SADC. In terms of participation, the focus was on getting "real" people involved in the process such as hearing the voices of migrant workers and the real issues they face as well as getting employers and people from educational institutions including TVET. It was acknowledged that at some point policy people should be involved, but participation should not be limited to that level. In view of the input from the ILO, there was very much a focus on tripartism and involvement of the key social partners in such a process. In addition, it was suggested that there would

be value in organising separate CoPs for practitioners, employers and unions so that they could engage with the specific practices relevant to their immediate needs. It was further agreed that individuals from the key regional bodies would be invited to attend any of the three CoPs so that they could deepen their understanding of how best they could support these priorities and practices.

2.2 Related research which influenced the CoP process

The research conducted by REAL and Singizi Consulting Africa focused on, amongst others, migration patterns in the region, how the SADC Qualifications Framework is being implemented and an overview of existing recognition and portability mechanisms that exist in SADC and whether these processes are perceived to be having a positive impact on the lives of individual migrants and on the economy.

Of relevance for the CoP process, the research highlights some key overarching findings:

- There is no indication that employers are looking for credentialed workers, or that most migrants are seeking credential recognition.
- Those migrants who get qualifications verified are primarily applying for higher education qualifications to be verified.
- The challenges facing migrants are far more extensive than credential recognition, but, where there are extensive qualification recognition systems and processes, they seem to make things harder, not easier.

In addition, the research found that there are many recognition of qualification instruments in place (various agreements, policies, tools and structures), all of which aim in different ways to support recognition of skills and qualifications in the region. However, these processes do not appear to get simpler if there are qualification frameworks in place that align with the regional framework. And what complicates the situation, is that these processes take place within a complicated regulatory environment pertaining to work permits with many ministries and agencies and these are applied within the context of a myriad of protocols to enable migration (despite the reality of more and more restrictions on migration in the region).

Of further relevance for the CoP process is the views expressed by employers and migrants (which is drawn from a survey conducted across three countries which also formed the basis of the deliverables in relation to the CoP process)

Some key findings emerging from interviews with employers point to the fact that visa allocation is driven by a national analysis of skills shortages, usually related to specifically designated sectors and occupations; the need for highly skilled workers; political factors are seen as more important than qualification recognition in terms of barriers to employing migrants and when they get potential employees skills recognized these processes are complex and cumbersome.

In terms of the experiences of migrants, the research findings point to the fact that the challenges facing migrants go beyond credential recognition. As highlighted earlier, where migrants do apply, they struggle to attain recognition and even where there are extensive qualification recognition systems and processes, they seem to make things harder, not easier. There is also limited data available that provides insights about the extent to which migrants – once have skills verified - are then able to access either education or work. Whilst migrants also have limited knowledge of the processes to follow or the existence of processes to get their qualifications recognized.

Some key findings from the surveys:

- Those migrants who get qualifications verified are primarily applying in relation to higher education qualifications.

- More than 50% of migrants surveyed across SA, Botswana and Seychelles tried to get their skills recognised.
- In the case of SA, 30% of those who tried were successful but a very small number got their skills recognised by a qualification's authority.
- In countries such as Botswana and Seychelles, a significant number got their skills recognised by their employer. Other avenues for recognition included, assessment centres; home affairs; professional bodies and in one case from a university.
- In SA, about 23,8% of migrants did not seek recognition as they did not have enough information or where to go whilst 25,3% indicated there didn't seem to be a process in place to recognise their skills (as opposed to qualifications) whether these were certified or gained through experience.
- In the case of Seychelles, some got their skills recognised through assessment centres.

3. CoP process: key learning's

This section covers the format and structure of the CoPs and the outcomes of the three CoP processes.

3.1 Format and structure of the CoP's

Emerging out of the preparatory process, the CoP process was governed by the following:

- The process would take into account the differences across the region
- COP should involve those directly affected by the recognition of skills and should include employers, workers (migrants) and practitioners (representatives from qualification authorities).
- Focus on getting "real" people involved in the process such that the sessions create a space where the voices of migrant workers, employers and people from educational institutions including TVET/ HEI's all surface the issues that they face.
- It was suggested that policy people should be involved, but participation should not be limited to that level.
- Since regions are at different stages, the COP process should begin with a smaller group and as the process gains momentum more participants should be invited.
- Focus should be to get people to buy into the value of a CoP process, there should be on-going feedback and sharing of the learning's and sharing that emerges.

In view of this, three separate CoPs took place between June and October, 2023 and follow-up meetings took place in April, 2024. This has involved a significant amount of time focused on carefully identifying the relevant people for each particular CoP. As part of this process, a short survey was conducted to ascertain interest in participating as well as engaging with numerous individuals across the region to double check that the most appropriate people were being targeted to participate in the CoPs. Aside from these interventions, the team attended various events so as to determine who some of the key players are and ensure they were invited to participate in the process.

The first CoP which focused on practitioners was held on 29 June involving around 41 individuals (the exact number is not certain as quite a few members joined on-line but had numerous people in the room with them). The second CoP was held on 21 September and 18 trade union representatives

attended. The third CoP focusing on employers was held on 21 October and was attended by 10 employer organisations from the region.

The structure of the CoP's covered a similar format:

- Introduction of participants and sharing of expectations
- Exploring what is a COP, why it is important and what we mean by "practice" (actions, purpose, values and guidelines)
- Grounding our practice in terms of which migrants are the interventions that we are undertaking, targeting? What the nature, purpose and aims of these recognition interventions are and what guides these processes? In terms of exploring what practice was relevant to each grouping, a representative was asked to kickstart the discussion by highlighting their experiences and practices. As a result, for the practitioners a representative from Kenya spoke about her experiences; an employer from Lesotho highlighted some of the challenges and practices whilst a representative from SATUCC highlighted the challenges unions in the region were facing in relation to assisting migrants.
- We then considered what it takes for a COP to work, whether there is value in continuing to meet as a CoP and if so – how often we would want to meet and who else should be involved in the CoP.

32. Key learnings from the CoP processes

The first CoP focused on introducing and connecting practitioners working in this space with each other and sought to reach a shared understanding of whether there would be value in creating a CoP and what the topics are that practitioners would like to see addressed in this CoP. Emerging out of the sharing, the following approaches to the CoP were suggested:

- The CoP should not be overly structured but there should be thematic themes which could guide discussion, sharing and learning
- The CoP should both focus on the sharing of good practices in ways that take context into account
- Membership should be fluid such that there is a core group and then, depending on the topic, additional people will be invited
- There is value in ensuring that the voice of migrants is given expression in this CoP (both through feeding in the survey findings and through involving migrants in these discussions)
- The COP should both focus on how to strengthen practices and explore how insights emerging from this process can be taken forward to influence change
- The CoP should be supported by a platform where members can share resources (see final section)

During the second CoP, trade unionists highlighted the following key areas:

- Issues around RPL (as in the case of SA) and the fact that it has not necessarily benefitted foreign workers whilst migrants are not aware of RPL.
- The role of unions in assisting migrants to navigate through the recognition process – with proposals for a brochure/leaflet to be developed which would outline the recognition processes as a significant number of migrants do not know the process (as reinforced in our

research) and as highlighted by participants results in migrants landing up working at a level not in line with their qualifications, partly because they are not recognised.

- A range of issues around advocacy were raised for example, how unions engage around the issue of migration and the need to mainstream this issue. Linked to this is the perception of how migrants support development with one participant calling for the need to ensure that migrants are integrated within local communities and their role in contributing to economic development is understood.
- There were also concerns raised around dealing with recognition in isolation of talking about regularising migration.
- The issue of politics and the lack of political will in dealing with the issue of migrants whilst trade unionists also pointed to the fact that employers might also take advantage of the situation and recruit migrants into lower levels so as to reduce costs.

During the final CoP, employers highlighted the following areas of challenges and concerns:

- The work permit processes are highly problematic and non-transparent and could take up to a year because of a lot of political interference (as highlighted in the case of Lesotho).
- The barrier to recruiting foreign workers is not so much skills recognition but how critical skills lists and occupations in high demand lists are used to exclude certain categories of workers. Employer concerns: work permits will only be issued for occupations on the list and that occupations are pitched at such a high level that recruiting such candidates will be challenging.
- Linked to the above, is the complexity of getting agreement around what skills are in demand and getting a shared understanding from stakeholders around this (as highlighted by both Lesotho and SA).
- Employers face challenges in trying to judge foreign skills and qualifications because of language issues. As a result of the inability to validate the qualification, foreigners are then employed at lower levels.
- Language was highlighted repeatedly firstly, in relation to both employers and qualifications authorities not being able to validate foreign qualifications. Secondly, in terms of employers being able to articulate what their needs are and then being able to interface in different spaces.
- Employers face challenges in understanding the processes around recognition.
- Beyond the recognition of skills and qualifications is the ability of employers to look beyond the qualification to the actual skills/competencies of the individual.
- A lack of understanding of the nexus between labour migration and development leads to no political will which impacts on how agreements and instruments are implemented.
- The recognition of migrant skills and qualifications has become highly politicised and is not located as a labour market need.

4. Recommendations in taking forward the CoP process

The 2023 round of CoPs highlighted the following:

- There was overwhelming support for the continuation of the CoP process
- Key stakeholders were supportive of such processes taking place largely on a quarterly basis
- There were calls for a mechanism to facilitate continued sharing as highlighted by the practitioners. They highlighted the need to share best practice, guidelines on issues such as

RPL, the role of micro credentials and ways to verify non-traditional qualifications and also used as a vehicle for advocacy.

- What also emerged strongly from both the union and employer CoP's is the need for both capacity building as well as toolkits/pamphlets covering issues on how to navigate the recognition process; promoting RPL to benefit migrants; and a "how to" brochure in navigating around the NQF.