

Country Profile

Ghana

Migration and Skill Corridors

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Ghana, once a country of destination for migrants, has primarily become a country of emigration. Socio-economic and ecological challenges contributed to emigration of Ghanaians to other West African countries and to economically stronger countries. This short country profile asks whether Ghana's new National Labour Migration Policies offer potential for setting up skill partnership agreements that would not only provide frameworks for Ghanaian citizens to legally migrate for employment, but also to contribute to the development of Ghana.

Produced by the EU-funded Link4Skills research project, this profile is part of a series providing relevant information about countries where the project is conducting empirical fieldwork. Our focus is on transnational labour migration with particular attention given to migration skill corridors. Countries investigated by the consortium include Austria, Canada, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Morocco, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland and Ukraine.

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1. Introduction

After Ghana's independence in 1957, the country's economy developed favourably, especially in the south. People from neighbouring West African countries migrated to Ghana to seek job opportunities in the agricultural, construction, mining, service and manufacturing sectors (Yaro & Setrana, 2024). Ghana's 1960 Population and Housing Census showed that about 12% of Ghana's population were immigrants (Ghana Statistical Service, 1960). However, a lack of skilled personnel contributed to a delay in the government's plan of rapidly transitioning from an agrarian to an industrial economy. To address these skills gaps, the government of Ghana sponsored some persons in the late 1950s and early 1960s to undertake studies in the former Soviet Union and other countries like the United Kingdom and the US. (Anarfi et al., 2003).

The attractiveness of Ghana as a destination country began to decline in 1965 due to multiple factors ranging from political instability, growth in unemployment and poverty rates. This marked the end of the first phase of Ghanaian migration and the beginning of a new episode. Professionals like teachers and lawyers started to look elsewhere for their livelihood. At the same time Ivory Coast was experiencing economic growth, and it became the destination for neighbouring countries such as Ghana. From the late 1970s, many people emigrated en masse to Nigeria due to the discovery and exploitation of oil in that country. By 1982, there were about 2.5 million immigrants in Nigeria, most of whom were from Ghana (Adepoju, 2005).

In the early 1980s, the situation in Ghana worsened because there were harsh climatic conditions like drought and bushfire outbreaks that led to general crop failure. During that decade key destination countries for Ghanaian immigrants experienced an economic downturn. As a result, the presence of Ghanaian immigrants in neighbouring countries was not appreciated. This ended the second phase of the Ghanaian migration phenomenon and marked the beginning of the third stage. Labour shortages in parts the Global North during this period presented an opportunity for Ghanaian emigrants to be absorbed into the job market of those countries. In the late 1990s and early 2000, Ghanaians started establishing diaspora communities in Europe, Canada and the US.

Throughout the 1990s until now, Ghanaians have continued to establish diaspora communities in Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and most recently the Netherlands and to some extent Spain. Less formally educated migrants settled mostly in Germany and Italy while moderately and highly formally educated persons migrated to English speaking countries like the United Kingdom, (Teye, Setrana & Yeboah 2023). Moreover, since the beginning of the new millennium, Ghana has witnessed the emigration of Ghanaian health professionals to the United Kingdom, USA and Canada. Although the phenomenon raises policy concerns due to a shortage of domestic healthcare workers, there have been no effective measures to curtail it.

Demographic trends

According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, Ghana is home to 30.83 million people (Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) 2021a). The population grew at 2.1% per year during the intercensal period between 2010 and 2020. This is the lowest recorded growth rate since the country gained independence. In the year 2000 Ghana had a population of 18.9 million. Previously, Ghana's population had doubled within two decades. Had that trend continued, the population would have reached about 36 million.

Ghana's female population makes up 50.7 % of the total while the male population makes up 49.3 %. The recent population census indicated that Ghana's population age structure is transitioning from one dominated by children (0-14 years) to one dominated by young people (15-35 years). The proportion of children declined from 41.3 % in 2000 to 35.3 % in 2021, while that of young people increased during that same period from 34.6 % in 38.2 % (GSS 2021b). The data show that Ghana has an active youth population which is economically active and has the potential to explore opportunities abroad.

2. Migration and Migration Corridors

In the first phase of Ghana's post-colonial migration pattern from 1957 until 1965, some Ghanaians emigrated went to the United Kingdom due to colonial heritage and language affinity. Others went to the United States or Russia. The second phase Ghanaian migration started in 1965 and extended into the early 1980s. During this period, Ghana began to experience economic crisis. That, together with the Aliens Compliance Order of 1969 that expelled non-Ghanaians without valid residence permits, made the country unattractive to foreigners. Migration corridors involving Ghana were mainly intra-regional. The favourable economies in the region that attracted Ghanaian emigrants were Nigeria and Ivory Coast. Those who emigrated were mainly professionals such as teachers, administrators and health workers, despite the shortage of skilled personnel in Ghana's labour market. They were followed by skilled workers such as masons and carpenters. The third phase of Ghana's migration phenomenon - from the mid 1980s until late 1990s - has saw a persistent increase in the flow of Ghanaian immigrants to OECD countries. Throughout the fourth phase - from the late 1990s until now – Ghanaians have been established establishing diasporan communities in OECD countries.

According to the OECD (2022), the flow of Ghanaian migrants to OECD countries was second highest among ECOWAS countries after Nigeria. Germany and Italy are the highest OECD destination countries for Ghanaians. The US, the UK, Italy, Germany and Spain received 85% of all Ghanaian migrants in the OECD area. While the OECD has no data on the stock of Ghanaians in Canada (Figure 1), there is a significant flow of Ghanaians to Canada (Figure 2). UNDESA (2020) data show that there are about 25,000 Ghanaians in Canada.

The major motivation for Ghanaians migrating to OECD countries in the fourth phase has been work opportunities. But currently, the dominant motivating factor is family reunification. The migration pattern from Ghana is facilitated by individual initiatives and capabilities as there are limited or no existing skill partnership agreements between Ghana and the popular destination countries of Ghanaian immigrants. Healthcare professionals, especially nurses, dominate the traditional Ghana-OECD corridors, namely Ghana-UK and Ghana-US and to a lesser extent Ghana-Canada.

The **Ghana-UK and Ghana-US corridors** are established, but there are no institutional skill partnership agreements. Recently, the UK and US have regulated the recruitment process of healthcare workers such that they can apply directly from Ghana. Individual qualified healthcare workers interested in working in the US or UK are to write examinations conducted by these countries. If successful, the individual healthcare workers can then apply for jobs directly or via recruitment agencies. These corridors are full of pre-existing socio-political engagements especially that of Ghana-UK. The Ghana-UK corridor also benefits from student scholarship schemes such as the Commonwealth Fund. Due to the predominance of women in the healthcare sector, women are frequent in this skilled corridor with husband joining through family reunification.

The **Ghana-Canada corridor** is an emerging one that is not clearly defined. Canada generally adopts the federal or provincial approach in recruiting prospective Ghanaian emigrants. Ghana does not have any national or federal partnership agreement with Canada, but individual professionals apply through Canada's point system which does not target any specific profession. Individual nurses apply through federal agencies using the point system. However, the challenge in this corridor is that the Canadian professional examination into the nursing field is carried out upon arrival in Canada.

The **Ghana-Germany corridor** was established during the Cold War in the late 1950s and early 1960s when students were sent to East Germany (German Democratic Republic). Over time, this corridor dried out and was re-established in the late 1980s. As critical labour shortages mount in the new millennium, the German government has brought about a 'paradigm shift' in its labour migration policy. Since 2022, the revised legislative framework (e.g. the Skilled Labour Migration Act) has opened new pathways for skilled workers - including those without academic degrees - to migrate to Germany. Germany has also sought to establish new partnerships for labour migration, notably with African countries. These include a partnership with Ghana through the establishment of the Ghanaian-European Centre for Jobs, Migration and Development, which previously operated as the Ghanaian-German Centre. Ghana is collaborating with Germany in the training of construction workers and other TVET skills to be recruited into the Germany labour market. These remain issues to be explored. Despite the shortage of health workers in many EU member countries, Germany does not recruit nurses from Ghana because of the WHO regulations that have blacklisted countries with a high patient-to-health professional ratio.

3. Migration and Skills

Historically, labour migration from Ghana was mostly initiated on an individual and family basis with limited or no government bilateral agreements through recruitment agencies or agents. Temporarily, Ghana had a bilateral agreement with Italy for labour migration in agriculture. Currently, the country has a bilateral agreement with Barbados on the recruitment of nurses. Ghana has a high potential to train professionals from different sectors and place them abroad, but only a few of these opportunities have been explored.

Ghana has recently developed a National Migration Policy to promote national development by enhancing migration's benefits while minimising its challenges. The objectives of the National Migration Policy are to promote and protect the interests, rights, security and welfare of citizens and migrants within and outside Ghana (Ministry of Interior, 2016:14). The National Migration Policy gave impetus for the enactment of several migration policies by ministries, departments and agencies. The most relevant is the National Labour Migration Policy enacted by the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations (MELR) for 2020-2024.

The National Labour Migration Policy seeks to “promote good governance of labour migration, to strengthen systems for the protection and empowerment of migrant workers and their families and to strengthen mechanisms to maximise the developmental impacts of labour migration” (MELR, 2020). In addressing youth unemployment, the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations seeks to enter into bilateral labour agreement with other countries to avoid unsafe travelling to OECD countries. This approach ensures mutual development and aims to enhance “triple-win” benefits for migrants, origin and destination countries. Efforts are being made within the TVET system to train more people with the skills needed for twenty-first century development. This policy could create more diverse skills that meet both domestic and internal labour demands.

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About the Link4Skills project

Link4Skills is an EU-funded research and project addressing the global challenge of skill shortages and mismatches through innovative, sustainable solutions that foster fair skill utilization and exchange across continents.

Focusing on Europe, Africa, Asia, and America, the project seeks to bridge the gap between skill supply and demand by facilitating re/up-skilling, promoting automation, and encouraging migration as policy options.

Link4Skills is creating an inclusive, participatory policy decision-making environment by integrating a diverse range of stakeholders, including EU decision-makers, inter-governmental institutions, national and subnational decision-makers, employers organizations, employees organizations, and civic society co-development institutions.

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