

**Labor Migration and Deskilling in the United Arab Emirates:  
Impacts on Cameroonian Labor Migrants<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract** Little empirical studies have examined Sub-Saharan African labor migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries<sup>3</sup>, particularly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). With growing unemployment and sociopolitical conflicts, combined with increasing immigration restrictions in the West, many Sub-Saharan African labor migrants have increasingly migrating to the GCC countries as temporary labor migrants, entrepreneurs, refugees, and students. Unlike other foreign labor migrants, many Sub-Saharan Africans tend to have acquired more formal education and advanced professional qualifications. Yet they often severely face deskilling problems in the UAE, which directly impact their social and economic contribution (i.e. remittances, knowledge transfer) to their origin countries. Drawing from 50 in-depth qualitative interviews and newspaper/document analyses, we examine the labor migration integration patterns, causes, and implications of deskilling on high-skilled Cameroonian labor migrants in the UAE. Several causes of deskilling problems among Cameroonian labor migrants have been identified: (1) non-recognition of foreign credentials; (2) social/racial prejudices; (3) unorganized social network institutions/communities; and (4) absence of the Cameroonian state embassy/consulate in the host country. These labor market constraints do not only produce economic losses and psychological/health related problems, but also reinforce their low-skilled labor market segmentation in the UAE labor market. It also raises critical questions about the appropriate role of the Cameroonian state in managing contemporary labor migration as a development strategy. This paper will also broadly examine the role of Cameroonian labor migrants as development agents in Cameroonian future development process.

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<sup>3</sup> The GCC countries are mainly comprised of six oil-wealth rich countries: Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait.

## Introduction

On January 2009, Mary migrated as a tourist from the northwest British region of Cameroon (a poor Sub-Saharan African country) to Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) in search of a decent employment opportunity. With a master's degree in education, Maribel has acquired extensive years of teaching and research trainings in Cameroon and other neighboring African countries to optimize her market competitiveness abroad. However, when Maribel entered the UAE labor market searching for employment, she acknowledges:

They asked for UAE experiences, which I didn't have. This put me at a huge disadvantage, even though I was a well-trained teacher and researcher back home in Cameroon. With my tourist visa, I only had one month to renew it and can't easily renew my visa because it's too expensive. After sending more than 100 applications to different schools, I failed to get a teaching job. At the last day, I ended up as an assistant to a local Indian teacher. This doesn't match my capacity, yet I have to take it. I had no choice. At my job site, I realize that despite my master's degree, my peers think too low of me and others because I'm simply black, which they never had one before (Mary, female, 25).

The story of Mary encapsulates the deskilling (or occupational downward mobility) dilemmas faced by many high-skilled Cameroonians in the UAE labor market. Despite their advanced formal education and professional trainings, many Cameroonians have often become segmented in the low-skilled labor market sectors. Their particular experiences raise the following core questions: what social, economic, and legal factors that shapes Cameroonians' labor market segmentations in the UAE? How and why they have more become segmented in low-skilled, menial jobs than other foreign labor migrants in the UAE labor market? What are the development implications of Cameroonians' deskilling experiences for origin, host countries, and migrants? Such questions are critical to analyze because

Cameroonians and other Sub-Saharan Africans increasingly represent the fastest growing temporary labor migrant populations in the UAE and other GCC countries.

This paper broadly examines the role of deskilling in labor market integration of Cameroonian labor migrants in the UAE. It is divided into four key sections. The first section explores the linkages between international migration and deskilling literature and highlights both macro and micro-factors that impact Cameroonian labor migrants' experiences in the UAE labor market. The second section contextualizes the patterns of Sub-Saharan African labor migration—particularly the Cameroonian case—to the UAE and GCC countries. Key historical, economic, political, and social drivers of Cameroonian labor migration will also be examined. The third section analyzes the labor market integration of Cameroonians and explains the causes and implications of deskilling on Cameroonian labor migrants (i.e. remittance and entrepreneurship). The final section examines the role of the Cameroonian state in contemporary labor migration, while exploring future research agenda for migration scholars, policy practitioners, and students.

### **Literature Review on International Migration and Deskilling: The Case of Sub-Saharan Africans**

Despite their large-scale emigration flows globally, limited studies have examined the role of deskilling in Sub-Saharan African labor market integration in the traditional Western labor immigration countries, mainly the United States and Canada (Corra and Kimuna 2009; Kposowa 2002; Creese and Wieber 2009, 2010, 2012; Mojab 1999) and non-Western countries (Morris 1998; Moorhouse and Cunningham 2010), particularly in the GCC countries. Empirical studies in Canada

show that Sub-Saharan African immigrants have become increasingly deskilled and segmented in low-skilled menial roles because they lack labor market requirements (particularly the “Canadian experience”)(Creese 2012; Mojab 1999). They face accent discrimination as a main systemic form of inequality, particularly of women (Creese 2010, 2012). This severely constrains Sub-Saharan Africans from accessing high-skilled labor market jobs, often segregating them in highly segmented, gendered, and racialized employment positions. Other scholars have also emphasized the role of racial prejudice as a deskilling factor within the host country labor market (Kposowa 2002; Mojab 1999; Tesfai 2011; Caps et.al 2011). In the US labor market, for example, Kposowa (2002) finds that race negatively impacts the earnings of Sub-Saharan African labor migrants, despite their high-levels of educational and training qualifications. Therefore, Sub-Saharan African immigrants’ educational status did not translate into higher earnings and labor market positions, and only became structurally segmented and discriminated within the US labor market (Mojab 1999; Kposowa 2002).

Even more limited case studies have analyzed labor market deskilling experiences within African labor migration contexts, particularly in South Africa. Morris (1998) acknowledged that xenophobia and race directly impact labor market opportunities for Congolese and Nigerian labor migrants and asylum seekers in South Africa. He found that employer discrimination and stereotypes shape hiring/recruitment process by reluctantly hiring foreign black Africans. More recently, Moorhouse and Cunningham (2010) concluded that inadequate social capital and xenophobia directly produces systematic barriers for labor market entry

for Zimbabweans in South Africa. They further show how national human resource development strategy further creates an exclusionary mechanism that prevents them from entering the South African labor market.

Sub-Saharan African labor migration to the GCC countries has largely been neglected in global migration literature (see Pelican et.al 2008; Pelican and Tatah 2009). Due to the increasingly restrictive immigration from the West, many Sub-Saharan Africans (including Cameroonians) have increasingly migrated to the GCC countries, particularly to the UAE, in search of socioeconomic and educational opportunities (Pelican et.al 2008). In particular, Sub-Saharan Africa's deskilling experiences in the GCC countries have not been documented, despite their increasing labor migration flows in the region. This is particularly a critical region to examine because there are neither labor sending, receiving state mechanisms nor intermediary institutions (i.e. community groups, NGOs, or quasi government entities) that facilitate service to promote labor market integration for Sub-Saharan African labor migrants.

This particular case study within an authoritarian labor-receiving context provides an interesting case study on how Sub-Saharan African labor migrants experience and cope with deskilling challenges in the UAE and of GCC countries. To our knowledge, no empirical studies have been conducted that examined the labor market integration issues and challenges of Cameroonian labor migrants in the UAE. This paper addresses such literature gap in international migration and deskilling literature by highlighting the causes, impacts, and policy options for deskilling on Cameroonian labor migrants in the UAE.

### **Sub-Saharan Labor Migration to the UAE and GCC Contexts**

The Sub-Saharan African labor migration has been deeply rooted in its complex historical, political, and economic colonial history (de Bruijn et. al 2001). During the Trans-Atlantic slave trade between the early 16<sup>th</sup> century until the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, African slaves were forced by European slave traders to leave the African soil and work in banana and sugar plantations in Europe, the United States, Latin America and the Middle East. When the Trans-Atlantic slave trade ended, both internal and international labor was further exacerbated by European colonial practices. Europeans legally controlled the internal movement of Africans within the continent by imposing policy measures like forced labor, hut and poll taxes, the exploitation of the best lands of agricultural settlers, and the provision of services to attract wage laborers (Henderson 1978). These restrictive-based policing strategies inevitably pushed a large African populations into the informal economy as wage laborers, working in Southern African mines and the East, Central and West African countries' rubber, tea, coffee and cocoa plantations. The wide spread labor flows from Benin, Niger, Mali, and Togo to the plantations and mines of Ghana, Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire also depicted the internal labor migration (Schuerkens 2003). These did not only produce massive internal labor migration within Africa, but also eventually intensified international labor migration.

When many African countries gained independence from their colonial masters, they increasingly instituted their own government rules and policies to rapidly achieve economic growth and modernize their governmental systems. Yet severe economic problems, including recessions, political violence, and high-

unemployment/underemployment, structurally forced many Sub-Saharan African labor migrants, particularly those highly-educated ones, to migrate in search of economic opportunities. International labor migration has therefore not only become a tool to escape the ensuing political and economic problems, but also has eventually transformed into a sociocultural norm within African societies.

In particular, Cameroon is a relevant case in point. After its independence in 1960, many high-skilled Cameroonians emigrated abroad due to high-unemployment and ensuing political violence. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2009) acknowledges that “in 2000, 17% of Cameroonians with a higher education emigrated. During the period of 1995-2005, 46% of Cameroonian doctors and 19% of nurses emigrated to mostly the United States and European countries.” These statistics do not only suggest high-human capital levels (including those professionals, doctors, nurses, teachers, who have at least bachelors or master’s degree), but further reinforce the high literacy rate in Cameroon, estimated at 67% (UNDP 2006). In addition, the World Bank’s Migration and Remittances Factbook (2011) estimated that nearly 280,000 Cameroonians were living abroad (as of 2010), which constitutes 1.4% of the total population. Yet the Cameroonian government official statistics provides a different perspective, contending that over four million Cameroonians live or work outside the country, working in diverse professional fields, including health, teaching, management, consultancy, research, trade and even sports. Unskilled labor (including house wives and children) from Cameroon, on the other hand, only emigrate to reunite with their families abroad. Therefore, Cameroon labor migration is uniquely different from other Sub-Saharan



Africans due to extremely high proportion of highly educated human capital populations. This is critical point to highlight because given the small size of Cameroon's population, the out-migration of high-skilled population could directly undermine their national development process.

Cameroonians' labor migrant population abroad is even more concentrated in Europe, the United States, Canada, and more recently the GCC countries. For example, France has received 50,000 Cameroonians, the highest number of Cameroonian migrants, while Germany follows with 20,000 Cameroonians. Recent statistics also show that 33, 171 Cameroonians presently live and work in the United States. Other recent labor-receiving destinations for Cameroonian labor migrants, include UK, Spain, Italy, and Gabon, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, and South Africa. Yet, due to increasing immigration policy restrictions in many Western and in some rich-African labor-receiving countries, many Cameroonians (particularly those from the English regions) have increasingly migrated to alternative labor-receiving destinations with less immigration restriction policies, mainly the GCC countries.

### **Drivers of Cameroonian Labor Migration**

Our in-depth qualitative interviews and discussions with Cameroonian migrants suggest complex pull and push factors—religious reasons, educational opportunities, trade and business opportunities, and family reunion—that trigger their labor migration decisions to the UAE and of the GCC countries. The social, economic, and political climates in Cameroon constitutes for their push factors.

*Pull Factors*

The labor migration flows of high-skilled Cameroonians can be explained through the complex religious, economic, and political factors. The first pull factor can be explained by the historical religious relationships between Cameroon and the GCC countries. Approximately 20% of the total Cameroonian population represents a Muslim population, and this gives Cameroonian Muslims strong religious ties with the GCC countries (especially Saudi Arabia) because of their pilgrimage act. To a larger extent, Cameroonian Muslims have therefore found it relatively easy to migrate to the GCC countries for religious purposes (Pelican 2008 et.al). This religious pull factor for high-skilled Cameroonian labor migrants has always been historically a determinant pull factor for their ongoing flows to the GCC countries.

The second pull factor stems from the increasing unemployment/underemployment within the Cameroonian labor market. The Republic of Cameroon has seven premier state owned universities and colleges that produce high-skilled Cameroonian graduates, which accounts for Cameroon's high literacy rate of 67% compared to other Sub-Saharan African countries. Yet when young Cameroonians graduate from these higher educations, they often could not find employment due to limited employment opportunities available within the local labor market. As a result, young, high-skilled Cameroonians have been forced to seek both economic and educational opportunities to the West and more recently the GCC countries for their higher education.

The third pull factor revolves around Cameroonians' increasing participation in international trade and business opportunities. Since Dubai is the fastest center

of global business attraction from electronics trading to fashion and design, coupled with its business free zone status, many Cameroonians have been pulled to invest or work as global entrepreneurs in the UAE labor market. This has inevitably resulted in a recent surge of Sub-Saharan African entrepreneurs, including those from Cameroon, who often seek for and obtain employment, while they operate their own private businesses in Cameroon.

The fourth pull factor highlights that international labor migration has been a primary source of concern, pride and respect for every Cameroonian family. Since international migration has been considered as a sign of respect and prestige within certain ethnic groups within the country, many Cameroonians, particularly the younger generations, increasingly felt compelled to work and live outside the country for some years to prove their individual worth and capacities. This positive social conception of international migration has not only propelled high migration rates among young Cameroonians, but also paved the way for family migration reunifications, which enables some family members (including mother, father, siblings and some extended family members) to co-migrate abroad.

#### *Push Factors*

In the early 1990s, the Cameroonian economy, along with other West African economies, rapidly declined due to currency devaluation. This event has not only caused public crises (notably the 75% salary reduction of Cameroonian civil servants, and 30% unemployment rates), but also became powerful trigger of Cameroonian labor migration. Although the economy has slightly improved over the years, this economic recovery has not effectively curbed Cameroonian labor

migration due to limited employment opportunities. A professor at University of Buea, Diffang Funge acknowledges that “there is a lot of job scarcity in Cameroon which compels people to look for greener pastures elsewhere.” With roughly about 20 million populations, an estimated 70% of Cameroonians farm, meaning approximately 13 million employable youths yet only two million are considered fully employed. The unemployment rate was estimated at 30% in 2001, and about a third of the population was living below the international poverty threshold of US\$1.25 a day in 2009. Since the late 1980’s, Cameroon has been following programs advocated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reduce poverty, privatize state industries, and increase economic growth. But privatization and economic growth has progressed slowly, while corruption continues to be a significant obstacle to economic growth. These particular factors strongly pushed high-skilled Cameroonians to emigrate to the West and more recently the GCC countries, particularly the UAE.

Even more problematic is the increasing institutional corruptions recorded by both local and international organizations about Cameroon. In 2005, Cameroon was ranked 137 out of 159 countries surveyed by Transparency International, highlighting the deep level of corruption within the country. Approximately 50% haven admitted to been involved in bribery, which makes it difficult to the younger generation of youths leaving tertiary institutions in search of jobs. Not only do they encounter the challenge of getting a job due to the non-retirement of the aged labor force, but also they need to bribe before they are offered jobs. Thus, despite the high-qualifications of young Cameroonians, they have remained constrained due to

prevailing corruption and unretired employees (some of whom have been due for retirement for the past ten years but continue to work due to under-the-table arrangements) in both public and private institutions. This economic challenge coerces the young intelligent minds to leave the country in search of “greener pastures” and eventual permanent immigration in the host country.

Furthermore, Pelican et al (2008) highlights the consecutive civil and political unrests in February 2008 have caused a lot of panic and insecurity among young, highly-educated Cameroonians. It was a popular affair that if a youth is affiliated to any political party and most especially the ruling party, he/she will easily get a job. If he/she was highly connected (having a “godfather”) or parents who are highly connected to any political figure in the country, he/she will secure a job for sure. Many became disheartened and dissatisfied with the so called “cosmetic democracy” of the country and decided to look elsewhere for a bright and secure future for themselves and their families. This political affinity or corruption has directly pushed other young Cameroonians, particularly those from the British region, to increasingly emigrate to the GCC countries, particularly Dubai.

### **Methodology**

To examine the under-researched roles, causes, implications of deskilling on the labor market integration of Cameroonian labor migrants in the UAE, we conducted 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews in Dubai, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi emirates between March and September 2013. We deployed a snowball sampling technique to strategically locate Cameroonian labor migrants working in various low-skilled labor market sectors (i.e. hospitality, security, administrative, IT etc) in

the UAE. We specifically analyzed their key demographic, labor market experience, housing, entrepreneurship, and other future migration decisions. Document and text analyses on government/NGO reports and local newspaper articles have also been employed, analyzing the Cameroonian and other Sub-Saharan migration discourses in the UAE and of the GCC contexts. Additional on-job site observations of Cameroonian labor migrants have also been employed, comparatively interviewing their labor market experiences/positions. These particular daily interactions did not only color our interactions with our participants, but also raise critical questions about their role as active development agents for the Cameroonian's future development process.

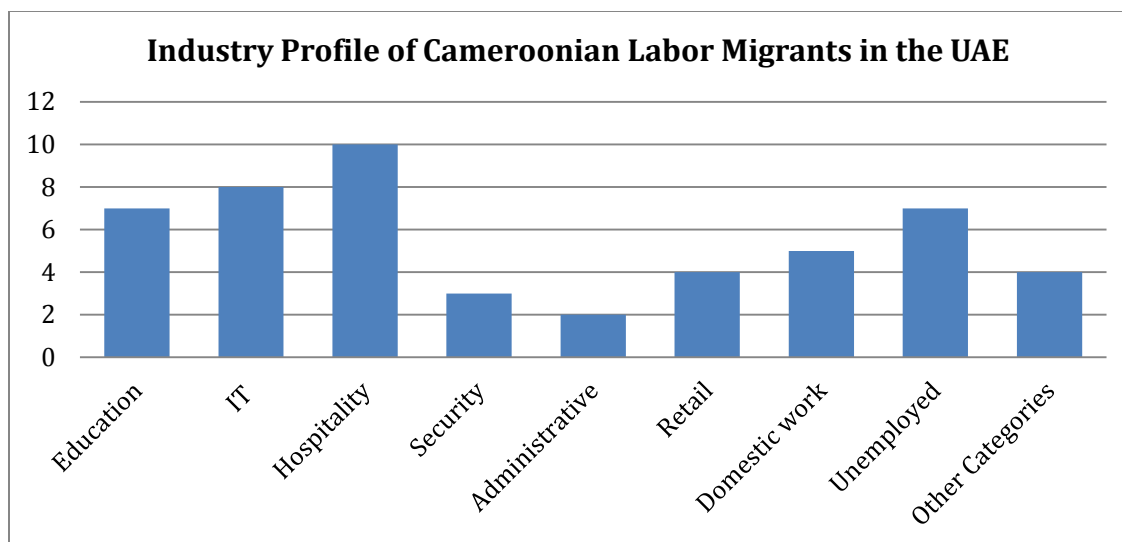
### **Role of UAE State, Labor Market, and Labor Migration**

In the UAE, foreign labor migrants outnumber the local native populations within the UAE labor market, approximately representing 7.2 million (out of 9 million total population) of the UAE's total population. In particular, the UAE state has an explicit preferential policy for hiring temporary foreign labor in the UAE. Under Article 10 of the Federal Law No. 10, it states that "in the event of non-availability of national workers, preference shall be given to: 1. Arab workers who are nationals of an Arab country, [followed by] workers of other nationalities. Due to their linguistic Arabic capacity, many Arab labor migrants tend to have an upper hand during the labor recruitment process. Western expatriates, on the other hand, are mainly segmented in high-skilled labor market, and often have high-salaries in comparison to the others (Kapiszewski 1999). Other labor migrants, particularly the Indians and Filipinos, have already carved a labor market niche in the UAE labor

market. In particular, Indians have long historically migrated to the UAE and of the GCC countries, and have dominated certain sectors, including human resource management. Filipinos, on the other hand, have also dominated, particularly in domestic work, retail, construction, engineering and other administrative/HR related activities. Sub-Saharan African migrants, on the other hand, constitute the “new labor migration pattern to the Gulf region,” and often have faced difficulties due to both state preferences and normalization of ethnic-specific markets, which often preclude them from accessing several high-skilled positions. These particular labor market constraints, coupled with the absence of discrimination law, makes Cameroonian labor migrants vulnerable to racial prejudices from abusive companies or individual employers in the UAE labor market.

### **Causes of Deskilling Cameroonian Migrants**

Drawing from in-depth cases of high-skilled Cameroonian labor migrants, four key causes of deskilling have been identified: (1) non-recognition of foreign credentials; (2) racial prejudice/discrimination; (3) unorganized social networks/communities; and (4) absence of Cameroonian state in the host country. These factors do not only segment high-skilled Cameroonian labor migrants in these low-menial job sectors, but also often produce labor market vulnerabilities in the UAE.



**Selected Profile of Deskkilled Cameroonian Labor Migrants in the UAE**

Education	Deskkilled
Higher (i.e. 4 years undergraduate education and above)	Maria (3 assistant to local elementary teacher) Michael (2 security officer) Timothy (club bouncer) Max (family driver) Rex (4 concierge) Carl (8 unemployed) Mirabel (unemployed) Mark (administrative assistant) Jake (3 IT technician assistant) Anthon (office assistant) Franco (2 store keeper) Francis (informal vendor)

*Non-Recognition of Foreign Credentials*

In the UAE, many employers tend to utilize the “UAE experience” as critical criteria for employment hiring procedures. They often selectively apply such concept in most predominantly low to middle level positions within the UAE labor market, except the high-skilled labor markets (mostly Western expatriates). When Cameroonians apply for employment, they often face such obstacle not only by their



absence or limited UAE experience, but also the high-level of suspicion from employers, who tend to question the reliability or validity of their high-level educational qualifications, cultural know-how, and other professional/trainings. As a Cameroonian labor migrant, Mary emphasizes: “They asked our experiences and of which I never had so that was a little problem but then I finally got it. They are looking for UAE experience and I never had it. I keep telling them that I don’t have it, and this has put me at a huge disadvantage, despite my extensive experience back home in Cameroon” (Mary, female, 25). She further acknowledges that “at my job site, they were thinking that despite my master’s degree, they think too low for me and others because we are black” (Mary, female, 25). This labor market constraint has not only precluded Cameroonian labor migrants from accessing high-skilled jobs, but also seen as an ‘institutionalized’ form of discrimination within the domestic labor market.

Such non-recognition of credentials has also directly been linked with social and racial discrimination within the labor market. Some Cameroonian migrants like Max highlights that “I thought the UAE was a nice country where the employment conditions are good for work, and everything and every person get treated equally no matter what. When I got here, I noticed you sign a contract, nothing goes except, you are not treated well. There’s so much discrimination, if you don’t speak Arabic, they treat you like trash. My employer is Syrian. Like when I work, something happens between an employee and tenant. If the guy is at fault, he gets lesser punishment yet I’ll be severely punished. I’ll get suspension and the worst part, salary deduction” (Max, male, 35). These exclusionary criteria do not

only shape the precarious nature of labor market conditions for Cameroonians, but also increasingly produce ongoing critical tensions between and among foreign labor expatriates.

Because of the abovementioned labor market discriminatory practices, many Cameroonian labor migrants have often become vulnerable to recruitment agencies and companies that often exploit their precarious employment status/conditions. Timothy notes that “African certificates like from Cameroon are not recognized here, and employers don’t care. There are so many people with high qualifications yet could not get jobs because they happened to have a certificate from an African country. No matter what diploma, they don’t care” (Rex, male, 30). Another Cameroonian labor migrant, Francis highlights “Cameroonians end up reinvesting again to get more certificates that are recognized in the UAE. Employers pay you AED 1,200 (inclusive of accommodation) while they pay Filipinos and Indians AED 3,700 for the same position. This is discrimination.” (Rex, male, 35). These particular cases do not only reflect employer’s behavior and preferences towards Cameroonians and other foreign labor migrants, but also further imply the subjugation of high-skilled Cameroonian labor migrants in the UAE. This does not only produce labor market disadvantages, but also makes them dislocated and untapped within the UAE labor market.

Because of these complexities, many high-skilled Cameroonian migrants, particularly those who could not afford to pay additional fees on tourist visa renewals, systematically become segmented in the labor market. As Rex highlights, “Today, I am out of the field (from IT) and am doing security in Dubai just to get the

'UAE experience' and I hope to switch still have that one day back to my field" (Rex, male, 36). These do not only deskilled high-skilled Cameroonian migrants temporarily but also bond them within a two year contract in the UAE labor market.

#### *Racial Prejudice/Discrimination*

Racial prejudice and discrimination directly determines deskilling outcomes. Many high-skilled Cameroonians point out racism to be a critical systematic barrier to employment mobility in the UAE. As Mary acknowledges, "racism – simply because I'm black and that was a problem! I think it's a big problem and they never had or wanted to employ a black, a black with no experience and they look at them as inferior and only those but most people. They look blacks as inferiors and apart from that, that's what it is, and what are you going to do" (Mary, female, 25). Such notion has been problematized by many high-skilled Cameroonians who have struggled to secure employment in the UAE labor market. As Timothy notes, "Black color is discriminated. I don't know, there's something in countries, they are still fighting. In job search, for example, Indians, Pakistanis and Filipinos have better chances, not because they are better, but because of their color. We just happened to be black, and it's problematized" (Carl, male, 30). These particular cases have not only reinforced Cameroonian labor migrants' position within the secondary labor market, but also normalize their 'second-class' position within the UAE expatriate labor communities.

On the other hand, relative to other labor-receiving countries in East/South Asia and the West, other Cameroonian labor migrants acknowledge that the UAE, given the large proportion of other foreign expatriates in the UAE, is not severely

discriminatory. As Rex emphasizes, “To be frank with you, I’ve been in India and in the UAE, it will always exist anywhere but the discrimination here is lower. If you actually analyze it, UAE is some of the multinational communities, where all foreigners come” (Rex, male, 36). Yet these experiences do not only impact high-skilled Cameroonians’ opportunities, but also their reinforce labor market position in the UAE.

*Unorganized Social Communities (i.e. church, Cameroonian associations)*

Unorganized social communities have also directly contributed to the deskilling challenges faced by high-skilled Cameroonians in the UAE. Many foreign expatriates have often relied on their social institutional communities/actors, including migrant associations, churches, clubs etc., for information on job hiring. Regarding Cameroonian migrants, the lack of formally organized association precludes them from accessing certain type of employment opportunities. Although there is a formal Cameroonian association in Dubai, some of them have voiced their concerns:

There is no association to the best of my knowledge. If there is, there’s lack of information. Let me inform you on that today. They always try to fail and they are here without papers and they would never join an association because they are illegal and don’t have association. The situation here is different. They want to claim and all legal, you must be under term, classifying that or working Cameroonians. Therefore it is working against our brothers – sending a message of exclusivity and it creates a downfall to their organization. With linking consulates to the Saudis, they only cover those legal statuses, but now it is difficult. Illegals will send you back and illegal persons will be troublemaker challenge for the country.

The exclusivity nature of few organized institutions do not only exclude certain Cameroonian populations, but raises critical questions on the role of the Cameroonian government in facilitating consular support and services for its labor populations in the UAE and of the GCC countries.

*Absence of Cameroonian State Embassy/Consulate*

The absence of Cameroonian state –mainly its consular support and services – have further undermined the deskilling challenges of high-skilled Cameroonian labor migrants in the UAE. Such absence further creates added administrative constraints and costs often shifting significant financial burdens to the Cameroonian labor migrant, who often have tourist visa: As Mirabel emphasizes, “Before we attest anything, we have to go back to Saudi Arabia or Cameroon to renew our passport. We have to go back, and this would often cost us AED 7000, excluding that nobody helps me if I have problems. For my situation, no organizations that help me address my problem” (Mary, female, 25).

Other Cameroonians who lost their passport further face more critical administrative constraints due the absence of the Cameroonian government. Those Cameroonians who have managed to secure employment yet face abusive employers and working conditions typically require additional labor protections. Carl adds, “Where do you seek help? Cameroonians get stranded and employers forget about them – those seeking change visas in Kish in Iran. They live in a terrible working conditions, but how can we fight if we don’t even have a consulate to protect us?” (Carl, male, 32). Another Cameroonian labor migrant acknowledges, “Passport, here you have to wait for six months before you even get the inquiries and get the passport. You’ll going to lose the country because so many Cameroons, it’s difficult to survive, what why we all need a consulate” (Carl, male, 30). The

absences of Cameroonian labor migrants further shift the sole responsibilities for Cameroonians to handle state responsibilities.

Some Cameroonian labor migrants further highlight that “If there’s a consulate, it’ll be a lot easier for Cameroonians to be able to get the documents and find better assistance” (Mark, male, 38). “Before you get something very big, the problem is that there is no consulate to intervene. It’s an on call and you are an IT, even at the beginning, a cleaner with a degree! It’s where the stabilizing the situations, they don’t know who is who, some Cameroonians fake their documents an they are unable to do and they will in global terms, they generalize them at that level. They ‘homogenize them’ which has serious policy implications they will put on the same category despite their varying levels of educational experience and knowledge” (Rex, male, 36).

#### *Other Legal Immigration Roles*

Current immigration rules and procedures further exacerbate the positions of Cameroonian labor migrants in the UAE. Without Cameroonian state, Cameroonians would be legally remained unprotected in the host country. As Max explains, “He first came here to search for a job and almost got one. He was about to submit everything and he lost his passport and lost his job. He had to return to Cameroon and get a passport. He came back to the UAE and found an educational books; he could make it due to the demands of the company. He still lost all the opportunities. If he had the Cameroonian consulate, it would have helped them get the job” (Max, male, 30).

Those who have the financial capacity to prolong their immigration stay further highlight that “Many Cameroonians don’t want to face these visa immigration issues because they don’t have the money to do it. I work with the Ambassador to help Cameroonians organize to renew their passports. It’s a real constraint for Cameroonians to get their documents because they have to pay AED 800 for the transportation DSL only” (Mark, male, 38). These particular visa costs do not only shape their mobility, but also contribute to their segmentation in the UAE low-skilled labor market.

### **Development Impacts of Deskilling on Cameroonian Migrants**

Given their complex discriminatory experiences and systematic exclusion in the domestic labor market, many high-skilled Cameroonian migrants inevitably become segmented in low-menial, paying jobs (i.e. such frontline security officers, waiters, food servers, and other low-level cleaning-related functions). These particular jobs prohibit them from exercising their optimal human capital training, directly impacting their working conditions and remittance earnings. As Mary describes her working conditions:

It [salary] does not come on time. Like last month and you just have to sit and wait and nothing, can you protest? They’ll fire you. It’s not easy to get another job, you sit and wait. And the working conditions, if you are absent for one day, they deduct AED 100 [\$30 in dollars] dirhams for one day. If you take a sick leave for the schooling, they only give six days. They’ll cut your salary more if you continue” (Mary, female, 25).

The non-recognition of Cameroonians’ educational qualifications further disempowers them to participate in the UAE labor market, yet their labor immigration status under the Kafala sponsorship system restricts their mobility. Despite her abusive employer’s treatment, Mirabel has to “continue” in order to

limit potential conflicts with her direct employers and sponsors. Such high-skilled Cameroonian populations have therefore become disempowered, underutilized, and restricted within the UAE labor market.

Apart from these work-related vulnerabilities, deskilling tends to reduce total remittance rates for high-skilled Cameroonian labor migrants in the UAE. As Jake emphasizes:

I know I make relatively higher wages in the UAE, but if I work as an engineer in the UAE, [given my 10 years of experience], I would be able to earn and send more money to family. Why do other migrants like Indians or Filipinos can easily utilize their credentials, why can't I? Is it because I'm black? I don't know. (Jake, male, 40).

The labor market segmentation of high-skilled Cameroonians also directly impacts their income, thereby reducing their total levels of remittances sent to their families in their countries of origin. This has not only weaken the development capacity of Cameroonians to contribute actively to the development process of the Cameroonian nation, but also raises critical questions about the role of government in facilitating effective transfers and management of foreign remittances into the origin country.

However, despite the direct negative implications of deskilling, other high-skilled Cameroonians have continued to pursue their personal and economic objectives. One recently arrived Cameroonian, Anthon highlights:

I know I can't become a nurse immediately, but I know once I fulfill this 'UAE requirements' I'll be able to work in a hospital and get higher salary. Things will become better over time, I believe. My neighbor in Cameroon has to go through the same, but look at him he has a stable life with two businesses already in place. It's part of the process.

Other Cameroonians further initiate their entrepreneurship activities, while at the same time continuing to fulfill the two year UAE experience requirements. Their



entrepreneurial pursuits were not only driven primarily to contribute to their family economic mobility, but also of their country's economic development. As

Max notes:

Despite the difficulties being in my job, I still started a business, where I supply eggs to hotels and companies in Cameroon. The budget is small, but we focus on export food, eggs, and send money. We set-up business. Through this business, I hired five employees and I've continuously used my salary here to keep up with my business. You just have to be tough and strong and hope in the long run you save enough and return to start your own business back home (Max, male, 35).

Regardless of the restrictive nature of immigration rules, coupled with their deskilling challenges, many Cameroonians have strongly remained positive in dealing with the UAE labor market. Others have not only initiated or sustained their ongoing entrepreneurial activities, but also shaped other future Cameroonians' to rethink about the initial deskilling challenges and requirements in the UAE.

Their economic contributions have not only propelled more entrepreneurship opportunities but also have slowly contributed to their local economic growth. Our qualitative assessments suggest that 90% of Cameroonian migrants have already initiated their local businesses, hiring between 5-12 local Cameroonian employees to manage their local businesses. Such acts directly reinforce the role of Cameroonian migrants as development agents in the process.

Another Cameroonian, Franco further notes:

Once I obtain all these gadgets and materials [referring to cameras, videos etc], I'd like to return to Cameroon easily and rebuild my business. Unlike the guy I previous mentioned, few people like him will start like that, all of us have to start at the floor level (Franco, male, 41).

It is also important to highlight that many Cameroonians foresee deskilling could potentially lead to social mobility, they believe that by deskilling themselves and acquiring the necessary 'local' experience, they would be able to achieve economic

mobility and relevant social networks in the future. Many Cameroonians also acknowledge that deskilling is now only part of the labor market norm, but they believe that such UAE experience can be a positive step to other future labor market opportunities in the future. Others see the UAE as a 'transit point,' as Franco highlights: "It's either I move to Cameroon, to the US, or the UAE for better opportunities before taking off! The final destination would be the US and of the reasons, change my status from single to married!" (Franco, male, 36). Therefore, despite its discriminatory and exploitative nature, many Cameroonians perceive deskilling as a 'temporary' struggle that could be circumvented in the long-run.

Despite systematic and race-based discriminatory practices, many high-skilled Cameroonian labor migrants still feel optimistic about the long-term economic opportunities they have in the UAE. As Mark emphasizes, "I believe I can make it in Dubai, get a better job and better salary. I believe in it. The economy is booming compared to other countries. The US and Eurozone economies are not stable. Compare to here, it's still stable and more likely to get jobs" (Mark, male, 35). Others cite the UAE's social environments to be a critical factor for their decision/option. As Mark highlights, "Dubai is more open. You have a possibility of getting jobs and that's what I mean" (Mark male, 35). These particular Cameroonian labor migrants (particularly those who have already stayed longer in the UAE) have tended to have positive views within the UAE labor market, but also foresee their deskilling experiences as a labor market imperative to future international migration flows.

## Conclusions

This paper has examined the deskilling experiences, challenges, and constraints faced by high-skilled Cameroonians in the UAE labor market. Drawing from very small in-depth qualitative interviews, we identified the following key conclusions. First, labor-market barriers, such as non-recognition of foreign credentials, significantly prohibit Cameroonians from equally accessing high-skilled jobs commensurate to their real human capital value in the UAE labor market. The so-called UAE experience requirements, combined with the possible high-cost of tourist visa renewal and other expenses (i.e. accommodation, documentations etc), often force high-skilled Cameroonian labor migrants to take low-menial jobs, despite high-levels of human capital training. Second, social and racial prejudices have also been identified as key deterrents to the high-skilled labor market. Since Cameroonians and other Sub-Saharan labor migrants have only recently been part of the “new labor migration trend,” they often struggle to compete with a highly racialized labor market, often historically dominated by Indians, Pakistanis, Filipinos, and other Asian migrant workers. These make it difficult for Cameroonians to enter these medium to high-skilled labor markets, often noting that “being black doesn’t cut it in the UAE.” Their presence furthermore has often been perceived to be associated with certain level of suspicions, criminality and inferiority, further blocking them from equally accessing high-paying jobs in the UAE labor market. Third, given the recent labor migration phenomenon of Cameroonian immigrants, the weak social communities and networks have also contributed to the deskilling effects of high-skilled Cameroonians. In particular, the

transfer flow of information, often through key informal institutions such as migrant associations, churches, and community centers, has been very limited among Cameroonians due to certain political and economic constraints. Fourth, the absence of the Cameroonian embassy/consulate further produces creates deskilling problems, as it fails to provide administrative/consular support (i.e. passport renewal etc) that could have supported/marketted Cameroonians strategically in the GCC countries. These aforementioned challenges do not only produce high economic losses, but also create critical impediments for the Cameroonian migrants to access high-skilled labor market and build sustainable employment within the domestic labor market.

Yet, despite the negative deskilling effects within the UAE labor market, other Cameroonian labor migrants still tend to have a positive view about their labor migration experience in the UAE. The racial discrimination issues, on the other hand, are seen to be low (relative to the West and other rich-Asian labor-receiving countries) yet have profound labor market implications. Others have even considered staying in the UAE for longer periods, while many see the UAE and other Gulf countries as 'transit' states to rich, Western labor-receiving countries like the United States and other European countries. It is also noteworthy to acknowledge that many Cameroonians tended to participate in their homeland economic development, not political, by supporting nongovernmental organization (NGOs) initiatives for women, children, elderly and disabled. Many also cite their direct criticisms against the local and national Cameroonian governments for its weak

state capacity to equally and justly distribute employment opportunities for both the British and French Cameroonians within the country.

As development agents of Cameroon, many Cameroonians have also increasingly contributing to the ongoing economic development process, despite the legal, economic, and political challenges. Many noted that they have started small-scale business, employing between 4 and 12 other local Cameroonians to start their own local business supporting the revitalization of their local domestic economies. Despite their low-levels of remittances (i.e. due to deskilling challenges in host country, lack of support from origin countries), many high-skilled Cameroonians have continued to strive establishing their own entrepreneurship to create sustainable income and support for their family. They also tend to foresee that deskilling challenges are only temporary part of a long-term challenge that *all* migrants have to encounter within the global migration process.

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