

EFFECTIVENESS OF EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY IMMIGRATION POLICIES IN MANAGING HUMAN TRAFFICKING AT MAJOR POINTS OF ENTRY

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Publication Date: August 2026

ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: The study assessed the effectiveness of East African Community immigration policies in managing human trafficking at major points of entry.

Problem statement: Regional integration has increased cross-border mobility, yet limited evidence exists on the effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in addressing human trafficking across prevention, detection, cooperation, prosecution, intelligence sharing and victim protection.

Methodology: The study adopted a mixed methods design combining descriptive quantitative and exploratory qualitative approaches, targeting 150 respondents and obtaining 127 responses through stratified random and purposive sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi structured interviews and document review, with quantitative data analysed using frequencies and percentages and qualitative data analysed thematically.

Results: The policies were rated most positively in detecting victims and perpetrators, with 81.10 percent rating them highly effective or effective, and in promoting intelligence and information sharing, with 79.53 percent giving positive ratings. Cooperation among immigration authorities received a positive rating from 53.54 percent of respondents. However, only 27.56 percent rated the policies positively in preventing trafficking, while 48.82 percent considered them ineffective or highly ineffective. Investigation and prosecution were

predominantly rated moderately effective by 60.63 percent, and victim protection was the weakest area, with 67.72 percent rating it ineffective or highly ineffective.

Conclusion: East African Community immigration policies were more effective in operational detection and information exchange than in prevention, prosecution support and victim protection, making the framework more responsive than preventive.

Recommendations: Partner States should strengthen preventive screening, harmonize operating procedures, expand interoperable intelligence systems, improve cross border investigations, train frontline officers continuously and establish adequately funded victim referral, protection and rehabilitation services.

Keywords: *Immigration policies, human trafficking, points of entry, policy effectiveness, victim protection, East African Community*

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking remains a complex transnational crime because recruitment, transportation and exploitation often occur across several jurisdictions and are embedded within ordinary migration and travel systems. Airports, seaports and land border posts are therefore important locations for both legitimate mobility and the possible interception of trafficking movements. Contemporary migration governance must facilitate lawful movement while identifying deception, coercion, document fraud and other indicators of exploitation. This dual responsibility has made immigration policy a central part of regional responses to human trafficking (Adamson, 2020; Kangaspunta, 2022).

Official points of entry do not automatically prevent trafficking because victims may possess genuine travel documents, provide rehearsed answers or believe that they are travelling for legitimate employment. Traffickers may also exploit high passenger volumes, differences in national procedures and weak links between immigration, police and social protection institutions. These conditions make effectiveness dependent on more than the existence of laws, since border personnel require usable procedures, reliable information systems and clear victim referral pathways. Research has consequently connected successful trafficking management to officer capacity, institutional coordination and technology supported identity verification (Berman, 2021; Premaratne, 2022; Tagoe, 2021).

Across Africa, mobility governance has increasingly incorporated biometric identification, electronic entry and exit systems, joint border facilities and regional cooperation frameworks.

The African Union has promoted integrated migration governance, but differences in resources, institutional capability and implementation continue to produce uneven results across states. Human trafficking networks exploit these uneven systems by shifting routes, recruitment methods and documentation practices in response to enforcement pressure. Regional policy frameworks are therefore most useful when they are supported by harmonized procedures, interoperable databases and coordinated investigations (African Union, 2020; Adepoju *et al.*, 2022; Fayemi, 2021).

The East African Community has pursued free movement and coordinated border management as part of regional integration. These initiatives have improved mobility and encouraged common procedures, but Partner States retain different national laws, institutional capacities and operational priorities. Busy crossings such as international airports and One Stop Border Posts may process travellers efficiently while still missing indicators of coercion or deceptive labour recruitment. The effectiveness of EAC immigration policies must therefore be assessed across prevention, detection, cooperation, information exchange, prosecution support and victim assistance rather than inferred from policy existence alone (EAC Secretariat, 2021; Omondi, 2021; Ocho, 2022).

Trafficking risks persist across the region despite continued policy development and border modernization. Immigration agencies have improved screening and information exchange in some locations, yet resource shortages, fragmented referrals and inconsistent implementation continue to affect outcomes. A framework that detects victims after movement but provides limited prevention or protection cannot be considered fully effective. This article therefore extracted and examined the second objective of the wider study, focusing specifically on the effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in managing human trafficking at major points of entry (IOM, 2021; IOM, 2022; Mutambo, 2021).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Effective regional immigration frameworks should prevent trafficking movements, identify victims and perpetrators, support cooperation among border authorities, enable timely intelligence exchange, strengthen investigations and prosecutions, and protect persons exposed to exploitation. Immigration reforms across the East African Community have expanded coordinated border procedures and mobility management, but the persistence of trafficking through official entry and exit points raises questions about the practical outcomes of these policies. Victims may still be treated as ordinary migrants or immigration offenders where

screening is not sensitive to trafficking indicators. Policy effectiveness therefore depends on whether formal commitments produce consistent protective and enforcement outcomes at operational points of entry (Howlett, 2020; Tadros, 2020).

Regional evidence suggests that border modernization has not been matched uniformly by integrated data systems, specialized training and victim centred referral arrangements. Some points of entry use digital verification and coordinated agency procedures, while others operate with limited equipment, staffing and access to shared intelligence. Such variation creates opportunities for traffickers to exploit the least capable border locations and move victims through apparently legitimate channels. Differences in implementation also make it difficult to determine whether EAC immigration policies are effective as a regional framework or only successful in selected operational functions (Atinga & Ngugi, 2021; Oduor, 2021; Tagoe, 2021).

Previous studies have described trafficking routes, border vulnerabilities and policy implementation challenges, but fewer have evaluated policy effectiveness across the complete management chain. In particular, limited evidence has compared the performance of EAC immigration policies in prevention, detection, institutional cooperation, intelligence sharing, investigation and prosecution, and victim protection using a common set of respondents. Without such evidence, policy reforms may continue to prioritize border control outputs while underinvesting in prevention and survivor assistance. The study addressed this gap by assessing the effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in managing human trafficking at major points of entry.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To assess the effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in managing human trafficking at major points of entry.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The theoretical review provides the conceptual foundation for explaining the effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in managing human trafficking at major points of entry. The study was guided by Neofunctionalism Theory and Transnationalism Theory, which explain regional integration, cross border cooperation and coordinated responses to transnational trafficking.

Neofunctionalism Theory

Neofunctionalism Theory explains regional integration as a progressive process in which cooperation in one sector creates pressure for further coordination in related sectors. Within the East African Community, economic integration and the free movement of persons have generated a need for common immigration procedures, information exchange and coordinated border management. Human trafficking represents a cross border problem that cannot be managed effectively when policy integration advances in mobility facilitation but remains limited in protection, investigation and enforcement. The theory therefore provides a basis for assessing whether regional immigration cooperation has produced practical spillover into the management of human trafficking (EAC Secretariat, 2021; Kipp, 2021; Omondi, 2021).

The theory is particularly relevant to the six dimensions assessed in this study. Effective regional integration should strengthen prevention, identification of victims and perpetrators, cooperation among immigration authorities, intelligence exchange, investigation and prosecution, and victim assistance. Uneven performance across these dimensions indicates incomplete institutional spillover, where cooperation is stronger in some operational areas than in others. Neofunctionalism consequently helps explain why positive results in detection and information sharing may coexist with weak prevention and victim protection (African Union, 2020; IOM, 2022).

Transnationalism Theory

Transnationalism Theory views contemporary mobility as a networked process that extends beyond individual state jurisdictions. Human trafficking networks may separate recruitment, transportation, documentation and exploitation across different countries, allowing traffickers to adapt quickly to national policy differences. Official points of entry become nodes within these networks because victims can travel alongside ordinary migrants using lawful documents and established transport systems. The theory therefore directs attention to cross border information systems, coordinated investigations and shared protection arrangements as essential components of policy effectiveness (Adamson, 2020; Sita, 2022).

The theory also clarifies why state centred enforcement may detect a suspicious traveller without disrupting the wider trafficking network or securing protection for the victim. Information held by one Partner State may not reach another agency in time, and the absence of linked referral systems may leave victims exposed after identification. Effective immigration policy must therefore follow trafficking movements across jurisdictions and connect border

management with police, judicial and social protection institutions. This perspective complements Neofunctionalism by explaining why partial regional integration leaves operational spaces that trafficking networks can exploit (Kangaspunta, 2022; Oucho, 2022).

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Global research shows that human trafficking at points of entry is difficult to identify because victims may carry valid documents and may not initially describe themselves as victims. Kangaspunta (2022) found that trafficking patterns adapt to migration controls and that apparent compliance with immigration requirements does not eliminate coercion or deception. Berman (2021) similarly emphasized that airport detection requires officers to move beyond document checking and assess travel purpose, behavioural inconsistencies and relationships among accompanying persons. These findings indicate that policy effectiveness should be measured through both interception capacity and the quality of subsequent protection and referral.

Technology has improved identity verification and the ability to compare travellers against national and international databases. Tagoe (2021) found that digital identity systems can strengthen border management by reducing document fraud and supporting faster access to traveller information. However, Smith (2022) cautioned that technology does not replace trained judgement and must operate within clear legal and ethical safeguards. Effective immigration policies therefore require the joint development of technology, trained personnel and accountable decision making.

Studies of policy implementation demonstrate that well formulated policies may produce weak results when administrative systems are fragmented. Howlett (2020) argued that policy effectiveness depends on institutional capacity, resources and consistent implementation rather than formal design alone. Immigration officials working under heavy passenger volumes may prioritize processing speed, while weak referral mechanisms can cause potential victims to be classified as irregular migrants. This implementation perspective is central to evaluating whether EAC immigration policies achieve prevention, protection and prosecution outcomes.

At the continental level, Adepoju *et al.* (2022) found that irregular migration and trafficking in Africa are sustained by economic vulnerability, complex mobility routes and uneven enforcement. The African Union (2020) has promoted coordinated migration governance, yet differences in national legislation and institutional capacity continue to limit harmonized responses. Fayemi (2021) further identified border insecurity and weak real time information

exchange as significant challenges in the Great Lakes Region. These studies show that regional policy effectiveness depends on interoperability and shared operational standards.

Evidence also points to persistent capacity gaps at African points of entry. Mabuza (2020) reported that weak surveillance, limited specialized training and extensive informal crossing routes reduce the ability of border agencies to identify trafficking movements. Mutambo (2021) similarly linked trafficking vulnerabilities in East Africa to resource shortages, corruption and inconsistent border governance. These findings suggest that regional policies may be visible at the strategic level while remaining uneven in frontline implementation. They also reinforce the need to evaluate several policy outcomes separately rather than treating effectiveness as a single undifferentiated result.

Within the EAC region, Oucho (2022) observed that high volume land border posts provide limited time for detailed interviews and risk assessment. IOM (2021) reported that trafficking victims travelling through East and Horn of Africa may appear to be ordinary labour migrants, which complicates identification and increases the need for specialized screening. Oduor (2021) found that Kenya's anti trafficking policy performance was constrained by enforcement and coordination gaps despite the presence of legal frameworks. Collectively, these studies indicate that policy existence has not guaranteed uniform effectiveness at points of entry.

Regional cooperation is repeatedly identified as a condition for disrupting trafficking networks. Omondi (2021) found that migration governance within the EAC is affected by policy coherence and the quality of institutional coordination, while Atinga and Ngugi (2021) linked improved border governance to stronger responses to transnational crime. Sita (2022) emphasized that migration and security challenges in East Africa require shared intelligence and coordinated action across jurisdictions. Nevertheless, limited empirical work has compared prevention, detection, cooperation, information sharing, investigation and prosecution, and victim protection within one objective specific assessment.

The reviewed evidence established three gaps addressed by the study. First, existing literature often focuses on trafficking routes or general border vulnerabilities rather than the effectiveness of immigration policies across distinct management functions. Second, many studies examine individual states or border locations without evaluating the regional EAC framework. Third, detection and enforcement receive greater attention than victim protection, creating an incomplete understanding of policy performance. The study addressed these gaps through a

mixed methods assessment of six effectiveness dimensions derived directly from the Chapter Four descriptive results.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed methods research design that combined a descriptive quantitative approach with an exploratory qualitative approach to assess the effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in managing human trafficking at major points of entry. The target population comprised immigration officers, police officers, customs officers, intelligence and security personnel, policy makers, government officials, civil society representatives and academic scholars involved directly or indirectly in immigration management and anti-trafficking operations within the East African Community. A sample of 150 respondents was targeted and 127 completed responses were obtained; stratified random sampling selected frontline personnel from airport, seaport and land border strata, while purposive sampling identified senior officials and other key informants with specialized knowledge.

Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires, while semi structured interviews and document review generated qualitative evidence on policy implementation and trafficking management. Quantitative data were coded and analysed in Excel using frequencies and percentages, while interview and documentary evidence were analysed thematically by identifying recurrent patterns related to policy effectiveness. Ethical clearance, informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, secure data storage and sensitivity in handling trafficking related information were observed throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results and discussions section presents and interprets the findings on the effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in managing human trafficking at major points of entry. The discussion covers respondents' demographic characteristics and evaluates policy effectiveness across prevention, detection, cooperation, intelligence and information sharing, investigation and prosecution, and victim protection and assistance.

Response and Demographic Characteristics

The study obtained 127 completed responses from the targeted sample of 150 participants. Police officers formed the largest institutional group at 22.05 percent, followed by immigration officers at 17.32 percent and intelligence or security officers at 14.17 percent. Government officers, customs officers, civil society personnel, policy makers and academic scholars were

also represented, ensuring that the findings reflected operational, policy, enforcement and protection perspectives. The gender distribution showed that 60 respondents, representing 47.23 percent, were male, while 55 respondents, representing 43.31 percent, were female. A further 12 respondents, equivalent to 9.45 percent, preferred not to disclose their gender. The relatively small difference between male and female participation indicates that the study obtained perspectives from both gender groups without substantial overrepresentation of either category. This balanced distribution enhanced the inclusivity of the findings and supported a broader understanding of the effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in managing human trafficking.

Regarding institutional affiliation, police officers constituted the largest group with 28 respondents or 22.05 percent, followed by immigration officers with 22 respondents or 17.32 percent and intelligence or security officers with 18 respondents or 14.17 percent. Government officers accounted for 11.81 percent, customs officers for 11.02 percent, NGO officers for 9.45 percent, policymakers for 7.87 percent, academic scholars for 3.94 percent, and other respondents for 2.36 percent. The diverse institutional representation ensured that the study incorporated perspectives from stakeholders involved in enforcement, immigration management, policymaking, security, victim protection, and research. This diversity strengthened the comprehensiveness and credibility of the findings by capturing both operational and policy-level experiences.

In terms of work experience, 49 respondents, representing 38.58 percent, had served for between 6 and 10 years, while 42 respondents, representing 33.07 percent, had between 16 and 20 years of experience. Another 20 respondents or 15.75 percent had worked for between 11 and 15 years, 11 respondents or 8.66 percent had less than five years of experience, and 5 respondents or 3.93 percent had worked for 21 years or more. The findings indicate that most participants possessed substantial professional exposure and were therefore capable of providing informed views on immigration policy and human trafficking management. The inclusion of respondents with different levels of experience also allowed the study to capture both emerging and long-term institutional perspectives.

Effectiveness of EAC Immigration Policies in Managing Human Trafficking at Major Points of Entry

The second objective of the study sought to assess the effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in managing human trafficking at major points of entry. Respondents were asked to

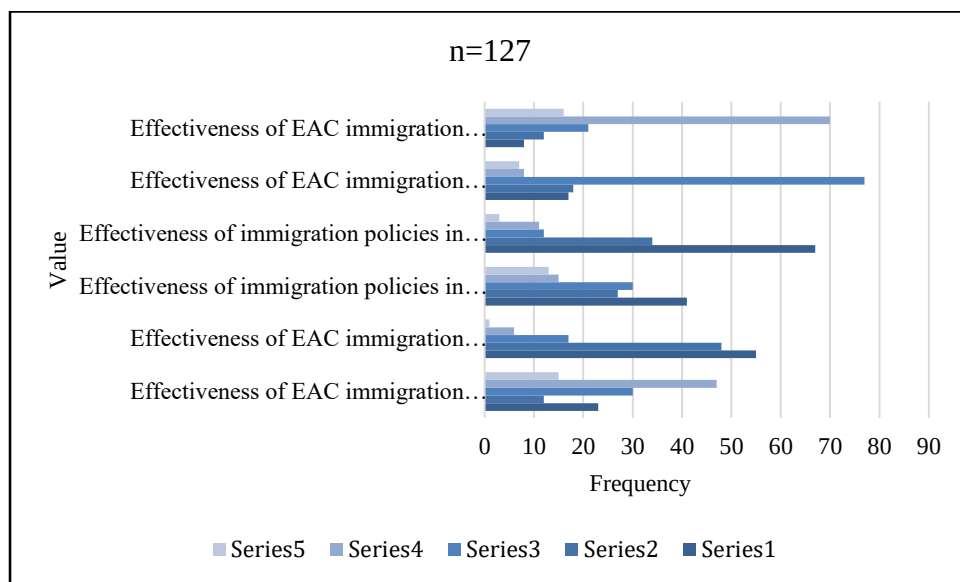
rate the effectiveness of existing immigration policies in supporting various aspects of preventing, detecting and responding to human trafficking. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Effectiveness of EAC Immigration Policies in Managing Human Trafficking at Major Points of Entry

Statement	Highly Effective	Effective	Moderately Effective	Ineffective	Highly Ineffective
Effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in preventing human trafficking at major points of entry.	23	12	30	47	15
Effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in detecting victims and perpetrators of human trafficking at border points.	55	48	17	6	1
Effectiveness of immigration policies in facilitating cooperation among immigration authorities across EAC Partner States.	41	27	30	15	13
Effectiveness of immigration policies in promoting intelligence and information sharing on human trafficking within the EAC.	67	34	12	11	3
Effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in supporting the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking offences.	17	18	77	8	7
Effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in protecting and assisting victims of human trafficking.	8	12	21	70	16

Source: Field Data (2026).

Figure 1: Effectiveness of EAC Immigration Policies in Managing Human Trafficking at Major Points of Entry



Source: Field Data (2026).

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that respondents held mixed views regarding the effectiveness of EAC immigration policies in managing human trafficking at major points of entry. While respondents generally considered the policies to be effective in detecting victims and perpetrators of human trafficking and promoting intelligence and information sharing among Partner States, they viewed the policies as less effective in preventing human trafficking and protecting victims. Opinions were also divided regarding the effectiveness of immigration policies in facilitating regional cooperation and supporting the investigation and prosecution of trafficking offences. These findings suggest that although the existing immigration policy framework has strengthened operational responses to human trafficking, significant gaps remain in prevention, victim protection, and overall policy implementation.

The study found that respondents regarded EAC immigration policies as least effective in preventing human trafficking at major points of entry. Only 35 respondents (27.56%) rated the policies as either highly effective or effective, while 30 respondents (23.62%) considered them moderately effective. In contrast, 62 respondents (48.82%) rated the policies as ineffective or highly ineffective. These findings indicate that despite the existence of regional immigration policies, they have not been sufficiently effective in preventing trafficking activities before they occur. This finding is consistent with Neofunctionalism Theory, which argues that regional cooperation must go beyond policy formulation to include effective implementation and institutional coordination. Although Partner States have adopted common policy

frameworks, weaknesses in implementation continue to undermine preventive efforts. Similar findings were reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024), which observed that many regional anti-trafficking frameworks continue to emphasize enforcement after trafficking has occurred rather than preventive interventions targeting vulnerable populations and trafficking networks.

In contrast, respondents considered EAC immigration policies to be highly effective in detecting victims and perpetrators of human trafficking at border points. A total of 103 respondents (81.10%) rated the policies as highly effective or effective, compared to only 7 respondents (5.51%) who viewed them as ineffective or highly ineffective. Seventeen respondents (13.39%) considered the policies moderately effective. This finding demonstrates that immigration authorities have made considerable progress in strengthening border screening procedures and identifying suspected trafficking cases. The finding supports Neofunctionalism Theory, which maintains that cooperation among regional institutions strengthens their operational capacity through the adoption of common procedures and coordinated practices. It also agrees with the International Organization for Migration (2022), which reported that improved border screening systems and enhanced capacity building have significantly strengthened the identification of trafficking victims across East Africa.

The effectiveness of immigration policies in facilitating cooperation among immigration authorities produced mixed responses. While 68 respondents (53.54%) rated the policies as highly effective or effective, 30 respondents (23.62%) considered them moderately effective and 28 respondents (22.05%) viewed them as ineffective or highly ineffective. The findings suggest that although institutional cooperation has improved, differences in administrative procedures, institutional capacity and national priorities continue to affect the level of collaboration among Partner States. Neofunctionalism Theory argues that regional integration depends on continuous cooperation among institutions; therefore, variations in implementation may slow the integration process. Similar observations were made by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (2021), which found that institutional coordination remains uneven despite the existence of regional migration frameworks.

Respondents also rated immigration policies positively with respect to promoting intelligence and information sharing on human trafficking within the EAC. Overall, 101 respondents (79.53%) considered the policies highly effective or effective, while only 14 respondents (11.02%) rated them as ineffective or highly ineffective. Twelve respondents (9.45%) viewed them as moderately effective. These findings indicate that information sharing has become one

of the strongest aspects of regional immigration cooperation. The finding supports the proposition of Neofunctionalism Theory that functional cooperation among regional institutions creates stronger mechanisms for addressing shared transnational challenges. It also corroborates the findings of UNODC (2020), which identified intelligence sharing as one of the most effective regional strategies for disrupting organized human trafficking networks.

The effectiveness of immigration policies in supporting the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking offences received more moderate ratings. Although 35 respondents (27.56%) considered the policies highly effective or effective, the majority, 77 respondents (60.63%), rated them as moderately effective, while 15 respondents (11.81%) viewed them as ineffective or highly ineffective. These findings suggest that existing immigration policies have contributed to investigations and prosecutions but have not yet achieved the level of effectiveness required to deter trafficking comprehensively. Previous studies by Gallagher (2017) similarly observed that weaknesses in evidence collection, cross-border investigations and judicial cooperation continue to affect successful prosecution of trafficking offences in many regions.

The findings further revealed that respondents considered immigration policies to be least effective in protecting and assisting victims of human trafficking. Only 20 respondents (15.75%) rated the policies as highly effective or effective, whereas 70 respondents (55.12%) considered them ineffective and a further 16 respondents (12.60%) regarded them as highly ineffective. Twenty-one respondents (16.54%) rated them as moderately effective. These findings suggest that victim-centred interventions remain one of the weakest aspects of EAC immigration policy implementation. Although immigration authorities have improved the identification of trafficking victims, comparable progress has not been made in providing protection, rehabilitation and referral services. This finding is consistent with the Palermo Protocol, which emphasizes that effective responses to human trafficking should give equal attention to prevention, prosecution and protection. It also agrees with the International Organization for Migration (2023), which noted that victim assistance services remain inadequate in many parts of East Africa despite improvements in border management and law enforcement.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that EAC immigration policies have been more effective in strengthening operational border management, particularly through improved detection mechanisms and intelligence sharing, than in preventing human trafficking and protecting victims. This suggests that the current policy framework is more responsive than preventive,

highlighting the need for stronger preventive strategies, enhanced victim protection mechanisms and improved institutional coordination to achieve more comprehensive management of human trafficking at major points of entry.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that EAC immigration policies have been relatively effective in strengthening the detection of victims and perpetrators of human trafficking, facilitating intelligence sharing, and improving cooperation among border management agencies. However, the policies have been less effective in preventing human trafficking, protecting victims and supporting successful investigations and prosecutions. This indicates that current immigration policies are more reactive than preventive, with greater emphasis placed on responding to trafficking incidents after they occur than on addressing the underlying factors that facilitate human trafficking.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that effective management of human trafficking within the EAC requires a more balanced policy approach that strengthens prevention, enforcement and victim protection alongside existing detection and information-sharing mechanisms. Greater harmonization of procedures, institutional coordination, cross-border investigations and victim-centred support is therefore necessary to improve the overall effectiveness of immigration policies at major points of entry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The East African Community Secretariat and Partner States should strengthen the preventive orientation of immigration policies by harmonizing anti-trafficking procedures, establishing common risk assessment tools, and integrating trafficking-sensitive screening into routine operations at airports, seaports, and land border posts. Regional immigration authorities should also develop interoperable intelligence databases that allow real-time exchange of information on suspected traffickers, trafficking routes, fraudulent travel documents, and vulnerable travellers. Joint cross-border investigations, standardized evidence collection procedures, and closer cooperation among immigration departments, police, prosecutors, and judicial institutions should be institutionalized to improve the investigation and prosecution of trafficking offences. Regular review of immigration policies should further be undertaken to ensure that regional responses remain aligned with emerging trafficking methods and changing patterns of cross-border movement.

EAC Partner States should establish stronger victim-centred protection and referral systems at all major points of entry because victim assistance emerged as the weakest dimension of existing immigration policies. Immigration and border officers should receive continuous training in behavioural screening, trauma-sensitive interviewing, victim identification, and the appropriate handling of vulnerable persons. Governments should allocate adequate resources for emergency accommodation, medical and psychosocial care, legal assistance, safe repatriation, and long-term reintegration services for identified victims. Formal referral partnerships involving immigration agencies, social services, civil society organizations, and international agencies should also be strengthened to ensure that identified victims receive immediate protection rather than being treated as irregular migrants or immigration offenders.

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