

Full Length Research Paper

The journey towards developing regional qualifications frameworks: Lessons from the intergovernmental authority on development qualifications framework experience

Kebede Kassa Tsegaye

Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Ethiopia.

Received 11 July, 2024; Accepted 7 August, 2024

The paper highlights the process of development, validation, and adoption of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Regional Qualifications Framework (GADQF). Using descriptive, textual, and contextual methods derived from participant observation, the paper provides an insider view of the policy-making and regional consensus-building process. It emphasizes the importance of political will, partnership, and ownership as key components of successful policymaking. In the lessons learned part, the paper outlines the significance of a regional qualifications framework in terms of skills mobility, curriculum harmonization, and ensuring the quality of learning outcomes, among other factors. Although the paper is not purely academic research, the information contained within it is expected to benefit academics, policymakers, and development partners/practitioners.

Key words: Qualifications frameworks, regional qualifications frameworks, mobility, policy.

INTRODUCTION

A qualifications framework categorizes and makes publicly available the qualifications certified by authorities responsible for assuring standards (UNESCO, 2020). There are approximately 150 national qualifications frameworks around the world (AIRC, n.d). However, qualifications frameworks vary in content and scope. Some focus on a particular level of education, such as higher education, while others address specific sectors, like TVET. Still, others pertain to particular professions, such as engineering. Regional qualifications frameworks serve as reference points for national frameworks. They

can help countries develop their own qualifications measurement tools to be used when needed.

Regional qualifications frameworks also function as collaborative media. Since qualifications systems vary from country to country, implementing a regional equivalency tool fosters collaboration, facilitates mutual learning, and enables countries to assess what exists in their own frameworks and what they can adopt from others.

The process of developing, validating, and adopting a regional qualifications instrument is participatory. Member

E-mail: gudasimter@gmail.com. Tel: 08077659162.

Author(s) agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

states within the regional bloc come together to share their expertise, experiences, and perspectives informed by their educational systems and understanding of quality. In countries without qualifications frameworks, the regional framework highlights the importance of establishing them. Therefore, regional instruments often stimulate the development of national ones.

There are three other important dimensions of regional qualifications frameworks: (a) regional integration through labor mobility, (b) the potential for curriculum harmonization since mutual recognition of degrees and certificates depends on the equivalency of skills and competencies, and (c) facilitating skills mobility or credit transfer, allowing individuals to move with their certificates to work or study in countries that recognize credits earned elsewhere. These opportunities benefit the general populace, and their significance to refugees, returnees, and other displacement-affected communities is immense. They can simplify life for these groups by providing easy reference frameworks and lighten the workload for educational authorities tasked with determining equivalency.

The paper outlines the process of developing the Intergovernmental Authority on Development Regional Qualifications Framework (IGADQF). It aims to compile and share the institution's experiences in leading the elaboration, validation, and adoption of the framework. The IGADQF originated from the Djibouti Declaration (DD) on quality education for refugees, returnees, and host communities in the IGAD member states, adopted in December 2017. The development process of the IGADQF was further endorsed by the Addis Ababa Call for Action for the accelerated implementation of the DD, which took place at the second conference of ministers in charge of education, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in December 2018. At this conference, the specific task of elaborating the regional qualifications framework was entrusted to IGAD. This paper is limited to the period up to the official adoption of the IGADQF in May 2024, at the 4th conference of ministers in charge of education held in Entebbe, Uganda.

It is important to note that this paper is not purely academic. Rather, it serves as a communication of how policies adopted by high-level decision-making bodies can be implemented at regional and national levels and what is required to achieve that. This insight is often lacking in academic or basic research. Complaints are frequently heard between academics, policymakers, and development partners. Academics often express concerns about the lack or inadequacy of empirical evidence to inform policies, while policymakers criticize academics for not producing policy-relevant research. Development partners recognize the importance of both research and policy but lament the lack of both to guide their practical interventions. Although there is still much to be desired in bridging this gap, the paper attempts to

showcase what can be accomplished with policies that are critically needed at both national and regional levels, despite the paper's regional focus (Cairney and Oliver, 2020).

Scope and limitations

The scope of the paper focuses on the IGAD region, which consists of eight member states. As mentioned earlier, the time frame covered by the discussion spans from 2017 to 2024, beginning with the adoption of the Djibouti Declaration on education for refugees, returnees, and host communities, which, among other mandates, tasked IGAD with developing a regional qualifications mechanism, culminating in the final adoption of the IGADQF. The paper describes the experience of the IGAD Secretariat in leading the development and adoption of the IGADQF.

Accordingly, the paper has couple of limitations. Firstly, it is not purely academic research but rather a personal reflection. Secondly, the narrative is largely qualitative and does not extensively reference the available literature. Despite these limitations, the information contained in the paper is expected to contribute to the work of academic researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. The lessons learned section provides an overview of the advantages of a regional qualifications framework and, by extension, national qualifications frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on a blend of qualitative methods, drawing useful information from secondary sources of literature on qualifications frameworks. However, most of the work reflects the personal experiences of the author, who serves as a senior coordinator of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation at IGAD. At the time of writing, the author works for IGAD and has led the preparation and adoption of the qualifications framework under consideration. For this reason, the paper can be considered as a narrative of actual experience by someone who has facilitated or "midwived" the development of this tool and knows the process from beginning to end. As such, this paper is a result of anthropological participant observation, a product of learning by doing. Coincidentally, the author is a student of anthropology, sociology, and international relations, making him well-versed in the qualitative methods commonly used in these fields. Therefore, the paper relies on descriptive, textual, and contextual analyses, as well as interpretative techniques.

The conclusions drawn from the study are intended to benefit three communities: academics, policymakers, and development practitioners. The first question addresses how to generate data that is usable for policymakers. The second targets policymakers, focusing on how to use research for informed policy and decision-making. The third dimension examines how development partners can use sound policies to support their efforts and contribute to data generation through their practical actions. By addressing these questions, the author hopes to inspire further studies with these considerations in mind.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The process

The development of the IGADQF was articulated in the DD. Paragraph 19 of the DD commits member states, the IGAD Secretariat, and partners to “Establish minimum education standards and targets on access and delivery of quality education for pre-primary, primary, secondary, higher education including TVET and education for people with special needs...” (IGAD, 2017). This provision laid the foundation for the IGADQF, and the Secretariat was charged with the responsibility of coordinating its elaboration in collaboration with partners and member states.

In light of this mandate, implementation activities resumed early in 2018. When the IGAD ministers in charge of education met in Addis Ababa at their second conference. Their final communiqué, entitled the Addis Ababa Call for Action on the implementation of the DD on education for refugees, returnees, and host communities, “Welcomed the development of the Framework for Consultation” and requested all stakeholders to develop “...a clear roadmap” (IGAD, 2018) for the regional qualifications frameworks.

Accordingly, IGAD developed the terms of reference for different work streams to implement the DD. UNESCO took the lead in preparing the fundamentals of the qualifications framework, including recruiting a consultant to conduct a national assessment of the state of the qualifications regime in the IGAD member states. The consultant was engaged and conducted the first study in four member states and one regional economic community, the Inter-University Council of EAC. The assessment report revealed that while all member states have some form of qualifications framework, only one country, Kenya, was implementing a comprehensive national qualifications framework with an agency, KNQA, to oversee its implementation.

The consultant presented the findings of the study at a one-day joint IGAD-UNESCO workshop held in Nairobi, Kenya, on 19 November, 2019. The workshop recommended building the regional qualifications framework on existing national and regional recognition mechanisms and emphasized the importance of having a roadmap for developing the IGAD regional mechanism (Mwiria, 2019).

As per the recommendation of the Nairobi workshop, IGAD and UNESCO advanced the initiative. UNESCO contracted a second consultant to develop the roadmap, who worked on it between 2020 and 2021. In December 2021, the key elements of the document were presented at a high-level regional conference of experts drawn from member states, partner agencies, and the IGAD Secretariat. This conference provided a significant opportunity to raise awareness and gain support for the

development of the qualifications frameworks. The recommendations made by the consultant, which were adopted by the conference experts, were then presented at the 3rd ministerial session in charge of education in March 2022, in Addis Ababa (IGAD, 2022). Upon receiving the report on the roadmap, the ministers, in their communiqué, stated that:

- 1) Recognize and acknowledge the development of the road map for the Regional Qualifications Framework; and task IGAD Secretariat to finalize and table the IGAD RQF at the upcoming Ministerial meeting...
- 2) Task IGAD Secretariat in collaboration with relevant development partners to develop the standards and guidelines to support the implementation of the IGAD RQF,
- 3) Further request the IGAD Secretariat to facilitate capacity building through training and knowledge/experience sharing among member states towards the implementation of the Regional Qualifications Framework.

The Secretariat took the assignment urged in the Communiqué seriously. To accomplish the tasks outlined in the roadmap, IGAD considered finding a consultant familiar with qualifications frameworks. This time, two partners, GIZ and ECW (Education Cannot Wait), joined IGAD to support the finalization of the qualifications framework. Accordingly, a third consultant was hired by GIZ to complete the document. The necessary work was carried out by this consultant, who utilized the earlier study of the qualifications regime at the member state level, the roadmap developed by the second consultant, the Africa Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF), and other related documents. The consultant finalized the tool, making it ready for validation by experts from member states, partner institutions, and the IGAD Secretariat.

The validation regional workshop took place in Entebbe, Uganda, in October 2022. The workshop validated the qualifications framework and fixed the name as IGADQF. However, the workshop noted that the gender component of the framework was insufficient and needed to be strengthened. Once again, IGAD took these comments into account and moved to the next step. This involved consulting with GIZ and finding a suitable consultant to review the IGADQF through a gender lens and make the necessary amendments. This work was completed by the end of 2023, and the document was ready to be submitted for final endorsement at the next ministerial conference. This took place at the end of May, 2024, and now IGAD has an endorsed regional qualifications framework. This milestone brings to a close the six-year journey to develop a regional qualifications recognition mechanism.

However, another journey, that of domestication and implementation, begins here. This largely involves

supporting member states in developing and adopting their own national qualifications frameworks. Some have already started this process. For example, Ethiopia has become the second country, after Kenya, to adopt a comprehensive national qualifications framework. In fact, the Ethiopian qualifications framework is said to have been developed 14 years ago but was pending endorsement by higher decision-making bodies. It seems that the right time has now come, and the instrument has finally been brought to life after so long.

The next member state likely to establish its own national qualifications framework is Uganda. It has scheduled a national consultation, supported by IGAD, for 30 to 31, July. It is expected that during this meeting, many issues surrounding the qualifications framework will be addressed, and stakeholders will identify their respective roles in the development and subsequent implementation of the framework. A series of national consultations are also planned for the remaining countries: South Sudan, Kenya, Somalia, and Djibouti, in that order.

The Kenyan national dialogue will focus on what has worked in the implementation of the national qualifications framework, as Kenya is the only IGAD member state with a comprehensive qualifications framework that has been implemented for many years. The dialogue will also aim to identify the challenges and lessons learned in translating high-level political commitment into action, providing valuable insights into what to expect when doing the same in other member states.

The task ahead concerning the IGADQF involves developing implementation strategies, including setting up a functional coordination mechanism, establishing regional governance architecture composed of national qualifications authorities, and creating a regional capacity to store, process, and communicate all qualifications. Additionally, systems for credit accumulation and transfer, particularly between institutions of higher learning, need to be developed. It is hoped that these objectives can be achieved within a reasonable timeframe in the coming years.

Why a regional qualifications framework?

As mentioned elsewhere, a regional qualifications framework offers several advantages. First, it facilitates the mobility of students, researchers, and professors. Second, it enables the movement of workers with their qualifications, which should be recognized without significant delay or doubt, as countries will apply collectively agreed mechanisms already in place. Third, a regional qualifications framework will pave the way for curriculum harmonization across the education system. Curricula are often nationalistic and, by their nature,

somewhat political. The presence of a commonly agreed qualifications framework is expected to help national educators and trainers focus on skills and competencies. A competency or performance-based approach, which takes into account contemporary needs and the demand for a trained workforce, is anticipated to guide the direction and volume of education and training.

Fourth, and closely related to the previous point, is that regional qualifications frameworks will democratize the job market by allowing the free movement of skilled labor from any of the member states to where jobs are available, and wages are commensurate with professional competencies. Fifth, the entire process is expected to enhance regional, people-to-people interaction and integration. As the Ethiopian saying goes, "One cannot yearn for a country he/she does not know," meaning that people will feel at home wherever they can work and earn a living.

Sixth, a corollary effect of all these factors is that qualifications frameworks can act as agents of peace and stability. When people can freely move in and out of a country for work or residence, they contribute to the maintenance of peaceful coexistence. Seventh, regional qualifications frameworks have the potential to reduce outward migration, particularly international migration. This is a crucial function of the regional qualification and skills recognition mechanism. However, it should not be assumed that this tool alone will minimize the potential for outmigration, as many other factors can either accelerate or mitigate migration flows.

In any case, when people with recognized or recognizable educational attainments migrate elsewhere, they benefit from the skills or educational levels they have achieved. The country of origin may also benefit. For one thing, it is reassuring to know that the skills it develops are internationally relevant. Moreover, remittances from qualified and recognized skilled labor will contribute to national economic development. Destination countries, too, will benefit from the influx of qualified and recognized skills. These are some of the benefits associated with a regional qualifications framework.

Qualifications Frameworks versus blueprints

A regional qualifications framework serves as a framework of reference, providing a broader structure of operation and suggesting areas of focus for comparability, so that countries have a tool to refer to. In contrast, a blueprint is a detailed plan of operation that prescribes what needs to be done and what should be avoided to achieve a goal. When developing a national qualifications framework, countries should decide on the specific elements or level descriptors to include.

However, they should ensure that their framework

serves as a mechanism for comparison and harmonization of skills and competencies within regional contexts.

In this sense, a regional framework cannot and should not prescribe the contents of a national qualifications framework. It can suggest areas of focus, but it is up to member states to incorporate these suggestions into their frameworks. The goal of a regional instrument is to facilitate comparability, mobility, recognition, and access to the job market throughout the region. Both regional and national qualifications frameworks aim to enhance the quality of education and skills building through formal, non-formal, or informal pathways. Additionally, these frameworks aim to ensure that skilled labor contributes to sustainable development at national, regional, and international levels, and supports individual self-actualization through meaningful participation in the workforce, earning a gainful income, and achieving psycho-social satisfaction from employment and inclusive livelihoods.

Conclusions

After six years of hard work, coordination, and partnerships, IGAD has successfully developed a regional qualifications framework with ten-level descriptors. Previously, only Kenya had a comprehensive national qualifications framework. As of June, 2024, Ethiopia has become the second country in the region to adopt a national qualifications framework. IGAD desires for all its member states to establish their own national frameworks to ensure that students, professors, workers, and qualifications can move seamlessly from country to country, facilitating regional integration and sustainable development. The key takeaways from the IGADQF development and adoption process are as follows: First, a regional qualifications framework requires high-level of political commitment. The enhanced political will at both regional and national levels has been crucial for the adoption of the regional qualifications framework. It is also important to note that this same strong political will is essential for its implementation at all levels.

Second, partnership with national, regional, and international stakeholders is a significant contributing factor to the development, validation, and endorsement of the regional qualifications frameworks. Continued support from these partners is expected to be crucial for its implementation and for the development of national qualifications frameworks.

Third, the equalization impact of a regional qualifications framework is recognized at all levels. This impact manifests in three ways: its potential for harmonizing curricula, its role in enhancing the quality of skills, and its significance in facilitating the movement of qualified labor across the region.

Fourth, the recognition of certificates, degrees, diplomas, and other learning outcomes, including recognition of prior learning (RPL), is an indispensable process that benefits a wide range of populations in the region, with refugees, returnees, and migrants being major beneficiaries.

Fifth, the framework's focus on gender equality and empowerment, especially for women and girls in displacement-affected communities, is a vital aspect of this instrument. Advocacy for greater gender mainstreaming and inclusion in the implementation of the regional instrument and national qualifications frameworks should be a continued effort by IGAD, member states, partners, and civil societies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

- American International Recruitment Council (AIRC) (nd). <https://www.airc-education.org/news-and-blog/a-national-qualifications-framework-what-it-is-why-the-us-needs-one-and-how-it-could-benefit-agents>
- Cairney P, Oliver K (2020). "How Should Academics Engage in Policymaking to Achieve Impact?" *Political Studies Review* 2020 18(2):228-244.
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (2017). Djibouti Declaration on Regional Conference on Refugee Education in IGAD Member States. Available at: https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/Djibouti_Declaration_Refugee_Education_2017_En.pdf
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (2018). Addis Ababa Call for Action on the Implementation of the Djibouti Declaration on Education for Refugees, Returnees, IDPs, and Host Communities. Addis Ababa, 6th December 2018. Available at: <https://igad.igadportal.org/attachments/article/2011/Signed%20Addis%20Ababa%20Call%20for%20Action%20-%202nd%20Ministerial%20Conference%20on%20Education%20for%20Refugee%20-%20Englis%20Version.pdf>
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (2022). Communiqué of 3rd Conference of IGAD Ministers in Charge of Education on the Implementation of the Djibouti Declaration on Education for Refugees, Returnees, IDPs and Host Communities. Available at [https://igadint-my.sharepoint.com/personal/kebede_tsegaye_igad_int/Documents/Attachments/Final%20Communiqué_30%20March%202022%20\(1\).pdf](https://igadint-my.sharepoint.com/personal/kebede_tsegaye_igad_int/Documents/Attachments/Final%20Communiqué_30%20March%202022%20(1).pdf)
- Mwiria K (2019). Mapping National Qualification Frameworks of IGAD Member States: Paper prepared for the UNESCO Regional Office Eastern Africa on the Development of the IGAD Regional Education Qualification Framework
- UNESCO (2020). A practical guide to recognition Implementing the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374905>