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Navigating forced migration in the Horn of Africa: a systematic review of IGAD's strategic challenges and opportunities

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ABSTRACT
This systematic review examines how the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has responded to forced migration in the Horn of Africa, focusing on the legal, economic, and humanitarian challenges affecting its capacity for coordinated action. The review includes 22 studies published after 1995 that evaluate IGAD's legal and policy frameworks, regional initiatives, and implementation practices. Sources were identified through systematic searches of Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, as well as official IGAD reports and regional policy documents retrieved in February and March 2025. Studies were screened for thematic relevance and geographic focus, and a qualitative thematic synthesis was used to identify core patterns. The analysis shows that IGAD has initiated meaningful regional frameworks, including the Nairobi, Kampala, and Djibouti Declarations, but the impact of these instruments is undermined by fragmented national legal systems that remain largely non-binding. As a result, displaced persons continue to face barriers to accessing basic rights such as employment, education, and freedom of movement. Financial constraints, infrastructure deficits, and inconsistent humanitarian coordination further impede effective responses. Many studies highlight the lack of inclusive, participatory mechanisms in both planning and delivery, especially in relation to vulnerable groups. While data limitations and methodological heterogeneity are acknowledged, the review identifies strategic pathways forward, including harmonisation of legal standards, investment in sustainable funding mechanisms, and strengthening of cross-border coordination through participatory governance.

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1. Introduction

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) was established in 1996 to combat the recurring and devastating droughts in the Horn of Africa region and the resultant food security and environmental degradation in the region following the Djibouti conference on drought and desertification. The original focus of Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) was on environmental and humanitarian concerns, and the organization's extremely thematic approach ultimately induced it to change strategic course. In 1995, to expand the mandate to address political, economic and security matters, the organisation was rebranded as IGAD and reconstituted under a new charter and institutional framework (IGAD Mediation Unit, n.d.).

IGAD's organisation structure includes the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, the Council of Ministers, the Committee of Ambassadors and the Secretariat in Djibouti. This mechanism allows for the linkage of peacebuilding, economic integration and environmental sustainability. The renewed attention to environmental concerns is symptomatic of the region's high vulnerability to environmental

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degradation due to climate change and resource-fuelled conflicts. IGAD's member states provide political support, resources, and expertise and leverage the organisation to support national and regional interests varying from peace and development to dealing with transboundary issues such as migration and climate change adaptation (IGAD, n.d.).

The organisational rebrand was stimulated by political changes at regional level, for example the collapse of Somalia's and Ethiopia's authoritarian regimes, the independence of Eritrea in 1993, and the rise to power of a new political leadership committed to regional integration (Yordanov, 2016). South Sudan became a member of IGAD in 2011 following its independence from Sudan, making the organisation a bloc of eight member countries.

A founder member Uganda has been a key player in the IGAD's initiatives to prevent conflicts, notably within the Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) in the Karamoja cluster (Kasaija, 2021). Member states especially Uganda have expressed frustration over IGAD's limited response to the Labour Mobility and Regional Integration (LMRA) initiative, leading to delays in the payment of annual subscription fees and a growing preference for alternative regional bodies, notably the East African Community (EAC) (Kasaija, 2021). Kenya, another founder member has advocated for IGAD's active role in the region. Kenya has also hosted a large number of Somali refugees. Driven by security concerns, Kenya has pushed for durable solutions to Somali refugees (Ahimbisibwe & Nkiko, 2023; Amnesty International, 2016).

Traditionally, regional organisations have had little involvement in humanitarian response, especially with respect to refugees and IDPs (Zyck, 2013). Although regional institutions such as the ECOWAS have made symbolic gestures, such as providing aid to the West African refugees, its efforts have been of peripheral character compared to the overwhelming involvement of the UN organisations especially the UNHCR and some international NGOs. The engagement of the ECOWAS, financed by the African Bank for Development, and implemented by the World Food programme, demonstrates the difficulties of regional entities to provide significant humanitarian assistance (Zanker, 2019). IGAD has mainly not been involved in displacement issues until 2017 even though it had endorsed the 2012 Regional Migration Policy Framework (Abebe, 2021; Ahimbisibwe & Nkiko, 2023).

Drawn from international frameworks which include the 2016 New York Declaration (NYD) and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), IGAD based its recent legal instruments on these international conventions and Guiding Principles (Good Practice) that shaped the 2017 Nairobi Declaration, the 2019 Kampala Declaration on Jobs and Livelihoods, and the Djibouti Declaration on Refugee Education. These efforts demonstrate IGAD's increasing determination to cope with forced displacement in the region. These international agreements called for multi stakeholder collaboration, thereby elevating the role of regional organisations like IGAD in addressing refugee and migration issues (Loganathan et al., 2023). The GCR specifically identifies a diverse array of actors, including national and local authorities, international organisations, financial institutions, civil society, and the refugees themselves, highlighting the necessity of a holistic approach to refugee protection and assistance (Atanasoska & Proyer, 2018). This shift aligns with arguments by Ndonga and Wood (2019) for the active involvement of African regional migration and refugee frameworks in managing these challenges.

The adoption of the NYD and GCR was influenced by the movement of 1.3 million asylum seekers (mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq) to Europe. This 'refugee crisis' narrative, largely constructed by Global North states, led to restrictive migration policies and a preference for containment within the Global South (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020).

Fernandez (2023) shares a similar view that in the NYD and GCR frameworks, some European governments sought to limit refugee movements to Europe while African and Middle Eastern governments, aimed at securing greater resources from rich European and North America countries. The GCR was premised on the whole society approach where regional organisations would play an active role. 'Although the compacts are global in scope, regional organisations and processes played important roles in their adoption and will likely be important actors in their implementation' (Ferris & Martin, 2019). This approach, however, has been criticised for reinforcing containment within the Global South (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020).

The NYD and GCR have steered attention towards frameworks to support the wellbeing and rights of forcibly displaced people, focusing on their integration into host communities (Khuu & Bean, 2021).

Internationally, regimes have reacted by producing frameworks and strategies to meet the needs of refugees and host communities. IGAD promoted a regional forced displacement agenda as early as 2017, resulting in important regional commitments such as the Nairobi Declaration on Durable Solutions for Somali Refugees and the Kampala Declaration on Jobs, Livelihoods and Self-Reliance for Refugees (Carciotto & Ferraro, 2020; Dare & Abebe, 2018). These initiatives were IGAD member state-led, particularly by member countries housing the largest protracted refugee populations, and under the guidance of the African Union (AU), which has actively encouraged regional bodies to take the lead on refugee governance and durable solutions.

The AU has played a pivotal facilitative role by endorsing IGAD's leadership and aligning its broader continental migration and displacement frameworks with IGAD's regional initiatives. This collaboration exemplifies a broader shift in international migration governance towards regionalisation and pluralisation, wherein regional organisations are not merely implementers of global norms but active co-creators, adapting and contextualising these norms to fit local realities (Trauner & Deimel, 2013). The AU's support is rooted in its continental peace and security architecture, which emphasises the importance of regional organisations in conflict prevention, management, and resolution. Central to this architecture are the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and the African Standby Force (ASF), both of which depend on regional mechanisms to anticipate and respond to emerging conflicts (Vines, 2013). As Bereketeab (2019: 137) observes, regional organisations are 'strategically placed to deal with regional conflicts, which are generally too big to be addressed by national states and too little (or remote) for sustained attention from the AU'.

Consequently, IGAD has sustained its mandate by developing a comprehensive suite of regional policy frameworks aimed at harmonising displacement governance and advancing durable solutions across its member states. These frameworks represent a progressive institutionalisation of regional cooperation, addressing the complex and interlinked challenges of forced displacement through legal, social, economic, and institutional dimensions. Designed to respond to the region's most pressing displacement-related needs, IGAD's frameworks focus on key areas such as employment, livelihoods, self-reliance, health, education, and long-term integration. Collectively, these instruments (discussed below) serve as strategic guides for member states, enabling more coordinated, context-sensitive, and sustainable responses to the evolving dynamics of forced migration.

The 2012 Regional Migration Policy Framework (RMPF) laid the foundation for IGAD's regional approach to migration governance. Though non-binding, it provides strategic guidance for member states to align national policies with regional priorities, particularly in contexts of forced displacement. The RMPF promotes labour mobility, migration-development linkages, and the integration of international refugee and IDP instruments into national legal systems (Hopkins & Buffoni, 2019; Kaba et al., 2016). IGAD has operationalised this framework through regional consultations and technical workshops. However, its voluntary nature and disparities in national capacities have limited its tangible impact on IDPs' access to essential services such as health, education, and livelihoods (Dick & Schraven, 2019).

Building on this foundation, the 2017 Nairobi Declaration marked a significant step towards the operationalisation of durable solutions for Somali refugees. It prioritised voluntary return, local integration, and reintegration in Somalia, while promoting self-reliance and regional responsibility sharing (Abebe, 2021; IGAD, 2017). IGAD has supported this agenda through high-level summits and technical coordination, yet implementation has varied. Kenya's securitised stance on the Dadaab camp contrasts sharply with Uganda's more inclusive policies (Ahimbisibwe & Nkiko, 2023; Omar & Musyoka, 2017), highlighting the challenge of achieving regional coherence amid divergent national interests.

The 2017 Djibouti Declaration further expanded IGAD's displacement governance by focusing on inclusive and quality education for refugees, returnees, and host communities. It called for the integration of refugee education into national systems and development plans, addressing the educational needs of over 11 million displaced persons in the region (Carciotto & Ferraro, 2020; UNHCR, 2017). IGAD has since launched initiatives such as the Regional TVET Strategy, the IGAD Qualifications Framework (IGADQF), and the IGAD Teacher Training Initiative (ITTI), which have strengthened education systems in displacement-affected areas and enhanced teacher capacity (Kassa, 2024b).

In parallel, the 2018 Declaration of the 10th IGAD Health Ministerial Committee Meeting addressed the health dimensions of displacement. It emphasised the integration of refugee health needs into

national systems and the importance of cross-border coordination in responding to public health emergencies such as Ebola, Cholera, and COVID-19 (Segadlo et al., 2021). These efforts have been reinforced through subsequent ministerial conferences and national commitments, with IGAD playing a central role in leveraging regional synergies to enhance health preparedness and response (Aras, 2018).

The 2019 Kampala Declaration on Jobs, Livelihoods, and Self-Reliance marked a pivotal shift towards economic inclusion, aligning with the CRRF and GCR. It committed member states to reform policies to expand refugee access to labour markets, documentation, and mobility (García, 2021; Hopkins & Buffoni, 2019). Despite donor-backed initiatives like the EU Emergency Trust Fund and the World Bank's Development Response to Displacement Impact Project (DRDIP), structural and legal barriers persist in countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan (Betts et al., 2019; Zetter & Héloïse, 2016). Nonetheless, IGAD has mobilised private sector actors to support digital literacy, renewable energy, and social protection, reinforcing its coordination role in sustainable livelihoods (Ahimbisibwe & Nkiko, 2023).

Complementing these frameworks, IGAD's Regional Joint Consultative Seminars on Internal Displacement have facilitated dialogue and knowledge exchange on durable solutions for IDPs, particularly in alignment with the Kampala Convention (Obila & Pop, 2020). These efforts culminated in the 2024 IGAD Policy Framework on Refugee Protection, which consolidates regional commitments into 11 priority areas, including access to jobs, education, civil documentation, and climate adaptation (IGAD, 2024). This framework operationalises a whole-of-society approach, defining roles for governments, civil society, the private sector, and international partners. It aims to harmonise refugee protection across the region while reinforcing IGAD's coordination capacity in line with the Nairobi Declaration and the GCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024).

Together, these frameworks illustrate IGAD's evolving and increasingly comprehensive approach to displacement governance. While implementation challenges remain, particularly due to national disparities and limited international support, IGAD's frameworks provide a critical platform for regional cooperation, policy harmonisation, and the pursuit of durable solutions (Dick & Schraven, 2019). Despite its formal mandate to coordinate and oversee the implementation of regional frameworks addressing forced displacement in the Horn of Africa, the literature suggests that IGAD continues to face significant challenges in effectively fulfilling this role. The organisation has had difficulty in bridging the gap between its declarations and regional commitments, and the implementation and uses of these interventions. For example, Gebru et al. (2023), Mulugeta (2019), and Kaiser (2016) have shown the existence of enduring institutional and operational deficiencies, and Hopkins and Buffoni (2019) and Akpuokwe et al. (2024) have demonstrated the poor translation of policy into practice. Others, such as Lindley (2011) and Liyew (2024) emphasise that broader structural and political pressures constrain IGAD's ability to coordinate a coherent regional response.

This research therefore aims to address this gap in the literature by exploring the following question: What are the specific legal, economic, and humanitarian challenges that IGAD faces in coordinating responses to forced displacement in the Horn of Africa? Informed by academic discourse on IGAD's evolving role, this study critically evaluates the effectiveness of its legal frameworks and initiatives, identifies the principal challenges it faces, and offers strategic recommendations to enhance its capacity in responding to forced displacement in the Horn of Africa.

2. Theoretical framework

This research is grounded in three key theoretical approaches: Liberal Institutionalism and the UN's Integrated Approaches to Peacebuilding provide the foundational framework for the review, while John Burton's Human Needs Theory informs the formulation of the research question. Collectively, they underscore the interconnectedness of conflict, displacement, and the necessity for comprehensive, regionally driven solutions. By focusing on human needs and fostering collaboration, these frameworks aim to create sustainable peace and stability in conflict affected regions.

2.1. Liberal institutionalism theory

Liberal Institutionalism emphasises the role of international institutions in fostering cooperation and promoting peace among states. It posits that both domestic and international institutions are essential in

facilitating peaceful cooperation between states (Tana & Heiss, 2018). Institutions promote interdependence and reduce the likelihood of conflict by establishing predictable norms and frameworks for interaction (Sheriff et al., 2015).

Liberal institutionalism focuses on institutionalised cooperation among member states, who must respect the rules and norms promoted by institutions to sustain cooperation (Milner, 2009). The norms prescribe behaviour and what can or cannot be done, regulate interests, define new actors (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Katzenstein, 1996; Ruggie, 1998). The institutions implement and oversee the principles and norms they are established for (Tana & Heiss, 2018).

Hence, in analysing IGAD's role in navigating forced migration in the Horn of Africa, Liberal institutionalism provides a useful lens due to its emphasis on rule based, institutionalised cooperation. It analyses the role of regional organisations in managing forced migration, since cooperation and respect for shared norms are essential in addressing regional conflicts and displacement. IGAD leverages its policy frameworks to enhance regional cooperation and address the challenges associated with forced migration. By fostering collaboration and strengthening institutional capacities, IGAD aligns with Liberal Institutionalism principles, advocating for shared norms and collective action (Fransen & Bilgili, 2018).

Despite facing political instability and limited resources, IGAD can improve migration management by enhancing coordination among member states. For example, promoting shared norms and integrating technology for data collection can enhance transparency and efficiency in migration management (Dick & Schraven, 2018; Urso & Hakami, 2018). Addressing the root causes of forced migration, such as environmental degradation, economic instability, and conflict, is crucial for IGAD's long-term strategy. Such an approach benefits both displaced populations and the broader goal of regional stability (Mölder et al., 2022). By fostering cooperation and engaging with external partners, IGAD can mobilise resources and expertise for effective migration policies (Feindt, 2012). With its emphasis on the role of international institutions in fostering cooperation, IGAD's structure as a regional convenor aligns well with the liberal institutionalism framework, particularly through its facilitation of declarations and policy frameworks. This study assesses IGAD's institutional effectiveness, despite its lack of binding enforcement mechanisms and the inconsistent commitment of its member states.

2.2. UN integrated approaches

The UN's Peacebuilding Architecture advocates for integrated strategies that combine political, economic, and social dimensions. It emphasises that sustainable peace depends on simultaneously addressing governance, development, and reconciliation. For instance, Chapter 8 of the UN Charter, Article 52(1), emphasises the importance of regional arrangements in maintaining international peace and security, thereby legitimising IGAD's involvement in humanitarian efforts and refugee protection. Similarly, Boutros-Ghali, 1992 Agenda for Peace highlights the crucial role of regional organisations in peacebuilding initiatives. Such arrangements can reduce the burden on the UN Security Council and enhance regional ownership of peace processes (Kasaija, 2015). A central focus of the agenda is posting conflict peacebuilding, particularly the repatriation of refugees, which is essential for establishing lasting peace (Koslowski, 2019).

Forced migration is intrinsically linked to both the causes and consequences of conflict, with refugee flows often both resulting from and contributing to instability (Bagonza et al., 2021). Recent international frameworks, such as the 2016 New York Declaration and the Global Compact on Refugees, recognise the pivotal role of regional organisations such as IGAD in addressing refugee crises (Amadi & Vundamina, 2023). These documents advocate for a multi stakeholder approach that includes regional cooperation to effectively manage refugee situations, acknowledging that refugee movements often have significant regional implications (Erdal & Oeppen, 2017). Effective peacebuilding involves collaboration among various actors, including local communities, governments, NGOs, and international organisations. Such inclusivity enhances the legitimacy and sustainability of peace efforts. IGAD's efforts to mobilise member states and implement action plans on refugee protection align with these global commitments, demonstrating its dedication to regional stability and humanitarian response (Huot et al., 2016).

This theory provides a lens to evaluate whether IGAD's institutional structure and partnerships are sufficient to implement such integrated responses. It also guides the analysis by highlighting the

importance of regional legitimacy, cross sectoral collaboration, and sustained political will in achieving durable solutions to displacement.

2.3. John Burton's human needs theory

Burton's theory posits that conflicts emerge when fundamental human needs such as security, identity, recognition, and participation, are not met. This perspective is crucial for IGAD as it enables the identification of the underlying causes of forced migration, including ethnic tensions and political exclusion, thereby facilitating interventions that target root causes rather than merely addressing the symptoms of displacement (Bentil & Asekere, 2021).

The significance of addressing unmet human needs is underscored by the fact that marginalised individuals are more prone to conflict or displacement. Historical instances of ethnic tensions in the Horn of Africa, particularly in South Sudan and Somalia, illustrate how such dynamics can lead to violence and mass displacement (Bentil & Asekere, 2021). By recognising these underlying issues, IGAD can advocate for inclusive governance that enhances political participation and representation among marginalised groups, effectively addressing the grievances that often precipitate forced migration (Abaho, 2020).

Furthermore, Burton's framework emphasises the necessity of fulfilling basic human needs, including food, shelter, and safety. IGAD's coordination of humanitarian responses is essential in ensuring that these needs are met for refugees and IDPs, which stabilises communities and mitigates further displacement (World Bank & UNHCR, 2015). For instance, IGAD's initiatives aimed at providing food security and shelter for refugees can significantly alleviate immediate pressures that lead to further migration (Schlechter et al., 2023).

Repatriation and reintegration of refugees are also critical components of addressing forced migration. Burton's theory suggests that successful reintegration requires addressing the psychological and social needs of returnees. IGAD can facilitate programs that support the emotional and social reintegration of refugees, fostering community cohesion and reducing the likelihood of conflict upon their return (Bentil & Asekere, 2021). This is particularly pertinent in contexts where returnees may face stigma or exclusion from their communities, which can hinder their reintegration process (Cardeli et al., 2020).

Moreover, the Human Needs theory highlights the interconnectedness of human experiences across borders, a principle that IGAD promotes through regional cooperation among member states in addressing forced migration. Collaborative efforts can include sharing best practices, resources, and strategies to effectively meet the needs of displaced populations (Mölder et al., 2022). The theory underpins IGAD's approach in addressing the root causes of displacement such as exclusion, insecurity, and unmet basic needs, through inclusive governance and coordinated humanitarian efforts. However, this research examines whether such an approach is feasible in practice, given IGAD's limited operational capacity.

3. Methodology

This study employs the systematic literature review (SLR) methodology which emphasises the importance of to identify assess, and interpret available research evidence (Abdulla & Krishnamurthy, 2016). The Scopus database and the VOSviewer tool were utilised for data analysis and visualisation, facilitating the mapping of relevant literature (Wollny et al., 2021).

To ensure methodological rigor, the study adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) framework due to its focus on enhancing the quality of systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Wang et al., 2019). It was developed in response to the challenges posed by low quality reviews and aims to standardise the reporting process, thereby improving transparency and reproducibility. The PRISMA guidelines provide a comprehensive checklist that outlines the necessary steps in the review process, including the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies (Marita et al., 2022).

Despite its strengths, the PRISMA approach has limitations, particularly regarding its capacity to accommodate ongoing literature searches in systematic reviews (Campoverde Molina et al., 2021). To address this, the study incorporates Crompton's recommendations for continuous screening and

updating of the literature, utilising the snowball technique to identify additional relevant studies that may have been overlooked.

The research data was systematically retrieved from the Scopus database using specific keywords related to forced migration policies and the Horn of Africa, along with the IGAD frameworks. The search strategy was refined to ensure the relevance of the literature, employing a title abstract keyword search strategy (Reiff & Schlegel, 2022). The results were then visualised and analysed using VOSviewer, which aids in understanding the relationships and trends within the literature (Wang et al., 2019). The PRISMA flow diagram as shown in Figure 1 was employed to document the number of records identified, included, and excluded, along with the reasons for exclusions, thereby maintaining transparency in the review process (Sherwood et al., 2019).

The SLR process was structured into four stages: Planning, Data Collection, Analysis, and Synthesis to ensure that the review is comprehensive and methodologically sound (Martin et al., 2021). Following the research question, we searched across over 184 academic and professional papers from the Semantic Scholar corpus. We retrieved the 22 papers most relevant to the research question.

3.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria focused on studies that assess the effectiveness of IGAD's current policies and activities in mitigating forced migration in the Horn of Africa; analyses that identify key legal, economic, and humanitarian challenges impeding IGAD's efforts; and publications offering strategic recommendations to improve IGAD's approach to managing forced migration. While a range of sources including review articles, primary research, policy guidelines, and dissertations, were initially considered, final inclusion was determined by thematic relevance to the research question. Sources were excluded if they did not directly engage with IGAD's displacement-related policies or activities in the Horn of Africa, were published in languages other than English, or focused on pre-1995 developments, before IGAD assumed its current institutional form.

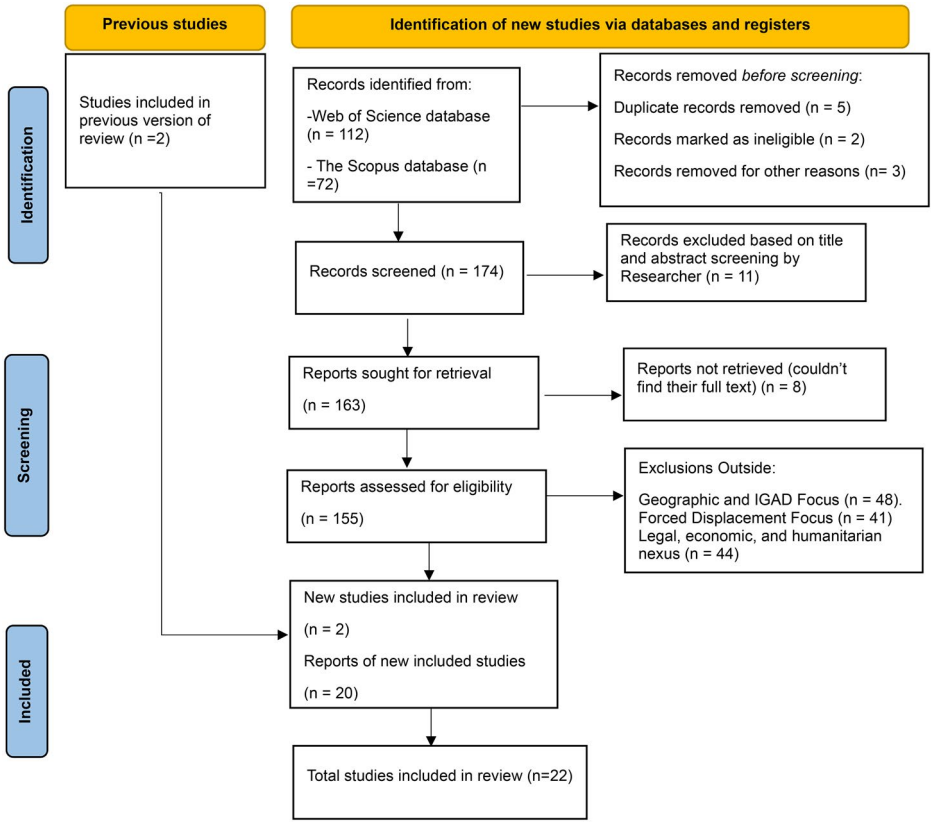

Figure 1. The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (adapted from Moher et al., 2009).

The researchers initially screened the titles and abstracts to determine thematic relevance to the review question. Only those that passed this initial relevance check were retrieved for full-text review and assessed in detail for eligibility based on the inclusion criteria. This process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, starting with records identified from the Web of Science (112) and Scopus (72) databases. After removing duplicates, ineligible records, and those excluded for other reasons, the researchers screened 174 records. Following this, 163 reports were sought for retrieval, and 155 were successfully accessed and assessed. Ultimately, studies were excluded if they fell outside the geographic and IGAD focus (n = 48), lacked a clear focus on forced displacement (n = 41), or did not adequately address the legal, economic, and humanitarian nexus (n = 44). This process resulted in 22 studies that met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final review.

3.2. Data extraction, management, and synthesis

We followed abstracts and summaries of documents based on their pertinence to the study's inclusion criteria. We then examined the full-text articles, from which we extracted and structured key data. This data encompassed the author's name, publication year, the study's focus, and IGAD's policies and initiatives in addressing forced migration issues. Then the study's objectives, concept definitions, primary results, conclusions, and recommendations were extracted. Following the extraction process, we employed content analysis to classify the specific IGAD policies on forced migration in the Horn of Africa.

4. Results

4.1. Characteristics of included studies

The 22 reviewed studies demonstrated a broad geographic focus across IGAD's region as shown in Table 1. Eight studies covered the full IGAD membership, including Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda. Additionally, seven studies concentrated specifically on South Sudan and its neighbouring countries, while two focused on Somalia, Kenya, and/or Sudan. Two others addressed Ethiopia or the Horn of Africa more generally, and one study focused solely on Somalia. Notably, two studies did not clearly specify their geographic coverage.

In terms of thematic focus, legal challenges were identified in 10 studies, while 9 studies highlighted policy or programmatic challenges. Similarly, nine studies offered recommendations related to integration, coordination, or leadership. Gender or marginalisation issues were discussed in only two studies, and three studies did not mention specific displacement-related challenges.

Regarding methodology, policy analysis or review was the most common approach, used in 10 studies. Qualitative methods including interviews, focus groups, or qualitative analysis, were employed in seven studies. Literature reviews and program or participant assessments were each used in two studies, while three studies utilised other formats such as commentaries, policy briefs, or edited volumes. Several studies employed more than one methodological approach.

Although this review did not include a meta-analysis due to the qualitative nature of the included studies, several potential biases were identified across the dataset. Most studies lacked formal assessments of methodological rigor or risk of bias, and many were case studies or grey literature with limited peer review. A small number relied on self-reported institutional data, raising concerns about selective reporting. Geographic distribution was also uneven, with a concentration of studies from Kenya and Uganda, which may skew regional generalisability. Sensitivity to missing data and publication bias could not be fully assessed, but the exclusion of non-English and pre-1995 studies may have limited the scope. Overall, the certainty in the synthesised evidence is moderate, given these limitations, though patterns of legal fragmentation, weak implementation, and coordination gaps were consistently reported across studies.

Key findings across the studies revealed that humanitarian challenges were the most frequently cited, appearing in 15 studies. Economic challenges were also prominent, identified in 12 studies.

Table 1. Characteristics of included studies.

Study	Study focus	Geographic coverage	Methodology	Key findings
Biel (2021)	IGAD peace diplomacy in South Sudan	South Sudan, Uganda	Policy analysis	Similar to Alameer and Al Kaoud 2024 focus on challenges in peace agreement implementation
Aman (2020)	IGAD's regional integration performance	Horn of Africa (not specified)	Qualitative interviews, focus groups	Humanitarian and economic challenges; lack of inclusivity, commitment, and stakeholder involvement
Lindley (2011)	Policy responses to Somali refugees in Kenya	Somalia, Kenya (Nairobi, Dadaab)	Interviews, policy analysis	Humanitarian, legal, and economic challenges; need for improved protection and integration
Sorenson (1995)	Disaster and development in the Horn; IGAD's role	Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia (Southern), IGAD region	Edited volume (various chapters)	No specific displacement challenges detailed; broad themes on disaster, relief, and regionalism
Gorokhov et al. (2023)	Migrant crisis and IGAD policy	Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Eritrea; migration routes	Policy analysis	Legal (agreement ratification), humanitarian (crisis scale), and economic (resource needs) challenges
Toroitich et al. (2021)	Cross-border tuberculosis interventions in IGAD	Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda; specific sites	Cross-sectional program assessment	Humanitarian (access, staffing, diagnostics), economic (resources), and policy (harmonization) challenges
Del Ministro (2021)	Displacement and durable solutions in Somalia	Somalia	Commentary	Humanitarian, economic, and legal challenges in settlement management; exclusionary practices
Imbiakha et al. (2021)	Military diplomacy in conflict management	Somalia (Mogadishu, Kismayu), Sudan (Khartoum, Juba), Kenya (embassies)	Interviews, questionnaires	No specific displacement challenges detailed; focus on military diplomacy
Rabele and Wielenga (2023)	Women's leadership in IGAD mediation (South Sudan)	South Sudan	Policy analysis	Humanitarian and legal challenges; marginalization of women in mediation
FAO (2011)	Food security and crisis management	Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, Sudan, South Sudan; Southern Somalia	Policy brief	Economic and humanitarian challenges; need for strong capacities and leadership
Ahadu (2019)	IGAD-led peace process in South Sudan	South Sudan	Qualitative interviews	Humanitarian and political challenges; need for stronger IGAD action
Mulugeta (2019)	IGAD-led peace process in South Sudan	South Sudan, Ethiopia (Addis Ababa), Kenya (Nairobi)	Qualitative interviews	Legal and humanitarian challenges; limited effectiveness of IGAD mediation
United Nations Women-Africa (2015)	Gender, peace, and displacement in Ethiopia/IGAD	Ethiopia, Horn of Africa	Policy analysis	Humanitarian and legal challenges; gender integration in displacement response
Maharani (2019)	IGAD mediation failure in South Sudan	South Sudan: neighbouring countries (not specified)	Qualitative analysis	Humanitarian, legal, and economic challenges; recommendations for IGAD reform
Serbessa et al. (2016)	HIV/AIDS vulnerability among pastoralists and refugees; interventions	Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda	Review of published and unpublished literature (2001–2014)	Socioeconomic, cultural, logistic, infrastructure, and programmatic factors contribute to HIV vulnerability; need for contextualised, integrated interventions
Kassa (2024a)	Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) teacher training for refugee and host community schools	Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda	Participant observation, textual/contextual analysis	Highlights participatory approaches, partnership, and coordination; recommends scaling up teacher training
Hopkins and Buffoni (2019)	Kampala Declaration on jobs, livelihoods, self-reliance for refugees	IGAD region (Djibouti, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya; sub-regions)	Policy analysis	Legal, economic, and humanitarian challenges in implementing Declaration; need for inclusive dialogue and collective action

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Study	Study focus	Geographic coverage	Methodology	Key findings
Colletta (2015)	Conflict, displacement, and policy responses in the Horn	Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda; Madera Triangle	Literature review, field observations, interviews	Legal (access, rights), economic (resources, services), and humanitarian (durable solutions) challenges; need for integrated development
Jok (2015)	IGAD-led peace process in South Sudan	South Sudan; IGAD region	Policy review	Focus on peace process challenges; no specific displacement challenges detailed
Kebede (2023)	Higher education for refugees, returnees, internally displaced persons (IDPs)	Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda	Policy review	Low access to higher education; need for legal frameworks, resource mobilization, and regional coordination
Akuey (2018)	Security implications of South Sudan crisis	South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya	Policy analysis	Humanitarian and economic challenges; dependence on aid; regional security threats
Biel (2022)	IGAD peace diplomacy in South Sudan	South Sudan, Uganda	Policy analysis	Structural and systemic challenges in peace agreement implementation

5. Discussion

5.1. IGAD's frameworks in the context of global norms

This review demonstrates that IGAD has emerged as a pivotal regional actor in the Horn of Africa, particularly in aligning its refugee response strategies with global frameworks such as the New York Declaration (NYD), the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). These frameworks collectively promote inclusive, sustainable, and equitable responsibility-sharing approaches in refugee protection, reflecting a paradigm shift towards multi-stakeholder engagement in humanitarian responses (Nicolosi & Momoh, 2022).

The findings further indicate that IGAD has operationalised several regional instruments that reflect the core principles of both the CRRF and the GCR. For instance, the IGAD Policy Framework on Refugee Protection and the Djibouti Declaration on Refugee Education stand out as critical initiatives. These frameworks strive to standardise asylum policies across member states and foster regional debates while ensuring access to essential services, e.g. education and healthcare - for refugees and host communities (Kassa, 2024b). The Djibouti Declaration, specifically, has received endorsement at the ministerial level, promoting a shared normative understanding that emphasises inclusive education and mutual recognition of academic qualifications across borders. This aligns closely with the GCR's principles of integration and self-reliance, ultimately fostering a more inclusive environment for displaced populations (Abaho, 2020).

Moreover, IGAD has effectively mobilised international partnerships with organizations such as the European Union, UNHCR, and the World Bank. The 'Delivering Durable Solutions to Forced Displacement' initiative exemplifies this multilateral engagement, which seeks to bridge humanitarian and developmental approaches, thereby enhancing resilience among both displaced populations and the hosting communities (Obila & Pop, 2020). This initiative demonstrates IGAD's capability to foster collaborative solutions that address the multifaceted challenges faced by refugees, which is essential given the unique socio-economic contexts within the Horn of Africa.

Although IGAD has aligned its policies with key global frameworks such as the NYD, CRRF, and GCR, significant challenges remain in translating these internationally agreed commitments into coherent and actionable regional and national policies and practices. The inconsistency between the strategic frameworks provided by IGAD and their practical execution at the national level has been primarily attributed to varying degrees of political commitment, institutional capacity, and stability among member states (Nicolosi & Momoh, 2022). This variance often results in a sporadic application of CRRF principles across

the region, highlighting the need for mechanisms that facilitate better alignment between regional and national policies (Kassa, 2024b).

Moreover, resource limitations and institutional fragility remain pressing issues that undermine the sustainability of refugee protection initiatives. The absence of robust mechanisms for monitoring and accountability exacerbates these challenges, impeding the ability to assess the impact of programs and adherence to frameworks established by the GCR (Abebe, 2021). Effective monitoring systems are vital in ensuring that commitments to equitable responsibility-sharing can be realised.

A notable deficiency in IGAD's approach is the limited involvement of refugees and local civil society organisations in the planning and implementation of regional initiatives. Although the GCR and CRRF emphasise community engagement and a whole-of-society approach, IGAD processes have predominantly operated in a top-down manner, leading to insufficient grassroots participation. This exclusion potentially marginalises the very communities these frameworks aim to empower, underscoring a critical area for development in IGAD's operational strategy (Nicolosi & Momoh, 2022).

5.2. IGAD's frameworks and theoretical implications

The evolving role of the IGAD in responding to forced displacement in the Horn of Africa since 2017 reflects a significant institutional maturation. This thematic review shows focal thematic theme area and underlying theories as shown in Table 2 and how these frameworks emphasise the necessity for security, identity, and participation among displaced populations. The Nairobi Declaration articulates a regional commitment to achieving durable solutions for refugees, focusing on fulfilling these core human needs (Gebru et al., 2023). However, its potential impact is hindered by inconsistent implementation across member states and the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms. This limitation relates to critiques of Liberal Institutionalism, which suggest that voluntary cooperation among states often leads to varying outcomes due to differing national interests and capacities (Tana & Heiss, 2018).

The Djibouti Declaration extends IGAD's mandate by promoting access to education which is an essential factor recognised in frameworks addressing human needs. It advocates for cooperative frameworks among member states while acknowledging gaps in funding and national capacities that invariably impact implementation (Kassa, 2024a). Moreover, the Kampala Declaration on Jobs, Livelihoods, and Self-Reliance (2019) further illustrates IGAD's engagement with the economic dimensions of displacement, linking economic inclusion to the broader humanitarian context. This is aligned with theories focusing on the economic needs of refugees while revealing challenges such as national level restrictions on employment and limited private sector involvement (Gebru et al., 2023).

Regarding health responses, the 2018 Health Ministerial Declaration highlights a comprehensive approach to health as a cross-border issue, promoting collaboration among member states (IGAD, 2018b). However, disparities in health infrastructure pose ongoing challenges in realising equitable health solutions for refugees. Research indicates that refugees face significant barriers to accessing healthcare, primarily due to systemic inequities and funding issues that mirror broader themes in health governance (Abbas et al., 2018; Efird & Bith Melander, 2018). These systemic barriers hinder the effectiveness of

Table 2. IGAD's legal frameworks, thematic theme area and theories.

IGAD's legal frameworks	Thematic theme area	Underpinning theories
The Nairobi Declaration on Durable Solutions for Somali Refugees (2017)	Regional Commitment to Durable Solutions	1. John Burton's Human Needs Theory, 2. Liberal Institutionalism
The Djibouti Declaration on Refugee Education (2017)	Education as a Tool for Integration and Stability	1. Human Needs Theory 2. Liberal Institutionalism
The Kampala Declaration on Jobs, Livelihoods, and Self-Reliance (2019)	Economic Inclusion and Self-Reliance	1. Human Needs Theory 2. Liberal Institutionalism 3. UN Integrated Approaches to Peacebuilding
The 2018 Health Ministerial Declaration on Refugee and Cross-Border Health	Health Systems Strengthening and Cross-Border Coordination	1. Human Needs Theory 2. UN Integrated Approaches to Peacebuilding
Regional Joint Consultative Seminars on Internal Displacement	Dialogue and Legal Harmonisation on Internal Displacement	1. Human Needs Theory 2. Liberal Institutionalism 3. UN Integrated Approaches to Peacebuilding
The 2024 IGAD Policy Framework on Refugee Protection	Institutionalisation of Regional Protection Standards	1. Human Needs Theory 2. Liberal Institutionalism 3. UN Integrated Approaches to Peacebuilding

IGAD's initiatives, reflecting the limitations often faced by regional organisations in enforcing health policies.

Additionally, the Regional Joint Consultative Seminars on Internal Displacement exemplify IGAD's normative efforts towards legal harmonisation under the Kampala Convention, resonating with principles of rule-based cooperation among states (World Bank & UNHCR, 2015). Yet, the voluntary nature of these agreements, alongside slow ratification processes, suggests that despite normative advancements, achieving significant and consistent outcomes remains a formidable challenge.

As a culmination of recent developments, the 2024 IGAD Policy Framework on Refugee Protection emerges as a pivotal instrument that integrates elements of human needs theory and reflects a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted issues surrounding displacement. By encompassing a wide range of human needs and promoting a holistic society approach, it signifies a progressive step in the region's response to displacement (Gebru et al., 2023). Nevertheless, its efficacy depends heavily on the political will of member states, resource mobilisation, and the consistency of implementation efforts.

6. IGAD's transformative outcomes

IGAD's achievements are evident in the adoption of key regional declarations such as the Nairobi, Djibouti, and Kampala declarations, which serves as guiding frameworks for refugee response in the Horn of Africa. These instruments reflect IGAD's commitment to practical solutions and collective action. IGAD has leveraged its diplomatic role to mobilise member states in support of the CRRF, earning recognition from UNHCR at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum for pioneering regional approaches to displacement (UNHCR, 2019).

While other African regional bodies such as ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC are still developing their GCR implementation strategies, IGAD has taken the lead in operationalising regional responses (Hopkins & Buffoni, 2019). This comparative advantage underscores IGAD's institutional maturity and its alignment with Liberal Institutionalism, which emphasises the role of regional organisations in fostering cooperation and shared norms.

The Nairobi Process has facilitated sustained dialogue on durable solutions, with follow up meetings such as the 2018 Experts Meeting and the 2023 IGAD EAC Ministerial convening stakeholders to assess progress (Ahimbisibwe & Nkiko, 2023). National level initiatives, including Somalia's National Development Plan and the Mogadishu Rental Subsidy Program, illustrate how IGAD's coordination has translated into tangible outcomes (Tran & Birman, 2017).

In education, IGAD has advanced refugee inclusion through the Djibouti Declaration, which catalysed the development of costed national education plans in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Sudan (Kassa, 2024b). Uganda's Education Response Plan (2018–2020) was the first to explicitly reference the declaration. IGAD has also supported the development of a Regional Qualifications Framework and launched the IGAD Teacher Training Initiative, which trained over 750 teachers, exceeding targets and addressing long standing capacity gaps (Tsegaye, 2023). In health, IGAD has supported member states in integrating refugees into national systems. Countries like Uganda and Kenya have adopted joint planning mechanisms, and Uganda's Health Sector Integrated Refugee Response Plan (2019–2024) offers a model for inclusive service delivery (Berke & Larsen, 2022). IGAD has also coordinated cross-border health responses, including COVID 19 support and TB screening, in collaboration with WHO and the EU (Katusiime, 2022).

IGAD has also organised benchmarking trips for some of its member states to learn more about Uganda's refugee management model (Katusiime, 2022). For example, an Ethiopian DRDIP delegation visited Uganda in January 2022 to learn more about designing and implementing refugee inclusive development initiatives and responses (IGAD, 2023). DRDIP projects funded by World Bank on the construction of schools, health centres, water sources and roads among member states (Abebe, 2021). DRDIP projects have built the capacity of refugee hosting areas and countries and has contributed to centralised state building (De Simone, 2022). IGAD has conducted capacity building trainings for women in refugee settlements overseen by Uganda's Minister for Disaster Preparedness and Refugees (IGAD, 2023; Katusiime, 2022).

Additionally, IGAD has facilitated regional exchanges and dialogues on IDPs. These exchanges have yielded encouraging outcomes, particularly in recognising the importance of adopting and implementing

laws, policies, and decrees related to internal displacement (Obila & Pop, 2020). This acknowledgment underscores the commitment of member states to address this pressing humanitarian issue.

IGAD has promoted dialogues on internal displacement, encouraging the adoption of legal frameworks such as the Kampala Convention (Tamara, 2013). These exchanges have emphasised the importance of national laws and policies addressing internal displacement (Obila & Pop, 2020). As of October 2019, Djibouti, South Sudan, Somalia, Uganda, and Ethiopia had ratified the Convention, signalling regional commitment (Abebe, 2021; Obila & Pop, 2020; Tamara, 2013). However, Kenya and Sudan have yet to sign, indicating the need for continued advocacy.

Regular consultative seminars have provided platforms for multi stakeholder engagement, addressing displacement drivers such as conflict and climate related disasters (Woldearegay & Mamo, 2019). These forums have supported the development of integrated policies and fostered multi-level governance that critical for regional economic integration and refugee inclusion.

IGAD's role in promoting economic inclusion is exemplified by the 2019 Kampala Declaration on Jobs, Livelihoods, and Self-Reliance. This declaration has encouraged the integration of refugees into national development plans and labour markets, while also mobilising private sector participation (Szkudlarek et al., 2022). Moreover, it has advanced economic self-reliance among refugees and host communities, aligning with IGAD's broader durable solutions framework.

Evidence suggests that successful refugee integration enhances economic self-sufficiency and social cohesion (Mahoney & Siyambalapitiya, 2017; Ott & Montgomery, 2015). Refugee entrepreneurship has emerged as a key driver of local economic development, underscoring the importance of enabling environments for refugee led businesses (Dushime & Muathe, 2023).

7. IGAD's challenges to respond to forced migration

IGAD faces a range of challenges in coordinating regional responses to forced displacement, which this review broadly categorises into legal, economic, and humanitarian dimensions. Table 3 summarises these challenges with associated impacts, implications and solutions that are discussed in the following sections.

7.1. Legal and political coordination challenges

7.1.1. Lack of harmonised legal frameworks

The regional dynamics of forced displacement within the IGAD face substantial legal challenges, particularly due to a lack of harmonised legal frameworks across member states (Toroitich et al., 2021). For example, unlike Kenya, which restricts refugees to camps (Betts et al., 2023), Uganda permits them to move freely, work, and access public services (Ahimbisibwe, 2019). The variance in national asylum laws and refugee policies among IGAD countries is a notable barrier to effective coordination in displacement responses. This fragmentation results in inconsistencies in protection standards and access to services, complicating cross-border management of refugee flows. Several studies articulate how this situation undermines regional strategies aimed at managing forced displacement and diminishes the portability of essential rights for refugees, such as access to education, healthcare, and employment across borders (Halsey et al., 2022; Hopkins and Buffoni 2019; Kebede, 2023).

Table 3. IGAD's challenges, implications, and solutions.

Challenge type	Impact on coordination	Regional implications	Proposed solutions
Legal: Fragmented frameworks, non-binding agreements	Inconsistent protection, limited mobility, weak enforcement	Hinders cross-border cooperation, leaves gaps in refugee/ internally displaced persons (IDP) rights	Harmonise legal frameworks, ratify regional agreements, strengthen gender inclusion
Economic: Resource constraints, infrastructure deficits	Inadequate service delivery, limited self-reliance	Increases dependency, strains host communities, impedes integration	Mobilise predictable funding, invest in infrastructure, develop burden-sharing mechanisms
Humanitarian: Service delivery gaps, marginalization	Poor health/education outcomes, exclusion of vulnerable groups	Prolonged crises, social tensions, reduced resilience	Strengthen coordination, adopt participatory/inclusive approaches, integrate gender

7.1.2. Non-binding nature of declarations

The non-binding nature of regional declarations significantly hampers the effectiveness of legal frameworks intended to support displaced populations. For instance, while the Kampala Declaration on Jobs, Livelihoods, and Self-Reliance for Refugees provides a strategic foundation, its enforceability remains questionable due to its non-binding character, leaving gaps in protection that adversely affect vulnerable populations (Adetula et al., 2016; Siradag, 2012). This is evident in cases like the Ethiopia Eritrea war (1998–2000) and ongoing conflicts in South Sudan and Ethiopia, where member states have acted contrary to IGAD's principles of peaceful resolution. Furthermore, the Kampala Convention on the Protection and Assistance of IDPs in region exemplifies this issue, as not all IGAD member states have completed its ratification, with notable absentees such as Kenya and Sudan (Hammond et al., 2020). This incomplete legal commitment among member states discourages regional solidarity and exacerbates protection gaps for IDPs (Doocy et al., 2016).

7.1.3. Refugees and IDPs legal rights

Legal rights remain severely restricted for both refugees and IDPs in many IGAD member states, leading to barriers in accessing basic services such as healthcare and education, as well as limitations on the right to work, property ownership, and movement (Lutz et al., 2020). Such barriers contravene international legal norms and hamper the socio-economic integration of displaced populations, often resulting in continued dependency and marginalisation (Ragi et al., 2024). The absence of comprehensive legal provisions further perpetuates the cycle of vulnerability among displaced individuals, with systemic inequalities prevailing in their ability to secure essential services.

7.1.4. Gender disparities

Gender disparities in legal and institutional frameworks present another layer of complexity in the regional response to forced displacement. Despite formal commitments to gender inclusion, women's representation in policymaking processes remains alarmingly low (Fletcher, 2020). The underrepresentation of women in displacement governance hampers the creation of responsive legal frameworks, thereby failing to address critical issues such as gender-based violence and access to reproductive health services (Czaika & Hobolth, 2016; Guruge et al., 2018). Gender mainstreaming in legal structures is essential for the protection of displaced women and for the overall effectiveness of legal responses to forced displacement.

7.1.5. Protractedness of the refugee situations

Protracted refugee situations are a defining feature of displacement in the Horn of Africa, with many lasting over a decade. According to UNHCR (2004), such situations are characterised by a state of limbo in which refugees' fundamental rights and essential needs remain unmet despite years in exile. Refugees from countries like Eritrea, Somalia, and South Sudan are particularly affected, as ongoing conflict and political instability hinder the realisation of durable solutions (UNHCR, 2024). While initiatives such as the Nairobi Declaration have aimed to facilitate voluntary repatriation - initially for Somali refugees and later extended to South Sudanese populations, their success remains limited due to persistent insecurity in countries of origin (Bagonza et al., 2021). Addressing these long-term displacement scenarios require a nuanced understanding of their complexity and a commitment to sustainable, rights-based solutions that prioritise safety, dignity, and long-term integration (Colletta, 2015).

The prolonged nature of displacement also places immense pressure on host communities, particularly in underdeveloped and marginalised regions where refugee camps are often located. These areas frequently suffer from food insecurity, limited access to healthcare and education, poor infrastructure, and environmental degradation (Njuki & Abera, 2018; Tamara, 2013). The influx of refugees exacerbates these challenges, leading to competition over scarce resources and, at times, intercommunal tensions (Gengo et al., 2017; World Bank & UNHCR, 2015). Moreover, the need for continuous humanitarian assistance diverts attention and funding from long-term development initiatives. IGAD's broader goals of regional integration, economic growth, and infrastructure development are often

disrupted by the urgent demands of humanitarian crises. Insecurity in key member states like Somalia and South Sudan further complicates regional cooperation and undermines peacebuilding efforts, highlighting the need for integrated approaches that bridge humanitarian response with development planning.

7.2. Economic coordination challenges

7.2.1. Short-term displacement funding

A significant challenge identified in the literature is the inadequacy, unpredictability, and short-term nature of funding allocated to displacement-related programs. Humanitarian and development financing is often received in fragmented cycles, tethered more closely to donor priorities than to long-term strategic planning for the region. This situation undermines IGAD's ability to effectively plan and implement sustainable interventions. In contexts characterised by protracted displacement, where the needs of displaced populations evolve continuously, such a financial landscape poses significant obstacles to meaningful action (Alshoubaki & Harris, 2018).

7.2.2. Economic strain and service gaps

The lack of predictable funding further constrains host countries' capabilities to invest in durable infrastructure and essential services that would benefit both refugees and local communities. This perpetual dependency on external aid undermines the prospects for self-reliance and exacerbates the ongoing cycle of aid dependency among displaced populations (Alshoubaki & Harris, 2018; Berke & Larsen, 2022). Areas hosting large numbers of refugees frequently grapple with inadequate service provision, including poorly maintained roads, insufficient educational facilities, and a lack of access to necessary healthcare services (Berke & Larsen, 2022; White, 2008). Consequently, these infrastructural deficits restrict access to opportunities for economic integration and elevate living conditions for both displaced individuals and their host communities (Hamza, 2021).

7.2.3. Investment and burden sharing

Displaced populations encounter numerous legal and practical barriers inhibiting their ability to attain employment or engage in entrepreneurial endeavours, significantly contributing to poverty and social exclusion (Alix García et al., 2018). Addressing these multifaceted challenges necessitates robust investments that extend beyond immediate humanitarian aid, focusing on building local infrastructure and fostering equitable burden sharing among IGAD member states. Literature emphasises the imperative of aligning humanitarian aid with development financing strategies (Alix García et al., 2018; Knapp et al., 2020).

7.3. Humanitarian coordination challenges

7.3.1. Service delivery and inclusion

IGAD faces difficulties in emergency response coordination, service delivery gaps especially in health and education sectors and the marginalisation of particularly vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and mobile populations. The coordination of emergency responses is often hindered by fragmented programmatic approaches across various humanitarian agencies, leading to inefficiencies and inconsistent service delivery (Kohrt et al., 2019). For instance, a review of humanitarian principles emphasises the need for holistic planning that aligns with the specific needs of different displaced populations (Nisbet et al., 2022).

7.3.2. IGAD's logistical and staffing challenges

IGAD faces critical capacity challenges that undermine its effectiveness, particularly in peacebuilding and refugee response. Persistent funding constraints limit its ability to implement initiatives, with a modest secretariat and heavy reliance on external donors often leading to ownership issues and externally driven agendas (Bereketeab, 2019; Healy, 2011; Toroitich et al., 2021). These issues were evident during the

Sudan peace process and continue to affect refugee programs, where short-term humanitarian aid dominates due to limited donor interest in long-term integration (Crawford & O'Callaghan, 2019; Forichon, 2018; Krause, 2016). Donor fatigue and shifting global priorities, such as the redirection of funds to the Russia Ukraine conflict, have further strained resources (Hawaz, 2023). Beyond funding, IGAD struggles with staff shortages, overreliance on consultants, weak communication with member states, and poor migration data systems, all of which hinder coordinated action and evidence-based policymaking (Murzakulova et al., 2021; Woldearegay & Mamo, 2019).

Furthermore, logistical challenges and staffing constraints complicate service delivery, especially in cross-border and remote regions where resource accessibility is limited (Lokot, 2021). The health sector particularly suffers from these shortcomings due to inadequate infrastructure, which undermines the provision of essential medical services. This is especially critical for populations that include vulnerable groups such as women and children, who often face heightened risks of abuse and neglect in these settings (Harrison et al., 2024). Research indicates that interventions targeting food security need to incorporate better monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, particularly because refugee populations can experience varying needs that are often overlooked by existing structures (Nisbet et al., 2022).

7.3.3. Non-inclusive approach

The marginalisation of vulnerable groups such as particularly women, children, and mobile populations, remains a pressing challenge for IGAD in its humanitarian programming. These groups are often insufficiently considered in the planning and implementation of strategic interventions, limiting their access to essential services (Haider, 2022). Despite growing recognition that gender sensitive and participatory approaches lead to more equitable outcomes (Fletcher, 2020; Foran et al., 2012), IGAD has yet to fully integrate these principles in all its processes and practice. Addressing this gap requires sustained stakeholder engagement and the mainstreaming of gender and other cross cutting issues across all levels of humanitarian response (Fletcher, 2020). Without the active involvement of affected populations, interventions risk overlooking critical vulnerabilities or imposing ill-suited solutions (Javed et al., 2021). Strengthening inter agency collaboration is therefore essential to ensure that IGAD's humanitarian efforts are both inclusive and effective, especially in contexts of forced displacement and compounded vulnerabilities (Nasar et al., 2023).

Furthermore, there are raised concerns among member states and stakeholders over a rapid launch of Initiatives without adequate stakeholder engagement, leading to a lack of ownership and uneven participation across the region (Hammond et al., 2020; Hopkins & Buffoni, 2019). Some member states have even shifted focus to other regional bodies like the East African Community (Urso & Hakami, 2018). Donors have also criticised IGAD for issuing ambitious declarations such as those on Somali refugees (2017), education (2017), and livelihoods (2019) without ensuring alignment with national development plans or securing full stakeholder buy in Abebe (2021) and Hammond et al. (2019). The Nairobi and Kampala Declarations, for instance, were adopted with limited consultation, leaving governments and affected populations, including refugees, under informed about their implications (Hopkins & Buffoni, 2019).

7.4. Cross cutting coordination challenges

7.4.1. Institutional capacity

Several studies have indicated that overlapping mandates across different departments and programs within IGAD have led to disorganisation and redundancy in response efforts. For instance, the literature highlights the critical importance of effective coordination and communication among various departments and stakeholders in crisis management, as poor coordination can hinder effective response strategies (Carayannopoulos, 2016). This fragmentation not only decreases efficiency but also undermines the collective strength needed for addressing the rapidly evolving complexities of displacement crises in the Horn of Africa. It is vital for organisations to develop clear communication frameworks and organisational synergy to enhance performance and achieve coherent crisis resolution (Christensen et al., 2015). Consequently, without fundamental changes that address these structural weaknesses, IGAD's ability to manage the complexities of forced displacement remains significantly hindered.

Moreover, the lack of institutionalisation within IGAD significantly undermines its initiatives, making them susceptible to fluctuations in political commitment and funding availability. This instability is compounded by deficiencies in human resources and financial support, which limit IGAD's operational capabilities. The absence of a long term, embedded framework for crisis responses leads to inconsistencies in effectiveness that are often reliant on temporary political will (Brück et al., 2019; Seble & Kewir, 2023). Studies indicate that sustainable management structures are requisite for ensuring that initiatives are not only executed but also maintained through varying political landscapes (Brück et al., 2019). Such vulnerability to external changes creates significant barriers to effective regional responses. Thus, enhancing institutionalisation is critical for IGAD to fortify its role in managing displacement challenges.

It is further identified that IGAD requires expert personnel who are adept at navigating the complex interplay of technical and political aspects associated with forced displacement crises. Existing literature supports the assertion that building human capital through strategic recruitment and retention is crucial for humanitarian organisations like IGAD (Bamidele & Pikirayi, 2023; Islam & Mozumder, 2021). Additionally, innovative resource mobilisation strategies must be cultivated to secure sustainable funding for IGAD's initiatives (Christensen & Ma, 2018). Experts argue that resolving these foundational issues is essential for IGAD to improve its ability to coordinate comprehensive and timely responses across its member states, thereby successfully mitigating the impacts of forced displacement (Raftery et al., 2023).

IGAD continues to face criticism for its limited capacity to bridge the gap between summit level commitments and follow up actions, largely due to weak monitoring and accountability mechanisms (Abebe, 2021). This highlights the need to strengthen its implementation frameworks alongside its convening role.

7.4.2. Regional cooperation

Divergent national interests among member states often undermine collaborative initiatives, as countries prioritise their own political agendas over regional consensus and action. This situation is exacerbated by a lack of commitment from some states to adhere to IGAD's mandates, resulting in inadequate implementation of agreed upon measures (Seble & Kewir, 2023). The proposed objectives outlined in IGAD's frameworks often contradict local and national interests, limiting the organisation's ability to effectuate meaningful policy changes within member states (Alameer & Al Kaoud, 2024). Furthermore, the implementation mechanisms of IGAD are perceived as weak, contributing to a cycle of inaction where pivotal decisions are postponed or ignored, thus complicating the organisation's navigation of the complexities inherent in regional forced displacement management (Magara, 2022).

Another significant hurdle in IGAD's supervisory role is the prevalence of overlapping memberships in various regional organisations, complicating efforts at coordination and cooperation. Member states frequently grapple with conflicting sovereignty issues, creating friction between national authorities and the expectations set by IGAD as a supranational body (Müller & Bergmann, 2020). Additionally, limited stakeholder involvement—particularly from local communities and civil society organisations—often results in critical perspectives being absent from discussions, thereby stymieing the development of comprehensive approaches to displacement (Farole, 2018). Disagreements regarding what constitutes the mandate of IGAD, and the extent of its authority further exacerbate these issues, complicating the organisation's efforts to unify its approach towards effectively managing regional crises (Weldesellassie, 2011; Yitay & Thobejane, 2017).

7.4.3. Funding fragility

Recent cuts to United Nations' finances, which have impacted significantly on agencies such as The International Organization for Migration (IOM), have affected IGAD's ability to respond effectively to forced displacement in the region. The IOM, an IGAD implementing partner in its operational framework of regional response has experienced a 30 per cent reduction of funding from donors, which has resulted in an ongoing reconfiguration, closure of projects and staff reductions in IOM global operations (IOM, 2025). Such financial restrictions have undermined collaborative programming and the institutional connections that IGAD would need to have to implement its displacement-related mandates. IGAD's strong dependence on project-based funding and technical partnerships with UN agencies means that fluctuations in international support have resulted in gaps in implementation, delays in implementing regional frameworks and inconsistency in services delivery to displaced populations. This has not only stretched

IGAD's coordination mechanisms but compromised its perceived credibility as a regional leader in displacement governance (UNHCR, 2025).

8. Strategic recommendations and opportunities for IGAD

To enhance its effectiveness in addressing forced displacement and regional challenges, IGAD must adopt a multi-dimensional strategy that strengthens its legal, economic, and humanitarian frameworks. Legally, harmonising national laws, ratifying regional agreements, and promoting gender inclusion are essential for cohesive regional governance. Economically, mobilising predictable funding, investing in infrastructure, and developing fair burden sharing mechanisms can improve sustainability and resilience. On the humanitarian front, IGAD should prioritise stronger coordination, inclusive and participatory approaches, and the integration of gender sensitive practices to ensure equitable and effective responses.

8.1. Regional policy harmonisation

To effectively address the issues of legal fragmentation and protection gaps experienced by displaced populations in the IGAD region, prioritising the harmonisation of legal frameworks among member states is critical. The marked differences in national asylum laws, exemplified by Kenya's encampment policy contrasted with Uganda's more progressive integration model, lead to disparities in the rights and services accessible to refugees and IDPs (Ahimbisibwe, 2019; Betts et al., 2023). As noted by Dick and Schraven (2019), such disparities hinder region wide coordination efforts and undermine the equitable treatment of displaced individuals across borders. Furthermore, the variability in access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and employment results in unequal opportunities and protection for vulnerable populations (Toroitich et al., 2021). To mitigate these issues, IGAD should spearhead initiatives to develop a cohesive regional legal framework that establishes minimum standards for the protection and rights of refugees and IDPs, thereby promoting consistency in their access to fundamental rights (Halsey et al., 2022; Kebede, 2023).

8.2. Cross-border legal frameworks

Advocating for the ratification and domestication of significant regional and international agreements, like the Kampala Convention, is another essential measure that IGAD must undertake. Despite the Convention's critical role in enhancing the legal status and protection of IDPs as recognised by various international entities, its unratified status by key member states, including Kenya and Sudan, remains a significant obstacle (, Hammond et al., 2020). By advancing the legally binding nature of such instruments, IGAD can foster a culture of accountability and cooperation among member states in the shared responsibility of responding to displacement issues (Adetula et al., 2016; Siradag, 2012). Creating a legally robust framework will not only enable effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms but also encourage regional solidarity, as highlighted by various studies advocating for better governance in displacement contexts (Magara, 2022).

8.3. Foster inclusive development

To promote equitable and sustainable responses to forced migration, IGAD should adopt a multifaceted approach that prioritises inclusive and participatory development. Engaging marginalised groups, particularly women and youth in planning and decision-making processes ensures that interventions are relevant, locally grounded, and more likely to succeed (Ostad Ali Askari et al., 2021; Toham et al., 2021). For women, IGAD should support gender equality through access to education, healthcare, and economic empowerment initiatives, as these have been shown to yield broad social benefits (Huis et al., 2017; Völker & Doneys, 2020). Similarly, investing in youth focused education and vocational training can reduce vulnerability to displacement and improve long-term livelihoods (Evers et al., 2019). Community based development models, including local leadership and capacity building, are also essential for ensuring that interventions reflect the unique needs of each context (Medeiros, 2021). By embedding inclusivity into its development agenda, IGAD can help build a more resilient and just Horn of Africa.

8.4. Mobilisation of predictable funding

To address ongoing economic challenges, IGAD must prioritise the mobilisation of predictable, long-term funding sources. The current reliance on short term, donor driven financing limits the region's ability to plan and implement sustainable solutions for displaced populations (Alshoubaki & Harris, 2018). IGAD should advocate for multi-year funding commitments from both international donors and member states, aligning financial support with regional development goals and the realities of protracted displacement. Establishing a regional funding mechanism or trust fund could be instrumental in pooling resources and enhancing financial sustainability, as emphasised by Ndaguba et al. (2018). Additionally, exploring innovative financing models such as those proposed by Atun et al. (2016) can help secure essential long-term investments and reduce dependency on fragmented aid flows.

8.5. Investment in infrastructure

IGAD should prioritise strategic infrastructure investments in displacement affected areas to improve living conditions and stimulate local economies. As highlighted by Berke and Larsen (2022) and White (2008), host communities often face overstretched services and inadequate facilities, particularly in healthcare and education. Investing in shared infrastructure can benefit both displaced populations and host communities, easing pressure on local systems and reducing tensions over resource competition. These investments should also be designed to create employment opportunities, generating broader economic benefits. To ensure sustainability and community ownership, infrastructure planning must be inclusive, reflecting the needs and voices of both displaced and host populations.

8.6. Develop burden sharing mechanisms

IGAD should promote equitable burden sharing mechanisms among its member states to address the disproportionate pressures faced by countries hosting larger displaced populations. These imbalances often intensify service gaps and social tensions (Alix García et al., 2018; Knapp et al., 2020). To foster a more balanced and collaborative regional response, IGAD can facilitate agreements that support shared responsibilities through coordinated financial contributions, technical assistance, and resettlement or relocation schemes. Aligning humanitarian and development financing with principles of regional solidarity will not only strengthen IGAD's capacity to manage displacement but also enhance long-term stability and cooperation across the region.

8.7. Strengthen coordination

To strengthen its humanitarian response, IGAD must prioritise enhanced coordination mechanisms and the adoption of participatory, inclusive approaches. The fragmentation of emergency response efforts and inconsistencies in service delivery, particularly in health and education sectors, underscore the urgency for cohesive planning and inter agency collaboration. Research indicates that such fragmentation often leads to inefficient resource allocation and inadequate responses to the needs of affected populations (Bharosa et al., 2009). To address these challenges, IGAD should establish a centralised coordination platform that engages member states, humanitarian actors, and development partners. This operational hub would streamline efforts, mitigate duplication of services, and facilitate timely interventions tailored to the unique needs of those affected by crises (Ruesch et al., 2022; Tatham et al., 2016).

8.8. Strengthening internal capabilities

IGAD must critically address its internal capacity gaps by investing in staff development, reducing reliance on external consultants, and improving logistical support for field operations. The relationship between effective humanitarian response and robust internal systems is essential, as studies indicate a strong correlation between local capacity building and the efficiency of humanitarian efforts (Tran & Schulte-Hillen, 2018). Strengthening internal capabilities enables IGAD to respond more effectively to

complex humanitarian needs, while also building trust among member states and stakeholders. As personnel within the organisation become more skilled and knowledgeable, they can implement strategies that embody inclusivity and coordination at the core of IGAD's humanitarian strategy, ultimately leading to more equitable, responsive, and sustainable support for displaced populations across the region. Investing in human resource development and local operations will not only enhance operational effectiveness but also ensure that interventions are context aware and culturally sensitive, fostering greater community acceptance and involvement (Casey et al., 2020; Day et al., 2012).

8.9. Strengthen regional cooperation and integration

IGAD should strengthen regional cooperation by promoting joint initiatives in areas such as drought monitoring, sustainable agriculture, and water resource management to address shared challenges like food insecurity and climate change (Haile et al., 2020; Yuniarti et al., 2022). Enhancing regional food security through coordinated production, storage, and distribution systems can improve resilience and reduce dependency on single food sources. Simultaneously, IGAD must reinforce mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution by facilitating dialogue, building member state capacity, and establishing platforms for regular information exchange on migration, security, and economic trends (Kanda et al., 2023; Villanueva et al., 2020). Promoting regional trade through harmonised regulations and investment in infrastructure such as transport and communication networks, will boost economic integration and job creation (Schilling et al., 2020). Cross-border cooperation on shared development projects and stronger institutional frameworks will further enhance IGAD's ability to address the root causes of forced migration and foster long-term regional stability.

8.10. Enhance peace and security initiatives

To address the root causes of conflict and forced migration in the Horn of Africa, IGAD should adopt comprehensive strategies that tackle poverty, unemployment, and political exclusion, key drivers of instability (Ujunwa et al., 2019; World Bank, 2024). Promoting inclusive governance and participatory decision making can reduce disenfranchisement and foster social cohesion. IGAD must also strengthen its conflict mediation capacity by training specialised teams, enhancing early warning systems, and supporting peacebuilding efforts in hotspots like Somalia and South Sudan (Müller & Bergmann, 2020). Regional security cooperation should be deepened through joint initiatives and intelligence sharing to counter transnational threats such as terrorism and human trafficking (Davletgildeev, 2018). Additionally, IGAD should prioritise the rehabilitation and reintegration of displaced populations by ensuring access to essential services and protecting their rights within peace and recovery frameworks (Kaba et al., 2016).

8.11. Improve environmental and agricultural programs

IGAD should strengthen regional environmental and agricultural programs by prioritising land restoration, sustainable water management, and climate resilient agriculture. Addressing land degradation and desertification through reforestation, soil conservation, and sustainable land use policies can enhance food security and reduce displacement (Gain et al., 2016; Mekonnen & Hoekstra, 2016). IGAD should support member states with technical assistance, capacity building, and the exchange of best practices and technologies (Li et al., 2019). Promoting integrated water resource management and water saving innovations like drip irrigation is vital to mitigate water scarcity (Ijjas, 2015; Razmjoo et al., 2020). Additionally, IGAD should back agricultural development by facilitating access to improved inputs, climate smart practices, and market linkages to boost rural livelihoods and resilience (Arsana et al., 2022; Doreen et al., 2020; Haasnoot et al., 2012).

8.12. Leverage technology and innovation

IGAD should harness technology and innovation to enhance data driven decision making, project monitoring, and regional coordination. Integrating tools like GIS, remote sensing, and mobile data collection

can provide real time insights into migration trends and environmental changes, enabling more targeted and effective interventions (Njiru et al., 2022; Rosyida et al., 2022). IGAD should also utilise platforms such as the Global Refugee Forum's support mechanism to streamline implementation and resource mobilisation. Emerging technologies like AI and blockchain offer further potential for predictive analytics and transparent financial management (Ishibashi et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Digital platforms can improve stakeholder communication and collaboration, while capacity building programs will ensure staff and member states are equipped to manage tech driven solutions. Strategic partnerships with tech firms and research institutions will help IGAD stay at the forefront of innovation in addressing forced migration.

8.13. Strategic pathways for financial fragility

To manage the effects of UN funding cuts, IGAD should develop a multi-faceted resource diversification strategy that leverages partnerships with non-traditional donors, regional development banks, and the private sector. By decreasing dependence on UN funding mechanisms, IGAD could also increase the sustainability and predictability of its displacement-related activities. This strategy aligns with IGAD's (2022) broader calls for a new paradigm of displacement governance, transitioning from short-term humanitarian interventions to long-term oriented development responses. Additionally, IGAD should also set up an institutionalised regional pooled funding mechanism that, while it could possibly be endowed with contributions from member states and international financial institutions, should be used to finance core coordination functions and maintain operations in the event of funding interruptions. Strengthening internal systems of financial management and demonstrating impact through clear, rigorous monitoring and evaluation will also be essential to attract and keep diverse funding partners (United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, 2025). In doing so, these steps could not only shield IGAD from outside funding variability, but also strengthen its legitimacy and lead in regional displacement governance.

9. Conclusion

Despite the complex and persistent challenges surrounding forced displacement in the Horn of Africa such as fragmented legal systems, limited state capacity, and the non-binding nature of IGAD's declarations, IGAD remains a pivotal actor with considerable potential to drive regional solutions. Its diplomatic influence, ability to convene member states, and growing recognition on the global stage, as evidenced by its acknowledgment at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum, position it well to attract both political and financial support.

This review demonstrates the continued relevance of Liberal Institutionalism and the UN Integrated Approach in understanding how regional institutions like IGAD coordinate responses to forced displacement. These frameworks highlight the importance of multilateral cooperation, institutional capacity, and integrated peacebuilding strategies. Complementing this, Human Needs Theory underscores the urgency of addressing unmet legal, economic, and humanitarian needs as core drivers of displacement and persistent barriers to sustainable solutions in the Horn of Africa. The study provides evidence that IGAD has both the potential and institutional mandate to assess the roles and capabilities of the diverse stakeholders involved in displacement response. Within this context, the CRRF and GCR frameworks reinforce the value of a multi-stakeholder approach, prompting critical reflection on each actor's unique contributions, level of preparedness, and structural limitations. Identifying and addressing these capacity gaps is therefore essential to enhancing the coherence, accountability, and effectiveness of IGAD's coordinated efforts.

While global frameworks such as the NYD, CRRF, and GCR offer a strong normative foundation, their impact depends on effective domestication and implementation at regional, national, and local levels. IGAD has made important strides through its declarations and action plans, but the gap between policy and practice remains a central challenge. Its experience underscores the need for sustained political will, institutional coordination, and practical mechanisms to translate commitments into action.

To build a more effective and humane displacement response system, the international community including donors, UN agencies, and development partners, must deepen support for regional and local actors. This includes investing in infrastructure, ensuring predictable funding, and fostering inclusive,

participatory approaches. Strengthening these dimensions will be essential to creating a more resilient and responsive architecture for managing displacement in the Horn of Africa and beyond.

9.1. Limitations

This review is subject to some limitations in both the evidence base and the review process. Many of the included studies were qualitative or policy-focused, with limited methodological transparency and no standardised assessment of reliability or bias. Additionally, the review excluded non-English documents and studies published before 1995, potentially omitting relevant historical or francophone sources. The reliance on publicly available literature may have led to underrepresentation of internal IGAD reports or confidential assessments. Finally, while a systematic approach was followed, the absence of dual screening and formal quality appraisal introduces the possibility of selection bias and limits the reproducibility of the review process.

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Authors' contributions

CRediT: **Frank Ahimbisibwe**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Cedric M. Nkiko**: Investigation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [F.A], upon reasonable request.

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