

Aligning European migration policies with African priorities

Policy advice on African migration
for Nordic decision makers





What's new?

The 27 European Union (EU) member states have been engaged in negotiations on a new pact on migration and asylum since 2020. With recent reports of increases in the number of asylum seekers to the EU, and in irregular migration across the Mediterranean Sea, pressure is building to keep to the schedule, with an agreement ready by 2024. Under Sweden's presidency of the EU, migration was one of the priority issues on the agenda as Sweden hosted its first EU summit in February 2023. Alongside EU efforts to build a new common migration policy platform, the African Union (AU) is building a new free trade area, which also has a protocol on the free movement of people, a dimension that will impact the EU-AU partnership on migration.

Why is it important?

Migration governance has become a key theme in EU-AU relations, significantly influencing the overall partnership between the two bodies. In the context of shifting geopolitical trends and other global challenges, both continents need stronger collaboration; a more genuinely shared vision and understanding of migration governance will be key in that endeavour.

What should be done and by whom?

Nordic decision makers should use their influence to take a leading role at EU level and encourage the adoption of a more holistic policy agenda, informed by the priorities of African policymakers and the aspirations of African migrants. This should provide the tools to bridge European and African perspectives on migration governance and invest in more sustainable strategies.

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Cover illustration:

Tunis, 24 February 2023. Ivorians gather in front of the Ivory Coast embassy for repatriation to Abidjan. Photo: Fethi Belaid, AFP.

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Policy advice on African migration for Nordic decision makers

Bridging European and African perspectives on migration governance will result in more sustainable migration policies. Under Sweden's EU presidency, Nordic decision makers have an opportunity to lead the way. They should adopt a holistic and long-term approach, informed by a research-based understanding of the dynamics of African migration that takes the aspirations of African migrants and the perspectives of policymakers more seriously.



JESPER BJARNESEN, SENIOR RESEARCHER, THE NORDIC AFRICA INSTITUTE

African migration has been at the top of Nordic foreign policy agendas for the past decade. The two central concerns of these agendas have been the irregular arrival of African migrants in Europe and accompanying concern about the safety of migrants, who are risking their lives; for example when attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. But African migration is about much more than the relatively small numbers of migrants who arrive in Europe without the proper papers.

A wider view and deeper knowledge of African migration has the potential to enrich other policy agendas – on poverty reduction, sustainable cities, higher education, gender inequality and climate change adaptation. Even for actors whose sole focus is on irregular migration to Europe, a more realistic and research-informed understanding of the underlying dynamics of African migration is essential for designing more efficient and humane policies.

African migration is regional

More than half of all African-born international migrants remain in Africa, and more than a third remain within their subregion of origin. The key driver behind these movements is livelihoods; either searching for new opportunities in a new place or maintaining long-standing transnational ties or practices, such as seasonal agriculture, artisanal mining or small scale trade. Many of these movements are circular, reflecting the migrants' intent to nurture bonds with their communities of origin.

People moving within their country of birth or within the same subregion tend to rely on well-established ties or socio-cultural norms around how to receive and accommodate newcomers. This means that new generations of migrants seek out the same destinations and means of travel. Given that travel is costly and sometimes unpredictable, most migration trajectories are step-wise, often leading from rural areas to urban centres and onwards to regional metropolises. It is equally important to appreciate this dynamic in relation to off-continent migration, including the migration of highly skilled migrants such as health workers or business professionals, as well as the irregular migration of people who are generally hoping to find low-skilled work in the European shadow economy.

Most African states and multinational bodies, including the AU and its regional economic communities generally approach African migration as a development issue, emphasising that African migrants are resourceful citizens who often send money back to their home communities through remittances. The issue of irregular migration tends to be given less attention than in European public and political debates, which often leads to misunderstandings and deadlocks in the dialogue between European and African actors. It is therefore important to:

- Distinguish between African migration in general and irregular migration towards Europe, when designing policies to address root causes of irregular migration.



ONE OUT OF SEVEN of the world's total 280 million international migrants.

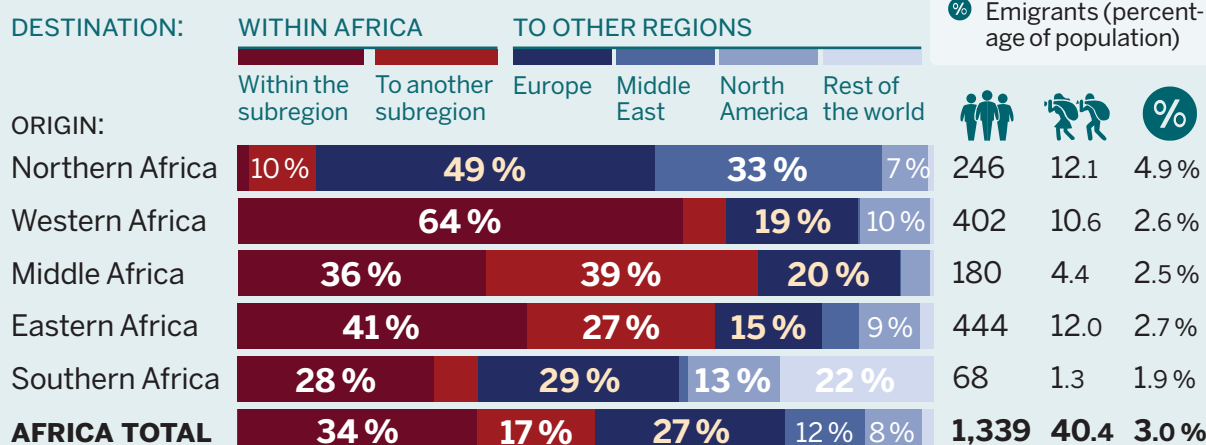
40 MILLION

INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS COME FROM AFRICA

International migrants

are defined by the UN as persons living in a country other than their country of birth

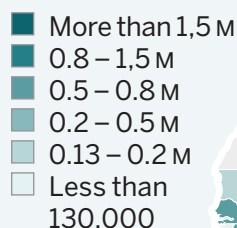
Where have they migrated to?



Where do they come from?

ABSOLUTE NUMBERS

M = MILLION MIGRANTS

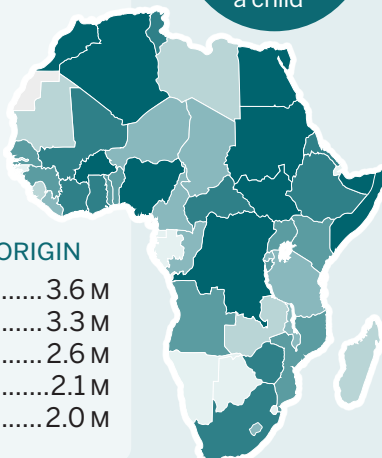


TOP FIVE COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

Egypt	3.6 M
Morocco	3.3 M
South Sudan	2.6 M
Sudan	2.1 M
Somalia	2.0 M

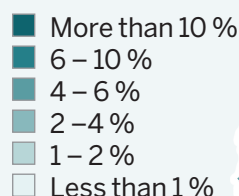
1 in 4

international migrants in Africa is a child*



RELATIVE NUMBERS

% = MIGRANTS IN PERCENT-AGE OF POPULATION

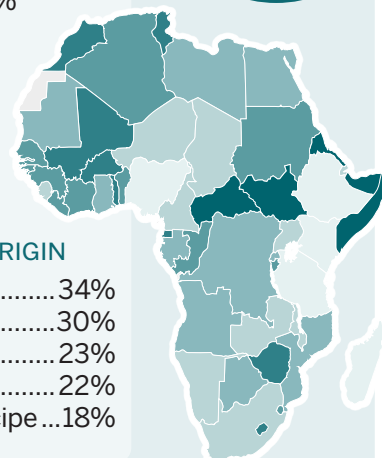


TOP FIVE COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

Cabo Verde	34%
Seychelles	30%
South Sudan	23%
Eritrea	22%
São Tome & Príncipe	18%

46 %

of the international migrants from Africa are women



INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS PER COUNTRY OF ORIGIN. Absolute and relative numbers.



ONE OUT OF EIGHT of the 87 million international migrants in Europe come from Africa.

11 MILLION

MIGRANTS IN EUROPE COME FROM AFRICA

TOP COUNTRIES OF DESTINATION FOR AFRICAN MIGRANTS IN EUROPE

Relative numbers *

France.....	6.4 %
Belgium.....	4.5 %
Portugal	4.0 %
Luxemburg	3.8 %
Malta.....	3.2 %

Absolute numbers

France.....	4.3 M
United Kingdom ...	1.6 M
Italy	1.3 M
Spain.....	1.1 M
Germany	0.6 M

39 %

of the migrants
from Africa to
Europe live
in France

3.8 %

of the migrants
from Africa to
Europe live in
the Nordics

0.4 %

of migrants from
Africa to Europe
live in Eastern
Europe

AFRICAN MIGRANTS IN EUROPE

* PERCENTAGE OF THE POPULATION
OF THE COUNTRY OF DESTINATION

■ > 3 %	■ 0.5–1 %
■ 2–3 %	■ 0.15–0.5 %
■ 1–2 %	■ < 0.15 %

Source: UNDP International Migrant Stock 2020

- Acknowledge the importance of remittances and support the frameworks of the Sustainable Development Goals and Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration on lowering transfer costs and facilitating remittance flows.

Population growth drives African migration

Globally, the number of migrants has increased over the past 50 years, and African migration has been growing at a similar rate. Today, approximately 3.6 percent of people across the world live in a country different from their country of birth; the share was approximately 2.6 per cent in 1960. Considering the evolution of affordable transportation and the dramatic increase in global connectivity this is a remarkably low share of the global population, especially in light of the political importance ascribed to migration in many parts of the world.

The low proportion of migrants in the world is not well understood. For example, a 2018 poll showed that Europeans generally believe that there are at least twice the actual number of immigrants in their country on average, with significant national variations.

It is against this backdrop that we should assess the nature of African migration over time. According to UNDP, the total number of Africa-born international migrants was, 40.4 million in mid-2020, their number having risen gradually over the past two decades. However, in relation to Africa's total population (1.34 billion people in 2020), that is only about 3 percent, which is below the global average of 3.6 percent. And the proportion of Africa-born international migrants in relation to the continent's total population has actually been between 2 and 3 percent for the past 60 years, with slow growth from 2.3 to 3.0 percent over the past two decades.

This relatively low proportionate increase in African migration is important to understand in assessing the motivations – or drivers – behind the numbers. When looking at the absolute numbers, one might be tempted to conclude that African migration has become vastly more popular today than before the internet and affordable air travel. But that is only part of the story.

The real driver behind African migration today – and even more importantly, for the next 50 years – is the continent's projected population growth. Between 2022 and

2050, the population of sub-Saharan Africa is expected to almost double, surpassing 2 billion inhabitants by the late 2040s. With average fertility levels remaining close to three births per woman in 2050, sub-Saharan Africa is projected to account for more than half of the growth of the world's population between 2022 and 2050. This growth trajectory also means that the African population will remain the youngest in the world for the foreseeable future. With 70 percent of people in sub-Saharan Africa under the age of 30, African migration in the future will be motivated by both absolute population growth and the increasing share of young people within the population.

It is telling that the increase in the percentage of Africa-born migrants has not risen more. In combination with research on migrant aspirations and governance, these observations show us that there are factors restricting the movement of African nationals, keeping the African share of the world's migrant population below the global average. The most important factor is poverty. Migration is costly and the majority of African states are ranked in the lowest quartile of the Human Development Index. The main reason why the number of Africa-born migrants has been rising over the past 60 years, then, is the continent's population growth rate. In summary, it is important to understand that:

- There has been a gradual but small increase in the overall number of migrants globally and African migration has followed that trend.
- The overall increase in the number of migrants globally is primarily an effect of population growth.

African migration is informal – and legal

Given regional free movement protocols across Africa and low incentives to invest in border controls, much African cross-border movement is informal, which makes it difficult to assess. It may be tempting to think that because cross-border migration in Africa is informal and, in that sense, unregulated, it is also problematic but this is not the case. In addition to long-standing regional agreements on free movement, most African states have signed the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, which contains a continental free movement protocol. This illustrates that African governments in general see regional free movement as an asset, much as governments within the EU do. To put it more bluntly, while cross-border movements in Africa are generally unregulated, they are legal within regional and continental free movement protocols.

The significance of informal livelihoods has been acknowledged in development policy for some time. According to the International Labour Organization, more than 80 percent of the continent's working pop-

ulation is estimated to be informally employed, so it would be virtually unthinkable to invest in livelihood policies without engaging with the informal sector. Migration practices on the African continent should be understood in a similar way; their informal or irregular character should be seen in relation to national, regional and continental migration governance landscapes, and should generally be approached as a subset of the continent's informal livelihood sector.

That said, migration within Africa does occasionally cause problems and concerns in some countries, including South Africa where anti-immigration sentiments have led to violence and persecution against perceived foreigners, and more recently in Tunisia, where aggression against sub-Saharan African migrants has been on the rise.

Contrary to the unregulated nature of intra-African migration, African migration towards regions off the continent is predominantly regular and increasingly directed away from traditional destinations in Europe. In 2020, most Africa-born migrants living outside the region were residing in Europe (11 million), Asia (nearly 5 million) and North America (around 3 million), but destination choices are becoming more diverse. In summary, it is important to:

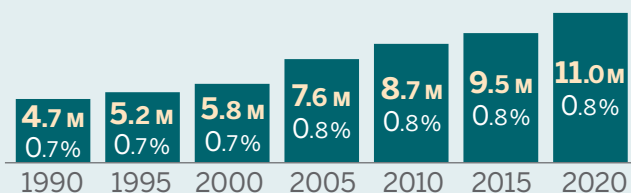
- Consider African migration and mobility within the spectrum of informal livelihood strategies.
- Acknowledge that statistics and assessment of flows may significantly underestimate the number of informal border crossings within subregions.
- Understand that most African policymakers support free movement initiatives at regional and continental levels.

African migration is in fact urbanisation

The preferred destination of most African migrants is a town or a city. According to the UN, nearly 90 percent of global urban expansion is predicted to take place in low and middle-income countries, especially in Asia and Africa. Some people move to urban centres within their country of birth, which leaves them out of migration statistics. These movements are central to urbanisation policies and research, but rarely considered in relation to migration governance. But urbanisation rates are also driven by people who cross national borders to reach urban destinations, which means that migration and urban policies are closely interlinked. Migrants from poorer countries and regions cross national borders to reach regional metropolises such as Johannesburg, Nairobi, Abidjan and Dakar. Many find work in the informal urban economy, sending remittances back to their families.

While Africa's largest cities have been growing quickly, much urbanisation is increasingly taking place in sec-

Increased African migration corresponds to population growth



THE NUMBER OF AFRICAN MIGRANTS in Europe has increased from 4.7 to 11.0 million over the past 30 years, which roughly corresponds to Africa's population growth from 637 to 1,339 million over the same time period.

AFRICAN MIGRANTS IN EUROPE 1990-2020

M = Migrants (million) | % = Percentage of Africa's population

Source: UNDP International Migrant Stock 2020

ondary cities and smaller, emerging urban centres. In the coming decades, new cities will emerge and small towns will grow much faster than the current megacities. This is both an opportunity and a challenge for African governments and their international partners. High urbanisation rates are making it difficult to build sustainable cities, putting pressure on urban infrastructure and labour markets. But proactive policies that combine insights from migration governance and urban planning can help prepare smaller cities and towns for future urban growth. In conclusion, it is important to:

- Integrate migration-related policies with the more established field of urban planning and sustainable cities.
- Encourage proactive urban policies that plan for future expansion of urban centres, especially of secondary cities and smaller urban centres.

Migration is key to the EU-AU partnership

As has already been implied, African and European policymakers often have very different priorities with regard to migration governance. It is sometimes difficult to agree on a common understanding of basic facts and figures around African migration. For example, the AU operates with significantly different assessments of the continent's migration flows than the UN, which often informs EU figures. While the AU estimates that 80 percent of African migrants remain within the continent, the UN estimate is 50-60 percent. In looking for common ground on migration governance, it is worth keeping these different understandings in mind, and searching for ways to address shared concerns.

Over the past decade, negotiations between the EU and AU on issues relating to African migration have shown two fundamental differences. While demands for increased border control and bilateral repatriation agreements have taken up most of the EU's attention, AU member states have consistently refused to accept the involuntary return of their citizens, even when these agreements have been coupled with promises of increased economic support. African actors have insisted that migration, in-

cluding African migration to Europe, is an important asset for the continent, as migrants send money home, get an education and establish lasting transnational ties throughout the vast and growing African diaspora.

The African diaspora has become a core issue both at AU level and in individual African member states. Many countries have a diaspora ministry. It is not uncommon to see presidential candidates begin their election campaigns abroad precisely to reach what the AU often refers to as its 'sixth region', which is supported through initiatives such as the African Union Commission's Citizens and Diaspora Organization and the African Union Diaspora Programme.

In light of these priorities, it is less surprising that African states resist European emphasis on combating irregular migration. Despite renewed promises of a "partnership of equals" and a substantial financial economic commitment by the EU during the 2022 EU-AU summit in Brussels, African observers are critical of the tendency of the EU and its individual member states to push their agendas through new conditionalities for co-operation. For example, the EU Council in January 2023 approved a proposal to include migration-related conditionalities in its Generalised Scheme of Preferences trade agreements with African countries. Such demands undermine the promises of an equal partnership in the eyes of many African decision makers.

To lay the foundations of a more inclusive and reciprocal collaboration with the AU and individual African states, it is important to:

- Acknowledge that African states and multinational bodies approach African migration as a development resource rather than a political problem, with less priority given to off-continent irregular migration.
- Address the contradiction in European discourses that promise equal partnership while increasing conditionalities on collaboration in the quest to combat irregular migration.
- Promote knowledge sharing between the EU and AU on the advantages of and obstacles to free movement in light of the AfCFTA protocol. ■



About this policy note

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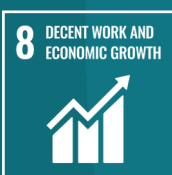
About the author

Jesper Bjarnesen, senior researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI), is an anthropologist working mainly on migration and mobility through wartime and peace in West Africa. His other fields of research include wartime displacement, intergenerational relations, rural-urban connections, informal labour recruitment, transnational migration and urban land rights.



About the institute

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