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# RESEARCH REPORT

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR  
REFUGEES  
(UNHCR)

MITIGATING IRREGULAR MIGRANT FLOWS  
THROUGH WESTERN AFRICA

ZEYNEP TURHAN





## Basic Overview of the Issue

Irregular migrant flows through Western Africa occur within, into and out of the region. Although it might be tempting to think of migration as happening only from Western Africa to Europe, most migrants stay within the region, traveling from one African country to another. Similarly, some migrants travel to Western Africa from neighboring countries. There are many reasons why West Africa has some of the most mobile population in the world. Refugees travel to and from the region in search of a new home. Labor migrants go to Middle-Eastern and European countries in search of high-paying jobs to support themselves or their families. West Africans who are well-off economically often choose to leave the region on their own initiative. Regardless of the reason, what is concerning is that a significant amount of this migration happens irregularly, i.e. outside the laws and regulations of the affected countries. Difficult visa requirements in European countries and the inaccessibility or complexity of legal migration processes within West Africa disincentivize legal migration, causing many to turn to illegal methods. Because of this, around 10-15% of immigrants worldwide and a much larger proportion in West Africa specifically can be classified as irregular. Irregular immigration presents a significant problem to states' security, stability and sovereignty. Immigrants who are not recognized by the government can operate outside the law, avoid paying taxes and otherwise threaten the stability of the country they are in. However the act of migrating illegally also hurts the migrant themselves. Irregular migration carries many risks. The lack of any government supervision means that human rights violations against migrants are far more common, and migrants are not able to receive the support they need.

Migration routes in West Africa can be traced back to the colonial era, when European colonial powers needed to transport slaves, migrants and goods between Europe and Africa. Following the decolonization process and the abolition of slavery in most countries, these routes continued to exist and are now being used by African immigrants. There are many different routes used by migrants to travel between West Africa, Europe and the Middle East, however a few stand out as being the most common. Intra-regional migration happens mostly from landlocked Sahel countries to coastal countries. This is because, due to historical and geographical reasons, coastal countries generally have prosperous agricultural



industries in need of workers while landlocked countries have a surplus of labour force. It should be noted that oil-rich countries such as Nigeria are an exception, in that they attract labour migrants regardless of their geographical position. Another popular migration route is that from West Africa to Mediterranean countries in Europe, mainly Spain, Italy, and France. Although migration from Africa to Europe is less prevalent than migration within Africa, this type of migration is also important to address. The reason for irregular migration between continents is often not ill intent, but a lack of ability to receive visas. This report will outline the various consequences of irregular migration, key players and potential solutions.

## Explanation of Important Terms

### *Intra-regional*

Happening within a region. Intra-regional migration in West Africa means migration from one West African country to another.

### *Inter-regional*

Happening between different regions. Inter-regional migration in West Africa means migration from a West African country to a non-West African country, or the other way around.

### *Labour force*

The total population capable of labour, i.e. work, within a country or region.

## Detailed Background of the Issue

### Reasons for Migrant Flows in Western Africa

While it would be easy to assume that the main driver for migration would be poor living conditions and economic underdevelopment within West Africa, there is much more depth on why people emigrate. According to former writer and Emeritus Fellow at the University of Oxford Nicholas Van Hear, four main factors drive migration within and outside Western Africa. Foremost, predisposing factors create an unfavorable socio-economic context in which out-migration is likely. Such factors are usually the end product of broad international developments. For instance, globalization stands among the major reasons for increased migration from Western Africa, as through globalization, unequal terms of trade



and demographic transformation are facilitated. Predisposing factors, formed through unequal development opportunities for different regions, are the main facilitators of migrant flow towards Europe through the Mediterranean and West African migration routes. Proximate drivers of migration are seen as the results of the abundance of predisposing reasons; proximate factors are the most common type of migration associated with macroeconomic challenges, security problems, and environmental change. On the other hand, precipitating drivers of migration, as can be inferred from the name, are situations that encourage migrants to finalize their departure decision. Precipitating factors for migration are often a general trend that can be observed within a few months or years; these include high levels of unemployment, low quality and price of agricultural produce, and organized terror threats. Even though migration through West Africa has been common for over fifty years, with the start of the 21st century, mediating drivers of migration have exponentially increased the number of migrants willing to leave their land. Mediating drivers of migration are grouped as developments in technology, communication, and transportation that help many migrants cross borders with less difficulty. While discussing the effects of mediating drivers for migration, a particular emphasis should be placed on various illegal migration companies charging upwards of five thousand US dollars to provide transportation services via boats and trucks across borders. Apart from the aforementioned reasons, there furthermore are social and cultural reasons behind migration; contrary to popular belief, in many West African nations, being able to migrate is seen as a privilege due to the money and effort needed to be spent thus, many people emigrate to raise the social class of their families and to be able to support them from foreign countries. Finally, the trend of migration occurring inside African states also highlights a general trend in which people leave landlocked countries in favor of coastal countries which have more mining resources providing more job opportunities. For instance, to date, the most common trade route is between Burkina Faso, a landlocked and resource-poor country to Cote d'Ivoire, which is known for its booming mining industry as well as access to ports. To summarize, it could be stated that migrant flow in West Africa is highly influenced by the inequality of opportunity between West African states and between the West African States and other geopolitical regions of the World whilst still being distinctly context-specific, meaning that the reasons behind migration are very different for different countries due to each country's own political and economic downturns.



## The Economic Effect of Mass Migrant Flows

The economic effects of migration in Western Africa can be categorized into two effects: the economic effect on countries with an outflux of immigrants and those with an influx of immigrant traffic. Foremost, for countries that lose more citizens than they intake migrants, migration flows towards foreign states directly damage and shatter the economic capabilities of the nation. As mentioned, many immigrants who leave their country are highly experienced or educated professionals, usually one of a few citizens with formal education in their respective areas. Acknowledging the fact that countries that let go of a considerable number of immigrants most likely already struggle with providing any services besides basic human rights, it can be stated migration flows directly strip the country of valuable manpower, which slows down development projects within the country and further decreases any effort that could be made to try to re-establish the economic state of the country; besides as people leave their country of origin many ordinary job titles get abandoned which correlates for a loss in the countries gross domestic product which the country could utilize to perform government services. Finally, countries that face immense migrant flow can also implement anti-migration policies, which are an additional cost to government bureaucracy.

For countries that receive migrants rather than lose citizens, the economic impacts of migration can vastly change according to what policy the country decides to implement; countries that usually allow migrants to flow into their country face an increase in both qualified and unqualified personnel, which boosts many privately owned sectors to flourish filling and creating jobs. However, as more jobs are taken, available opportunities for work are presented to citizens of the country, and the number of migrants decreases massively, causing high unemployment rates and encouraging many people to resort to crime or re-migration, setting additional economic damages along the way.

For countries that do not accept migrants to their country, migrant flows are a direct threat to the economy as the country is forced to fortify its borders to limit migrant flow as much as possible. The most distinguishable effort to re-enforce borders to limit migration can be seen in the European Union, which through FRONTEX (European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders) has allocated 6.9 billion euros to encourage the countries of Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia to help detain migrants



within their borders; a move aimed to extend the border of the European Union as far away from Europe as possible. The European Union has furthermore bought high-technology naval equipment to restrict the flow of immigrants and has established reintegration programs for refugees who decide to settle in their country of origin, all initiatives that have a huge setback on the European Union budget. Finally, migration causes economic impacts that can not be associated with any state. As migration rates increase, mediating factors that affect migration also gain monetary value. For example, as migration becomes more common, illegal migrant transport companies increase their operations, increasing their monetary gain.

### The Political Effects of Migrant Flows

Whether or not governments favor it, migration is becoming ever more widespread daily, affecting decision-making and governance within the country. For countries such as Nigeria and Burkina Faso, which actively lose hundreds of thousands of migrants per year, migration has become a central issue for the respective parliaments to solve since the loss of citizens and, thus, taxpayers directly send the country down a dangerous spiral into poverty and underdevelopment. In such countries, governments are forced to implement strict laws and regulations that may interfere with human rights to control the outflux of migrants.

For countries that receive migrants, an independent scenario can be observed. Countries that receive migrants, whether willing or unwilling, are bound to represent the effect of it on the governmental scale. Thus, state politics also change massively according to the migration flow to the country, creating parties with different viewpoints on the issue of migrant flows. It should be noticed that the sheer number of migrants can cause political turmoil and political instability within countries with high percentages of migrant populations, such as in Cote d'Ivoire, in which approximately ten percent of the population is formed by first-generation migrants. The rise of unwanted migration can also encourage extremist and excessively nationalist values, hurting global World initiatives. More importantly, migration significantly affects international politics more than intra-state politics. Migration stands as a uniting force to many countries, forcing to take the initiative against migration together, possibly forming new alliances between countries. The coalition formed by Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, and the European Union stands as a testament to the aforementioned fact with the Northern African countries working to prevent migration to Europe by conducting



raids and anti-migration procedures within their own borders.



## International Response to Migration Flow in West Africa

The international community faces a critical challenge in addressing the migration flow in West Africa, with all states acting differently in response to the ongoing crisis.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was probably the organization most supportive of the migration movement through their policies that encourage migration, notably the Free Movement of Persons Act that has been put in place since the late 1970s; the act allows any citizens of 15 out of the 16 country organization to be able to travel freely across borders. Noting that five out of eight migrants stay within West Africa while emigrating, it is safe to say that most emigrants are highly encouraged by the Free Movement Act.

In response to the massive migration crisis, the International Organization for Migration has extended its Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) policies, making it available and accessible for West African citizens. The European Union, on the other hand, has been the most defensive international actor on migration through West Africa, increasing border security through its FRONTEX initiative, providing an emergency trust fund for West African nations, and signing deals with North African Nations that promise monetary gain in return for increased migrant searches and border security.

The European Union's defensive policy can be largely understood as a big majority of migrants who do not migrate within the borders of West Africa aim to reach Europe, creating overcrowded migration routes along the Mediterranean Sea, which can lead to the death and injury of migrants. The Canary Islands migration route, which is considered among the less crowded routes, has seen a whopping 15.000 migrants passing through it; unfortunately, at least 424 migrants have died whilst en route. The European Union has also increased the sea patrol boats and coastal defense forces of Italy and Spain to reduce the illegal migrant flow into the country. However, the most controversial decision yet was the allocation of funds by the European Union to Morocco, Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia to use the countries as obstacles for migrants who wish to enter Europe by seizing control of illegal migrant traffic routes and re-deporting migrants back to their country. Finally, the African Union has emphasized the importance of treating "all migrants with dignity, wherever they come from, refrain from racialized hate speech that could bring people to harm, and prioritize their safety and human rights" condemning the North African Nation's deal with the European Union.





## Major Parties Involved

### *Nigeria*

Being the most crowded country in West Africa, Nigeria has lost over one and a half million people to migration. Recent surveys show that 7 out of 10 Nigerians are willing to leave their country if given the opportunity. Nigeria is considered one of the strongest economies of West Africa and is considered to have better living conditions for civilians compared to its neighbors; however, despite the positive aspects, increasing terror threat in the north of the country by the terrorist organization Boko Haram, expanding religious bias and conflict alongside with dispute over the oil industry leads many workers and experts to emigrate to neighboring countries. It should be noted that even though many leave the country, Nigeria is second regarding migrants received. Many migrate to Nigeria as the country is considered to have the most amount of active urban job opportunities.

### *Cote d'Ivoire*

Cote d'Ivoire has experienced the biggest migrant flow to the country and is the main destination for labor migrants from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Through the migration of workers, the capital city of the country, Abidjan, has witnessed rapid growth in population and economic output. However, as over two and a half million migrants have moved to the country, foreigners now form 9.7% of the population, which may cause future political instability and extremism in the near future.

### *Burkina Faso*

Burkina Faso has been hit the hardest by the migrant crisis, with over 1.3 million migrants leaving for the neighboring country of Cote d'Ivoire. The UNHCR has previously reported that constant attacks and persecution against civilians have forced the local population to relocate in search of labor jobs. The rise of militant Islamist groups in the region further increases the tendency for citizens to migrate out of the country.

### *Libya*

Libya was commonly utilized as a corridor to reach Europe by many migrants despite heavy internal conflict within Libya. In the previous decade, the European Union has aided Libya with more than 450 million euros in exchange for stopping the illegal migrant flow. As of currently, Libya is home to one of the largest refugee channels to Europe, namely the



“central mediterranean migrant route,” which around 200.000 Africans use each year to emigrate to Europe.

### *The European Union*

The European Union is among the organizations that have provided the most aid to the African Continent. The European Union has taken many initiatives to stop migrant flow to Europe, as mentioned in the report. Migrants from Africa reach Europe through the coasts of Italy and Spain and then utilize the visa-free policy of the European Union to reach North-West European nations such as Germany and France. The increase in the migrant population within Europe has also accelerated the rise of nationalism, especially in Italy.

### *The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)*

Ecowas consists of 15 out of the 16 Sahel states in Africa, even though currently, four members of the Union (Mali, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) have been suspended from the community, and actions of the community are criticized for being indecisive, ECOWAS throughout its history has established many difficult tasks within West Africa like the establishment of the West African Monetary Zone and the Free Movement of Persons Act.

### *The African Union*

The African Union was created in 1963 with the goal of encouraging unity and solidarity among its members while also protecting Member States' sovereignty and territorial integrity. The organization is one of Africa's most successful, having participated in numerous border wars and economic deals.

### *International Organization for Migration (IOM)*

IOM is a sub-branch of the UN that aims to tackle illegal migration and promote migration based on legal means. The IOM is the main UN body involved in migration within West Africa as they have, with the help of individual states or alliances, collected funding to establish voluntary return programs for migrants in foreign countries.



## Chronology of Important Events

Date	Description of Event
<b>1950-1975</b>	The main time period in which the decolonization of Africa occurred. In this period many African nations gained independence, leading to political instability and creating the need to address issues of irregular migration.
<b>May 1979</b>	ECOWAS adopts the Free Movement Protocol, allowing citizens of member states to move freely between them and engage in economic activity. This made migration within Africa much easier.
<b>2004</b>	FRONTEX, an agency of the European Union, was founded. This agency is responsible for border control within Europe and catching illegal refugees, especially those coming from Africa.

## Relevant International Documents

- [IOM Report on Irregular Migration from West Africa to the Maghreb and the European Union](#) International Organization for Migration (IOM), 10 Nov 2015; 1607-338X
- [World Food Programme on Addressing Irregular Migration through Principled Programmatic Approaches](#) World Food Program, 18 July 2023; IFPRI-WFP
- [IOM IRREGULAR MIGRATION TOWARDS EUROPE | WESTERN AFRICA](#) International Organization for Migration (IOM), Feb 06 2023
- [Valetta Summit Political Declaration](#) The European Union/African Union, 11-12 November 2015



- [AFDP Africa Economic Brief](#) African Development Bank Group, 2014; Volume 5 Issue 1
- [FIRST REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN WEST AFRICA](#) Economic Community of West African States, 26-28 April 2006; ST/HCR(063)/R336
- Assistance to refugees, returnees and displaced persons in Africa The United Nations, 22 Aug. 2008; A/63/321

## Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

### Attempts to Limit Migration in the 60's and 70's

During the 1960s and 1970s, as a result of increased migration associated with former colonies in Africa gaining independence, many African countries sought to limit immigration in an attempt to prevent an immigration crisis. Some went even further and orchestrated mass expulsions of minority ethnicities from their countries: examples include Senegal's expulsion of Guineans (1967), Chad expelling many Benin nationals, and Ivory Coast expelling Ghanaians from its territory (1968). Although such measures were meant to maintain stability in these countries, not only were they often violations of human rights, but they also increased international tension and contributed to the conflict seen in Africa today.

## Solution Alternatives

Alternative solutions to stop and prevent uncontrolled migrant flow from West Africa can be categorized into long-term and short-term fixes to the issue. As the number of migrants traveling through West Africa is great, alternatives could be provided to migrants, encouraging them to stay in their country of origin. Such encouragement could be done by distributing funds to people who consider migration and undertaking development projects aimed at keeping the educated workforce within the country, which would stop uncontrolled and illegal migrant flow in the near future. Furthermore, the number of summits and conferences that target foreign migrants returning to their country for work could be increased, potentially stabilizing migrant influx and outflux. Finally, media tools could showcase the life of migrants in Europe while accurately detailing the hardships a migrant



faces to falsify the wrong image of Europe believed by many migrant candidates.

## Useful Links

- <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/western-africa>
- <https://www.unhcr.org/africa/sites/afr/files/legacy-pdf/49e479ca0.pdf>
- [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-97322-3\\_1](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-97322-3_1)

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“West and Central Africa - Irregular Migration Routes to Europe - West African Atlantic Route (January - September 2023) - Canary Islands (Spain).” *ReliefWeb*, 14 Dec. 2023, reliefweb.int/report/canary-islands-spain/west-and-central-africa-irregular-migration-routes-europe-west-african-atlantic-route-january-september-2023.

*EU Action to Manage Irregular Arrivals in Spain - Consilium*,  
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“Migration Data in Western Africa.” *Migration Data Portal*,  
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