

International Migration and the African Union: Migration Dynamics and Challenges in Africa

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the differentiated dynamics of international migration within Africa and to evaluate the institutional and policy challenges faced by the African Union (AU) in managing these flows. The selection of this topic is grounded in the increasing significance of migration as a driver of political, social, and economic transformations across the continent, as well as its role in shaping Africa's regional integration agenda. The research problem centers on the AU's limited institutional capacity to formulate effective migration governance strategies in the face of growing irregular migration, forced displacement, and cross-border mobility. Methodologically, the study relies on a comparative analysis of AU policy frameworks, complemented by data from recent migration reports and academic studies. Findings indicate that while migration presents structural challenges, such as institutional fragmentation and lack of harmonized policies, it also provides opportunities for fostering regional cooperation, labor mobility, and socio-economic development. The study concludes that strengthening migration governance is essential for advancing the AU's integration objectives. The originality of this study lies in its focus on the dual character of migration, presented both as a challenge and a potential catalyst for regional integration, thus offering a nuanced contribution to the existing literature on African governance and international migration.

Keywords: International Migration, African Union, Migration Governance, Regional Integration, Institutional Challenges

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Uluslararası Göç ve Afrika Birliği: Afrika'da Göç Dinamikleri ve Zorluklar

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Öz: Bu çalışma; Afrika'daki uluslararası göçün farklılaşan dinamiklerini incelemeyi ve Afrika Birliği'nin (AB) bu göç akımlarını yönetme sürecinde karşılaştığı kurumsal ve politik zorlukları değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Konunun seçilme nedeni; göçün kıta genelinde siyasi, sosyal ve ekonomik dönüşümlerin önemli bir belirleyicisi hâline gelmesi ve aynı zamanda Afrika'nın bölgesel entegrasyon gündemini şekillendirmesidir. Araştırma problemi; düzensiz göç, zorunlu yer değiştirme ve sınır ötesi hareketlilik karşısında Afrika Birliği'nin etkili göç yönetim stratejilerini geliştirmekte yeterli kurumsal kapasiteye sahip olup olmadığıdır. Yöntem olarak Afrika Birliği'nin politika çerçevelerine yönelik karşılaştırmalı analiz yapılmış, ayrıca güncel göç raporları ve akademik çalışmaların verileri incelenmiştir. Bulgular; göçün kurumsal parçalanma ve uyumlu politika eksikliği gibi yapısal sorunlar doğurmasına rağmen bölgesel iş birliği, emek hareketliliği ve sosyo-ekonomik gelişim için fırsatlar sunduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışmanın sonucunda, etkili göç yönetişiminin Afrika Birliği'nin entegrasyon hedeflerini ilerletmede kritik olduğu gözlemlenmiştir. Bu araştırmanın alan yazınına özgün katkısı; göçü hem bir sorun hem de bölgesel entegrasyon için potansiyel bir katalizör olarak ele alarak uluslararası göç ve Afrika yönetişimi alanında yapılan çalışmalara yeni bir bakış açısı sunmasıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Uluslararası Göç, Afrika Birliği, Göç Yönetişimi, Bölgesel Entegrasyon, Kurumsal Zorluklar

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Introduction

International migration remains one of the most pressing and dynamic governance challenges confronting the African continent. The phenomenon of migration in Africa is shaped by diverse socio-economic, political, and environmental forces, even as the African Union (AU) increasingly seeks to craft coherent policies and frameworks to harness developmental potential of migration while mitigating its risks. The purpose of this introduction is to establish the rationale behind the chosen topic, present the underlying problem, and provide a succinct overview of the methodological approach, key findings, and anticipated contribution to the literature.

This study aims to critically analyze the intersection of international migration trends in Africa with the institutional frameworks of the African Union, focusing on how the AU addresses the continent's migration dynamics and the inherent challenges of governance. The topic is timely and relevant: migration is not merely a humanitarian or security issue, as it is inherently linked to regional integration, economic development, labor mobility, and political cohesion. For instance, migration within Africa overwhelmingly remains intra-continental, with over 70–80% of Sub-Saharan migration occurring between neighboring states, a fact that underscores the regional nature of migratory flows rather than transcontinental departures (Bertossi, Elouassif, & Tardis, 2021).

The African Union has made institutional efforts, such as adopting the Free Movement Protocol in 2018 and launching the Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA), to facilitate mobility; yet implementation has been uneven, reflecting institutional capacity gaps, political reluctance, and resource constraints (Manga, 2023; African Union, 2018a). Despite the foundational recognition that migration can fuel development by enabling labor circulation, diaspora engagement, and remittance flows, the African Union faces significant governance complexities that undermine the realization of migration as a lever for regional integration. Challenges include: low ratification of regional migration instruments; fragmented policy coordination across member states and Regional Economic Communities (RECs); and limited financial and logistical investment in migration management (Mudungwe, 2025).

Moreover, forced migration, driven by conflict, ecological degradation, and human trafficking, poses profound challenges. The Kampala Convention (the first binding continental treaty on internal displacement, 2009) has yet to be ratified or implemented effectively in many states, limiting its protective potential for internally displaced persons (IDPs) (UNHCR, 2019).

This study draws principally from the following sources: AU policy documents (such as the MPFA, Free Movement Protocol, Kampala Convention), scholarly articles, and institutional analyses. Key analytical documents include “Framing

a Study of African Migration Governance Reform” (New South Institute, 2023), which maps pathways to free movement; research on the AU’s institutional capacity in migration governance (Manga, 2023); comparative reviews of migration governance frameworks across continental and regional levels (Urso & Hakami, 2018); and critical reviews of AU refugee and displacement conventions (OAU Refugee Convention, 1969). The analysis includes: (a) a literature-driven mapping of migration dynamics in Africa; (b) a policy analysis of AU’s governance frameworks; (c) case-based reflections on institutional failures and successes (such as low ratification rates and limited enforcement mechanisms); and (d) the synthesis of insights to propose policy recommendations.

African migration patterns are varied and multifaceted. The “Age of Intra-African Migration” (1850–1960) exemplifies how continent-wide mobility remained pivotal, challenging the external narrative that portrays African migration as primarily transcontinental (de Haas & Frankema, 2025). Additionally, contemporary migration increasingly encompasses diverse typologies, including labor migration, refugee flows, and internal displacement, with internal and cross-border movement significantly outnumbering outward international migration (UN Academic Impact, 2024). However, environmental stressors, such as overfishing in Senegal driving migration to Europe, reveal that ecological pressures escalate irregular migration risks (Thompson, 2025).

The AU’s normative frameworks (Free Movement Protocol, MPFA, Refugee Convention, Kampala Convention) reflect aspirational goals but fall short in implementation. The slow ratification of key instruments underscores political disjointedness (New South Institute, 2023). Additionally, limited institutional capacity, both administrative and financial, impairs the AU’s ability to coordinate migration governance effectively across member states and RECs (Manga, 2023; Manga Edimo, 2020). Furthermore, governance mechanisms for displacement (Kampala Convention) suffer from unclear mandates and enforcement gaps (Addadzi-Koom, 2023).

Despite challenges, migration presents integration opportunities. Free movement was envisaged to spur intra-African trade, labor mobility, and human capital exchange (New South Institute, 2023). Institutional efforts, such as the AU Passport and diaspora engagement initiatives, exemplify forward-looking mechanisms to bind the continent together (UNCTAD, 2020). Ensuring refugee protection, leveraging Kampala Convention enforcement, and harmonizing REC–AU frameworks could contribute to deeper regional integration. This study adds original value in three ways: (1) by centering the AU, not merely states or international donors, in analyzing migration governance; (2) by integrating migration dynamics with institutional capacity in a single analytical frame; and (3) by synthesizing environmental, economic, and political drivers into a unified perspective on how migration can propel or hinder regional integration.

Following this introduction, the study is organized into three major sections (excluding conclusion): (1) Variegated Dynamics of Migration in Africa; mapping the forms, drivers, and geographic patterns of migration across the continent. (2) Challenges for the African Union in Managing International Migration; critically evaluating institutional frameworks, enforcement mechanisms, capacity limitations, and political resistance. (3) Prospects for Regional Integration through Migration Governance; highlighting policy pathways, existing efforts, and strategic recommendations to harness migration for integration.

Variegated Dynamics of Migration in Africa

Migration is commonly understood in relation to both time and geographical space. It refers to the relocation of individuals that entails a shift from their usual place of residence to another administrative area within the same country, or alternatively, the movement across political borders into another state over a given period of time (Tsegay, 2023). The former process is categorized as internal migration, while the latter constitutes international migration. Those who undertake such movements are referred to as migrants.

In this sense, international migration indicates a situation in which individuals leave their country of origin or habitual residence and remain abroad for a minimum duration of one year (Tsegay, 2023). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a migrant is defined as:

A person who departs from his or her habitual residence, either within national territory or across an international frontier, for a temporary or permanent period, and for diverse reasons. This designation encompasses several legally recognized categories, such as migrant workers; individuals whose mobility is defined in legal terms, for instance, smuggled migrants; as well as persons whose status or the form of their movement is not specifically regulated by international law, including international students (IOM, 2019).

Over the past several decades, global migration flows have expanded remarkably. Data from the World Migration Report (2019) shows that the number of international migrants reached 272 million worldwide, representing nearly a fourfold rise since the 1960s and accounting for approximately 3.5% of the global population. A substantial proportion of these individuals originated from the Global South. In the same year, over 21 million migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) resided in a different African country from their birthplace, while nearly 19 million had settled on other continents. These figures illustrate that migratory patterns emerging from this region exert profound impacts not only on countries of destination but also on states of origin. Migration has increasingly been recognized as a complex global phenomenon, intricately tied to social and

economic development, and it has thus become a central theme in academic discussions. Within the framework of examining the determinants of migration decisions, scholars have identified a wide range of contributing factors, spanning economic, political, social, and environmental domains. Economic drivers, particularly the availability of employment opportunities and income prospects, are among the most influential determinants of migration in Sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, social dimensions, including family connections, community networks, and cultural norms, play a pivotal role in shaping decisions to relocate. Political contexts, such as conflict, insecurity, and governance challenges, alongside environmental stressors like droughts and natural disasters, have also been emphasized as crucial influences. In most cases, the decision to migrate emerges from a convergence of these economic, political, sociocultural, demographic, and environmental pressures (Weldemariam et al. 2023, p. 2).

Drawing from both theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence, the intentions guiding migration decisions in Sub-Saharan Africa are shaped by a wide spectrum of influences stemming from both countries of origin and countries of destination. These determinants encompass personal, sociocultural, political, and economic conditions, alongside the impact of policy measures. As outlined within the referenced framework, the factors influencing return decisions can be broadly grouped into three categories: (1) structural factors, (2) personal and social factors, and (3) policy interventions. In general, it becomes clear that individual and social motives, particularly family-related considerations, emerge as the most significant drivers of migration in Sub-Saharan Africa. Within the realm of structural factors, unemployment-related issues constitute the most powerful triggers, followed closely by the pursuit of economic objectives, such as securing adequate savings and realizing favorable migration outcomes. Regarding policy-related influences, immigration regulations have been identified as highly relevant; in particular, restrictive migration policies often act as substantial barriers, curtailing the opportunities for re-migration. Moreover, the political climate and the socioeconomic conditions in the home country play an equally pivotal role in shaping migration decisions (Weldemariam et al. 2023, p. 5).

With respect to other dynamics of migration in Africa; persistent inequalities in wealth distribution, coupled with unchecked population growth and the resulting rapid, unregulated, and unplanned urbanization, as well as porous and poorly monitored borders, are recurring features across many African states. Collectively, these dynamics contribute significantly to the sharp rise in migration as individuals search for pathways out of poverty. Another critical driver of migration in Africa lies in the patrimonial view of governance, whereby natural and financial resources of the state are regarded as the exclusive property of political elites. This exploitation of public resources fosters an environment in which adherence to laws is largely disregarded, further motivating large numbers of citizens to seek opportunities beyond their national borders. In such contexts,

the use of institutional privileges for private ends is not only normalized but also valorized as a marker of power (Mazzitelli, 2007).

Flahaux and Haas argue that colonial legacies have left enduring imprints on contemporary migration trends both within Africa and from the continent outward (Flahaux & Haas, 2016). Alongside this historical backdrop, unemployment and the absence of viable opportunities remain decisive contributors to the magnitude of outward migration. Moreover, structural deficiencies such as the unequal distribution of wealth and resources, inadequate infrastructure, and pervasive corruption, often visible in the form of poor service delivery by public officials, security agents, customs officers, and political leaders, further propel individuals to seek improved living conditions abroad, particularly in environments perceived as more stable and equitable.

According to a UNHCR report, approximately 14 percent (or 2.4 million) of international migrants in Africa were categorized as refugees or individuals in refugee-like circumstances (UNHCR, 2011). Despite this significant proportion, however, the majority of African migrants move for reasons unrelated to conflict, with education and economic aspirations now standing out as the most prominent motivations. Flahaux and Haas corroborate this observation, noting that nearly 86 percent of international migration within Africa cannot be attributed primarily to conflict. While political instability, uncertainty, and violent conflict may indeed serve as push factors for emigration, they can equally act as reasons for individuals to remain—particularly when the imperative to safeguard one’s family outweighs the risks of displacement. Consequently, the broader political and security climate within a country plays a crucial role in shaping migratory behavior. In authoritarian contexts, migration is frequently curtailed as “political instability and military conflict push many countries to seal off their mutual borders” (Flahaux & Haas, 2016, p. 24).

To observe the structural dynamics of migration involving Africa, it is useful to examine long-term quantitative trends. Figure 1 provides a clear overview of international migrant stocks associated with the region between 1990 and 2020, distinguishing between migration within Africa, migration from Africa to other regions, and migration to Africa from abroad. This visual representation allows for an informed assessment of the dominant patterns shaping African migration.

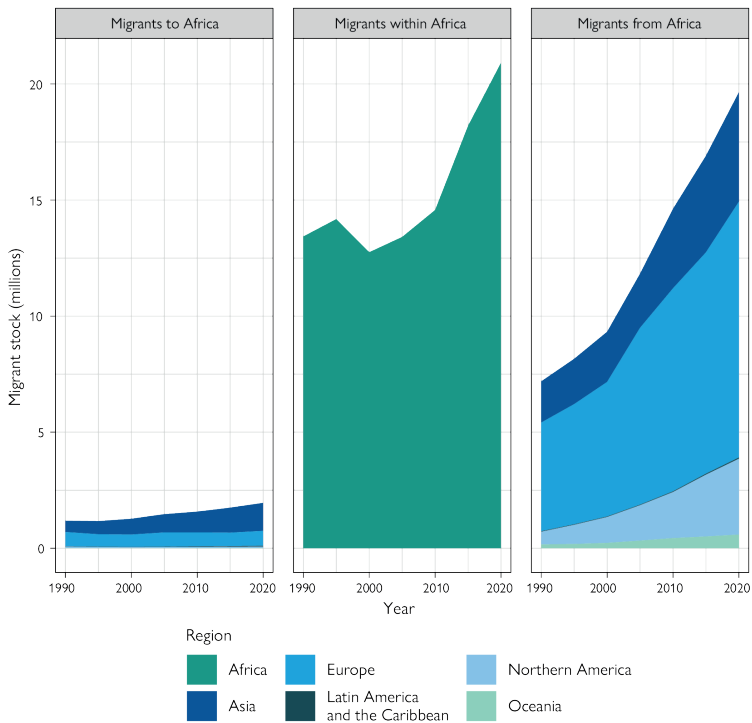


Figure 1: Migrants to within and from Africa, 1990-2020 (IOM, 2024, p. 57)

Figure 1 illustrates the dynamics of international migration related to Africa across three dimensions: migration to Africa, migration within Africa, and migration from Africa, covering the period 1990–2020. The data clearly demonstrate that intra-African mobility constitutes the predominant form of international migration in the region. As of 2020, approximately 21 million Africans were residing in another African country, indicating a substantial increase since 2015 and a stable upward trajectory since 1990.

In contrast, migration from Africa to other world regions has grown steadily but more moderately. The number of African-born persons living outside the region more than doubled between 1990 and 2020, with Europe hosting the largest share in 2020 (approximately 11 million), followed by Asia (nearly 5 million) and Northern America (around 3 million). This upward trend is especially pronounced after 2010.

By comparison, the stock of migrants originating from outside Africa but residing within the region remains relatively low and stable, remaining around 2 million between 2015 and 2020. Most of these migrants originate from Asia and Europe, underscoring Africa’s limited role as a destination region at the global level.

Overall, the figure highlights three consistent patterns: intra-regional migration is dominant, extra-regional emigration is rising, and immigration to Africa from other regions remains marginal.

In recent years, African migration has undergone a reconceptualization, diverging from earlier assumptions that it was primarily driven by poverty and violent conflict. Instead, contemporary scholarship emphasizes that African migration is not exceptional, nor does it differ fundamentally from migratory patterns observed elsewhere in the world (Flahaux & Haas, 2016).

Challenges for the African Union in Managing International Migration

Africa is currently experiencing significant developments in migratory flows, which occur predominantly within the continent. These movements also extend toward Europe, North America, and certain Middle Eastern countries, and may be voluntary, as a result of pull factors in destination regions, or involuntary/forced due to push factors in countries of origin. Migration may take place through legal or undocumented channels and involves diverse social categories, including refugees, internally displaced persons, nomadic populations seeking pasturelands, rural youth and women moving to urban areas in search of employment, job seekers, as well as an increasing number of qualified individuals, women, and children under the age of 18 (African Union, 2006).

These migratory flows unfold within an African context characterized by the limited institutional capacities of some states to address migration challenges both individually and collectively. Of the approximately 150 million migrants worldwide, more than 50 million are estimated to be Africans. As migration numbers continue to rise and are expected to persist in the foreseeable future, the management of migration has become one of the critical challenges for states in the new millennium. In recent years, migration has steadily risen to the top of continental and international political agendas, demanding urgent attention from governments regardless of their level of involvement or interest in migration management (African Union, 2006).

A comprehensive and balanced approach to migration is required, one that considers contemporary migration dynamics, emerging trends, and the interconnections between migration and broader economic, social, political, and humanitarian issues. A notable contemporary trend is the increasing number of women migrating in search of improved economic and employment opportunities.

The root causes of migration are multiple and complex. The push-pull framework provides insight into the various forces driving these movements. In Africa, adverse socioeconomic conditions, such as low wages, high unemployment rates, rural underdevelopment, poverty, and limited opportunities, fuel outward migration. These conditions often stem from the imbalance between rapid

population growth and available resources, inadequate technological capacity to exploit natural resources, and insufficient employment creation in countries of origin. Additionally, political and social factors, including poor governance, nepotism and corruption, human rights violations, political instability, environmental pressures, and conflict and civil unrest, also contribute to migration. The perceived or actual possibility of improved living standards, higher income, increased security, and better education and healthcare in destination countries further motivates mobility. Moreover, reduced migration costs, enhanced communication technologies, greater access to information, and the desire to reunite with family and social networks amplify push-pull dynamics (African Union, 2006).

While well-managed migration can generate substantial benefits for the development of countries of origin and provide significant advantages to destination states, poorly managed or unmanaged migration can have severe negative consequences for the welfare of both states and migrants, including potentially destabilizing effects on national and regional security.

International migration exerts deep social, cultural, political, and economic consequences on migrants as well as on both the countries of origin and destination. Within the Africa context, the following illustrate the main effects of international migration; Demographic: Large-scale migration raises the population in receiving regions while reducing it in sending regions, thereby producing adverse demographic consequences in both (Gebresellasie, 1993, p. 4). Economic: The economic outcomes of international migration are interpreted differently depending on ideological perspectives. For instance, Marxist thinkers argue that migration is ultimately destructive; they contend that it undermines self-sufficiency and fosters dependency and underdevelopment (Ogaden, 1984, p. 35; Jones, 1983, p. 278).

Social: Migration disrupts family structures, social networks, regional connections, and national bonds. When migration is forced, it often leads to suffering and emotional distress. Cultural: The cultural consequences of migration become especially evident when migrants speak different languages or follow religions and traditions that contrast with those of host societies. Frequently, they may be stigmatized, viewed with suspicion, or even perceived as threatening. Assimilation is rarely straightforward. Living in a new cultural environment means that migrants “must endure certain physical and social distinctions as foreigners, never fully grasping their surroundings and unable to adjust completely to the evolving cultural setting.” (Smith, 1948, p. 292). Impact on the Individual: Migration also leaves a strong mark on the migrant personally, shaping their self-confidence, creativity, motivation, morale, and personality. Relocating to a new place often cuts off many of the bonds that once tied individuals to their social groups and provided them with identity and status (Gebresellasie, 1993, p. 4).

The rights-based approach (RBA) to international migration is not without shortcomings. Researchers still face difficulties of consensus and operationalization regarding the RBA, as well as challenges in applying it within the African context. While principles of human rights such as equality and non-discrimination are not exclusive to developed nations, it is often assumed that human rights dialogue in Africa is less functional than in Europe, given its Western origins. Within international law, the RBA to migration is still regarded as rights enforceable only against states and their authorities. Yet, human rights violations occur at multiple levels. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), there are challenges in carrying out rights-based research focused on international migrants. Broadly, a rights-based approach to migration research must be connected with state institutions, non-governmental organizations, and private actors so that the perspectives of civil society can be reflected in SSA forums. Such an approach is also expected to shape the political agenda in SSA concerning a wide spectrum of migrant rights issues (Dinbabo & Carciotto, 2015, p. 169).

The most critical external impact of migration on Africa is the outflow of skilled labor to other regions. Each year, an estimated 70,000 trained professionals leave the continent, creating a severe shortage of expertise (Sima, 2024). As a result of this brain drain, Africa spends nearly US\$4 billion annually to hire roughly 100,000 foreign experts. This figure amounts to 35% of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Africa and is regarded as a major factor in further undermining already vulnerable health systems in low-income countries that send migrants (AfDB, 2011).

Remittances also have the potential to generate inflation in developing economies. When large sums of remittances are converted into domestic currency, the money supply increases. If such inflows are not directed into capital investment or productive activities, they are diverted into consumption spending, which accelerates inflationary pressures. The surge in remittances may create a spending effect that drives up the prices of non-tradable goods (Sachs & Larrain, 1993). In addition, migration can produce severe negative consequences through family separation. Research by Kufakurinani et al. (2014) documents various psychosocial difficulties faced by children and adolescents, described as “diaspora orphans,” in Zimbabwe, whose one or both parents reside abroad, resulting in delinquency and dysfunctional behavior among the youth.

According to AU meeting (2006); the loss of essential skills has intensified Africa’s already limited capacity to tackle development challenges. Many regions face shortages of qualified professionals as doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers, and managers continue to leave in search of better opportunities abroad. These large-scale outflows not only undermine national development but also strain state capacity to maintain border control and contribute to tensions among origin, transit, and destination countries.

Women migrants are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, especially in domestic service, where trafficking often occurs. Safeguarding their labor and human rights is thus critical in migration governance. Similarly, child trafficking remains a pressing concern in parts of Africa, requiring prevention efforts, victim support, training of authorities, and prosecution of traffickers. Migration also negatively affects older populations, whose displacement compromises health and economic security. To address these challenges, coordinated regional policies are needed, with African states ensuring ownership of migration processes through stronger capacity-building at national, regional, and continental levels (AU Meeting, 2006, p. 4-7).

For African countries to fully benefit from migration, several challenges must be prioritized. Strategies should include developing frameworks for circular migration and considering mechanisms such as a potential “brain tax” on destination countries. Migration dynamics should also be incorporated into international trade negotiations, particularly within the WTO’s Doha Round Mode 4 discussions. Beyond physical return, greater emphasis should be placed on virtual return, enabling skilled migrants to contribute knowledge and expertise without necessarily relocating. Remittances must be critically examined in terms of how they can actively support national development, as their positive impact is not automatic. In addition, policies such as dual citizenship can encourage diaspora engagement and investment in home-country development, provided that migration issues are integrated into Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and mainstream development policies. Ultimately, the responsibility lies with African states to design sustainable and regionally relevant migration solutions, rather than relying primarily on Northern countries, international organizations, or the growing influence of emerging Asian powers. (Adepoju et al., 2008, p. 11).

The main challenge is developing an international framework to manage migration through comprehensive policies. With increasing globalization, wealthy countries facilitate the flow of capital, goods, and services, while restricting the movement of labor from poorer countries. Facing rising domestic unemployment, these countries become more selective, primarily favoring skilled migrants (UN, 2005; Farrant et al., 2006). Such restrictions on regular migration lead to an increase in irregular migration (Adepoju et al., 2008, p. 25-26).

At present, Africa counts eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs), with several states holding membership in more than one, creating what Lucas (2015, p. 1475) aptly described as a “confusing array of overlapping regional economic communities.” Among these, ECOWAS, COMESA, SADC, and the African Union stand out as the most significant regional bodies for the governance of migration. They not only cover the majority of Sub-Saharan Africa but also include the continent’s largest and most densely populated nations, key receiving, sending, and transit countries, as well as regions where migration is especially dynamic (Adepoju, 2018, p. 97).

Although the potential of intra-African migration for boosting economic growth and development has been increasingly acknowledged in national and regional policy agendas, much of the debate is still overshadowed by negative concerns. These range from border tensions that threaten peace and stability, to refugee and trafficking issues, and the persistent problem of brain drain. In response, the AU has played a leading role in establishing continental and regional policy frameworks. Its first Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA) was launched in 2006, later reviewed in 2016, which resulted in an updated version and a corresponding plan of action. The current MPFA and its Action Plan (2018–2030) are designed to provide guidance for both member states and RECs, aligning migration management with the AU's strategic goals, Agenda 2063, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and global migration governance norms (European Union (EU), 2020, p. 31-33).

By contrast, the European Union has placed stronger emphasis on deepening economic ties and partnerships with Africa, with migration to Europe and job creation as key priorities. Much of this agenda has been backed through significant funding from instruments such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF). A closer look at the AU's present migration policies reveals only a partial approach to the complex set of structures shaping intra-African mobility. On the one hand, there are clear efforts to address smuggling routes, promote cooperation among sending, transit, and receiving states, reduce remittance transfer costs, and strengthen the self-reliance of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). On the other hand, most AU policy measures remain non-binding, making it difficult to monitor progress and assess continental-level implementation effectively (European Union (EU), 2020, p. 31-33).

The African Union's migration-related frameworks and policy documents reveal several fundamental shortcomings, which span institutional, conceptual, and political dimensions. A central weakness lies in the absence of a specific institutional mechanism to oversee or monitor the implementation of the African Common Position and the Migration Policy Framework. In practical terms, this means AU member states cannot be held accountable for compliance, and even those that are genuinely committed to applying these frameworks lack the necessary direction and technical support from the AU itself. Consequently, one of the most urgent priorities is the creation of a formal institutional body that could ensure both accountability and the provision of coherent guidance, thereby making it possible to transform the AU's stated ambitions into tangible outcomes (Achiume & Landau, 2015, p. 3).

Both the African Common Position and the Migration Policy Framework repeatedly stress the importance of a human rights perspective in order to advance social integration and safeguard the welfare of migrants and their host communities. Yet, despite these rhetorical commitments, they fall short of offering concrete, evidence-based policy recommendations that would effectively enable member states to operationalise human rights in practice. For instance, while civic

and human rights education can indeed contribute to fostering social cohesion, such educational initiatives are insufficient to counteract the deeper, structural socio-economic and political drivers that give rise to xenophobic practices and discrimination (Achiume, 2014, pp. 323, 359–360).

This gap between normative principles and practical mechanisms is not confined to the AU context alone. A similar problem is evident at the global level, where international human rights instruments and policymakers often struggle to bridge the divide between abstract human rights norms and the concrete policy tools necessary for their realisation (Achiume & Landau, 2015, p. 3).

Prospects for Regional Integration through Migration Governance

Although Agenda 2063 identifies regional integration as one of Africa's major aspirations, this integration must necessarily be both economic and social. At the heart of social integration lies the cohesion of African societies across the continent, reflected in shared values, a collective sense of belonging, interconnection, and solidarity among communities of diverse national backgrounds. However, in countries that host migrants, the perception that outsiders exploit the labor market and welfare systems without making adequate contributions, coupled with competition over scarce resources, often shapes public attitudes and policy responses. Such dynamics can, in turn, fuel xenophobic sentiments (Mudungwe, 2014). Consequently, it may be argued that xenophobia, to some degree, constitutes an obstacle to the realization of Africa's vision of a united and integrated continent.

Due to the weakness of migration governance structures across Africa, the continent has not been able to fully leverage the developmental benefits that migration could offer. At the same time, Africa is equally ill-prepared to reduce, as much as possible, the adverse effects of migration on development. Although African states are conscious of the migration challenges confronting them, there remains a significant gap between their declared commitments and their actual technical capacity to manage migration effectively (AUC, 2017). In light of this, it becomes essential to examine the underlying reasons why only a limited number of African countries have invested in strengthening their migration governance systems.

The African Union (AU), a continental body made up of 54 Member States, was created with the purpose of fostering political and socio-economic integration while safeguarding peace and security across Africa. Within the larger strategic partnership between Africa and the European Union, the AU has signed several inter-regional agreements, including the Joint Africa-EU Declaration on Migration and Development, the Africa-EU Strategic Partnership on Migration, Mobility and Employment (MME), and the Ouagadougou Action Plan to combat Trafficking in Human Beings, with particular focus on Women and Children (Nita, 2013, p. 9-10).

From the AU's perspective, the free circulation of persons constitutes a vital element of a prospective continental common market. This principle is reinforced by the Abuja Treaty (1991), which sets forth as one of its objectives "the progressive elimination, among Member States, of barriers to the free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital, as well as the right of residence and establishment" (Abuja Treaty, Art. 4(2i)). To gradually realize freedom of movement across the continent, Member States are expected to enact corresponding legal frameworks, whether at the unilateral, bilateral, or regional level. The AU has consistently maintained that continental free movement can only be attained through the establishment of sub-regional free movement regimes. Accordingly, the primary responsibility rests with the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), which are tasked with enabling intra-regional mobility of their populations by introducing regional migration instruments or reinforcing those already in place. The AU's function in this process is limited to coordination and supervision, lacking the power to enforce implementation.

Presently, eight RECs are officially recognized as the building blocks of the African Economic Community: the Community of Sahel Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) (Nita, 2013, p. 9-10).

In Africa, regional migration governance has developed in heterogeneous formats, reflecting varying degrees of institutionalization and divergent policy priorities. Broadly, three main formats can be distinguished (Angenendt & Koch, 2017, p. 17). The first has evolved in parallel with regional economic and trade integration policies within formal regional organizations. Unsurprisingly, in many cases, the promotion of freedom of movement constitutes the core of migration-related debates, although additional themes are frequently incorporated into the policy agenda. The second format consists of informal dialogue mechanisms, notably the so-called Regional Consultative Processes (RCPs), which have emerged at regional or sub-regional levels and are often facilitated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). These processes tend to prioritize security-related issues (Lavenex et al., 2016, p. 457), reflecting a more pragmatic rather than developmental orientation.

The third format involves transregional cooperation dialogues and programs that bring together representatives from at least two different regions of origin and destination. These interactions, such as the EU–Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative ("Khartoum Process") and its West African counterpart, the "Rabat Process," convene more or less regularly to deliberate on migration governance, though they remain primarily focused on security matters, with only a limited

role in the formulation of migration programs. Notably, all three formats in Africa are overwhelmingly state- or government-driven, with minimal involvement of informal, non-state forms of regional migration-related exchange. The latter, however, remain significant and are exemplified by historical trade routes and contemporary transnational migrant networks (Hartmann, 2016, p. 6; Ngunyi & Oucho, 2013, p. 137).

Within these frameworks, three strategic narratives or overarching objectives of regional migration governance can be identified (Knoll & de Weijer, 2016, p. 7; Lavenex et al., 2016, p. 4). The first concerns the enhancement of opportunities and livelihoods, emphasizing regional free movement, deeper economic integration, and the maximization of the developmental potential of remittances, whether economic, social, or cultural, for both individuals and countries of origin. It also stresses the importance of facilitating the integration of migrants within host communities (Knoll & de Weijer, 2016, p. 14). The second narrative adopts a rights-based perspective, which highlights the protection needs of migrants and forcibly displaced populations while underscoring their long-term economic and social integration into host societies (Lavenex et al., 2016). The third narrative centers on security and control, with particular emphasis on addressing irregular migration, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking. This approach reflects the increasing securitization of migration governance at the regional and transregional levels (Dick & Schraven, 2018, p. 6-7).

There exist considerable opportunities to enhance both migration governance and regional integration across Africa. Among the effective practices are the improvement of labour migration governance through the Joint Labour Migration Programme (JLMP), along with the signing of bilateral labour agreements and memoranda of understanding between African countries of origin and their destination counterparts. The JLMP, adopted in January 2015 by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, was designed with an overarching aim of reinforcing effective governance and regulation of labour migration and mobility in Africa through an inclusive framework. This is pursued through two central objectives: first, strengthening the governance and regulation of labour migration and mobility; and second, supporting the practical implementation of standards and policies on labour migration (IOM, 2024, p. 55-56).

Since its inception in 2015, several notable results have been achieved. These include the release of the second report on labour migration statistics in Africa, the preparation of multiple strategic briefs analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on African migrant workers, the organization of numerous capacity-building workshops targeting workers, employers, and national labour statistics officials, in addition to various other initiatives aimed at reinforcing institutional capacity for labour migration governance on the continent (AU et al., 2020).

Progress has also been marked by the rapid advancement of the Global Compact for Migration and regional trade cooperation through the AfCFTA, both showing promising outcomes. Moreover, the longer-standing RCPs, facilitated by the RECs, have broadened stakeholder participation in migration policy formulation and governance-related decisions. Nevertheless, there remains an urgent necessity for African Union Member States to accelerate the enforcement of the African Union Free Movement Protocol. Should this protocol be fully realized, its benefits would include a rise in trade and tourism, the improved transfer of knowledge in science, technology, education, and research, as well as infrastructure development. By enabling migrants to permanently integrate into host communities, they would also contribute their expertise and skills. In addition, the enforcement of the protocol would expedite the continent's transformation from merely a free trade area into a fully functioning common market. Ultimately, Africa already possesses substantial policy tools and initiatives to underpin both regional integration and the governance of migration (IOM, 2024, p. 55-56).

Conclusion

The analysis of international migration and the African Union's role in managing migration dynamics and challenges reveals a multidimensional reality that cannot be reduced to simplistic narratives of crisis or opportunity. Instead, the study demonstrates that migration in Africa is simultaneously a structural challenge and a developmental opportunity that tests the institutional capacity of the African Union (AU) and its member states. The overarching conclusion is that migration governance in Africa remains characterized by fragility, fragmentation, and uneven implementation, yet it also presents a pathway for deeper regional integration if the AU can strengthen its institutional frameworks, harmonize national approaches, and leverage migration as a resource for continental development. The findings confirm that while migration has always been a defining feature of Africa's socio-economic and political landscape, the continent's evolving migration governance structures are still struggling to keep pace with its complexity and scale.

One of the most striking findings of this study is that intra-African migration remains the dominant pattern, with 70–80% of African migrants moving within the continent rather than beyond it (Bertossi, Elouassif, & Tardis, 2021). This reality challenges Eurocentric perceptions that frame African migration primarily in terms of irregular flows to Europe, and instead underlines the internal and regional nature of mobility. The fact that African migration is embedded in social networks, labor markets, and cultural histories means that governance frameworks must be designed with regional specificity, recognizing that cross-border mobility within Africa is both a necessity and a historical norm (de Haas & Frankema, 2025). However, the AU's policy frameworks often adopt a top-down institutional logic that fails to capture the bottom-up realities of mobility across

porous borders, particularly in West and East Africa where informal economies drive much of the cross-border movement.

The study highlights that forced displacement is a defining challenge that exposes the AU's limited protective capacity. Africa remains home to more than one-third of the world's displaced population, with internally displaced persons (IDPs) far outnumbering refugees (UNHCR, 2019). The Kampala Convention, adopted in 2009, was the first binding regional treaty on internal displacement, yet its effectiveness has been undercut by weak ratification, poor implementation, and lack of funding. In countries like South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nigeria, internal displacement continues to overwhelm local and national capacities, leaving the AU in a reactive rather than proactive role (Addadzi-Koom, 2023). This disconnect between normative ambition and practical enforcement underscores the structural limitations of the AU as a supranational institution operating in a context of fragile states and contested sovereignties.

At the same time, migration governance has revealed itself as a potential engine for regional integration if strategically harnessed. The AU's vision of free movement and continental citizenship reflects an effort to recast migration as a driver of labor mobility, intra-African trade, and diaspora engagement (UNCTAD, 2020). Remittance flows, which have grown steadily, provide not only vital household income but also potential capital for development projects. For example, in 2022 remittances to Sub-Saharan Africa surpassed USD 53 billion, outstripping official development assistance in several countries (World Bank, 2023). If institutionalized through diaspora bonds, migrant investment schemes, and portable social security arrangements, migration could become a structural asset for Africa's development agenda. The AU Passport initiative, though still limited in distribution, symbolizes a bold attempt to operationalize pan-African mobility, representing the possibility of deepening continental integration through the free circulation of people alongside goods and capital.

Nevertheless, the study concludes that without addressing structural governance weaknesses, the potential of migration will remain under-realized. These weaknesses include: inadequate funding of AU migration initiatives, over-reliance on donor-driven agendas, lack of technical expertise, and absence of robust monitoring mechanisms. The AU has often depended on external actors such as the European Union to finance its migration programs, creating tensions between Africa's regional priorities and external migration management agendas (Manga Edimo, 2020). This dependency risks subordinating African migration governance to European security concerns, particularly around irregular migration, border controls, and return agreements, thereby diluting the developmental vision articulated in the MPFA. Strengthening the AU's fiscal autonomy, enhancing member states' contributions, and establishing independent monitoring institutions are thus essential to realigning migration governance with Africa's own integration objectives.

The overall conclusion is that without stronger institutions, harmonized policies, and member state commitment, the governance of migration will remain reactive, donor-driven, and fragmented, perpetuating cycles of irregularity and vulnerability. Yet with sustained investment, genuine political will, and integration of migration into broader development and security strategies, migration could serve as the backbone of Africa's continental project. Ultimately, the AU's ability to manage migration effectively will determine whether it can evolve into a genuinely supranational body capable of steering Africa toward unity, development, and resilience in the face of twenty-first-century challenges.

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