

Critical migration policy narratives from West Africa

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Abstract

Although there are contesting perspectives on migration, there is little understanding of how narratives of various policy actors shape migration governance in West Africa. This paper relies on a desk-review and qualitative data to examine the narratives that shape migration policy formulation and outcomes in West Africa. The findings indicate that while various stakeholders have been championing divergent narratives on migration, programmes that have been adopted by West African countries to manage migration have largely been based on the narratives of political elite and international development partners, although there were situations where these narratives were not supported by any strong evidence. While early views on the impacts of international migration portrayed it as a threat to socio-economic development, more recent narratives have recognized the potential of migration to contribute to socio-economic transformation. Consequently, various West African countries are developing policies to harness the benefits of immigration, emigration and return migration for socio-economic development.

INTRODUCTION

While human mobility has always been an integral part of livelihoods in West Africa (Adepoju, 2005), the sub-region has become the focus of policy discussions on migration governance in recent years (Awumbila et al., 2014). The increased interest of the international community in migration issues in West Africa is partly due to the high level of labour migration and forced displacement being witnessed in the sub-region (Teye et al., 2019;

UNHCR, 2020). Although media images and political narratives tend to suggest that there is mass migration from West Africa to Europe, a majority (i.e. 72%) of migrants from West Africa have been migrating intra-regionally (UNDESA, 2018).

Human mobility in West Africa is facilitated by the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment (i.e. free movement protocol), which was adopted in 1979 by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to promote regional integration and economic development through free movement of labour and services (Awumbila et al., 2014). The free movement protocol is expected to grant ECOWAS nationals the right of entry, right of residence and right of establishment within the sub-region. ECOWAS citizens currently enjoy right of entry within the sub-region, although implementation of the right of residence and right of establishment aspects of the free movement protocol has been negatively affected by anti-migrant sentiments in some ECOWAS countries (Teye et al., 2019; Yeboah et al., 2021).

Outside Africa, Europe is the most popular destination of West African migrants. However, restrictive migration policies in European countries and availability of employment opportunities in some Asian countries have resulted in increased migration flows to the Gulf region, in recent years (Deshingkar et al., 2019). As West Africa is a major source of irregular migrants and refugees arriving in European countries (IOM, 2018), the European Commission has been engaging West African governments to develop regional frameworks and national policies for managing migration (Knoll & Weijer, 2016). Although it is generally acknowledged that a deeper understanding of the interests and perspectives of various migration policy actors can help identify potential areas of engagement with different stakeholders (Dimitriadis et al., 2020), there is little understanding of the emergence and effects of contesting narratives on migration governance in West Africa.

Against this background, this paper examines the competing interests and narratives that have been shaping international migration governance in West Africa. In so doing, the paper critically examines how major narratives have influenced the development of programmes aimed at protecting migrants and harnessing the benefits of migration. More specifically, the paper addresses the following questions: What are the key narratives and counter narratives shaping migration policies and decision-making processes of potential migrants in West Africa? What factors have contributed to the emergence of various narratives on international migration?

The paper argues that while there are contesting views on migration, the migration policies and programmes implemented in West African countries were largely based on narratives of political elites and international development partners, although some of these narratives were not supported by empirical evidence. While migration was, historically, seen as a developmental challenge, its potential to contribute to socio-economic development is now increasingly acknowledged. The paper demonstrates that some West African governments are now developing policies to harness the benefits of emigration, immigration and return migration for socio-economic development.

The paper is divided into four sections. The next section presents the theoretical perspectives used to frame the key arguments. It also presents the research methodology. The third section discusses key migration policy narratives and how they have influenced policy development. The last section presents the main conclusions and policy implications of the findings.

CONCEPTUALISING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NARRATIVES AND MIGRATION POLICY

The main theoretical perspective employed to discuss the empirical findings of this paper is the *Narrative-Actor-Politics Framework* (Keeley & Scoones, 2003), which posits that public policy processes are shaped by an interaction of three factors, namely narratives and discourses, actors and networks, and politics and interests (IDS, 2006: 4). Although “narrative” is a contested concept, it is generally used to refer to “a set of ideas that are developed to make sense of what is happening in the world and to justify our response” (Crawley & McMahon, 2016: 8).

Narratives tend to be popularised by a section of the media and advocacy groups to discuss the causes of social problems and provide interventions for dealing with them. While there are usually competing narratives and counter narratives on any issue, stated public policies tend to reflect narratives that are in line with the interests of the powerful policy actors (IDS, 2006). “Actors and networks” entail the coalitions of interest groups that facilitate the sharing of ideas. The “politics and interests” dimension of the framework posits that the policy process is not value free, as the political context is influenced by the interests of political elite (Keeley & Scoones, 2003).

In analysing the effects of policy narratives on migration, a distinction can be made between “grand or meta-narratives” and “micro-narratives”. The grand narratives are dominant discourses which are relied upon by policymakers to develop migration policies. Micro narratives, on the other hand, emerge from migrants and members of the host communities. While micro narratives hardly influence stated policies, they actually determine policy outcomes and migration experiences for both migrants and host communities (Dimitriadis et al., 2020).

Research methodology

The data used to write this paper were obtained through a combination of desk-review and interviews conducted with different stakeholders. The documents reviewed include academic publications, national migration policies of some ECOWAS countries, ECOWAS free movement protocol and reports on high-level policy discussions between the European Union and African Union leaders. As a way of keeping the selection of sources as broad as possible, a systematic search of different databases, namely SCOPUS and University of Ghana online Balme Library database, was carried out. Additionally, Google and JSTOR search engines were used to select relevant papers for assessment. Some of the policy documents reviewed were also based on recommendations by government officials.

The paper also relied on qualitative data generated as part of previous research projects, including the “Migration and Development (MADE) in West Africa project” (2016–2019) and the “Migration Decision-Making Processes study” (2018–2019). The MADE research involved interviewing of ECOWAS immigrants and public officials responsible for managing migration in Ghana and Sierra Leone. In all, 28 persons in Sierra Leone and 35 respondents in Ghana were interviewed on various topics, including perceptions of migration, implementation of the ECOWAS free movement protocol and rights of migrants. As part of the “Migration Decision-Making processes study”, 17 current migrants living in Europe and North America were interviewed virtually on their migration decision-making processes and experiences. Additionally, 18 return migrants and 11 aspiring migrants were interviewed in Accra on their migration decision-making processes. The paper also benefited from informal interviews conducted with West African government officials during a high-level meeting of African parliamentarians and government officials in Niamey, Niger in September 2018. During the meeting, the author had informal oral interviews with 8 West African government officials on their perceptions of migration governance. In all the interviews described above, the public officials were purposively selected based on their specific roles in migration governance. The different categories of migrants were also selected through snowball sampling technique. In line with ethical guidelines on anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper.

INFLUENCE OF KEY NARRATIVES ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION POLICIES IN WEST AFRICA

An analysis of formal declarations and migration policies indicates that various narratives on migration exist simultaneously in West Africa. Consistent with the findings of Knoll and de Weijer (2016), this paper identified four major themes within which there are competing narratives by different actors involved in the governance

of international migration in West Africa. While the first narrative portrays migration as a threat to socio-economic development, the second one presents migration as an effective strategy for promoting socio-economic development. The third narrative suggests that migration is largely caused by poverty, while the fourth narrative views migration as a humanitarian issue. In this section, the emergence and effects of these narratives are discussed.

International migration as a threat to socio-economic development

One of the earliest narratives on population mobility, in West Africa, portrays migration (both immigration and emigration) as a threat to socio-economic development. With reference to immigration, strong “anti-migrants” narratives which suggested that immigrants were a threat to economic development emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s when many West African countries gained independence (Adepoju, 2002). These narratives, which were initially championed by traders of host countries, resulted in the development of national legislative instruments to restrict intra-regional migration. As the economic situation worsened further, some countries resorted to expulsion of West African immigrants. For instance, Ivory Coast expelled nationals of Benin and Togo in 1958. It again expelled Beninese in 1964 and Ghanaians in 1968. Senegal expelled Guineans in 1967 (Adepoju, 2005:4). Ghana also expelled several ECOWAS nationals in 1969 (Awumbila et al., 2014). The largest case of mass expulsion took place in Nigeria in 1983 and 1985 when nationals of several ECOWAS member states were expelled from Nigeria (Adepoju, 2005).

Despite the adoption of the ECOWAS free movement protocol, which is generally seen as a regional good practice of free movement framework (Yeboah et al., 2021), ECOWAS citizens still face a number of challenges associated with working in host countries. For instance, non-nationals are normally not legally permitted to work in the civil, judicial, and security services in some ECOWAS countries, such as Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria (Teye & Asima, 2017; Teye et al., 2019). Certain economic sectors of some of the Anglophone countries, in particular, are also reserved for only nationals. Ghana's Investment Promotion Act 2013 (Act 865), for instance, precludes all migrants, including ECOWAS nationals, from engaging in “low capital” businesses, such as petty trading, operation of taxis, barber shops, beauty salons and selling of sachet water (Teye et al., 2019). Similarly, the Nigeria Immigration Act of 2015 tends to restrict immigrants from engaging in certain economic activities which are reserved for people with low investment capital (Yeboah et al., 2021). Anti-immigrant sentiments are also widespread in public discussions in some West African countries (Awumbila et al., 2014). Similar to the situation in some European countries (Dimitriadis et al., 2020), immigrants are still sometimes portrayed as “others”, “criminals” or “a threat to economic development” in some West African countries. During the MADE West Africa study in Ghana and Sierra Leone, for instance, a number of public officials interviewed blamed immigrants for the economic challenges being experienced in their respective countries. This is highlighted in the statement below, which was made by a male public official in Sierra Leone:

Although we have ratified the ECOWAS protocol, we can't sit down for immigrants to take over all the jobs in our country... Migrants are also involved in human trafficking, robberies and other serious crimes.

(RAAT, Immigration Department, Sierra Leone, 25 September 2017)

Some of the state officials from West African countries interviewed during the African parliamentarians and government officials meeting in Niamey in September 2018 similarly complained about how immigrants compete with nationals for jobs in the popular host countries. However, counter narratives from immigrants tend to challenge the narratives of the host communities, as shown in the statement below by a Nigerian businessman who was interviewed in Sierra Leone as part of the MADE West Africa study:

The claim that migrants are responsible for unemployment is not true because we rather came here to create these same jobs, and we employ their people. The government of Sierra Leone can solve the unemployment problem by encouraging more migrants to come here and invest.

(MUKU, Nigerian Trader, 14 October, 2017)

The two statements above demonstrate how narratives and counter narratives are produced by different actors to justify alternative solutions. In recent years, anti-immigrant sentiments, in West Africa, are also sometimes directed towards low-skilled Asian immigrants, who are “illegally” engaging in economic activities in the extractive and informal sectors in West Africa. For instance, in 2013, Ghanaian security forces deported about 4500 Chinese migrants who were said to be “illegally” engaging in artisanal gold mining in the country (Botchwey et al., 2019).

On the other hand, narratives on the relationship between emigration and development tend to suggest that the exodus of highly skilled migrants results in brain drain, which negatively affects socio-economic development in West Africa. In many West African countries, the brain drain narrative emerged in the 1960s when large numbers of teachers and other highly skilled professionals emigrated to economically prosperous neighbouring countries, such as Nigeria and Ghana, for greener pastures. The brain drain narrative gained momentum from the 1970s to early 2000s when African governments, civil society groups and development agencies raised concerns over the effects of massive emigration of health professionals on the health systems in Africa (Teye et al., 2015). Such narratives were supported by empirical data. For instance, a study by Anarfi and colleagues showed that about 56% of doctors and 24% of nurses trained in Ghana were working in developed countries, particularly in Europe and North America (Anarfi & Agyei, 2010). While brain drain narratives portrayed highly skilled professionals who migrated to developed countries as “unpatriotic citizens” (Mangala, 2017), counter narratives by these emigrants tend to justify such movements as necessary for enhancing livelihoods. During the Migration Decision-Making Processes study, for instance, a Ghanaian who migrated as a male nurse to the United States of America in 1991, but he is now a doctor, captured this counter narrative in the statement below:

Some people think that those of us who left Ghana were unpatriotic, but migration has enabled me to help others in Ghana. During the time I was working in Ghana [1984–1991], my family was very poor. Since coming to the US, I have been sending money to my family members.... Even though I was only trained as a nurse in Ghana, I have been able to undertake further studies and I am now a medical doctor. This is good for Ghana, since I can go back to work there.

(NYUMU, Male Ghanaian migrant in USA, 27 March 2019)

During the same study, a Ghanaian female teacher in Canada explained how she migrated to move out of economic challenges in Ghana:

I was a teacher in Ghana for close to 6 years after completing University. I moved to Canada in 2001 because of economic challenges in Ghana. I felt bad I had to leave my students because I was the only Physics teacher [in that school] but I was also thinking of my future...

(LUTY, Female Ghanaian teacher in Canada, 1 May 2019)

As shown in the above statements, migration decisions of migrants are shaped by micro narratives which suggest that migration can help promote the welfare of migrants and their families.

To deal with brain drain in sectors facing shortage of labour, governments of some West African countries have implemented various strategies, including the bonding of professionals (e.g. teachers and health workers) to work for some years before being allowed to migrate as well as periodic upward adjustment of salaries.

Some West African governments have also been relying on the World Health Organisation (WHO) to influence developed countries to reduce the active recruitment of health professionals from poor countries (Anarfi et al., 2010). These strategies have collectively worked to reduce brain drain from the health sector in some countries, such as Nigeria and Ghana (Teye et al., 2015). However, the health systems of many other West African countries, such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Mali, are still seriously affected by brain drain. Meanwhile, even the countries that no longer have serious brain drain problems have sections in their National Migration Policies that seek to prevent highly-skilled people from leaving. Section 3.2.3 of the National Migration Policy of Nigeria, for instance, noted:

The challenge before the Nigerian government, as with many African governments, is to reverse brain drain, or at the very least mitigate its effects on social and economic development.

(Federal Government of Nigeria, 2015: 29)

The National Migration and National Labour Migration Policies of Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone have also identified brain drain as a challenge and outlined strategies to deal with it and related developmental challenges of emigration (see ICMPD, 2016). Although brain drain occurs in various sectors, it is brain drain in the health sector that has continued to be seen a serious developmental challenge in West Africa.

Migration as a strategy for promoting sustainable development and improving livelihoods

As noted already, although West African countries have promoted free movement as part of efforts to promote regional integration and economic transformation since the 1970s, there have been concerns over brain drain and the influx of migrants. The last decade, however, witnessed increased realisation that migration can contribute to growth and socioeconomic transformation of both sending and host countries (Mangala, 2017). As there is still some level of scepticism about the developmental potential of immigration, only a few programmes have been developed to facilitate the transfer skills by high-skilled immigrants in West Africa. For instance, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Sierra Leone recently adopted the Intra-African Talent Mobility partnership programme which seeks to establish "Schengen" type mechanisms to facilitate skills transfer and economic integration (Teye & Asima, 2017). On the other hand, the dominant narratives on emigration have dramatically changed from it being portrayed as "a threat to socio-economic development" to the recognition that "it is an effective developmental tool to solve unemployment problems, reduce poverty, and mobilize financial resources for growth". Increased flows of remittances, in particular, have been used to justify the benefits of emigration to West African countries. As shown in [Table 1](#), international remittance flows to all the West African countries increased tremendously in the last two decades. In 2019, Nigeria was the first country in terms of inward remittances received (US\$ 23.8 billion), followed by Ghana (US\$ 4.1 billion), and Senegal (US\$ 2.5 billion). In the same year, the contribution of remittances to GDP was, however, highest in the Gambia (15.09%), Cape Verde (11.90%), Liberia (11.28%) and Senegal (10.70%) (see World Bank, 2020).

As a result of a combination of factors, such as the inclusion of migration management in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 and the desire to enhance interactions between emigrants and their homeland as part of "symbolic nation building", many West African countries have integrated migration issues, including diaspora engagement, into their national development plans. Some countries, such as Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Togo, have also been supported by development partners, such as ILO, ICMPD and IOM, to develop National Migration Policies, National Labour Migration Policies/strategies and Diaspora Engagement Policies for the purpose of harnessing the benefits of migration for socio-economic development. Most of these policies seek to protect the rights of emigrants, while promoting the

TABLE 1 International remittances flows to West African countries (2000–2019)

No.	Countries	International remittances received (US\$)			Contribution of remittances to GDP (%)		
		2000	2010	2019	2000	2010	2019
1	Benin	85,876,253.12	139,569,120.49	216,993,145.20	3.34	2.00	1.51
2	Burkina Faso	67,335,105.90	120,462,189.14	467,251,841.70	2.56	1.34	2.92
3	Cape Verde	89,761,166.15	130,909,874.54	235,867,714.20	16.65	7.87	11.90
4	Côte d'Ivoire	119,317,176.80	373,477,565.78	338,023,577.20	1.11	1.50	0.58
5	Ghana	32,396,800.00	135,852,160.00	4,053,694,728.81	0.65	0.42	6.05
6	Guinea	1,166,455.05	46,260,000.00	158,130,000.00	0.04	0.67	1.29
7	Guinea-Bissau	8,021,091.46	45,890,277.97	130,991,138.80	2.17	5.40	9.78
8	Liberia	N/A	294,231,962.16	346,244,091.60	N/A	14.73	11.28
9	Mali	73,163,954.85	472,745,533.92	1,034,339,163.26	2.48	4.43	5.99
10	Mauritania	N/A	N/A	64,458,913.64	N/A	N/A	0.85
11	Niger	14,460,552.87	134,423,547.48	308,661,888.80	0.80	2.35	2.39
12	Nigeria	1,391,826,072.14	19,744,686,092.98	23,809,281,401.01	2.00	5.43	5.31
13	Senegal	234,066,647.20	1,479,119,819.85	2,522,205,664.88	3.95	9.12	10.70
14	Sierra Leone	7,134,994.32	44,218,574.71	52,980,314.89	1.12	1.72	1.29
15	The Gambia	N/A	115,699,061.00	275,477,907.90	N/A	7.50	15.09
16	Togo	34,234,286.84	336,597,485.32	458,478,354.64	2.30	9.82	8.35

Source: World Bank (World Development Indicators-WDI).

transfer of skills and remittances back home. For instance, section 3.3.2 of the Sierra Leone Labour Migration Policy states:

The State shall provide a sound macro-economic environment to facilitate the efficient flow of remittances....the State shall work with financial institutions to reduce the cost of sending remittances to Sierra Leone. The State shall also adopt programmes to enhance the knowledge of migrant workers and their families regarding the management of remittances.

(Government of Sierra Leone, 2018:32)

Given the current recognition that people in the diaspora can contribute to socio-economic development in their home countries, emigrants who were once perceived as “unpatriotic citizens” are now being seen as “development actors” (Teye et al., 2017). Some West African countries, such as Ghana, have even passed dual citizenship instruments to ensure that people in the diaspora still have strong ties with their countries of origin. Diaspora Affairs Bureaus have also been established in some West African countries to engage these “new development actors”. In many of the West African countries, including Ghana, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Togo, Senegal, “Diaspora festivals”, “Home Coming” events and other gatherings are increasingly being organized by governments and non-governmental organizations to provide platforms for people in the diaspora, residents and public officials to discuss how to work together to promote socio-economic development. Also, in view of this new understanding that emigration can be used to solve unemployment problems and generate financial resources for national development, some West African countries, such as Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria, have been working with popular destination countries, especially in the Gulf region, to develop bilateral labour export agreements. Ghana, for instance, now has a bilateral labour migration agreement with Qatar.

Poverty, political conflicts and climate change as “root causes” of international migration

The dominant narratives on the drivers of migration suggest that international migration from West Africa is driven by poverty, political conflicts and climate change (EC, 2005). One main strategy proposed to deal with these “root causes” of irregular migration is development assistance, especially with regard to employment creation in migrant source regions. Other strategies which have been proposed to reduce the level of emigration include promotion of good governance, peace-building initiatives, and building resilience to deal with climate change (EC, 2005; Knoll & de Weijer, 2016). While these narratives have been championed by the European Commission and international organisations, they have also been accepted by West African governments. For instance, the Rabat Process, which is a major Euro-African migration dialogue, established in July 2006, has led to the development of approaches that seek to deal with the root causes of migration from Africa to Europe. Rabat Process meetings led to the development of the joint Valletta Action Plan and Marrakesh Programme (2018–2020). A recent European Commission report on the Marrakesh programme emphasizes how the root causes of irregular migration can be addressed through the creation of Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF):

The Valletta Summit made addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement a priority topic in the cooperation between African and European countries in matters of migration. The creation of the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) represents a new financial mechanism dedicated explicitly to addressing the root causes of the irregular migration and forced displacement of persons in Africa.

(ICMPD, 2019:1)

The European Union Emergency Trust Fund seeks to address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement from Africa through four strategic objectives, namely: generation of employment opportunities; strengthening resilience to food crises and environmental stress; improved migration management; and improved governance and conflict prevention mechanisms. Of all these strategies, the European Commission and its African partners tend to emphasise poverty reduction:

By helping to create livelihood opportunities that offer alternatives to emigration, EU development policy, centred on the eradication of poverty and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, including through the promotion of economic growth and job creation and the promotion of good governance and human rights, helps address the root causes of migration.

(EC, 2005: p.4)

The identification of poverty, conflicts and climate change as “proximate drivers” of migration in West Africa is certainly supported by empirical evidence (Awumbila et al., 2014). In recent years, climate change and conflicts have caused massive population movements from Sahelian countries, such as Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso (UNHCR, 2020). However, contrary to the media narrative that suggests that West Africans who migrate irregularly are mainly driven by poverty, conflicts and climate change, empirical evidence has shown that only a small proportion of vulnerable climate-induced migrants move towards Europe (Teye, 2017). Data provided by the International Organisation for Migration (2018) on irregular arrivals in Europe shows that relatively drier Sahelian countries (e.g. Niger and Burkina Faso) do not really send out significant number of irregular migrants to Europe. For instance, in the first quarter of 2017, the West African countries which largely produced irregular migrants arriving in Italy were as follows: Nigerian (13% of irregular arrivals); Guinea (13% of irregular arrivals); Ivory Coast (10% of irregular arrivals); Gambia (9% of irregular arrivals); and Senegal (8% of irregular arrivals) (IOM, 2018).

Migrants from regions that are seriously affected by conflicts, poverty and climate change tend to migrate only to nearby villages. Only a few of them may move to urban areas and then subsequently cross international borders. Poverty reduction alone may not significantly reduce irregular migration towards Europe because irregular migrants are not the poorest of the poor in the West Africa. Indeed, the very poor people do not have the resources needed to fund international migration. This argument that programmes that seek to reduce poverty may not *significantly* reduce migration flows towards Europe is consistent with the Migrant Hump Theory, which suggests that, in the early stages of development, economic development tends to lead to increase emigration, since a certain threshold of wealth is necessary to enable people to migrate. It is only at the latter stages of development that emigration tends to decrease (de Haas, 2010). As shown in the quotation below by an irregular migrant who was deported to Ghana, migrants' social prestige and migration culture also influence migration decisions:

I was doing well before traveling [to Spain].I paid 7000 Euro to the connection man who helped me to get there... The reason I travelled and still want to go again is that, in this community, people who travel and come back are highly respected. So in this community, people who are educated and have money want to travel and come back but getting the visa is the problem. (HMT, Ghanaian return migrant from Spain, 11 February 2019)

The above case shows how a culture of migration, in some communities, shape migration decisions. A number of African parliamentarians who were interviewed during an African parliamentary union meeting in Niamey, Niger in September 2018 noted that since migration is an integral part of life in Africa, the only way that European governments can help reduce irregular migration is to create more regular channels of migration in addition to poverty reduction initiatives:

If European countries really want to reduce irregular migration and ensure that migrants don't die on their way to Europe, they need to give visas to people who want to go to Europe to enter their countries. As our countries develop, more people will want to travel to other countries...Some go through the desert and the seas because they don't have visa to go through the regular routes.

(AAPT, Nigerian state official, 5 September 2018)

The findings here clearly show that another reason why reducing poverty may not lead to a drastic reduction in international migration flows is the fact that migration itself is an integral part of social transformation (De Haas & Frasen, 2018) and therefore likely to increase as societies develop and more people become educated.

MIGRATION AS A HUMANITARIAN AND PROTECTION ISSUE

In view of the increased incidence of forced displacements, trafficking in persons and violation of migrants rights, "humanitarian narratives" that portray migrants as vulnerable persons who need international protection have been championed by international human rights and humanitarian organisations, in recent years. In line with global patterns, the number of forcibly displaced persons has increased in West Africa in the last decade as a result of a sharp increase in conflicts caused by armed groups. For instance, as at the end of 2019, about 2,159,009 forcibly displaced persons were being hosted in the ECOWAS region. About 348,108 of these persons were refugees, 46,713 were asylum seekers, whilst 1,734,241 were stateless persons (UNHCR, 2020). The deterioration of forced displacement situation has prompted both international and regional responses (UNHCR, 2021). In many West African countries, the protection of forcibly displaced persons has historically been guided by a combination of

frameworks, including the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, OAU Convention Governing Refugee Problems in Africa (1969), ECOWAS Humanitarian Policy (2012), and national legislative instruments on refugees. Since 2018, West African countries have been working with UNHCR to implement the Global Compact on Refugees, which seeks to ensure enhanced protection of refugees. The UNHCR and governments of West African countries are also currently employing the “Peace-Humanitarian-Development Approach” to integrate peace-building strategies with economic inclusion programmes for refugees and IDPs (UNHCR, 2020).

In addition to efforts to protect forcibly displaced persons, the “humanitarian narratives” have also contributed to increased regional efforts to combat trafficking in persons and protect the rights of both regular and irregular migrants. The ECOWAS Common Approach on migration (2008) and the Global Compact on migration are being implemented to facilitate safe and regular migration in many West African countries. The recent reports of several cases of abuse of West African migrants’ rights in Libya and the Gulf region has also provided a strong support for the “humanitarian narrative” of migration (Deshingkar et al., 2019). In some West African countries, national strategies being implemented to combat human trafficking and protect the right of migrants include strengthening the capacity of agencies dealing with human trafficking, bilateral labour agreements with popular destination countries and placing a ban on recruitment for job placement in the Gulf Region where serious violations of migrants’ rights have been reported. There have also been efforts to enhance labour migration regulatory and legislative frameworks in some countries, such as Nigerian, Sierra Leone, Togo and Ghana. In Nigeria, the National Migration Policy outlined 11 strategies to reduce human trafficking and protect migrants’ rights. One of these strategies states that the government should:

Collaborate with the authorities in destination countries through Nigerian missions abroad and partners, to monitor the condition of trafficked persons and to ensure their welfare and respect of their human rights.

(Federal Government of Nigeria, 2015: 40)

While the recent emphasis on the protection of vulnerable migrants can help protect their rights, claims that many irregular migrants are victims of human trafficking (see Salt & Stein, 1997) are not supported by perspectives of irregular migrants. Although some migration brokers play a key role in the precarization of vulnerable migrants, there are other brokers who actually help migrants to navigate strict immigration regimes and structures of exploitation (Deshingkar et al., 2019). Additionally, as shown in the statement below by a migrant who entered Europe irregularly, the claims by humanitarian groups that migrants who make dangerous journeys across the Sahara desert with the hope of reaching Europe are not aware of the risks of embarking on such dangerous trips are also not supported by evidence on the ground:

My cousin was already staying there [Spain] and I asked him to help me travel there but he discouraged me. He told me that the routes through Libya were dangerous and that some of his friends died on the way. I also heard a lot of dangerous stories about that journey but I wasn't worried because I knew that God is with me. So I kept putting pressure on him and one day, he linked me with a connection man who helped me.

(TALO, Ghanaian return migrant, 22 February 2019)

As demonstrated by the statement above, while many irregular migrants are aware of the dangers of travelling through the desert, they sometimes still embark on such journeys because of the belief that they would be protected by God. The migrants also justify their decision by the fact that there are very limited legal channel of migration (see also Belloni, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that while divergent narratives on the drivers and impacts of migration emerged over the years, stated migration policies adopted by West African countries are largely based on narratives of political elites and development partners, especially the European Union. However, migration decisions are largely shaped by micro narratives of individual migrants who contest these dominant policy discourses. While a full analysis of the power dynamics involved goes beyond the scope of this paper, the findings show the dynamic nature of migration and the fact that EU narratives may misrepresent complex realities.

In line with changing political economy, the dominant narratives on the developmental impacts of international migration changed from emigration being portrayed as a treat to socio-economic development (1960s–2000s) to it being recognized as a developmental strategy. As a result, there have been policy changes to harness the benefits of immigration, emigration and return migration. With reference to the drivers of migration, the dominant narratives portray poverty as the main “root cause” of irregular migration from West Africa. Consequently, the major strategy which is being implemented by West African governments and European development partners is development assistance, especially with regard to employment creation. Based on the findings that irregular migration is also driven by social transformation (De Haas & Fransen, 2018) and cultural values, it is concluded that development assistance can only reduce irregular migration when it is combined with the creation of regular channels of migration for the West African youth.

The paper also concludes that while recent narratives that portray forced migration, human trafficking and the violation of migrants’ rights as humanitarian issues are supported by evidence, claims that most irregular migrants are victims of human trafficking (Salt & Stein, 2002) are not consistent with the narratives of irregular migrants. Similarly, claims that migrants who make dangerous journeys across the Sahara desert with the hope of reaching Europe are not aware of the risks of embarking on such migration trips have been contested by migrants. In reality, many irregular migrants are aware of the dangers of irregular migration. However, in the absence of legal channels to realize their migration dreams, irregular migration is part of migrants’ agency to implement their migration projects. In view of these findings, it is recommended that policies that create legal channels of international and intra-regional migration should be combined with development assistance. Additionally, given that migration decisions are largely shaped by micro narratives of migrants rather than grand narratives, policymakers should make efforts to incorporate the perspectives of migrants into migration policies.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

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