



Africa's Migration Futures

Introduction: Migration and Africa's Development Pathway

Alize le Roux

Last updated 26 October 2026 using IFs v8.72

Table of contents

Introduction: Migration and Africa's Development Pathway	3
Briefly	3
Understanding migration and immobility	3
A systems approach: drivers of migration	4
Development and migration dynamics	5
Migration and Africa's structural transformation	6
Donors and Sponsors	8
Reuse our work	8
Cite this research	8

Introduction: Migration and Africa's Development Pathway

- Briefly
- Understanding migration and immobility
- A systems approach: drivers of migration
- Development and migration dynamics
- Migration and Africa's structural transformation

Briefly

Migration is both an outcome and a driver of development. Across Africa, decisions to move, remain or return emerge from the interaction of demographic change, labour markets, governance, conflict, climate pressures and regional integration. Migration in turn influences labour allocation, remittances, urbanisation, productivity, inequality, human capital and economic integration.

Migration requires resources, networks and opportunities, meaning that those facing the greatest pressures, such as poverty and climate change, may often be unable to move. Africa's wider mobility landscape, therefore, includes voluntary mobility, forced mobility and immobility, with people and households sometimes shifting from one category to another over time.

Although migration has become increasingly politicised, off-continent migration receives disproportionate attention. The broader African mobility landscape is shaped by substantial internal movement within countries, while intra-African migration between countries also plays an important role in established labour and livelihood systems. African international migration itself is relatively evenly divided between intra-African and off-continent destinations.

This theme examines migration as part of Africa's broader development pathway. Internal migration refers to movement within a country's borders, including rural-to-urban migration and movement between provinces or regions. International migration refers to movement across an international border. It consists of intra-African migration (movement between African countries) and off-continent migration (movement from African countries to destinations outside Africa). The International Futures (IFs) model quantifies international migrant flows and stocks.

Understanding migration and immobility

Distinctions between types of migration are analytically important because they have different development, legal and political implications. Firstly, **voluntary** migration refers to movement primarily driven by the motivation to improve living conditions and expand opportunities, including employment, education, family reunification, social mobility and environmental pressures. Much African migration is voluntary and economically motivated, and a substantial share of documented international movement occurs through **regular** channels. The true scale of **irregular** (sometimes referred to as undocumented or illegal) migration is difficult to measure because administrative data capture it only partially. Migrants may also move between regular and irregular status during different stages of their journeys. **Circular** migration refers to repeated voluntary movements between origin and destination countries and can generate remittances, skills transfers and investment, while simultaneously helping destination countries address labour shortages. **Internal** migration, within the borders of a country, is the most prevalent form of mobility in Africa and is closely linked to structural transformation, urbanisation and changing labour markets.

Secondly, **forced** migration occurs when individuals are compelled to move due to conflict, violence, persecution, disasters or severe governance failures. It includes **refugees**, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons (IDPs), each recognised under specific **international** legal frameworks. Africa hosts some of the world's largest displacement crises, many of which become **protracted** (5+ years) because return, local integration or resettlement opportunities remain limited.

Displaced populations often lose homes, livelihoods, documentation and access to education or healthcare, while large-scale displacement can place pressure on host communities, infrastructure and public services. They may nevertheless contribute economically when they are allowed to work, move freely and access markets. In practice, the distinction between voluntary and forced international migration is often blurred, as violence and insecurity frequently overlap with economic strain, food insecurity, climate stress and unsustainable livelihoods.

Thirdly, **immobility** refers to situations in which people remain in place despite deteriorating economic, political or environmental conditions, often because of limited resources, insufficient social networks, restrictive border systems or physical insecurity. Those with the greatest need to move are often the least able to do so safely and may become trapped in highly vulnerable conditions. Understanding immobility is important because development outcomes are also shaped by those who are unable to move, and migration policies that restrict movement can exacerbate forced immobility.

Migration aspiration refers to the desire or motivation to move, while migration capability refers to the practical resources, finances, networks and freedom required to actually migrate. Actual migration occurs only when a person has both the aspiration and capability. Chart 1 depicts how aspirations and the capability to migrate shape migration outcomes.

Chart 1: Migration outcomes shaped by aspirations and the capability to migrate

Source: Source goes here

A systems approach: drivers of migration

African migration patterns vary significantly across countries and subregions depending on historical systems, economic geography, governance quality, labour demand, transport infrastructure and conflict dynamics. Mobility reflects both efforts to improve livelihoods and responses to risk, shaped by access to resources, information, social networks and legal pathways. Migration systems in Africa are highly path-dependent: existing migrant communities, established trade corridors, linguistic ties, colonial relationships and family networks influence where people move. These **network effects** reduce the financial and social costs of migration, cumulatively reinforcing established corridors even when the original drivers weaken.

Migration frameworks often distinguish between “**push**” and “**pull**” factors. Push factors are conditions in the source country that encourage people to leave their places of origin, such as poverty, unemployment, insecurity or environmental stress. Pull factors are destination-country conditions that attract migrants, including wages, employment opportunities, security, education and social services. This push/pull framing can be applied at the macro- and micro-levels, reflected in Chart 2.

Chart 2: A conceptual framework for the ‘Drivers of Migration’.

Source: Source goes here

At the macro level, structural conditions such as economic growth, demographic change, governance quality, conflict and environmental pressures are among the biggest push factors. Economic stagnation, high unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities, particularly among youth, are among the most important drivers of migration across Africa. At the same time, differences in wages, labour demand and perceived economic [opportunity](#) are the strongest pull factors.

Governance and political conditions are strong push factors. Weak institutions, corruption, political exclusion, insecurity and conflict contribute to internal displacement and cross-border migration. In fragile and conflict-affected states, displacement often becomes protracted, with negative consequences for productivity, social cohesion and development.

Environmental pressures increasingly [interact](#) with these dynamics. Climate change affects migration indirectly through its impacts on agriculture, food security, water availability, livelihoods and conflict. Droughts, floods and environmental degradation can undermine household resilience and increase mobility pressures, particularly in rural and fragile regions. Environmental stress rarely acts as an isolated driver of migration; instead, it compounds existing fragilities and increases exposure to economic, political and social risks. Migration can also function as an adaptation strategy, enabling households to diversify livelihoods, spread risk and access alternative sources of income.

At the micro level, whether these wider pressures ultimately translate into migration depends on the circumstances and choices of individuals and households. Age, gender, education, skills, income, aspirations, family responsibilities and access to information all affect both the desire and the capacity to move. Migration, therefore, differs significantly between groups. Young adults, particularly those with some education and resources, are generally more likely to migrate than the poorest or oldest segments of society. Gender shapes aspirations and the capacity to move, as well as the routes, employment opportunities and risks available to migrants.

Between the macro and micro levels sits a range of meso-level conditions that can make migration more or less possible. These include migration policies and institutions, visa regimes, border controls, labour agreements, regional free-movement arrangements, asylum systems, recruitment channels, transport links, the costs of moving, access to finance and technology, and social and diaspora networks. These factors can facilitate movement, redirect it towards particular destinations or channels, or prevent it altogether. Digital communication platforms, mobile financial systems and social media also increasingly shape access to information and migrant networks.

Development and migration dynamics

Migration and development are deeply interconnected. Although migration is often framed as a consequence of poverty or conflict, development does not necessarily reduce migration. Improvements in income, education, infrastructure and connectivity can reduce some of the pressures that compel people to move while simultaneously increasing their capacity and aspirations to do so. Migration may therefore initially increase as countries develop, before stabilising or declining as domestic opportunities expand further. This broad relationship is often described as the migration or mobility transition. It should not, however, be understood as an automatic or [linear process](#): historical evidence from Africa shows that migration patterns have risen, fallen and changed direction as economic, demographic and political conditions have evolved. Chart 3 illustrates the migration-development transition model.

Chart 3: Migration-Development transition model

Source: Source goes here

Africa is likely to remain within this transition for some time. Improvements in development and governance may reduce some distress-related pressures. Still, they are occurring alongside rapid population growth, a large young population, a vast expansion of the working-age population and the lowest existing mobility in the world. Many African economies are not yet creating sufficient productive employment to absorb this growing labour supply.

Migration remains an important mechanism through which workers and households respond to these differences in opportunity: within countries, between African countries and, for those with the resources and opportunities to do so, off-continent.

Internal migration is equally important to this development transition. As economies urbanise and diversify, workers move from rural areas and agriculture towards towns and cities and into manufacturing, services and informal urban employment. Africa's urban population is projected to reach around 1.4 billion by 2050. This movement can support structural transformation by bringing labour closer to more productive activities and larger markets. Still, rapid urbanisation can also outpace job creation, housing, infrastructure and public-service provision, contributing to informal and precarious urban livelihoods. Migration is therefore not separate from Africa's development transition; it is one of the mechanisms through which that transition occurs.

Migration and Africa's structural transformation

Migration can influence structural transformation by changing the distribution of labour, skills, capital and knowledge within and between economies. Migrants can fill labour and skills gaps, contribute to production and tax revenues, establish businesses and support productivity in destination countries. Globally, migrants are estimated to contribute around 10% of GDP, while research on African migration suggests that migrants spend approximately 85% of their incomes in destination countries.

For countries of origin, one of the most visible economic effects is through remittances. Africa received approximately US\$95 billion in remittances in 2025, making these flows a stable source of external finance for the continent. While most originate outside Africa, intra-African transfers are increasingly important: around US\$20 billion in 2023, or roughly **one-fifth** of Africa's total remittance inflows, originated from within the continent. Remittances primarily **support** household consumption, food security, education, healthcare and housing, while also providing foreign exchange and helping some countries finance current-account deficits. Their contribution to longer-term structural transformation, however, depends partly on whether they can also be channelled into savings, investment and productive activity.

Migration can also facilitate the transfer of skills, knowledge and technology, while diaspora networks can strengthen trade and investment links between origin and destination countries. These effects are particularly relevant within Africa, where regional migration connects labour markets and supports cross-border commerce. Around 86% of employment on the continent is estimated to be informal, and informal cross-border trade is an important source of livelihoods, particularly for women and small-scale traders. UNECA estimates that informal cross-border trade accounts for 7–16% of all **intra-African trade**.

The effects are not uniformly positive. Emigration can reduce pressure in labour markets and allow workers to access opportunities unavailable at home. Still, sustained losses of scarce skills can weaken domestic capacity in sectors such as health, engineering and education. An estimated 70 000 **skilled** professionals leave Africa annually, although the scale and consequences of these losses differ substantially between countries and sectors. The movement of highly skilled workers can therefore generate both brain drain and opportunities for "brain circulation" through return migration, diaspora engagement and knowledge exchange.

The development impact of migration consequently depends not simply on how many people move, but on who moves, where they move, the conditions under which movement occurs and how migration is governed. Safe and regular mobility, recognition of qualifications, portable social protection, lower remittance costs and better links between migration and labour-market planning can increase its development benefits, while poorly governed or forced movement can expose migrants and communities to high social and economic costs.

These dynamics are central to Africa's broader regional integration agenda. The AU's [Agenda 2063](#) envisages an integrated continent in which people, goods, services and capital can move more freely. The African Continental Free Trade Area ([AfCFTA](#)) advances this objective through greater economic and trade integration. The Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment ([Free Movement Protocol](#)) seeks to facilitate the movement, residence and establishment of African citizens. The two frameworks are legally distinct but complementary: deeper trade integration is likely to be more effective when traders, entrepreneurs, workers and service providers can also move more easily across borders.

Unlike the AfCFTA Agreement, which entered into force in 2019 and under which trading began in 2021, the Free Movement Protocol was adopted by the AU in 2018 but has not secured sufficient ratifications to enter into force.

Both political concerns and practical implementation challenges have constrained progress. Some governments remain concerned about sovereignty, border control, security and the possibility of large or poorly regulated migration flows. Others face practical constraints related to population registration and identity documentation, border management systems, recognition of qualifications, social security portability and the alignment of national migration and labour market regulations. The result is an important gap in Africa's integration project: continental trade integration has advanced considerably further than continental free movement of people.

Donors and sponsors



Reuse our work

- All visualizations, data, and text produced by African Futures are completely open access under the [Creative Commons BY license](#). You have the permission to use, distribute, and reproduce these in any medium, provided the source and authors are credited.
- The data produced by third parties and made available by African Futures is subject to the license terms from the original third-party authors. We will always indicate the original source of the data in our documentation, so you should always check the license of any such third-party data before use and redistribution.
- All of our charts [can be embedded](#) in any site.

Cite this research

Alize le Roux (2026) State Futures in the Global South. Published online at futures.issafrica.org. Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/22-migration/> [Online Resource] Updated 26 October 2026.

About the authors

Ms Alize le Roux joined the AFI in May 2021 as a senior researcher. Before joining the ISS, she worked as a principal geo-informatics researcher at the CSIR, supporting various local and national policy- and decision-makers with long-term planning support. Alize has 14 years of experience in spatial data analysis, disaster risk reduction and urban and regional modelling. She has a master's degree in geographical sciences from the University of Utrecht, specialising in multi-hazard risk assessments and spatial decision support systems.

About African Futures & Innovation

Scenarios and forecasting can help Africa identify and respond to opportunities and threats. The work of the African Futures & Innovation (AFI) program at the Institute for Security Studies aims to understand and address a widening gap between indices of wellbeing in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The AFI helps stakeholders understand likely future developments. Research findings and their policy implications are widely disseminated, often in collaboration with in-country partners. Forecasting tools inspire debate and provide insights into possible trajectories that inform planning, prioritisation and effective resource allocation. Africa's future depends on today's choices and actions by governments and their non-governmental and international partners. The AFI provides empirical data that informs short- and medium-term decisions with long-term implications. The AFI enhances Africa's capacity to prepare for and respond to future challenges. The program is headed by Dr Jakkie Cilliers.