



Africa's Migration Futures

Africa's Migration Profile

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Table of contents

Africa's Migration Profile	3
Africa in comparative perspective	3
Key characteristics of African migration	3
Donors and Sponsors	6
Reuse our work	6
Cite this research	6

Africa's Migration Profile

- [Africa in comparative perspective](#)
- [Key characteristics of African migration](#)

Africa in comparative perspective

Of the approximately 313 million international migrants globally in 2025, around 52.5 million were born in an African country. Of these, 26.9 million lived in another African country, representing intra-African international migration, while 25.6 million lived outside the continent, representing off-continental international migration. African-born migrants living off-continent represent a relatively small share of Africa's total population (roughly 1.65%). Chart 4 presents the African-origin international migrant stock by destination region from 1990 to 2025.

Chart 4: African-origin international migrant stock by destination region, 1990–2025

Source: [Source goes here](#)

Among African migrants living off-continent, Europe is the largest destination, hosting approximately 48% (12.2 million), followed by Asia with 32% (8.1 million, of which the Arabian Peninsula accounts for nearly 5.4 million), North America with just under 4 million, and Oceania with about 0.7 million. The remainder live in other destinations, including South and Central America and the Caribbean.

Africa is also a migration destination. In addition to the 26.9 million African-born migrants, approximately 5.2 million migrants living in Africa originated outside the continent. The continent therefore hosted roughly 32.1 million international migrants in total in 2025. Africa consequently functions simultaneously as a region of origin, destination and transit.

Relative to its large population, however, international migration remains comparatively [limited](#) in much of Africa. The UN [estimates](#) that international migrants accounted for 3.7% of the total global population in 2024, compared with 12.6% in Europe and 15.9% in North America; in sub-Saharan Africa, the share was about 2%. This should not be interpreted as meaning that Africans are generally immobile, since these figures exclude internal migration and displacement. Rather, international mobility remains constrained for many Africans by migration costs, restrictive migration regimes, infrastructure and connectivity gaps, and limited access to regular migration pathways. Reducing unnecessary barriers to safe and regular mobility could therefore support greater regional integration, labour-market matching and development.

Key characteristics of African migration

Africa's migration systems vary considerably across regions. Eastern Africa has particularly large migrant and displaced populations, reflecting the interaction of cross-border labour mobility, regional integration and protracted conflict. Countries with relatively large international migrant populations in relation to their size include Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Djibouti.

A substantial share of intra-regional migration occurs through established labour and livelihood systems and, in some Regional Economic Communities (RECs), through formal provisions facilitating cross-border movement. The East African Community Common Market Protocol, for example, provides for free movement of persons and workers, as well as rights

of establishment and residence, although implementation remains uneven. The scale of irregular migration is more difficult to establish because administrative systems generally capture only part of this movement.

Much intra-African international migration is labour-oriented, with migrants moving towards regional economic hubs such as Abidjan, Johannesburg, Lagos and Nairobi. Estimates put the number of international migrant workers in [Africa](#) at approximately 14.5 million in 2019. Many migrants maintain strong economic and social [networks](#) with their countries of origin through remittances, family networks and repeated or circular movement.

Climate change, mobility and adaptation

[Climate change](#) is intensifying mobility pressures by affecting livelihoods, food and water security and exposure to disasters. Scenario modelling by the Africa Climate Mobility Initiative suggests that, under high-impact conditions, up to 5% of Africa's population could be moving in response to climate impacts by 2050, with most movement expected to remain within countries. The [World Bank](#) estimates that climate change could drive up to 86 million internal migrants in sub-Saharan Africa and approximately 19 million in Northern Africa by 2050.

Africa remains highly dependent on climate-sensitive livelihoods, including [agriculture](#). As climate change increasingly affects crop quality and yields, vulnerable communities often face severe impacts while possessing limited adaptation options.

Most climate-related migration remains internal or regional rather than long-distance international movement, with people facing declining agricultural productivity, environmental degradation or diminishing returns from fishing and livestock production often moving first towards nearby towns and cities.

Forced displacement and protracted crises

Forced displacement has become one of the defining features of African mobility. According to the [Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre](#), 38.8 million people were internally displaced in sub-Saharan Africa at the end of 2024, accounting for about 47% of the global total. Of these, 33.1 million were displaced by conflict and violence and 5.7 million by disasters. Most people forced from their homes remain within their own countries, while refugees who cross an international border often remain in neighbouring states.

Refugee and asylum-seeker populations are concentrated particularly in Eastern Africa and the Horn of Africa, driven by protracted crises in Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia. Central Africa and parts of Western Africa also host large displaced populations linked to conflicts in the Sahel, DR Congo and surrounding areas.

Durable solutions remain limited, leaving many people in prolonged displacement or dependent on return, local integration or resettlement opportunities. Displacement in Africa is also increasingly [urbanised](#), with growing numbers of displaced people settling in towns and cities rather than camps. Chart 5 shows asylum-seekers, internally displaced people and refugees in Africa from 2000 to 2025.

Chart 5: Asylum-seekers, internally displaced people and refugees in Africa, 2000-2025

Source: Source goes here

Irregular migration and changing routes

Irregular migration is difficult to measure consistently because available data generally capture only detected crossings, making continent-wide trend analysis uncertain. Nevertheless, the three major irregular migration [corridors](#) are:

- the Southern Corridor towards South Africa;
- the Eastern Corridor towards the Arabian Peninsula; and
- Mediterranean and Atlantic routes linking Northern, Eastern and Western Africa with Europe.

Detected movements along these routes fluctuate considerably in response to conflict, border enforcement and changes in route accessibility. Detected irregular crossings into Europe peaked in 2015 and rose again, to a lesser extent, in 2023 before declining along several routes. Movement along the Eastern Corridor towards Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula has similarly varied in response to conflict, changing border controls and dangerous conditions along the route.

These changes do not necessarily indicate equivalent changes in the underlying pressure or intention to migrate. Migration routes are adaptive: restrictions or increased enforcement along one route can redirect movement towards alternative pathways rather than preventing it altogether. In some cases, these alternative routes are longer, more expensive and more dangerous.

Migrants travelling irregularly may rely on smugglers or other intermediaries to cross borders or navigate restricted routes. This can expose them to exploitation, abuse, trafficking and death. Smuggling arrangements vary considerably, from small and relatively informal networks to more organised criminal [operations](#). Restrictive migration environments can therefore [instead](#) reshape the geography and risks of irregular movement, even where the underlying drivers of migration persist.

Gender and migration

Women increasingly migrate independently for work, education and economic opportunity. As of 2019, women accounted for 39% of migrant workers in Africa, with the number of female labour migrants increasing by 60% between 2010 and 2019. As of 2020, approximately 47% of international migrants in Africa were [female](#).

Women migrants are disproportionately concentrated in informal sectors, including domestic work, care work and informal trade, where legal protections are often limited and workers frequently remain undercounted in official statistics.

These continental patterns vary substantially across regions, reflecting differences in geography, economic structures, conflict, governance and regional integration.

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Cite this research

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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.

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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.