



Africa's Migration Futures

Policy-relevant Insights

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The four scenarios show why lower international migrant numbers should not be taken as evidence of reduced displacement or vulnerability. The World at War generates the greatest pressure to move but the smallest international migrant stock. Conversely, better development does not necessarily mean less migration. The Sustainable World produces substantial mobility, but stronger regional integration redirects a much larger share of it towards opportunities within Africa.

The regional analysis reinforces a second finding: the same development pathway can produce different migration outcomes depending on the migration system already in place. In Western and Eastern Africa, where cross-border mobility is supported by established regional agreements, labour and trade networks and longstanding migration corridors, stronger African integration can have a particularly strong effect on where people move. In Central Africa, proximity to neighbouring countries remains the dominant organising feature of migration, while in Southern Africa, longstanding labour corridors centred on South Africa remain persistent. Northern Africa differs again: its geography and strong connections with Europe and the Middle East mean that its migration system remains more strongly influenced by off-continent labour demand, migration policy and border management.

Good migration governance, now and in the future, depends heavily on Regional Economic Communities, cooperation between neighbouring states and the labour markets and migration corridors already in place.

Against this background, ten policy priorities emerge for African governments, Regional Economic Communities, the African Union and their partners.

Expand safe, regular and productive migration pathways

African migration policies should be aligned with broader development, labour and education strategies. Regular labour, education, family and circular migration pathways can help match Africa's expanding workforce with developmental opportunities within the continent and abroad while reducing the risks and costs associated with irregular movement.

The scenarios show that improved development conditions can increase people's capacity to migrate even as distress-related pressures decline. The Sustainable World illustrates this clearly: improved development conditions do not eliminate migration but create greater scope for mobility to occur through safer, more regular and development-supportive channels. Policies should therefore focus on improving migration governance and enabling regular and circular pathways rather than solely on restricting migration.

Implement continental and regional frameworks

Africa already has ambitious migration and integration frameworks, including Agenda 2063, the African Continental Free Trade Area, the AU Free Movement Protocol, the Migration Policy Framework for Africa and REC-level mobility arrangements. The principal challenge is implementation.

The AU, RECs and member states should improve policy coherence, clarify responsibilities and address administrative and institutional barriers that limit implementation. National migration policies should be more closely aligned with regional and continental commitments, while cooperation between RECs will be increasingly important where migration corridors cross regional boundaries.

Reduce the practical costs and barriers to regional mobility

Regional integration requires more than formal agreements. Better transport links, more efficient and interoperable border systems, recognition of qualifications, portable social protection, streamlined and efficient migration administration and accessible identity documentation can reduce the cost and uncertainty associated with moving within Africa.

These investments are particularly important in the Sustainable World, where the largest share of African migrants move within the continent due to improving integration and expanding opportunities. By 2050, around 61% of African-origin international migrants live elsewhere in Africa in the Sustainable World, compared with 48% in the Growth World. Interventions should focus on facilitating legitimate mobility, strengthening effective border governance and improving state capacity to govern migration.

Prevent forced displacement and protect people who must move

Conflict, insecurity, livelihood collapse and climate shocks, especially in the World at War scenario, can create intense pressure to leave while simultaneously destroying the resources, infrastructure and routes that enable migration.

Conflict prevention, accountable governance, climate adaptation, livelihood resilience and functioning public services are therefore central to reducing forced displacement. Where displacement occurs, rights-based protection, access to work and services, documentation and durable solutions should be prioritised.

Policies must also account for involuntary immobility. Some of the people facing the greatest risks may have the fewest resources or capabilities to move. Migration governance must include measures that enable people to move in ways that enable development and reduce vulnerabilities, such as planned relocation or urbanisation.

Avoid over-securitising migration policy

Restrictive enforcement can change irregular routes without removing the pressures that drive them. Where regular pathways narrow, migration may become more expensive, irregular and dangerous, increasing reliance on smugglers and exposure to exploitation and abuse.

The Divided World demonstrates how migration can persist even when political fragmentation and harder borders constrain formal mobility. African governments and external partners should therefore assess migration-control measures against their effects on rights, regional integration, development and institutional accountability, rather than primarily against interception or arrival numbers.

Free movement and effective migration governance are not synonymous with unregulated borders. The objective should be predictable, legitimate and well-managed mobility rather than securitising migration.

Strengthen diaspora engagement and reduce remittance costs

African diasporas are important sources of finance, skills, knowledge, trade links and investment. Remittances exceed US\$100 billion in some recent Africa-wide estimates and provide an important source of household income and foreign exchange.

Governments can increase the development returns of migration by lowering transfer costs, expanding formal and digital remittance channels, improving financial inclusion and creating credible opportunities for diaspora saving and investment. Diaspora engagement should extend beyond remittances to include skills exchange, entrepreneurship, trade networks, technology transfer and investment.

Protect migrant workers and make rights portable

The development benefits of labour migration depend significantly on the conditions under which migrants work. Migrant workers should have access to decent work, fair recruitment practices, safe working conditions, equal treatment under labour law and protection from exploitation and crime.

Social security and benefit systems should be made portable across borders. Bilateral and regional labour agreements should incorporate enforceable rights and protections rather than focusing only on recruitment volumes.

This will become increasingly important if ageing economies outside Africa seek greater access to the continent's expanding workforce. The difference between mutually beneficial labour mobility and extractive migration will depend substantially on the rights, bargaining power and protections available to migrant workers.

Mainstream gender and protection risks

Migration opportunities, employment sectors, routes and risks differ substantially by gender. Women are increasingly migrating independently for work, education and economic opportunity, but remain concentrated in some sectors where labour protections are weak and exposure to exploitation is high.

Migration and displacement policies should therefore use gender-responsive analysis and address risks including trafficking, gender-based violence, exploitative recruitment and unequal access to documentation and services. Gender should be considered not only as a protection issue but also in understanding how migration affects labour markets, households, remittances and development outcomes.

Strengthen civil registration, legal identity and migration data

Legal identity is fundamental to safe mobility, access to services and the protection of rights. UNECA has estimated that around 542 million Africans lack foundational identification, while UNICEF estimates that 49% of children under five in sub-Saharan Africa are unregistered and 61% lack a birth certificate.

Investment in civil registration and identity systems should therefore accompany efforts to improve migration governance and regional integration. Better documentation can expand access to regular pathways, labour markets, financial services and social protection while strengthening states' ability to manage migration.

At the same time, major gaps remain in data on irregular migration, circular mobility, displacement and migrant characteristics. Better migration, displacement and labour-market data are essential if policy is to be based on the scale and characteristics of actual movement rather than assumptions or perceptions.

Build more accurate public narratives about migration

Migration debates are increasingly shaped by claims that migrants are primarily security, economic or social threats. Yet the evidence presented in this study shows a more complex reality. Most African mobility takes place within the continent, much of it within countries, while African international migration is almost evenly divided between intra-African and off-continent destinations. Migration is closely intertwined with labour markets, structural transformation, regional integration and household livelihoods, and its effects vary depending on who moves, where they move and the conditions under which movement occurs.

Governments, researchers, civil society and the media should communicate more clearly where migrants move, why they move and how migration affects countries of both origin and destination. Better public narratives should not dismiss legitimate concerns about employment, public services, infrastructure or social cohesion, but should distinguish these from unsupported or politicised claims. Policy should be based on the actual scale, composition and consequences of migration rather than perceptions that overstate particular forms of movement.

Chart 17: Policy recommendations

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Chart 17 summarises the policy recommendations. The scenarios differ not only in the scale and geography of migration, but also in the conditions under which movement occurs. Migration can contribute to development when people can move safely, exercise meaningful choice, access rights and employment, and maintain productive links with countries of origin. By contrast, conflict, forced displacement, exploitation, restricted pathways and involuntary immobility can increase vulnerability and undermine development outcomes. Migration policy should therefore focus not only on the volume of movement but also on improving the conditions under which mobility takes place and reducing forced and unsafe forms of movement.

Africa's migration future will not be determined by migration policy alone. It will be shaped by the continent's wider development trajectory: whether economies create opportunities, institutions become more effective, regional integration deepens, conflict declines and African countries can engage with global labour markets on more favourable terms. Migration governance can influence who can move, where they move and under what conditions, but these outcomes remain closely connected to the broader choices shaping Africa's future.

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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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