

Regional migration narratives: The case of East Africa

The Narratives of Migration: Between Politics and Policies

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Introduction

- There are approximately 184 million people who live outside their country of nationality, of whom 37 million are refugees (WDR 2023).
- Migrants as a share of the global population increased only marginally: from 2.9% of the global population in 1990 to 3.6% in 2020.
- The largest share of emigrants are from middle-income countries
- Africa is a world region with the least intercontinental outmigration, accounting only 14.1 % of the world's total migrant population as of 2017; compared to the share of Asia (41%) and Europe (27.1%) (IOM 2020)
- Less than one-third (27.2%) of all African migrants live in Europe

Introduction, ctd...

- Most African migrants are not crossing oceans, but rather crossing land borders within Africa;
- 94 % of African migration across oceans takes on a regular form; and
- Most global migrants are not African (IOM 2020; AMR)
- In Sub-Saharan Africa, most movements take place within the region.
- Intra-African migrations since 2010 have increased +46.3% compared to +26% for Africa-Europe migrations (Mo Ibrahim foundation 2022)

Introduction, ctd...

- East Africa has several dominant narratives at the backdrop of multiple migration realities and flows in the region
 - Refugee protection regimes,
 - Intra and extra-regional irregular migration;
 - Involuntary return flows,
 - Migration policy and governance
- However, this study focuses on the narratives around the northern migration route and its implications for migration policy and programming in Ethiopia and other countries in the region;
- It is based on KIIs with migration scholars, practitioners, authorities in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, as well as a systematic review of the literature

Migration trends and patterns in EHoA

- Migration from and within the Horn of Africa (HoA) is mixed, complex and significant in volume
- The complexity stems not only from the magnitude of outflows and drivers of that movement but also from the diversity of the movers as well as their place of origin and country of destination.
- EHoA is currently home to a quarter of all international migrants living in Africa, of these many live in another African country as a refugee (IOM, 2022).
- Three major inter-regional routes: Eastern route, Southern route and the Northern route; all are increasingly characterized by their irregularity.
- Migration within the region - also known as - the HoA route - is also significant, which involves forced migrants and returnees

Migration trends and patterns in EHoA, ctd...

- The rise of Mediterranean crossing by North African citizens and a decline in crossing by SSA citizens over the past decade or so (Munz and Yarryeva (2022))
- The northern route is less significant for EHoA migrants; it remains to be the dominant narrative
- This narrative is evident in policy, research, media as well as migration-related project interventions, which are often supported by the EU and/or its member states
- However, some Eritreans and Somalis are more likely to migrate irregularly through this route as they have a higher chance of being granted refugee status

Migration trends and patterns in EHoA, ctd...

- In 2021 and 2022, the HoA route accounted for a higher proportion of movement than the eastern routes
- It represented 50% of overall movements in 2021, while the Eastern (40%), Southern (9%) and Northern (1%) routes accounted for the other half of movements combined (IOM 2022 DTM)
- These intraregional and extra-regional migration are triggered by various political, socio-economic, and environmental factors
- Migration to the GCC also has intensified due to the high demand for domestic work, expansion of illegal agencies, social networks and the relative fall of migration costs.
- It is also the result of a shift in demand away from Asian domestic workers who tend to seek higher wages, towards cheap labour source countries
- This underlines not only the complexity of human mobility across national borders but also indicates the importance of conceptualising this movement in a broader global perspective, going beyond the traditional pull-push factors (Adugna 2019).

The narrative around Africa migration

- There is no single narrative that defines this large continent which is characterised by mixed and complex migration trajectories associated with its diverse history, culture and geography.
- The discourse over Africa is often linear and oversimplified narrative, which is not just depicted in people's mobility but also in broader issues. This premise is further supported by the campaigns within the African diaspora strongly advocating for message that: "Africa is a continent, not a country."
- More African migrants' move within the continent; extra-regional movements are largely regular
- The notion of irregular migration was created after borders and visa regimes were introduced, as it was a norm, prior for African pastoralist and traders to move between places within the continent (Okyerefo & Setrana 2018).
- The livelihoods of the Masai people spreading across E.Africa is a good example (Adepoju 2021)
- Moreover, the migration route from N.Africa to Europe, via the Mediterranean, for mostly short-term work was largely regular until visa requirements came into force (Fargues, 2017; Adepoju et al.,2021).

The narrative around Africa migration

- The misperception however is that Africa-Europe migration is dominated by irregular migration
- Indeed, Europe is the largest destination for African migrants outside Africa (11 M), followed by Asia (nearly 5 M) and N.America (around 3 M) (IOM 2022).
- In 2020, some 10.6 M African migrants were living in Europe, and 8.6% in EU member states, of these the majority (5.4 million) were from N.Africa and only 3.3 million from SSA (UN DESA 2022).
- During the period 2008-2020, 57 % of African migrants in Europe were from N. Africa, and the remaining 43 % from SSA (Munz and Yarryeva 2022)
- However, European policymakers saw population growth, lack of economic opportunity, and violent conflict as long-term triggers for future unchecked irregular migration (Coggio 2021).

The narrative around Africa migration, ctd...

- The existing perception is that Africans have been and always regarded as the frontrunners when it comes to international migration
- Despite its significance, intra-Africa mobility has been overlooked and least understood
- African potential migrants do not intend to migrate to Europe; in both East Africa and Central Africa, around 40 % prefer to stay within the region or the continent (Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2021)
- Migration is a major agenda in Europe-Africa cooperation, although both continents have a different priority
- African countries see extra-regional migration as an opportunity
 - Development (African diaspora is recognized by the AU as the 6th region of Africa)
 - Labour externalization - migration as a pressure relief valve for high unemployment
 - Remittances
 - Little attention has been provided to skills and knowledge transfer

The narrative around Africa migration, ctd

- However, in Europe, migration has been increasingly seen in terms of border security or management
- The EU framed migration especially since 2015 as a ‘crisis’ to be addressed through different interventions (a crisis is often address through a short-term, life saving, emergency intervention)
- The European perspective is reflected in its overwhelming focus on three areas,
 - Addressing the ‘root causes’ of irregular migration; enhancing border controls to restrict migration, with a particular focus on smuggling and trafficking in persons; return, readmission and reintegration (the 3 R’s)
 - “the disruption of the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks”.

The narrative around Africa migration, ctd

- Politicians like to talk about migration in water metaphors. Migrants always seem to come in flows, waves or tides. They also like to give voters the image that they are “in control” of immigration; indeed, that immigration is a flow that can be turned on and off like a tap (De Hass 2012)
- This narrative however has created border securitization, externalization and expanded Africa-Europe border (Vammen et al. 2021).
- Securitised border governance is leading to externalisation of violence (Frouws 2020);
- Externalization of border security in the Sahel, HoA and N. Africa has also been an important means to protect European borders (Laine 2020; Munz & Yarryeva 2022).
- Border controls may simply divert migration rather than halt it entirely (Coggio 2021)

Implications of narratives on migration policy and programming

- Europe has been deeply involved in the management of African borders for centuries; from the trading posts of precolonial times to the negotiation of the colonial boundaries at the 1884 Congress of Berlin, mainly to exploit raw materials and labour (Vammen et al., 2022; Mbembe 2000; Niang 2020)
- Over the past decade, more interventions aiming to restrain SSA migration to Europe
- Perception drives policy; that is, policy-making on immigration and asylum-seeking is to a significant extent motivated by prevailing public attitudes (Laine 2020)
- Sensationalist media reportage and popular discourses give rise to an image of an 'exodus' of desperate Africans fleeing poverty at home in search of the European 'El Dorado.' Millions of Africans are believed to be waiting to cross to Europe at the first opportunity (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016)
- However, no evidence of widespread public support for highly restrictive measures found (Ruhs 2022)
- This distorted image of reality has become an explosive issue in a political climate in which nationalist and xenophobic populism is on the rise (Mckeen 2019).
- Local Media outlets in Ethiopia tend to perpetuate the same narrative

Implications of narratives on migration policy and programming, ctd...

- Europe's focus on controlling migration from Africa may have affected its broader development assistance priorities, potentially prioritizing support to countries strategically relevant for migration instead of on the basis of development need (Coggio 2021; Frouws 2020)
- Focusing development projects on migration leads to a problematic measure of success. Is a reduction in the volume of migration the criteria to measure their success? (Frouws 2020)
- A significant portion of the EUTF funding – which primarily is not 'new' development funding but already existing funding re-allocated into the EUTF – does not actually go to development projects, but to migration and border management projects (Frouws 2020)
- Migration programming implemented in EHOA countries have prioritized EU interests in countering irregular migration
- The 3 R's are unpopular among African countries; EU sought to leverage ODA to press EHOA countries to cooperate on border management and 3 'R's
- In Ethiopia, for example, international donors put pressure on the government to introduce legislative and institutional structures to control irregular migration

Implications of narratives on migration policy and programming, ctd...

- Regional programmes such as AU- HoA Initiative on Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling and the IGAD Regional Consultative Process on Migration (IGAD-RCP) generally focuses on border management and combatting trafficking in Person (TiP) and smuggling of Migrants (SoM); enhancing rule of law, prosecution and border management
- The Khartoum Process which involves 30 EU member states and 11 African member States focuses on prevention of irregular migration, combatting human smuggling and trafficking, 3 R's.
- The Better Migration Management (BMM) Programme which were implemented from 2016-2022 with two phases designed to improve migration management in the HoA, combatting TIP and SoM.
- The Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) was instituted in 2015, has created an unprecedented, accelerated moment of control and confinement (Vamen et al., 2022;

Implications of narratives on migration policy and programming, ctd...

- EUTF aims to address the root causes of irregular migration so that fewer African migrants make their — often dangerous — way to Europe (Bartels, 2019; Raineri & Strazzari 2021).
- The Fund (5 billion Euros) has many priorities: addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement; strengthening international protection to providing assistance to vulnerable people on the move and reintegration in origin countries. It also includes promoting legal pathways options for African migrants (Bartels 2019).
- Demanding greater control measures over the movement of people and the strengthening of borders – both physically and legally
- This further narrowing of the safe & legal avenues available to people fleeing war and persecution, has led to more people to resort to irregular entry, using smugglers networks
- It is a vicious cycle where more restrictive policies again lead to more demand for (and more power of) smugglers, etc. in a dynamic where only smugglers are the winners (Horwood 2022).

Implications of narratives on migration policy and programming, ctd...

- The Team Europe Initiative for the C. Med. Migration route, also aims to address irregular migration (12 countries: Tunisia, Libya, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Nigeria)
- In recent years, there has been a strong focus on and narrative around the so-called root causes of migration.
- To begin, the term 'root causes' and the narrative which follows is overwhelmingly negative about migration: "we need to cut the problem at the roots, otherwise it keeps growing back", i.e. the solution is prevention, not management. The root causes narrative means that migration as a whole becomes a problem (Frouws 2020).
- While the narrative of preventing migration by addressing its root causes seems compelling, it contradicts the broad academic consensus that economic development leads to more rather than less migration, at least in the short term (Zaun & Nantermoz 2022; De Haas 2010).

Implications of narratives on migration policy and programming, ctd...

- Addressing the ‘root causes’ approach that is increasingly emphasized on the so called ‘push’ factors, risks overlooking the fact that pull factors including established diaspora connections, aspiration for better opportunities elsewhere
- In addition, non-economic reasons are key drivers of migration especially in areas where migration has become a norm or tradition.
- For all the emphasis on tackling root causes, the EUTF has been used to treat the symptoms of irregular migration, such as porous borders at Europe’s southern periphery and along migratory routes (Coggio 2021; Frouws)
- Centred on addressing “root causes” of migration, has left a raft of pressing development issues unaddressed (Soto 2022)
- Structural ‘root’ causes are often overlooked- international politics, inequality, climate change, globalisation, conflict, etc
- Some politicians including the Italian PM see it differently- the continuation of exploitation in Africa driving irregular migration

Conclusion

- There is an established migration narrative that migrants from the EHoA are increasingly moving towards Europe on an irregular basis
- Unfortunately, migration programming in the region is adding to the oversimplification of the otherwise complex migration trajectories.
- There is a risk that simplistic narratives lead to inadequate responses.
- Poverty is often assumed to be a single cause of migration and migrants from East Africa are characterised as vulnerable people who are manipulated by criminal smugglers, stressing the importance of breaking their networks
- However, studies shows that migrants and their families are often making migration decisions, with the support of smugglers who are local residents, neighbors, former migrants, among others.
- The non-economic dimension of migration and its pull factors are increasingly missing in the migration discourse

Conclusion...

- Migration programme and discourses have prioritized EU interests which focuses on migration management, rather than migration governance.
- Indeed, border securitization is also a concern among African countries, as intra-African migration is often negatively framed
- Media reports and public opinion certainly shape migration policy and programmes
- However, the fear of “invasion” emanates not only based on a small fraction of HoA migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea but also taking into account a long-term projection of demographic growth coupled with limited economic opportunities
- Many current policies (de facto and de jure) dealing with irregular and smuggled migration breach international agreements and conventions (Horwood 2022)

Conclusion...

- Policy measures should rather focus on widening safe, legal pathways for labour migration and providing local livelihood alternatives.
- Focusing more on migration governance over securitization, and on long-term interventions including in public services, rural development, education and youth employment is key
- Positive narratives? can capitalize on celebrating diversity, integration
- It is important to decentering migration governance (Triandafyllidou 2022), with migration policy and programming emphasize on maximizing the benefits of migration for the all parties involved
- Migration policy needs to take the perspectives of different actors in origin regions/countries
- Strengthening Migration Research Centers in the Global South including those established by IDRC can potentially shift existing narratives; can leverage data-drive policy making process

THANK YOU!