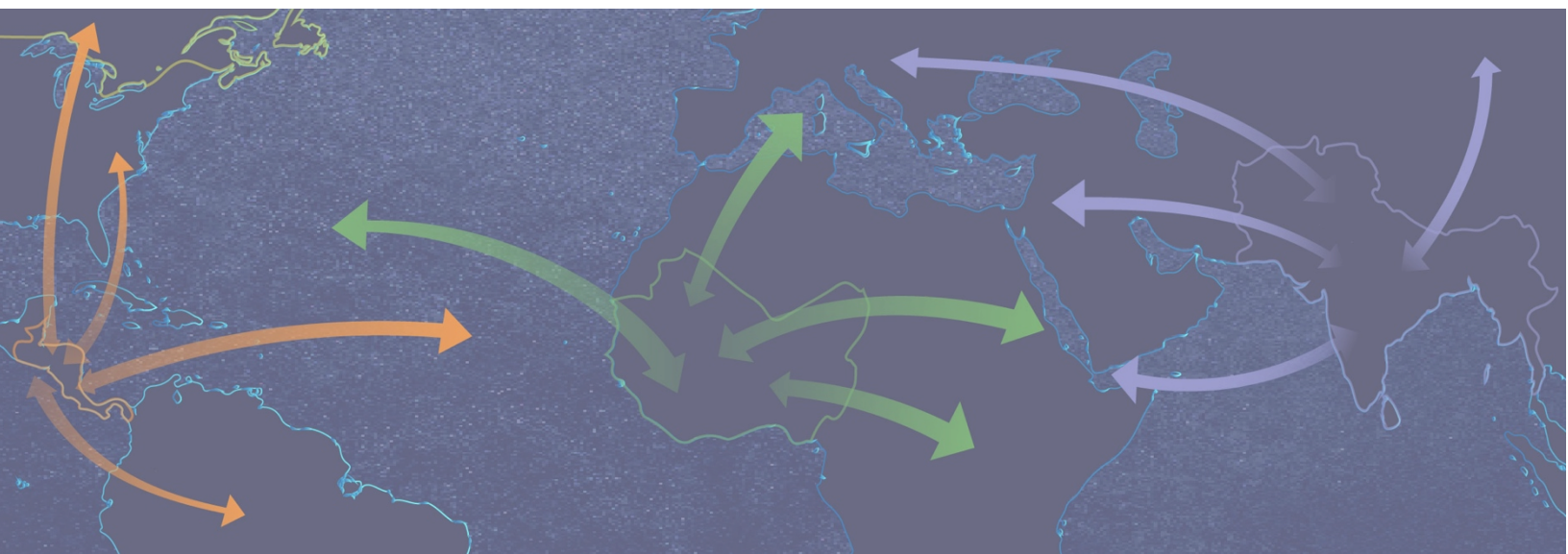# MEMO

Complex Migration Flows and Multiple Drivers in Comparative Perspective

Regional report
Migration within, into and from West Africa – Trends, drivers, and governance frameworks

The MEMO Research Project

MEMO is a **multidisciplinary project** to develop a socio-ecological system framework that integrates drivers (main contextual factors) and individual determinants of migration; its primary objectives are:

To map the links between internal, intra-regional and intercontinental migration along complex population dynamics and migration systems;

- To describe and interpret the interplay among migration drivers (environmental conditions, demographic and health factors, economic development dynamics, socio-political issues), accounting for cultural and emotional processes that can shape individual decisions to migrate;
- To provide evidence to inform policy and support an efficient and rights-based governance of international migration.

Differences and analogies of migration drivers and determinants are comparatively established across (and within) the following regional migration systems:

- **The Americas** – focusing on migration flows from the northern countries of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) to Mexico and further North to the USA and Canada.
- **West Africa** – focusing on Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Ivory Coast and their inter-related flows to each other, to neighbouring countries in West Africa and towards Europe and Canada.
- **South Asia** – focusing on Nepal and Bangladesh, internal and cross border flows within South Asia, as well as to Malaysia and Canada. The migration system and population dynamics are described and modelled to capture the plurality of (multi-directional) population flows.

MEMO will contribute innovative analytical tools to support a rights-based governance of migration and related drivers.

Research partner organizations

Regional report
Migration within, into and from West Africa – Trends, drivers, and governance frameworks

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1.0 Introduction

Migration in West Africa is multifaceted—deeply influenced by historical, socio-economic, and political factors. The region has long been characterised by high levels of mobility, with migration patterns shaped by the search for economic opportunities, political stability, and safety. Intra-regional migration is the most prevalent, supported by frameworks like the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol that allows people to move within the region for employment in agriculture, mining, and trade. Additionally, forced displacement driven by conflicts and instability contribute to significant migration flows. Three countries—namely, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—recently announced their withdrawal from the ECOWAS citing its failure to provide support for them to fight insecurity and terrorism, sanctions imposed by the regional economic community, and deviation from its founding principles. Despite these countries' decision to withdraw technically from the REC, in practice, citizens from these countries benefit from the ECOWAS free movement protocol and vice versa.

In recent decades, outward migration from West Africa to Europe, North America, and emerging destinations like the Gulf States, Gabon, and South Africa has grown (Teye, 2022; Setrana and Kleist, 2022). These migration trends are driven by a mix of economic hardship, environmental shifts, and security concerns. Factors like social networks, access to information, and migration intermediaries play key roles in facilitating movement. Understanding the underlying drivers of migration within and from West Africa is crucial to addressing its impacts on both the region and its people.

This paper examines the historical and contemporary dynamics of migration in West Africa. It offers a detailed analysis of migration patterns and the complex factors that drive mobility in West Africa, highlighting the role of policy structures and migrant intermediaries in the migration process.

The paper is organised as follows: the Introduction is followed by an overview of the immigration and emigration trends and flows in West Africa. Next, it examines the complex drivers of migration patterns in West Africa from both historical and contemporary perspectives. The paper follows with a detailed examination of the role of policy structures and intermediaries in shaping migration patterns both within and from West Africa. It then examines the opportunities and challenges faced by migrants and concludes a discussion of the main arguments and research questions for future research.

2.0 Brief overview of regional migration flows

While the absolute number of international migrants in Africa has grown over time, their proportion relative to the continent's total population has slightly declined, from 2.5 per cent in 1990 to 1.9 per cent in 2020. The growth in international migrant stock slowed notably in 2020, largely due to measures introduced to stem the Covid-19 pandemic such as lockdowns and travel restrictions implemented by governments across Africa and globally. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs data show that more than five out of every eight migrants originating from ECOWAS countries remain within Africa (UNDESA 2020). A significant portion of these movements involves cross-border trade and travel, which play an essential role in meeting labour demands in critical sectors. This migration also contributes to economic stability and enhances the socio-economic well-being of both origin and destination countries (Setrana and Okyerefo, 2024). Studies by Yaro and Setrana (2024) and Okyerefo and Setrana (2017) highlight this trend. Olsen (2011) further underscored this with evidence showing that migration within West Africa is nearly six times higher than migration within Europe, involving over three per cent of the region's population.

While historical migration patterns in the region have typically followed a north-south direction, recent decades have seen notable changes. Traditionally migrant-receiving nations such as Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Nigeria have increasingly become sources of skilled professionals, including doctors and nurses, migrating to Europe and North America since the 1980s (Teye et al., 2015). Nevertheless, despite widespread political and media narratives suggesting a mass movement from West Africa to Europe, data contradicts this portrayal. According to UNDESA (2020), 26 per cent of total migration from West Africa is to Europe and 24 per cent to Oceania, North America, and Asia. Moreover, data in Table 1 reveals that every West African country both receives and sends migrants to neighbouring nations. Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Ghana are the leading destinations for migrants; Table 2 identifies Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Mali as the main countries of origin for migrants.

The Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire have the highest proportions of international migrants relative to their populations—8.92 and 9.72 per cent, respectively. In many cases, the main countries from which a nation receives migrants also serve as key destinations for its emigrants. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate these reciprocal flows. For instance, Burkina Faso is the largest source of migrants in Côte d'Ivoire and Côte d'Ivoire is the primary source of migrants entering Burkina Faso; similarly, Togo is the leading contributor of immigrants to Ghana, while Ghana ranks as Togo's second-most common source of immigrants (Table 1). A similar relationship is evident in migrant destinations: Burkina Faso sends the majority of its migrants to Côte d'Ivoire, while Burkina Faso itself is the top destination for migrants from Côte d'Ivoire (Table 2).

Geographic proximity plays a significant role in these migration patterns, as seen in the movement of people between neighbouring countries, for instance Ghana and Togo or Sierra Leone and Liberia. Historical factors such as colonial relationships and shared official languages also contribute to migration flows within the region (Cross, 2013; Yendaw, 2022). For example, the strong economic and cultural ties between Ghana and Nigeria stemming from their colonial past have led to significant two-way migration. Nigerian migrants account for 20.8 per cent of all migrants in Ghana, making them the largest migrant group in the country (Yendaw, 2022; Owusu Kyereko, 2018). 2.1 Northern Central America

The countries of Northern Central America—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—are predominantly countries of origin of diverse mobility flows. Since the 1960s, net migration rates in the three countries have been negative, with a significantly higher number of emigrants than that of immigrants for Guatemala and El Salvador (see Figure 2).

In the 1970s and 1980s, a large share of out-migration from these countries was due to civil wars and internal conflict. Honduras was a country of destination of those who fleeing civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. While there is some intra-regional migration, mainly towards Costa Rica, most immigrants from Northern Central America have the U.S. as their intended destination. As an example, in 2020 close to one-and-a-half million Salvadorans lived in the U.S.—a figure equivalent to 22.4 per cent of the total Salvadoran population (see country report for more details).

Table 1: Stock of immigrants by country of destination and top five countries of origin, 2020

No	Country of destination	Immigration		Top five countries of origin				
		Frequency	Percent	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth
1	Benin	394,276	3.25	Niger	Togo	Nigeria	Côte d'Ivoire	Ghana
2	Burkina Faso	723,989	3.46	Côte d'Ivoire	Mali	Ghana	Togo	Niger
3	Cabo Verde	15,788	2.84	Guinea-Bissau	São Tomé & Príncipe	Senegal	Portugal	Russian Federation
4	Côte d'Ivoire	2,564,857	9.72	Burkina Faso	Mali	Guinea	Liberia	Benin

5	Gambia	215,659	8.92	Senegal	Guinea	Guinea-Bissau	Mali	Mauritania
6	Ghana	476,412	1.53	Togo	Burkina Faso	Nigeria	Côte d'Ivoire	Liberia
7	Guinea	121,437	0.92	Sierra Leone	Liberia	Mali	Côte d'Ivoire	Senegal
8	Guinea-Bissau	17,945	0.91	Senegal	Guinea	The Gambia	Liberia	Portugal
9	Liberia	87,947	1.74	Côte d'Ivoire	Guinea	Sierra Leone	Ghana	Nigeria
10	Mali	485,829	2.40	Côte d'Ivoire	Burkina Faso	Guinea	Mauritania	Senegal
11	Mauritania	182,286	3.92	Senegal	Mali	Guinea	Algeria	France
12	Niger	348,056	1.44	Mali	Nigeria	Burkina Faso	Benin	Togo
13	Nigeria	1,308,568	0.63	Benin	Ghana	Mali	Togo	Niger
14	Senegal	274,929	1.64	Mauritania	Guinea	Mali	Guinea-Bissau,	Sierra Leone
15	Sierra Leone	53,746	0.67	Guinea	Liberia	The Gambia	Nigeria	Ghana
16	Togo	279,936	3.38	Benin	Ghana	Nigeria	Niger	Côte d'Ivoire

Sources: Immigration: https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international- migrant-stock Top (5) countries of origin: https://www.knomad.org/data/migration/immigration
Sources: (UN, 2020; Knomad.org, n.d.)

Ethnic ties significantly influence the movement of migrants in West Africa (Yendaw, 2022). For example, some Ewe people from Togo often migrate to Ghana's Volta Region to work and live among their relatives. Similarly, the Kpelle ethnic group, whose members are found in both Liberia and Guinea, frequently crosses the borders of these countries for economic and social purposes. Another example is the Kissi ethnic community, which spans Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, with individuals moving between these nations (Teye et al., 2015). These ethnic groups, whose presence transcends national boundaries, often view the borders drawn during colonial times as

arbitrary divisions (Awumbila et al., 2014). Land border closures in 2020 and 2021 to control the spread of Covid-19 disrupted intra-regional migration. However, after pandemic restrictions were lifted and borders reopened, migration flows within the region started to recover.

In addition to intra-regional migration, West African migrants are increasingly moving to other parts of Africa. For instance, migration to countries outside West Africa, such as oil-rich nations in Central Africa like Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, has increased in recent years. There has also been a notable movement of West Africans to South Africa (Teye, 2022). Previously, Libya served as a critical transit point for migrants attempting to reach Europe via the Mediterranean. However, political instability and insecurity in Libya since 2011 have significantly reduced migration through this route.

Proximity plays a vital role in determining migration destinations within West Africa, with many migrants choosing nearby countries. As noted earlier, colonial histories and the adoption of common official languages have significantly shaped intra-regional migration patterns (Awumbila et al., 2014).

Table 2: Stock of emigrants by country of origin and destination

No	Country of origin	Emigration		Top five destination countries				
		Frequency	Percent					
		2020	2020	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth
1	Benin	681,800	5.62	Nigeria	Côte d'Ivoire,	Togo	Gabon	France
2	Burkina Faso	1,600,000	7.65	Côte d'Ivoire	Ghana	Mali	Niger	Togo
3	Cabo Verde	187,600	33.74	Angola	Portugal	United States	France	Netherlands
4	Côte d'Ivoire	1,100,000	4.17	Burkina Faso	Liberia	France	Mali	Ghana
5	Gambia	139,200	5.76	Spain	United Kingdom	United States	Nigeria	Sweden
6	Ghana	1,000,000	3.22	Nigeria	United States	United Kingdom	Côte d'Ivoire	Italy
7	Guinea	550,800	4.19	Côte d'Ivoire	Sierra Leone	Senegal	Liberia	The Gambia
8	Guinea-Bissau	111,800	5.68	Portugal	Senegal	The Gambia	Spain	Cabo Verde
9	Liberia	233,600	4.62	Guinea	Côte d'Ivoire	United States	Sierra Leone	Ghana

10	Mali	1,300,000	6.42	Côte d'Ivoire	Nigeria	France	Gabon	Niger
11	Mauritania	130,200	2.80	Senegal	Nigeria	France	Mali	Spain
12	Niger	399,700	1.65	Nigeria	Benin	Côte d'Ivoire	Cameroon	Togo
13	Nigeria	1,700,000	0.82	United States	United Kingdom	Cameroon	Ghana	Italy
14	Senegal	693,800	4.14	France	The Gambia	Italy	Spain	Mauritania
15	Sierra Leone	152,500	1.91	Guinea	United States	United Kingdom	Liberia	Senegal
16	Togo	545,400	6.59	Ghana	Nigeria	Côte d'Ivoire	Benin	France

Europe has long been a key destination for migrants from West Africa, with historical connections between the two regions tracing back to the colonial era (Akanle, 2023). Economic crises and political instability during the 1970s and 1980s further accelerated migration to Europe. Since then, both skilled and unskilled migrants from West Africa have sought opportunities there, using both legal channels and irregular routes. Data indicates that irregular migrants from West Africa comprise a significant share of those entering countries such as Italy, Spain, Malta, and Greece (IOM, 2020). These migrants often traverse the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. The rise in irregular migration has largely been driven by restrictive immigration policies and limited legal pathways for migration (Teye et al., 2024).

Migration from West Africa also extends to the Gulf States, where private recruitment agencies, formal and informal, play a crucial role in facilitating the movement of low-skilled workers. Popular destinations include Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. These migrants, often women employed as domestic workers, face significant challenges, including exploitation and abuse. For example, in 2015, the Ghana Labour Department reported that around 1,550 Ghanaians were working in domestic roles in Middle Eastern countries (Teye, 2022), prompting several West African countries to implement bans on labour migration to protect their citizens (Bisong, 2021).

In short, the migration landscape in West Africa is complex and characterised by diverse patterns and drivers. Intra-regional migration remains the most common, with proximity, ethnic ties, and historical connections playing significant roles in shaping flows. Colonial legacies such as shared languages further influence movements within the region. Ultimately, economic opportunities, cultural ties, and geographic proximity continue to shape migration decisions, while ongoing efforts aim to safeguard migrants' rights and welfare.

3.0 Factors influencing migration in West Africa

Migration in West Africa is a complex and ever-evolving phenomenon, requiring continuous analysis of its structures, processes, patterns, and impacts across both developed and developing societies (Teye, 2022). The factors driving migration within and beyond the region can be classified into predisposing, proximate, precipitating, and mediating factors, which are best understood through the historical context of migration in West Africa (Teye, 2022; Van Hear and Crisp, 1998) Precipitating factors driving migration in West Africa are the direct triggers that compel individuals to leave their homes; Proximate factors refer to the immediate drivers of migration such as economic hardship; and Mediating factors are the channels that facilitate migration, including transportation and communication infrastructure, and the presence of social networks.

3.1 Human Mobility within West Africa: Historical antecedents

Early forms of mobility: Human mobility in West Africa has deep historical roots that have shaped the region's socio-economic and cultural development from the pre-colonial era to the present. In pre-colonial times, migration was primarily driven by economic motivations such as the search for fertile land to settle and farm or the pursuit of trading opportunities. These activities contributed to the creation of trans-Saharan trade routes (Adepoju, 2003; Manuh, 2005). Yaro (2008) highlights that many communities and religious groups in the sub-region migrated to their current locations in search of safer environments and better ecological conditions. Resource distribution played a crucial role in population movements as people sought to trade goods like salt, food, and livestock. These exchanges laid the foundation for the trans-Saharan trade network, which became a vital economic and cultural corridor.

Beyond trade, migration during this period also fostered social and cultural connections through intermarriage, the exchange of slaves, and military alliances, which all contributed to unity among West African communities. Pre-colonial migration was therefore a blend of socio-economic needs and cultural factors, collectively categorised as predisposing factors that shaped the region's mobility patterns (Yaro, 2008).

The colonial era

During the colonial era, migration in West Africa was shaped by existing and newly-introduced predisposing factors, mostly unfavourable socio-economic conditions. Colonial economic policies created significant regional disparities by prioritising plantation economies in coastal areas over northern regions. The establishment of national borders for administrative purposes fundamentally altered mobility patterns within and beyond West Africa. Forced migration was a prominent feature of this period, with millions of individuals subjected to the transatlantic slave trade, resulting in their displacement to North America, Europe, and the Caribbean (Teye, 2022;

de Haas et al., 2019). Additionally, colonial governments imposed restrictions on movement, thus reducing intra-regional mobility.

Despite the challenges caused by arbitrary borders during the colonial era, some positive developments emerged. Road and railway networks, as well as other infrastructure projects, facilitated large-scale population movements, particularly seasonal cross-border labour migration involving men. Colonial economic and recruitment policies, including contract and forced labour laws, also drove labour mobility. Workers were often recruited from northern countries like Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali to southern regions such as Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana where they were employed on plantations and in mining (Anarfi and Kwankye, 2003; Yaro and Setrana, 2024; Teye, 2022).

Human Migration after Independence

By the early 1960s, most West African countries had gained independence and migration patterns during this period were shaped by a combination of precipitating, proximate, and mediating factors. These drivers have evolved over time, becoming more complex and diverse. In the immediate post-colonial period, particularly during the 1960s, intra-regional migration largely followed a north-to-south trajectory. Ghana, for instance, attracted labour migrants from countries like Niger, Burkina Faso, Togo, Mali, Benin, and Nigeria due to its flourishing mining and cocoa industries (Awumbila et al., 2014). Similarly, seasonal migration was common, with workers from Mali, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau traveling to The Gambia and Senegal to work on groundnut farms.

In the wake of the 1973 oil crisis, Nigeria emerged as a key destination for West African migrants, especially unskilled labourers from Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Cameroon, and Cape Verde. These migrants found employment in Nigeria's construction and service sectors (Teye, Awumbila, and Benneh, 2015; Yaro, 2008). By the late 1970s, an estimated one million Ghanaians had migrated to Nigeria (Teye, Awumbila, and Benneh, 2015). However, economic downturns in the region led to significant shifts in migration patterns, including large-scale relocations from traditional destinations such as Côte d'Ivoire. This period also witnessed mass expulsions of migrants, particularly in Ghana in 1969 and Nigeria in 1983 and 1985 (Bakewell and de Haas, 2007; Yaro, 2008).

3.2 Contemporary Migrations in the Region

In the 1980s, migration trends within West Africa remained consistent with earlier patterns of labour migration flowing from the Sahelian regions to the coastal areas. These movements were driven by a combination of economic and environmental factors, reflecting the challenges and opportunities within the sub-region.

Precipitating factors driving migration in West Africa are the direct triggers that compel individuals to leave their homes. These include acute economic difficulties that undermine livelihoods including climate change and environmental impacts, such as droughts and floods, unemployment, low wages, and declining local industries. Limited access to essential services like healthcare, education, and social welfare further pushes people to seek better opportunities elsewhere. Additionally, escalating security issues in countries like Mali and Nigeria, including conflicts and insurgencies, have intensified migration, particularly among internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees seeking safety and stability.

Proximate factors refer to the immediate drivers of migration. These include economic hardship, i.e., widespread poverty, high unemployment rates, and low prices for agricultural products—all prevalent in many West African countries. Young people, disproportionately affected by these economic conditions, are particularly likely to migrate in search of improved livelihoods and the ability to support their families. Available data suggest that labour migration constitutes the largest share of intra-regional migration.[1] Similarly, global trends like unequal terms of trade and demographic changes—such as the higher fertility rates in West Africa compared to Europe—create labour surpluses that encourage migration towards countries with labour shortages.

Migration within the region is influenced by mediating factors such as access to resources, the quality of transportation and communication infrastructure, and the presence of social networks. For example, better access to transportation and information about overseas job opportunities has simplified the process of reaching migration destinations. Additionally, social networks in destination countries are crucial in supporting new migrants by assisting with settlement and finding employment opportunities.

Another significant mediating factor is the role of migration brokers and intermediaries who facilitate the migration process, though at times in exploitative ways. The growth of social media also serves as a driver, increasing awareness of opportunities abroad and the potential social status that migration can bring.

Countries within the region experiencing security problems, for example the insurgency led by Boko Haram in Nigeria, contribute to significant out-migration. Opportunities for employment and relative peace are significant proximate factors drawing migrants to destination countries within and beyond the region, particularly in coastal West Africa. Countries like Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire still attract labour migrants for their mining and plantation economies.

In West Africa, migration is also influenced by deeply ingrained cultural expectations that require sons to make significant sacrifices for the welfare of their parents. However, the challenging living conditions faced by many young people often hinder their ability to fulfil these traditional roles as

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[1] IOM (2022) Migration Flows in West and Central Africa. Available at https://dtm.iom.int/data-stories/migration-flows-west-central-africa

providers within their families and communities. The journey by sea or land then becomes a symbolic rite of passage, allowing young people to prove their determination and courage. In Senegal, for instance, migration represents a process of self-affirmation, serving functions of both emancipation and individualisation (Tîmera, 2001). The image of a successful young migrant who supports their family and community of origin is extremely valued in West Africa especially Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Ivory Coast (Prothmann, 2018).

The irregular migration of young persons via the Mediterranean is another type of movement beyond the region that is spurred by economic factors. Senegal is of special interest in literature because of its geographical position as a transit point facilitating irregular migration to Europe. It is one of the key convergent locations for prospective African migrants to Europe (Italy, Spain, etc.) through clandestine crossings of the Mediterranean Sea and the desert, with all the risks involved. It is thus considered a centre for migration business by smugglers and traffickers and a focus of restrictive migration policies from the European Union (Maher, 2017). Irregular migration from Senegal typically involves young people aged 18-36 years with a medium level of education. Occasionally, women and children aged 13 to 15 years also attempt illegal migration by sea or land (IOM, 2019). Continued restrictive immigration policies, limited regular channels, lack of opportunities in the home country, diaspora and social media networks often influence this decision.

In effect, colonial migration patterns in West Africa were largely driven by labour demands in mining and agriculture, imposition of national boundaries, and colonial economic policies. Post-independence migration in the sub-region persisted along established routes, but with shifts in destination countries due to crisis. Contemporary migration is increasingly regulated by regional frameworks such as ECOWAS protocols which can be described as a mediating factor.

4.0 Overview of regional and continental protocols governing migration in West Africa

This section examines the impact of policy frameworks, particularly the implementation of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol, on migration trends within West Africa. To ensure migration is rights-based for all workers, ECOWAS member states align with both regional and continental standards, notably the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment as well as the AU Migration Policy Framework for Africa. Table 3 provides an overview of these regional protocols and their application within the West African context.

The adoption of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Rights of Residence and Establishment in 1979 had a significant impact on mobility within the region. Designed to facilitate intra-regional migration, the protocol aimed to reduce travel restrictions, enabling the exchange of assets, knowledge, and skills across borders (Bakewell and de Haas, 2007; Teye, Awumbila,

and Benneh, 2015; Quartey, Setrana, & Tagoe, 2020). This framework represents a vital step toward the vision of a borderless West Africa.

The protocol's implementation has faced several challenges. Wealthier member states often tighten border controls in response to perceived pressures such as an influx of migrants from economically weaker states or states experiencing political instability or armed conflict. Additionally, corruption among border authorities—including customs officials and police—remains a persistent issue, resulting in extortion and difficulties for travelers, migrants, and traders. These challenges highlight the dual nature of the region's regulatory framework, which provides opportunities for integration and mobility while presenting obstacles to the seamless realization of free movement principles.

Table 3: The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement

DATE	THE PROTOCOLS	REASONS FOR THE PROTOCOL	IMPLEMENTATION STATUS BY MEMBER STATES
Lagos, 28 May, 1975	The Treaty establishing the Economic Community of West African States signed in Lagos on 28th May, 1975	This Treaty established ECOWAS to ensure regional integration	All member states remain committed to it. However, a current challenge is the decision by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to withdraw from ECOWAS and establish the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).
Dakar, 29 May, 1979	Protocol A/P.1/5/79 Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment	To implement the concept of free movement as outlined in sub-paragraph (d) of paragraph 2 of Article 2 and Article 27 of the ECOWAS Treaty.	All countries recognised the protocol but there are implementation challenges. A major challenge is the introduction of AES
1982	Protocol A/P 3/5/82 Relating to the Definition of Community Citizen	Assist to define community citizen, acquisition, loss and forfeiture, withdrawal and re-integration within the ECOWAS Community	Member states accept the definition, but a major challenge is the introduction of AES
1985 July	A/SP. 2/7/85 Supplementary Protocol on the Code of Conduct for the Implementation of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment	To strengthen cooperation in managing the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital.	There is increasing cooperation among member states
1985 Dec	Decision A/DEC.2/7/85 of the Authority of Heads of State and Government of the Economic Community of West African States Relating to the	To streamline and simplify procedures for cross-border movement within Member States and promote the use of a unified passport.	Replaced by the ECOWAS Card

	Establishment of ECOWAS Travel Certificate for Member States		
1986 July	A/SP.1/7/86 Supplementary Protocol on the Second Phase (Right of Residence) of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment	To move forward with the Protocol's second phase, which focuses on the right of residence.	There are still implementation challenges. Some countries still demand residence permit. Cote D'Ivoire has recently announced the abolition of the residence permit requirement
1989 June	A/SP.1/6/89 Supplementary Protocol Amending and Complementing the Provisions of Article 7 of the Protocol on Free Movement, Right of Residence and Establishment	For the amicable resolution of disputes	All member states recognise this provision
1990 June	Supplementary Protocol A/SP 2/5/90 on the Implementation of the Third Phase (Right of Establishment) of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment	To implement the third phase of the Free Movement protocol.	Not fully implemented.
1990 Dec	Decision A/DEC. 2/5/90 Establishing A Residence Card in ECOWAS Member States.	To establish a single Residence Card for the Community.	Not fully operational
1992 Dec	Decision C/DEC. 3/12/92 on the Introduction of a Harmonized Immigration and Emigration Form in ECOWAS Member States	The adoption of a standardised Community immigration and emigration form will help streamline and simplify cross-border procedures within Member States.	Recognised but not fully operational
1993 and 2010	(ECOWAS) Revised Treaty	To adjust to global changes in order to maximize the benefits from these developments.	Endorsed by all member states
Accra, 10 -11 July 2014	Supplementary Act A/SA.3/07/14 Repealing Chapter III, Articles 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 on Residence Card Valid as Visiting and Residence Permit of Protocol A/SP/1/7/86 on the Implementation of the Second Stage (Right of Residence) of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and	The provisions of Chapter III, Articles 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, concerning the Resident Card or Resident Permit, are hereby revoked.	Biometric card introduced but not fully operational

	Establishment on Residence Cards and Residence Permit		
Accra, 10-11 July 2014	Supplementary Act A/Sa. 1/07/14 Amending Paragraph 8 of Article 1, Paragraph 1 and 2 of Article 3 and Paragraph 1 and 2 of Article 5 of Protocol A/P1/5/79 on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment Relating to Travel Documents	A valid travel document may include a passport, an official biometric national identity card, or a laissez-passer issued by a Member State or any ECOWAS institution.	ECOWAS card recognised as travel document but not fully operational
Accra, 10 - 11 July 2014	Supplementary Act A/SA.2/07/14 Amending Paragraph 9 of Article 1 of Protocol A/SP.1/7/85 on the Code of Conduct for the Implementation of the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment	To guarantee that a citizen who is a national of one member state but resides in another member state is afforded the same rights as the citizens of the member state of residence.	Not fully operational
Accra, 10-11 July 2014	Decision A/DEC.1/07/14 Amending Decision A/Dec.2/7/85 on the Establishment of a Travel Certificate for ECOWAS Member States	The National Biometric Identity Card is officially recognised as a travel document within the ECOWAS region, effective July 2014.	Was postponed to 2016
Abuja, 15 Dec 2014	Decision A/DEC.01/12/14 Amending Decision A/Dec 2/7/85 Establishing of a Travel Certificate for ECOWAS Member States	The Biometric Identity Card was scheduled to be introduced in member states by 2016.	Only six (6) countries have stated the implementation of the ID Card: Ghana, the Gambia, Benin, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, and Sierra Leone

Source: Setrana (2024) based on the ECOWAS Protocols on Free Movement

5.0 Opportunities and challenges of migration of West Africa

This section focuses on the opportunities and challenges associated with migration both within and from West Africa to other areas. After examining the various social and economic benefits associated with West African migration regimes, it discusses the challenges posed by migration in the sub-region.

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5.1 Opportunities

Enhance socioeconomic integration

Migration within and from West Africa present various socio-economic opportunities, often facilitated by initiatives like Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS. As noted earlier, the introduction of the economic block in 1979, subsequent protocol on Free Movement, Right of Residence and Employment in 1979, and the current implementation of the ECOWAS card affirm the resolve of greater integration in the sub-region. Easing the movement of persons and goods within the region does not only enhance social and cultural ties but also improve on trade liberalization among ECOWAS nationals and member states. For many years, women have dominated cross-border trade in West Africa, engaging in exchange of goods like apparel, jewellery, cosmetics, and food (Awumbila & Torvikeh, 2018).

West Africa is touted as a leading migratory area among the various Regional Economic Communities (RECs) on the Continent. The introduction of the economic block in 1979, subsequent protocol on Free Movement, Right of Residence and Employment in 1979 and the current implementation of the ECOWAS card affirm the resolve of greater integration in the sub-region. Easing the movement of persons and goods within the region will not only enhance social and cultural ties but also improve on trade liberalization among ECOWAS nationals and member states.

Larger market demand and supply

Migration serves as a means to address labour shortages for the growth of the ECOWAS subregion and beyond. Trade liberalization within the sub-region means larger market for goods and services. With a population estimated at 456,245,597 by the World Population Review platform, liberal migration based on the free movement protocol will mean increasing market for producers (World Population Review, 2023). The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which seeks to enhance trade across Africa by reducing barriers to the movement of goods and labour is an initiative that could enhance these existing trade integration (AU, 2018). Currently, major trading among member states includes the informal cross border trade, mostly involving women. For example, Ghanaian traders going to Togo for clothes or Niger for onion and Burkina Faso for Tomatoes. Other ECOWAS nationals particularly, Nigerians are trading in Cote D'Ivoire in all sorts of goods including but not limited to mobile phones businesses and spare parts. A number of young persons are migrating from northern Mali in search for work and to improve family resources (Keita, 2009).

Remittance inflows

The economic impact of remittance inflows in West African countries is profound, not only as a source of foreign exchange but also as a stabilising force for the region's socioeconomic landscape. According to World Bank data on personal remittances received in 2023, Nigeria leads West Africa with inflows totaling $19.55 billion, or for 5.2 per cent of its GDP. This underscores

the significant role of diaspora contributions in bolstering economic resilience. For Ghana, received remittances of $4.63 billion contribute 6.1 per cent to its GDP, while countries like The Gambia and Liberia exhibit even higher remittance-to-GDP ratios at 23.3 and 18.2 per cent, respectively (World Bank Group and KNOMAD, 2023). These figures illustrate the deep reliance of smaller economies on remittance flows for economic stability and development. Inflows vary markedly across the region, reflective of the sizes of both their respective national economies and diaspora populations. For instance, Cabo Verde, a smaller economy, receives $316 million in remittances, yet these constitute a substantial 12.5 per cent of its GDP. Similarly, Senegal's remittance inflows of $2.94 billion represents 9.3 per cent of its GDP. These significant percentages indicate the centrality of remittances in supporting household consumption, healthcare, education, and entrepreneurship in these nations and highlight the need for targeted policies that recognise remittances as a critical economic factor, especially for fostering sustainable development in West Africa.

Table 4: Remittance inflows in West Africa (2023)

No.	Country	Remittance inflows (US$ million)	% of GDP in 2023
1	Benin	233	1.2
2	Burkina Faso	579	2.8
3	Cabo Verde	316	12.5
4	Cote d'Ivoire	1,042	1.3
5	Gambia, The	550	23.3
6	Ghana	4,633	6.1
7	Guinea	527	2.3
8	Guinea-Bissau	206	10.5
9	Liberia	800	18.2
10	Mali	1,154	5.6
11	Mauritania	109	1.0
12	Niger	725	4.4
13	Nigeria	19,550	5.2
14	Senegal	2,936	9.3
15	Sierra Leone	322	8.2
16	Togo	650	7.2

Source: World Bank (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS)

Other forms of remittances which are hardly measured and spoken of but contributes to development is social remittances. Social remittances are the skills, knowledge, norms and values West African migrants either return home with or transfer to the home country while they are abroad (Setrana and Arhin-Sam, 2021). For example, some university scholars return home to

contribute their knowledge through teaching and supervision under the Diaspora-Linkage programme in the University of Ghana funded by Carnegie (Setrana, 2019).

<u>Establishing business opportunities</u>

Migration and free movement within West Africa have also contributed significant social remittances in the form of business opportunities, socio-political ideas and knowledge transfer as well as student mobility. Migrant networks facilitated opportunities for migrants to access and establish business ventures in several parts of West Africa. There are many migrants in West Africa working in agriculture and informal trade businesses within the sub-region. For instance, of the 460,000 foreign nationals recorded in Ghana, the largest number is from the ECOWAS region (GSS, 2020). Among them, 43 per cent, 28 per cent, and 11 per cent were employed, respectively, in agriculture, wholesale trade, and manufacturing. Similarly, in 2020 Senegal recorded 275,000 international migrants: 60 per cent originated from neighboring West African countries and were primarily engaged in handicrafts, retail trade, and transport (UNDESA, 2019; IOM, 2020a).

<u>Enhance cooperation and collaboration</u>

Free movement of goods and persons within the sub-region grant various governments and other agencies the opportunity to collaborate and cooperate for information-sharing on best practices and other alerts (IOM, 2020a). For example, security agencies collaborate on information about criminals through the West African Police Information System (WAPIS); in public health, the West Africa Health Organization (WAHO) coordinates disease surveillance across borders, allowing countries to quickly share health alerts and mobilise joint responses to threats like Ebola and Covid-19, enhancing collective resilience (ECOWAS, 2020). Through these systems, West African nations strengthen regional solidarity thus improving their ability to tackle common challenges effectively.

<u>Reducing Tension and Conflict</u>

Migration serves as a mechanism for reducing conflicts and fostering peaceful coexistence across West Africa. One of the tensions among the member states is in relation to boundary disputes. When there is free movement the issue of border disputes will be reduced because most of the boundaries that divide traditional areas making it difficult to cross to the other part will ease. Economic pressures and limited resources in certain regions often lead to localised conflicts as communities compete over scarce resources. Migration can alleviate some of these pressures by redistributing populations and resources more evenly, reducing the strain on densely populated areas (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, as individuals and families migrate to new communities, they bring diverse perspectives and cultural practices that can enrich local societies and foster greater understanding. Such intercultural exchanges promote tolerance, reduce prejudice, and build bridges between communities, contributing to a more peaceful, united West Africa.

<u>Enhanced Student Mobility</u>

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Migration also provides opportunities for enhanced student mobility within West Africa, allowing many West African citizens to access high quality tertiary education in other member states. In 2020 for example there were nearly 3,000 Nigerian students in various degree programs in Ghana and this will definitely increase over the years. Moreover, Benin and Cote D'Ivoire hosted, respectively, 187 and 258 students from the sub-region who were enrolled in engineering, medicine, oil and gas, automation, and business management programmes. These educational opportunities provide prospects for employment after graduation in both destination and origin countries (Abura, 2022). Many ECOWAS nationals who pursue higher education in other West African Countries usually return to their home country. There is, however, evidence of some taking up employment opportunities in destination areas, for example, Nigerian graduates finding employment in Ghana's oil, mining, and gas sectors (ibid.).

5.2 Challenges

Despite the potential benefits, migration in West Africa faces substantial challenges that limit its effectiveness and the opportunities it can offer. These challenges stem from political, economic, and social barriers that complicate the free movement of people and goods across the region.

Sovereignty as a stumbling block

The Westphalian treaty that gave birth to sovereign states since 1648 has been a great tool for the protection of countries, however, in terms of regionalism it becomes a stumbling block if member states continue to uphold their sovereign rights to the neglect of the regional concessions made (Asante, 2020). An example is still demanding work permit when ECOWAS say otherwise. This caution is often rooted in the need to prioritize internal stability over regional commitments, which leads to inconsistent and fragmented migration policies across West African countries. As a result, migration policies in West Africa remain inconsistent, challenging the implementation of ECOWAS's vision for a cohesive, integrated region (Adetula, 2018).

Harassment, delays and increasing cost of travel at the borders

Even though ECOWAS protocol demand free movement, there are still many requirements and hence travellers particularly cross-border informal traders go through harassments and demands of unofficial payments. Migrants encounter extortion, discrimination, and sometimes physical violence from border officials (IOM, 2020a). There are many checks points that traders have to content with leading to delays. Aside this, the unofficial payments of fees and certain charges make the cost of travelling very costly.

Inadequate border infrastructure to facilitate migration and mobility

The introduction of the ECOWAS card requires advanced technology infrastructure at the borders to facilitate migration. Unfortunately, such advanced logistics are not currently in place, hindering the implementation of the ECOWAS National Biometric Identity Card (ENBIC), which was introduced to smoothen and facilitate migration and trade. Hindering the seamless movement of

people undermines the aim of the economic integration and challenges the competitiveness of the west African markets (Setrana, 2024).

National Security interest leading to securitization of migration

The volatile security situation within the Sahel region of ECOWAS has led to the securitisation of migration[2]. Unfortunately, migration has been framed as a security threat which slows down regional relations as well as contradicting the core principles of ECOWAS. The security perception associated with migration has compelled countries to strengthen border management and security measures, thereby affecting cross-border training and border community engagements. For example, the increasing insurgencies along the Burkina Faso-Ghana border has raised security concerns among border communities and this has further affected families' engagement across border communities and trade as well as farming activities[3].

6.0 Discussion of findings of the literature review and setting a research agenda

Research indicates that while many West African migrants travel to other African countries, there are also significant migration flows to Europe, the Americas, and more recently, the Gulf States. Contrary to the widespread belief that West African migration is primarily directed towards Europe, evidence from both historical and current studies highlights that most migration within and from the region occurs on an intra-regional basis (Yaro and Setrana, 2024). Intra-regional labour migration typically involves movement from the Sahelian countries to the coastal and resource-rich areas in the south.

Colonial history, geography, environmental challenges, and shared cultural traits such as common languages are among factors influencing the choice of migration destinations within the region. Despite the continued dominance of intra-regional migration, West African migration patterns are undergoing notable changes. For example, Libya, which was once a popular transit destination for migrants attempting to reach Europe via the Mediterranean, has become less attractive due to persistent political instability. In response, new migration hubs have emerged such as Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, which attract migrants with their oil-driven economies. These evolving trends highlight the need for further research into the drivers and experiences of movement to these newly-favoured destinations.

Migration in West Africa is influenced by various factors. Key drivers in migrant-sending areas are socio-economic conditions: widespread poverty, poor living standards, high unemployment, low

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[2] https://ghana.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl2291/files/documents/2023-05/iom-ghana-security-perception-study-2023-digital.pdf
[3] https://ghana.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl2291/files/documents/2023-05/iom-ghana-security-perception-study-2023-digital.pdf

agricultural commodity prices, and inadequate access to health and education services. These conditions also contribute to irregular migration and youth trafficking, encouraging both skilled and unskilled individuals of all genders to seek opportunities through legal and illegal means, both within and beyond the region (Van Hear, 2012). Policies like ECOWAS's Free Movement of Persons, along with the Right of Residence and Establishment, have made it easier for people to migrate between countries such as Ghana and Nigeria. However, these movements have also facilitated activities like smuggling, trafficking, the proliferation of small arms, terrorism, and other forms of crime, with security threats in Mali and Nigeria, including those posed by Boko Haram, being notable examples (UNHCR, 2020a).

Mediating factors also play a role in migration decisions by either enabling or constraining movement. These include the presence of social networks, access to transport, and advances in communication technology. While earlier studies emphasised the negative aspects of migration intermediaries (Salt and Stein, 1997), recent research highlights their significant role in assisting potential migrants (Deshingkar et al., 2019). Migration drivers are primarily economic, but their effects are highly context-dependent.

Migration decisions are complex and shaped by structural factors such as poverty and environmental shocks, as well as by socio-cultural influences and individual agency. People often evaluate the potential for improved social and economic circumstances when deciding to migrate (Setrana, 2021; Schenk, 2020). Digital platforms, peer influence, and stories of successful migrants also play crucial roles in shaping aspirations (Setrana, 2021). Migration to destinations like the EU, UK, USA, Canada, and Australia is often viewed as a pathway to success, reinforced by kinship and social networks that perpetuate the belief in migration's benefits through chain migration and remittances—both tangible and intangible (Akanle and Adesina, 2017b; Akanle and Olutayo, 2012). The migration process in West Africa is influenced not only by individual aspirations but also by the roles of family, friends, and social networks. Both individual motivations and collective influences are critical to understanding how migration decisions are made (Yeboah, 2021; Akakpo and Bokpin, 2021). These decisions are fluid and multifaceted, particularly at the household level, requiring a comprehensive approach to fully grasp their complexity (Tamanja, 2016).

The literature review reveals a growing interest in understanding the migrant recruitment industry in West Africa. However, there remains limited insight into the patterns and irregularities characterising these recruitment processes. Further studies are needed to uncover the methods, strategies, and actions of the various actors operating within the region's migration recruitment sector. This includes identifying and analysing the roles, practices, and interactions of these actors while assessing their influence on migration decisions and the experiences of migrants from different social and economic backgrounds. Key research areas include pinpointing intermediaries involved in internal and cross-border migration; understanding the role of migrants

in these dynamics; examining the sectors into which migrants are recruited; and assessing the fairness and ethical standards of these recruitment practices.

The literature review also emphasises the disproportionate focus of policy and public discourse on migration from Africa to Europe overshadowing the significant contributions of internal and cross-border migration within West Africa. To address this gap, research should investigate the drivers of these movements, their impact, and the experiences of specific social groups— including women, children, and youth—who are often engaged in internal and cross-border migration.

Key areas for exploration include the challenges migrants face during cross-border movements despite the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol, with particular attention to the role of digitalisation in shaping the experiences of female cross-border traders. There is also a need to evaluate the extent to which the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol is being implemented and examine the obstacles ECOWAS nationals face in integrating into host communities. Furthermore, research should explore tensions between the ECOWAS protocols and the policies and laws of member states, assessing how these alignments or misalignments impact the effectiveness of the protocol's implementation.

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