

YOUTH MIGRATION FROM AFRICA: ADDRESSING CAUSES AND FINDING SOLUTIONS

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Introduction

Human migration is an age-old phenomenon that stretches back to the earliest period of human history. In the modern era, migration continues to provide states, societies and migrants with many opportunities. At the same time, migration has emerged in the last few years as a critical political and policy challenge in matters such as integration, displacement, safe migration and border management. In 2015, there were estimated 244 million international migrants globally - an increase from an estimated 155 million people in 2000 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UNDESA).

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines a migrant as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary and involuntary; (3) the causes of the movement; or (4) the length of the stay. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines youths as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. However, according to the UNESCO's African Youth Charter, a youth is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence and awareness of the interdependence as members of a community.

Drivers of Youth Migration

Young people migrate for a plethora of reasons. The decision to migrate is often related to important life transitions, such as obtaining

higher education, finding and starting work, or getting married. With some 71 million youth unemployed globally in 2016 (International Labour Organization, ILO), the search for employment opportunities continues to be a significant driver of youth migration in Africa. Many youths also choose or are forced to migrate to escape poverty, violence, conflict, or displacement due to the effects of war or climate change. As such, youths are heavily represented in migration as refugees or asylum-seekers. These issues influencing youth migration in Africa have dominance in some parts of the continent which I will proceed to discuss.

North Africa

Large income disparities between the origin and destination countries, high levels of unemployment, conflict and violence within and in surrounding sub-regions, extremely porous borders, volatile security and political situation remain significant drivers of massive youth emigration in North Africa. As a key-hub of transit activity for migrants, the North African sub-region is confronted with protection challenges associated with irregular migration to Europe. World migration report of 2018 states that between 2011 and 2016, approximately 630,000

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people used the "central Mediterranean route" to get to Italy. Majority of these migrants departed from Libya, with other departure countries including Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia. Of those who disembarked in Italy in 2016, the majority were from Western and Eastern Africa (Nigeria, Eritrea, Guinea, Cote d' Ivoire, Gambia, Senegal, Mali and Somalia). Others travelled from Morocco and Algeria to Spain,

along the so-called “Western Mediterranean route”.

Challenges and serious human rights violations which these African youths face along these corridors are profound and include deaths at sea, in the desert, and in other transit locations; missing migrants, exploitation, physical and emotional abuse, trafficking, smuggling, sexual and gender-based violence, arbitrary detention, forced labour, and most recently, slavery.

West and Central Africa

Historically, migration in this region has occurred in response to population pressure, environmental disasters, poor economic conditions, conflicts and adverse effects of macro-economic restructuring. Migrants from and within the sub-region include temporary cross-border workers, seasonal migrants, clandestine workers, professionals and refugees. For many West and Central African youths who have crossed the Mediterranean to reach Europe, Nigeria is an important country of transit as well as a major smuggling hub. Moreover, a number of borders in West Africa are extremely porous, enabling unauthorized movements between countries. Conflict and violence linked to political upheavals, communal and ethnic tensions, and recently, Boko Haram extremism, have affected internal and cross-border displacement.

Eastern and Southern Africa

Migration in Eastern and Southern Africa continues to involve high numbers of irregular migrants, characterized by mixed migration flows and underpinned by multiple drivers, including socio-economic factors, while conflict and political instability remain important drivers of irregular migration from Eastern Africa. Human trafficking is particularly prominent in both sub-regions, with people increasingly using the services of traffickers to reach their intended destinations. Many trafficking networks are based in the Horn of Africa, while countries that are members of the East African Community (EAC) such as Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania are largely transit countries. The Middle East, Europe, and Southern Africa are the three major destinations of migrants from Eastern Africa, who use four major routes, including the Western route via Sudan, into Libya and across the Mediterranean; and the

Eastern route transiting through Yemen to Saudi Arabia and beyond.

Similar to Eastern Africa, irregular migration is widespread in Southern Africa, involving intra-regional migrants such as those from Zimbabwe to South Africa as well as those from outside the sub-region. Many migrants originate from the Horn of Africa, notably from Ethiopia and Somalia. These migrants frequently utilize the services of smugglers. However, these persons face a significant number of vulnerabilities including extortion, physical and sexual violence, kidnapping and robbery, with many losing their lives as a result of being transported in inhumane conditions.

Intractable conflicts, political and communal violence, and peace-building setbacks have displaced millions in East Africa, with most countries in the sub-region affected. At the end of 2016, for example, there were over 1.4 million South Sudanese refugees and over 1.8 million internally displaced persons. Somalia was the origin of over 1 million refugees and more than 1.1 million internally displaced persons, while Burundi, Eritrea, Rwanda and Ethiopia also produce significant population of refugees, internally displaced persons or both (World Migration Report 2018).

Environmental change and disasters in East and Southern Africa are prevalent and increasing, and are influencing human movement and displacement. The sub-region has faced increased variability in precipitation and higher occurrence of drought in recent decades. These slow-onset environmental changes have a major impact on food security, given that agriculture is a dominant economic activity in both sub-regions. Recently, drought influenced by the El Nino climate cycle in 2015 and 2016 has caused humanitarian crises related to widespread food shortages and famine, contributing to displacement in several countries. Rapid-onset disasters such as flooding in 2016 also displaced about 300,000 people in Ethiopia, 40,000 in Kenya, 70,000 in Somalia, and thousands more in the United Republic of Tanzania and Madagascar (World Migration Report 2018).

Migration is not only a coping mechanism to escape poverty, it is an opportunity for rural young people to feel a sense of pride, self-

respect, and be viewed as leaders within their family, and their broader community. Young people view migration as an avenue to improve their status, learn new skills, and transit into adulthood. Thus, migration continues to serve as the means to improve livelihoods.

Youth are an integral component of the migrant population, both in terms of volume, and the effects they have on both their points of origin and destination. Estimates show that 15 percent (approximately 26 million) of the migrant population are youth (Touray 2006). Rural youth are particularly disadvantaged; with inadequately developed education and skills, many find limited employment opportunities in cities. Most face a future of low-wage employment, unemployment, underemployment, poverty, drugs, and crime.

The arrival of rural migrants in urban centers often worsen socio-economic situation in most states by expanding the pool of young urban job seekers, which increase the pressure on employers to offer competitive incomes and work standards to their employees.

Urban areas are becoming extremely overcrowded and overburdened, putting pressure on insufficient infrastructures, schools, health facilities, sanitation and water systems.

This escalating problem of urbanization has created a new context of poverty in which urban centers are overtaxed and unprepared to absorb increasing youth unemployment. In absolute numbers, youth unemployment becomes more prevalent in urban areas than rural areas. The situation is worse for young women - many of whom have migrated to escape forced and early marriage - as they face different kinds of barriers in the labour market, much of which are attributable to cultural attitudes of some men. While some women find employment opportunities in domestic settings and in small businesses, many girls are exploited because they are young,

easily manipulated, unaware of their rights, and afraid to expose their unscrupulous employers.

In the worst of situations, many women work fifteen hours a day; yet, they are beaten, badly fed, poorly paid, and become sex slaves to pay for their basic needs. The prostitution business which these unsuspecting girls engage complicates the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa. With the rising level of poverty, crime, prostitution, violence, and exploitation in sub-Saharan Africa, migrating youth are in an age fraught with potential threats exacerbated by ill-prepared and rapid urbanization. As a

consequence, many rural migrants are no better off in the city than in their village. By fleeing their communities, rural youths become human rights victims with no parental protection as life in most African cities is enclosed in marginalization and social exclusion.

To reduce the rate and negative consequences of rapid urbanization, policies that empower and integrate African youths into productive agricultural-based activities are necessary. If governments commit to this investment, the desire to migrate would diminish.

Rural youth could evolve into agents of change with the capacity to improve their living standards, which is considered essential in order to promote sustainable development.

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Solutions

Government Interventions to Promote Development

Young people are integral to reducing extreme poverty and hunger in Africa. They can act as ambassadors of rural development and provide innovative ideas when crafting development policies. Young people look forward to the opportunity to be actively involved in the development of their communities by creating the foundations for economic growth and productivity. In this context, policy-makers and development specialists must promote an earnest paradigm shift in the way they shape poverty-reduction programs and fully engage

as well as empower young people in order to diminish the cycle of poverty in Africa.

These efforts should include four areas of focus: (1) promoting youths' capabilities to engage in agricultural/ environmental education and national service; (2) incorporating gender reforms with a focus on marginalized young women; (3) expanding resources and social services, primarily in education and health care; and (4) engaging youth perspectives when evaluating progress achieved in addressing poverty-related issues. To be sustainable, these efforts need to be embraced at all levels of government in the continent.

At the international level, youth unemployment is recognized as an urgent issue. This urgency is evidenced in the United Nations Millennium Development Goal Target 16 which sought to "develop and implement strategies for decent and productive work for youth" (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 2005). National governments need to effect a change by incorporating youth into their domestic policies. The national governments in Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, need to provide youths with a means to stay in their communities. This can be accomplished by incorporating the youth into national development strategies that would promote improved living standards.

The integration of youths into agriculture extension programs and other rural-based economic activities will further increase the level of labor productivity and deter an exodus from their communities. For example, youths can generate increased agricultural production through investment in innovative, eco-friendly planting practices, and post-harvest methods.

Youth Involvement and Rural Development
As the tradition of some African states limit youth access to land, the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), an Ethiopian organization, promotes policies that would reverse this cultural norm and embrace youth empowerment through improved labor productivity. The REST program

supports the argument that agricultural development is one of the most promising sectors for youth employment and the optimal means to keep them from illegal migration. At the local level, governments, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), and the private sector can follow REST's example by engaging young people in building rural infrastructure, which provides unemployed youth with valuable practical skills that could be transferred to other employment situations.

At the same time, the communities could benefit through improved access to food production, water, and markets to sell their goods - all of which would combat the shackles of poverty that keep pushing African youths out of the continent. By engaging youths in poverty reduction policies, states should embrace a holistic approach to directly tackle the causes and consequences of poverty. A sustainable solution aimed at improving youth unemployment and underemployment, especially in the context of sub-Saharan Africa's booming population, is imperative to reduce migration and its consequential marginalization.

In the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, governments need to take affirmative action to enhance the well-being of their citizens, especially the youth. As Africa is home to some of the most disadvantaged and marginalized youth in the world, the increasing trend of young people migrating from Africa as a survival strategy is of great concern. Many, who arrive in Western countries with the hope of finding employment, are sometimes exploited or find themselves in tragic situations.

Government's recognition of this trend is crucial as youths represent the legacy of the past and the successes or failures of the future. As agriculture is one of the most promising sectors for youth employment, African governments must prioritize investments and programs in irrigation, water resource management, and improved agricultural practices in order to

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expand young farmers' capabilities to produce food and conserve the land's natural resources while providing them with the skills and abilities to increase their incomes.

Pro-agricultural youth programs that elevate economic and employment opportunities are only one part of the solution. Governments need to tackle youth migration problems through quality education that would promote social development. By mainstreaming this as part of a development strategy, youths will acquire the skills to make development choices that will improve their lives, thus, reducing incessant youth migration. These policies should holistically provide the young people with leadership skills for the benefit of their countries, as well as access to quality education and knowledge.

This approach will provide governments with the opportunity to reduce youth migration and its negative impact on Africa. The resulting policies would create a cycle of pro-poor growth that would improve human capital and socio-economic development in Africa. Without the above policy recommendations, Africa may not effectively address the challenges posed by an increasing youth population and migration.

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