

The Geopolitics of African Migrations to Europe: International Hypocrisy about the Right and Need for Africans to Emigrate

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Modern African patterns of migration are gradually becoming an important issue in world affairs. Although not often publicized, as was the case for the South East Asian boat people, the desperate movements of Sub-Saharan African to Europe constitute a global challenge which is currently neglected but which has the potential to become more acute in decades to come. This article does not intend to address the issue of migrations into Europe comprehensively; its focus is Sub-Saharan Africa, its people, current migration trends and the impact of these on Europe and also on their homeland. African modern global migrations are at a turning-point. They represent a massive intellectual and human capital loss for the continent but they also constitute a crucial source of investment in local communities, as well as a massive contribution to inward capital flows from abroad which are needed in African countries. Money transfers to families at home (for example, via Western Union) are an interesting characteristic of these trends.

European Arrogance and Security Posture vs Partnerships

The cultural shock of 9/11 and the associated security concerns which now affect western civilization, including the European citadel, have resulted in a much-distorted perception of migrants, their motives, goals and objectives. Historically, African migrants are neither terrorists nor beggars. While the majority of African immigration to Europe is for economic reasons, almost all economic problems in Africa have their roots in political failure, ethnic rivalries and in a pathetic inability of African leaders for decades to turn their

countries into business-friendly nations, where their own citizens can dream, build and prosper securely.

Most scholars and researchers now recognize that migrating to western countries is an important investment for most migrants, their families and communities. Each migrant pays a very high financial and psychological cost for his adventure, without any insurance. Many lose everything, including their lives. During the last ten years, the total travel cost of African migrants to western shores can be estimated be more than \$6 billion. This cost is still increasing but people prefer to take the risk instead of investing that money at home. It is important for research in foreign affairs to help build a better global understanding of African contributions to the complex movements of human and financial capital that sustain global economies. This is a new fundamental geopolitical challenge to North–South relations. One part of the world cannot indefinitely control the quantity and quality of migration flows. It has never happened in the past and will not happen in the future. However, Africa and the western world need a win-win partnership on migration, which requires intellectual resources beyond migration laws and police. Failure to address this will only result in medium to long-term devastating consequences on global security.

A growing number of western officials and diplomats now openly declare ‘We cannot receive all the misery of Africa.’ While this may sound trendy and aimed at their electoral constituencies, the consequences of such attitudes are debilitating. Should Europe be opened to all poor Africans? The answer is obviously no; it is an issue of national sovereignty on immigration policies. However, the question is grossly misleading, as Africa is definitely not a ‘poor continent’, with its extraordinary mineral and energy resources, as well as its human capital. The real issue is the unacceptable level of poverty and social exclusion in Africa. While this was agreed in the millennium goals, very little has been done to help millions of Africans enjoy globally acceptable living standards, as well as peace and the rule of law in their societies. Addressing social vulnerability or poverty and governance in Africa is a challenge to international relations and the global movement of capital and resources. Global peace is deeply linked with a greater and equitable share of global prosperity. What is required is less intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa to protect ex-colonial economic dominions and preferential relations, and more transparency and the mutual respect of civil societies. There is a need for greater international accountability on investments in productive business and industrial partnerships in Africa: these will certainly generate growth, jobs and a better place to live.

While it is important to build a framework for migrations that benefits all parties, the international community has failed both to recognize the right of Africans to migrate and to offer protection to migrants. Despite an abundance

of international treaties and agreements, the migrants caught in an 'illegal' situation in the host country are often abused, tortured and treated below humanitarian acceptable standards. We have witnessed shameful 'charters' commissioned to return African migrants home forcibly, often chained and brutally manhandled until they are delivered back to Africa by European security forces at a cost that could have been better used to address the issue. The international community can no longer witness these situations without reacting.

International Context of African Migrations

Growing global opportunities for business and human development, and a wider access to information and communications technology, have set the conditions for greater human mobility. In the case of Africa this is exacerbated by years of poor governance and the failure to plan and respond effectively to the hope of young generations in search for a better life.

The twenty-first century could be seen as one of opportunities, of greater freedom and modernity. However, it is also pathetically a century of sharp global contrasts. Although the international community can be acknowledged for major achievements in the last few years in Sub-Saharan Africa – for example, debt reduction, humanitarian assistance in chronically affected countries, support to fight HIV/AIDS and better governance in Africa – the continent remains far below global average living standards. Abject poverty, unemployment, natural disasters and wars constantly remind the most optimistic Africans at home that it is time to run before it is too late for them to afford it. Thus the pragmatic movement of African hordes, in search for a better shared prosperity, also demonstrates complex patterns of panic. Skilled or not, poor or rich, educated or not, people vote with their feet where ballots either don't exist or have no meaning. They run as far as possible towards places where they can exercise their right to prosper, and earn a decent wage for their strength and skills. The right to prosper is a fundamental human right, which should be protected and promoted as much as democracy. Africans aspire to live in countries where their investments are sustainable and their life pensions guaranteed. Africans migrate away from the impunity of careless leaders who have failed in their mandate to build sustainable societies. As long as there are in Africa four civil servants for every one small business, insecurity will push out those who can still afford the adventure to western shores.

However, historically coming late to the game, the African global economic emigrant too often ends up as a 'criminal', having challenged the migration laws of host countries. Several reports highlight a growing score of abuses by

western states exercising their sovereign right to regulate and maintain the rule of national emigration laws. However, the tainted approach of a decadent nation-state concept fails to understand the root causes of modern African emigrations, and to properly manage its potential of shared opportunities. As if looked down on from above, the African is treated with extreme arrogance by the citadel. The question is how long will it last? What will be the geopolitical consequences? A European immigration policy based on win-win partnerships with Africa is long overdue. This policy must go far beyond security-based and project-based approaches that provide only patches to an exploding barrel.

International Hypocrisy

‘The trend of increasing numbers of migrants taking ever greater risks to reach the European territory is almost symbolic of the EU’s failure so far to effectively address the root causes of migration’ (Amnesty International, 2006). The entire western world shares the same hypocrisies, which can be described with a few observations: globally, African migrants are negatively affected by a generally poor observance of international obligations under human rights and refugee laws. The principles of international burden-sharing and protection are still a dream. The result is a constant abuse of basic rights and human dignity suffered by migrants in the name of the laws of states. But no human being is illegal, and the principle of ‘illegal immigrant’ is potentially dangerous when used without international control.

The persistence of colonial trends in international relations is reflected by the collusion of failing states and global interests driven by the thirst for natural resources. This is exacerbated by the emergence of a new giant, China, that has taken the game to the next level. We are witnessing a new scramble for Africa, or rather for African resources, which is further squeezing the continent and its people into another forty-year period of lost geopolitical dreams. No lessons learned from Congo, Nigeria and Sudan seem to work for the African masses. Instead, the key global players now know how to get the oil but are not interested in changing the lives of those who really own it.

The poor understanding of the real dimensions of forced displacements in Africa is further complicated by European arrogance and the failure to understand and maximize the benefits of migration for all parties. Despite this, it can be argued that in all its forms, African migrations to Europe result in net economic gain for host countries and net loss for poor African countries, which did not anticipate it through sound policies. Labour force and brain-drain losses are obvious, but there are more geopolitical pitfalls to be investigated.

International Obligation to Protect Migrants

It may be arguable, but the classic concept of the nation-state is dead and will not help failing immigration policies in European countries that feel threatened. It is important to understand Africa's late arrival in the historical trend of global economic migrations and its right to a share, as the continent itself has been an amenable host to several hordes of European and Asian migrants. There is an international obligation of accountability in the protection of African migrants, mostly uprooted people that do not intend harm in their quest for freedom and sustainable prosperity.²

While freedom of movement is recognized as a civil right within national borders, no state currently allows full freedom of movement across its borders, and international human rights treaties do not confer a general right to enter another state. According to Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, citizens may not be forbidden to leave their country. Curiously, there is no similar provision regarding entry of non-citizens in a sovereign country. It is an important aspect that needs to be addressed urgently. In this regard, an international campaign for the right to 'emigrate' is due.

Host states should be reminded of their responsibilities and accountability for 'uprooted people' at home and in host countries. This should be translated into respect for refugees and migrants' rights in the fight against 'irregular migrations'. It is important to recognize protection as a key right for all emigrants, irrelevant of their legal status in the host country, as they do not have an intention to harm. Equally fundamental is the 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.

Recently, we have witnessed the EU participating in high-level meetings on the links between migration and development, such as the Rabat Conference in July 2006, the UN High Level Dialogue on migration and development in September 2006 and the Tripoli Conference the same year. However, more needs to be done through an effective engagement with civil society in vulnerable societies and disadvantaged groups, to address the root causes and work towards a better ethic of migration in a more equitable world. Migration is today at the point where international trade was fifty years ago, says Mr Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah of the Institute for Public Policy Research in the US. For many at that time, the current governance system for international trade was unimaginable. 'Those thinking about a new international framework for managing migration face remarkably similar challenges,' he has stated. 'How to design a system that leads to freer and fairer flows of people, skills and remittances?' 'I dread to think of the scenes we may be contemplating in, say, 20 years if we do not make a massive consolidated effort to create jobs and opportunities in West Africa,' said UN Special Representative for West Africa, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah. 'What is

happening now is only a tip of the iceberg, compared to what will occur if urgent solutions are not found.’³

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Selected Legal Instruments for International Migrations

1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights
2. Convention on Prevention and Punishment of Crime of Genocide – 1948
3. International Labour Organisation Convention No. 97 Migration for Employment Revised – 1949
4. Convention Relating Status Refugees – 1951 and ITS Protocol – 1967
5. Convention on Political Rights of Women – 1953
6. International Labour Organisation Convention Discrimination IRO Employment and Occupation – 1958
7. Convention Against Discrimination in Education – 1960
8. International Convention on Reduction of Statelessness – 1961
9. International Labour Organisation Convention No. 118 Equality Treatment of Nationals and Non Nationals in Social Security – 1962
10. International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination – 1965
11. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – 1966
12. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – 16 December 1966
13. International Labour Organisation Convention No. 143 Migrations in Abusive Conditions and Promotion of Equality of Opportunity and Treatment of Migrant Workers – 1975
14. Déclaration sur la race et les préjugés raciaux, Paris, UNESCO – 1978
15. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women – 1979
16. International Labour Organisation Convention No. 157 Concerning Establishment of an International System for Maintenance of Rights in Social Security – 1982
17. Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment – 1984
18. Déclaration sur les droits de l'homme des personnes qui ne possèdent pas la nationalité du pays dans lequel elles vivent, Assemblée Générale des Nations Unies, 13 Decembre 1985
19. Convention on the Rights of the Child – 1989
20. International Convention on Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families – 1990

21. Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons – Especially Women and Children – Supplementing UN Against Transnational Organized Crime – 2000
22. Protocol Against Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air – Supplementing UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime – 2000
23. United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime – 2000

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NOTES

- 1 This article expresses the author's personal view and not that of the United Nations.
- 2 'Uprooted people', a concept that well defines most African immigrants, was introduced in by the World Council of Churches in 1995.
- 3 Quotes from Sriskandarajah and Ould-Abdallah are from G. Mutume, 'African Migration: From Tensions to Solutions', *Africa Renewal*, 19, 4 (2006).