

The Global Forum



Migration from Africa to Europe

Mobility that Needs to Be Better Managed

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1 Current Trends in Migration from Africa to Europe

The discussion about migration in the broad area of sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, and Europe has created a toxic narrative in the media and in the political arena, with alarming messages about a “migrants invasion” and a “loss of identity” becoming more frequent and popular in many European countries. But this narrative ignores several important facts. The total number of irregular arrivals is a very small portion—less than 1 percent—of the European population. In the broader context, the Mediterranean crossings constitute a small part of much larger intraregional population movements in the African continent.

Yet the gap between real data and perceptions on the size and type of African migration to Europe appears unbridgeable. While it is true that the share of African migrants heading overseas has more than doubled since the 1960s, in 2017 53 percent of all African migrants (or 19.4 million) still migrated within the continent.¹ Moreover, there were approximately 24.2 million displaced and stateless individuals living in Africa, including 6.8 million refugees and asylum seekers, about 14.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees, and 712,000 stateless people.² African countries are more than carrying their share of responsibility for refugees. Migration from Africa to Europe stands at around 9.1 million people, most originating from North Africa (5.1 million),

1 IOM 2017; UNDESA 2017.

2 UNHCR 2017.

while the number of Africans in Asia (mostly in the Gulf and Jordan) is around 4.4 million. Migrants from North Africa migrate overseas most frequently, but for other African migrants the most prevalent destination is another country in the region.³

Hence, the attention in Europe is disproportionate to the problem. In 2017, 186,768 migrants were registered to have arrived by sea or land in Spain, Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, and Cyprus. Because most of those who survive the journey are rescued at sea and subsequently registered by national authorities, this data is both accurate and timely compared to irregular migration flows in other parts of the world. But the level of attention is due in part to how these migrants are traveling, as images of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea are powerful. Importantly, though movements by sea and by land across the eastern, central, and western Mediterranean migration route registered in 2018 were lower than what had been recorded in the previous five years, the Mediterranean Sea continues to be the most dangerous body of water in the world for migrants.⁴ This is very concerning, especially considering that the intrinsic nature of irregular migration entails a greater level of risk for migrants, often including violence, exploitation, and other human rights abuses.

Irregular migration routes that reach Europe intertwine across sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, the Middle East, and the western Balkans. The routes change frequently depending on many factors, including tighter controls by border authorities. Most North and sub-Saharan African migrants reach Europe through the central and western Mediterranean, while most migrants from the Middle East and South Asia reach Europe via Turkey, Greece, and the western Balkans. Migrants and refugees from the Horn of Africa traditionally travel through Sudan or Egypt to enter Libya, while fewer have tried to reach Israel from Egypt in recent years. Western and central African migrants move within the region, enjoying the rights attached to membership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS),⁵ and few travel through Niger or Mali to reach North Africa, where they seek work. Libya, Algeria, and Morocco remain historically important transit countries between Africa and Europe.

3 This is due not only to geographical proximity with some European countries, previous labor recruitment agreements, and postcolonial ties, but also to the fact that migration within North Africa is almost nonexistent: borders are closed between Algeria and Morocco while after 2011 Libya no longer has been a main destination country for large numbers of Egyptians and Tunisians.

4 For updated figures, see the IOM Missing Migrants' portal at <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>.

5 Citizens of ECOWAS Member States enjoy the right to enter, reside in, and establish eco-