



**IPATC**  
INSTITUTE FOR PAN-AFRICAN  
THOUGHT AND CONVERSATION



**THE NORDIC  
AFRICA INSTITUTE**  
NORDISKA AFRIKAINSTITUTET

## **Centering the Voices of African Migrants in Africa/European Union (EU) Migration Debates**

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## 1. Introduction

**Bridging the gap between African and European Union (EU) policies on migration, remains critical in regularising mobility between the two continents within the context of the 2018 United Nations (UN) Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. Despite divergent policy positions on migration, African and European policymakers have managed to facilitate dialogue on migration governance. However, these conversations have largely excluded African migrants, who are at the centre of these policy responses.**

To provide a forum to discuss concrete ideas for policy development, the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC) in South Africa, and the Sweden-based Nordic Africa Institute (NAI), organised two joint webinars on 26 March and 7 May 2021 under the theme, "Centering the Voices of African Migrants in Africa/EU Migration Debates." Both meetings provided African and European policymakers, migration experts, and civil society activists from both continents with an opportunity to engage with the voices of African migrants in Europe, and to reflect on their implications for policy development within the frameworks of the 2018 Global Compact and the 2020 EU New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Both webinars also aimed to consolidate a 130-member Community of Practice (CoP) on implementing the UN Global Compact, which was established by IPATC in 2019. This informal group comprises representatives of African and EU governments, the UN, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), African regional bodies, as well as policy experts, scholars, and civil society activists from both continents.

Mr Joseph Peters, a migrant from Sierra Leone affiliated with the Joel Nafuma Refugee Centre (JNRC) in Rome, Italy, and Dr Joy Kategekwa, the Strategic Advisor to the Regional Director of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Regional Bureau for Africa in New York, were the main speakers at the first webinar on 26 March 2021, while Dr Adeoye Akinola, Head of Research and Teaching at IPATC in Johannesburg, chaired the event. The webinar attracted 51 participants.

The speakers at the second webinar on 7 May 2021 were Mr Kitimbwa Sabuni, Spokesperson for the National Association of Afro-Swedes in Sweden; Dr Tekalign Mengiste, Senior Researcher at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia; and Mr Bora Kamwanya, Diaspora Experience Consultant at the African Foundation for Development (AFFORD) in London, England. Dr Jesper Bjarnesen, Senior Researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute in Sweden, chaired the meeting. This webinar attracted 70 participants.

This report is based on presentations, key discussions, and policy recommendations that emerged from both meetings, as well as additional research.

“African and European policymakers have managed to facilitate dialogue on migration governance. However, these conversations have largely excluded African migrants, who are at the centre of these policy responses.”



MR JOSEPH PETERS, A MIGRANT FROM SIERRA LEONE, WAS ONE OF THE MAIN SPEAKERS AT THE FIRST IPATC/NAI WEBINAR IN MARCH 2021.

IMAGE SOURCE - IPATC  
LINK - <https://ipatc.joburg/3-centering-the-voices-of-african-migrants-in-africa-european-union-eu-migration-debates/>

## 2. Root Causes, Drivers, and Pull Factors

There are multiple and shifting motives for migration within Africa and beyond. The notion of addressing the “root causes” of migration, which originates in European policy discourses in the 1980s, has gained increasing prominence since the European “refugee crisis” of 2015/2016. Root causes consist of social, political, and economic conditions that are believed to result in mobility across borders. In an African context, security and development challenges broadly encompass the dominant narrative through which migration within the continent and into the EU, has been framed. As conflict and instability spread in African countries such as Mali, Nigeria, Niger, and Libya, migration continues to occur along the sea route from the Mediterranean coast to the Canary Islands.

These conflicts, as well as continuing challenges of poverty, climate change, and poor governance may be understood as “push” factors for migration from Africa, while economic, social, and political stability may be conceived as the “pull” factors attracting African migrants to the EU. The focus on “root causes”, however, neglects other “drivers” of migration which include social networks, access to information, and other resources that allow mobility to occur – thereby eliminating key dimensions in understanding Africa/EU migration. This, in turn, impacts policy responses, since important idiosyncracies of this migration are often missed in this discourse.

As revealed by the 2019 UNDP report, *Scaling Fences: Voices of Irregular African Migrants to Europe*, which engaged the perspectives of over 1,000 migrants from 39 African states into 13 EU countries, the core reasons for Africa/EU migration cannot merely be reduced to the identified “root causes”. Africa/EU migration is also characterised by a search for better opportunities by educated and skilled Africans, who are already earning and making a living in their countries of origin. The UNDP report notes that 50 per cent of the migrants in the study left their home countries despite having a job and earning an income. In such cases, the prospects of earning more money and remitting this income back home, was the main attraction for migrating. Remittances by African migrants to their home countries have been a critical source of livelihood. In 2020, the World Bank reported that \$42 billion in remittances had entered sub-Saharan Africa. These remittances have also been important in creating opportunities for others to migrate to EU countries. As reported in *Scaling Fences*, 53 per cent of respondents acknowledged financial and other support from families and friends to facilitate their travel to Europe.

While African migration to the EU continues to be primarily voluntary and regular, increasingly restrictive EU migration governance has pushed many migrants to resort to using irregular channels.



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ADAPTED IMAGE FROM THE 2019 UNDP REPORT, *SCALING FENCES: VOICES OF IRREGULAR AFRICAN MIGRANTS TO EUROPE*.

IMAGE SOURCE - UNDP  
LINK - <https://www.undp.org/publications/scaling-fences-voices-irregular-african-migrant-europe>



“ During the 2015 “migration crisis” in Europe, more than one million people crossed the Mediterranean into the EU, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. ”

EUROPEAN NGOs CONDUCT A RESCUE MISSION IN NOVEMBER 2017.

IMAGE SOURCE - Doctors Without Borders

PHOTO CREDIT - Maud Veith/SOS Méditerranée

LINK - <https://msf.org.uk/issues/mediterranean-search-and-rescue>

### 3. The Experiences of Irregular African Migrants

During the 2015 “migration crisis” in Europe, more than one million people crossed the Mediterranean into the EU, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In that year, the International Organization for Migration reported 170,100 African migrant and refugee arrivals in the EU by sea, as well as 3,149 deaths. In 2020, 33,418 new arrivals were recorded and 983 deaths. The two IPATC/NAI webinars in March and May 2021 highlighted the determination of both regular and irregular African migrants in Europe to endure the perils of the journey, the hostility of host communities, and the challenges of earning enough money to ensure the future of their children, while still contributing to their home communities through sending back remittances.

As reflected during the webinars, irregular African migrants confront danger and are exposed to insecurity from the moment they leave their home countries. Instability is widespread in several African countries such as Libya and Mali through which migrants are forced to transit. This has sometimes led to physical injuries or enslavement for labour, as well as ransom and slave auctions by armed groups in Libya. Black African migrants are particularly at great risk, as they face racism and xenophobia in arabophone North African countries such as Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. The experiences of being enslaved by armed groups in Libya, shared during the webinars, brought to the fore the human impact of migration governance systems which push many African migrants to adopt irregular pathways through the Mediterranean Sea and the Sahara Desert.

In Libya, many African migrants have been arbitrarily detained in government-controlled facilities – the Orwellian-sounding Directorate for Combatting Illegal Migration (DCIM) – for indefinite periods under inhumane conditions. A 2019 report by the New York-based Women’s Refugee Commission revealed widespread sexual violence against jailed migrants of both genders in Libya. Many African migrants who have been arrested and detained in transit countries often die in captivity, and do not make it to Europe. The IOM estimated that there were at least 700,000 such migrants in Libya between 2016 and 2020.

African migrants who manage to escape from transit countries and travel by sea often do so at great risk in flimsy vessels. They also risk being intercepted by the EU-supported North African coastguards, whose role is to prevent migrant boats from reaching EU shores. In March 2021, the IOM reported that, since the beginning of that year, 4,159 migrants had been intercepted in the Mediterranean Sea by the Libyan coastguard and returned to the Maghrebi nation to face indefinite detention in often deplorable conditions. African migrants who do make it to Europe often face further humiliation, discrimination, and other human rights violations including the denial of access to basic services, while they wait in camps to be processed through the asylum system.

## 4. Race, Migration, and Belonging

According to the Luxembourg-based Eurostat, a record 1.3 million people – mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq – applied for asylum in the EU and other European states during the 2015 European “migration crisis”. This increase in migrants seeking to settle in Europe heightened the anti-immigration discourses and sentiment across EU territories, thus confirming the intersectionality of race, migration, and belonging.

Right-wing politicians in Europe have capitalised on this anti-immigrant narrative since 2015, heightening fears of a massive influx of irregular migrants who supposedly pose a major security threat to EU countries and citizens. A 2020 policy report by the German-funded European Network for Economic and Fiscal Policy Research, notes that anti-immigration politics has resulted in significant gains for right-wing parties across Europe. This research, which focused on Austria, Denmark, Italy, Sweden, and Switzerland concluded that the increase in the number of migrants entering the EU has coincided with the electoral success of extreme right-wing parties in these countries.

These political developments have complemented the rise in new and existing right-wing vigilante groups across Europe, which have been responsible for promoting hate crimes against migrants. In a 2020 report on human rights in the EU, the New York-based Human Rights Watch noted that in the first half of 2019, 609 attacks on refugees and asylum seekers were recorded in Germany, including 60 attacks on refugee shelters, and 14 attacks on relief organisations working with refugees and migrants. The report further highlighted the denial of public funding to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with refugees and migrants in Poland.

Based on discussions during both IPATC/NAI webinars in March and May 2021, racialised outcomes of migration have also had an impact on African migrants who continue to face discrimination even after obtaining citizenship in EU countries. African migrants living in the EU noted that, despite obtaining the right to stay in the EU, they are still widely suspected of being illegal. This insecurity is deflected onto the children of these migrants who – despite frequently having European citizenship – are still often treated with deep distrust, and regarded as outsiders. A 2016 report on race and discrimination in Europe by the Brussels-based European Network Against Racism (ENAR) notes that in France, for example, the descendants of migrants from Africa had lower rates of employment than all other migrant groups. While these conditions are not representative of all EU states, it is alarming that these narratives remain the experiences of so many African migrants seeking to enter Europe. Migration and race thus closely co-exist in the lived experiences of many African migrants across the EU.



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SUPPORTERS OF RIGHT-WING POPULIST GROUPS GATHERING IN COLOGNE, GERMANY, IN JANUARY 2016.

IMAGE SOURCE - International Business Times  
 PHOTO CREDIT - Sascha Schuermann/Getty Images  
 LINK - <https://www.ibtimes.com/eu-refugee-crisis-2016-10-million-more-asylum-seekers-heading-europe-german-official-2259181>

## 5. The African Diaspora and Prospects for Socio-Economic Development in Africa

A 2018 report by the Italian Ispra-based Joint Research Centre (JRC) notes that in 2017, the then 28 EU countries hosted 9.1 million African-born migrants. The Washington-based Pew Research Centre further observed in a 2018 report that the majority of African migrants in the EU in 2017 were concentrated in just four countries: Britain, France, Italy, and Portugal. New African migrants often follow the paths of previous immigrants, including those of family and associates, thus highlighting the importance of a diaspora presence in a particular destination when making the decision to migrate. Migration, especially by Africans, is thus often a result of collective effort requiring not only financial resources, but also access to information and networks.

Despite continuing migration from Africa to the EU and North America, African migrants generally retain strong connections to their home countries. In a 2011 report, the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) noted that remittances are often associated with social cohesion, as well as a sense of belonging, sharing, and trust which is linked to a desire by the African diaspora to give back to the continent through social and financial capital. For Africa, remittances of \$42 billion in 2020 make up the largest source of net international inflows after foreign direct investment, and, in recent years, has often surpassed foreign aid. This is clear demonstration of the resilience of the African diaspora who are committed to the socio-economic development of their home continent, even amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic which has adversely affected their livelihoods.

Apart from financial contributions, the African diaspora of Ethiopians, Senegalese, and Congolese also contribute valuable skills, business acumen, and technology to their home countries. Non-financial flows to Africa by the diaspora also include social and political ideas related to human rights, effective governance, and other socio-political concerns. This was evident in the protests by members of the African diaspora against poor governance in Nigeria during the October 2020 “#End SARS” campaign against police brutality.

Cooperation between African governments and the diaspora can also be seen in initiatives in which 15 African countries have established ministries and institutions to work with the diaspora on various development programmes. The Addis Ababa-based African Union (AU) Commission has also created the African Citizens Directorate to address issues relating to the African diaspora and their home countries. International institutions such as the UN and the World Bank have recognised the role of the African diaspora as the “fourth development aid actor,” together with governments, mainstream development agencies, and international organisations.



“ The AU Commission has created the African Citizens Directorate to address issues relating to the African diaspora and their home countries. ”

THE AFRICAN UNION HEADQUARTERS IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA.

IMAGE SOURCE - Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat

PHOTO CREDIT - Tong Ji Architectural Design (Group) Co., Ltd.

LINK - <https://www.skyscrapercenter.com/building/african-union-headquarters/13950>

## 6. Policy Recommendations

The following five policy recommendations emerged from the IPATC/NAI policy dialogues in March and May 2021:

1. First, African governments must embark on transformative development on the continent in order to expand opportunities for their citizens in all sectors of the economy. They should also ensure a more equitable distribution of the continent's resources in order to meet the aspirations of their one billion citizens;
2. Second, EU policymakers must prioritise their engagement with African migrants and civil society actors in order to respond to Africa/EU migration governance challenges in more nuanced ways. Thus, Brussels should ensure that legal pathways to migration are accessible to a wider group of African migrants with diverse skills;
3. Third, EU policymakers must acknowledge that race and migration are intertwined in the governance of migration. The racial, national, and religious profiling of migrants seeking to gain legal status to the EU should thus be strongly condemned and halted;
4. Fourth, European politicians should highlight in public discourses, the contributions of African migrants to European society, and ensure equal access to resources and opportunities for these migrants. Policies should also be made on the basis of evidence-based research.
5. Finally, African governments must recognise the important role played by the diaspora in the socio-economic development of their countries, and provide the necessary institutional support and enabling environment for their engagement and participation in the development of their continent.



“ European politicians must highlight in public discourses, the contributions of African migrants to European society, and ensure equal access to resources and opportunities for these migrants. ”

AFRICAN MIGRANT FIELD WORKERS IN PUGLIA, ITALY, DURING THE TOMATO HARVEST.

IMAGE SOURCE - The Washington Post  
PHOTO CREDIT - Alessandro Penso/OnOff Picture  
LINK - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-sight/wp/2014/09/18/the-experience-of-african-migrant-workers-in-italy/?variant=116ae929826d1fd3>