

Online Article

Moving Africa: Labour Mobility, Free Movement and the Democratic Governance of Belonging

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Protocols

The Chair of this session and Executive Secretary of CODESRIA, Professor Godwin Murunga; the Deputy Executive Secretary, Dr Ayemi Lawani; the co-directors of this Institute, Professor Mary Setrana of the Centre for Migration Studies, University of Ghana and Dr Faisal Garba of the University of Cape Town; the resource persons, Professor Elieth Eyebiyi and Dr Margaret Monyani; our rapporteur, Mahuna Nicanor Sinhou; distinguished laureates; ladies and gentlemen.

Let me begin by thanking CODESRIA for the invitation and the honour of speaking on the final morning of this Institute. Keynotes usually open a meeting and set its agenda. Mine comes at the end, after ten days in which you have done the hard intellectual work. So instead of introducing a field you have spent two weeks reconstructing, I want to examine what your conversation about democratic agency and mobility demands of those of us who have sat in gov-

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ernment, made budgets, signed protocols and, too often, failed to implement them. And I want to place before you an argument that I believe sits at the heart of the theme you have chosen—which is, that the question of migration governance and democratic agency is a question about the kind of African political and economic order we are trying to build.

I have looked at your programme with some envy. You have discussed the pastoral corridors of the Niger basin; the mining frontiers of Zimbabwe; climate migrants reshaping Toliara; internal migrants seeking services in Lusaka; returnee women in Casamance and Côte d'Ivoire; migrant women made invisible in Niger's migration policy; encampment in Malawi; and schooling under displacement in

Cameroon's North-West. Collectively, these papers show that *Africans are not waiting for policy to permit them to move because they are already moving and governing their mobility from below*. The question for policy is whether the state will catch up with its citizens or continue to stand in their way. I will make five arguments and end with ten proposals that I hope will go beyond this room.

Migration is a question of democratic governance, beyond border management

My first argument is that we have allowed migration to be captured by the language of security and border management, when the fundamental questions concern citizenship, belonging and the democratic contract. We talk about flows, borders, irregular migration, readmission, trafficking, border security, border management, migration control. Democratic governance, on the other hand, is discussed in the language of citizenship, participation, accountability, representation and rights. Bringing the two together

forces us to ask a more fundamental question: *Who has the authority to determine how Africans move, under what conditions they move, and whose interest's migration governance is ultimately intended to serve?*

As we know, African mobility is old. Long before the Berlin Conference, traders, scholars, pastoralists, pilgrims and labourers moved across this continent through networks that had no need for passports. Colonial rule classified those who moved into administrative categories and turned borders into instruments for extracting and controlling labour. The mine-labour systems of southern Africa, the forced cultivation and labour recruitment of French West Africa, and the movement of Sahelian labour to the cocoa and groundnut economies of the coast were organised around extraction and not citizenship.

Although independence led to the change of flags, the underlying logic often endured. Too many postcolonial states inherited the colonial border and defended it with greater zeal than its authors. We remember the expulsions in the case of Ghana's Aliens Compliance Order of 1969, Nigeria's expulsions of 1983 and 1985, and the cycles of xenophobic violence in South Africa since 2008. Each came at a time of economic hardship and turned neighbours into scapegoats, without solving the economic problem that triggered it.

Let me speak as someone who has served in subnational and national government. Some of our deepest mobility challenges lie within national borders. In Nigeria, a citizen who moves from one state to another can live there for thirty years, pay taxes, raise children, and still

be treated as a 'non-indigene' when it comes to employment, scholarships or political office. There, the distinction between indigene and settler creates, in effect, an internal border within a single citizenship, but Kenya, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and others have their own versions. If we struggle to guarantee equal belonging to citizens who move within our borders, we should not be surprised that we struggle to extend it to Africans who cross them.

To speak of democratic agency in migration governance is to confront a question of power relations and to recognise people who move as participants in shaping the societies in which they live. They are workers, taxpayers, parents, traders and, where citizenship permits, voters. As such, a democratic theory of migration governance questions who decides the terms on which Africans move and who is accountable when those terms fail.

The facts we must confront

My second argument is that African migration policy is usually shaped by a picture that bears little resemblance to the reality. For instance, the dominant image of African migration in international policy discourse remains the migrant attempting to cross the Mediterranean, an exodus of young Africans in overcrowded boats heading north to Ceuta in Spain or Lampedusa in Italy, the desert route, the dangerous border crossings and the humanitarian crisis repeatedly reproduced in Western media and too often accepted in our own capitals. Let me offer four corrections.

First, *most African migration takes place within Africa*. Around 25 million Africans live in another African country; irregular journeys to Europe or the Gulf represent a

small fraction of the whole. The everyday story of African migration is a Burkinabè farmer in Côte d'Ivoire, a Zimbabwean teacher in Botswana, a Nigerien trader in Kano, or a Malawian miner in Johannesburg and across the many economic corridors that connect African communities. So, the fact that most African migration is intra-African should fundamentally change the way we think about migration governance. It means African migration policy cannot be designed principally as a response to Europe's migration anxieties.

Second, *mobility is a development resource*. Africa received about USD 96 billion in remittances in 2024, with Egypt (USD 22.7 billion) and Nigeria (USD 24.8 billion) among the continent's largest recipients. Intra-African remittances alone are estimated at around USD 20 billion annually. For many households, these flows are the only reliable social protection they have, funding school fees, hospital bills and small businesses in a way that no aid programme has matched.

Third, *a significant share of Africa's mobility is forced, and displacement continues to grow*. The war in Sudan has produced one of the world's largest displacement crises: by the end of 2025, about 12.8 million people were displaced, 9.1 million inside Sudan and 3.6 million in neighbouring countries. The Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, eastern DRC and the Horn of Africa add millions more, and climate stress is reshaping where people can live and work. Because livelihoods, conflict and environmental pressure interact in decisions to move, the boundary between 'economic' and 'forced' migration is far less clear than our legal categories suggest.

Fourth, *demography will make mobility more important*. Africa's population is projected to grow by about 70 per cent by 2050, adding hundreds of millions of working-age people. Few national labour markets can absorb that growth on their own, so young Africans will continue to move in search of education, livelihoods and opportunity. The policy question is whether they move through safe, legal and productive pathways, or through the smugglers, traffickers and fraudulent recruiters who profit from the absence of such pathways.

Collectively, these realities point to a different policy agenda. Africa's central migration challenge is to build institutions that enable Africans to move, work and belong across the continent safely, productively and on fair terms.

The structure we have built and why it stalls

My third argument is that Africa already has an extensive architecture for governing mobility. What it lacks is the political commitment and the institutions needed to put that architecture into practice.

On paper, the architecture is impressive. For instance, the African Union (AU) adopted the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment in January 2018, before opening it for signature at the Kigali Summit in March 2018, alongside the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). We have the Migration Policy Framework for Africa and the Joint Labour Migration Programme involving the AU, ILO and IOM. Our Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have their own instruments, with the ECOWAS

Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment dating back to 1979.

The record of implementation tells a different story. The Free Movement Protocol has been signed by thirty-two states and ratified by only four: Mali, Niger, Rwanda and São Tomé and Príncipe. Fifteen ratifications are required for it to enter into force, and the last ratification was Niger's, in 2019. We have moved much further and faster in building a continental market than in allowing Africans to move across it. But goods require people to produce, transport, trade and consume them; a continental market depends on the mobility of the people who make it work.

Although visa openness has improved, with several countries introducing reforms, the 2025 Africa Visa Openness Index found that only 28.2 per cent of intra-African travel scenarios were visa-free. Why, then, does implementation stall? From my experience in government, I would identify five reasons.

1. *Sovereignty and security anxieties*: Ministries responsible for internal security approach freer movement through concerns about insurgency, trafficking and cross-border crime. These concerns deserve serious attention, but restricting regular mobility also widens the space in which informal routes and illicit intermediaries operate. Effective free movement requires stronger regional security cooperation, information sharing and border governance.
2. *Labour market anxieties*: Governments facing high unemployment fear that mobility will intensify competition for jobs and public services, a fear that can feed anti-migrant sentiment in hard times. The answer lies in better labour

market evidence and mechanisms that allow mobility to respond to skills shortages across countries.

3. *Weak civil registration and identification systems*: Mobility rights depend on reliable proof of identity and nationality. Where people lack birth registration or identity documents, those rights are hard to claim, and the risk of statelessness grows.
4. *The missing institutional plumbing*: A right of residence has limited practical value when pensions and social security benefits cannot travel with workers, professional qualifications are difficult to recognise across borders, and a teacher, nurse or engineer may effectively have to restart a career after moving to another country. Therefore, regional mobility requires systems for recognising qualifications, transferring social protection and matching skills to labour market demand.
5. *The gap between protocol and practice at the border*: Anyone who has travelled by road along the Abidjan–Lagos corridor will recognise this. A regional protocol may guarantee movement, but the traveller meets checkpoints, unofficial payments, inconsistent documentation requirements and officials who apply regional rules unevenly. The credibility of regional integration is eventually tested at the border crossing.

The ECOWAS experience shows both the promise and the fragility of regional mobility. For more than four decades, it built the most advanced free movement regime on the continent. Then, in January 2025, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger formally left ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel States. To its credit, ECOWAS directed its members to keep granting citizens of the three countries visa-free movement, residence and establishment rights *until further notice*. That decision shows that

the rights of ordinary people can, and should, be protected from the quarrels of governments. But ‘until further notice’ is not a durable legal guarantee, and millions of people in the central Sahel and coastal West Africa, including pastoralists whose seasonal routes ignore these new political lines, now depend on it. At the continental level, the experience is even more dispiriting. Agenda 2063 speaks of an African passport and borders that facilitate rather than obstruct African integration. But the distance between the Africa we described in our treaties and the Africa experienced by ordinary citizens is still considerable.

Labour mobility and Africa’s demographic moment

My fourth argument is that labour mobility must become an integral part of Africa’s development strategy, rather than remain primarily within the domain of ministries responsible for immigration and border control.

In Nigeria, young people have a word for leaving—*japa*. It captures the frustration of a generation increasingly looking elsewhere for opportunity, as doctors, nurses, engineers and software developers move to the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, the Gulf, other parts of Africa and beyond. The vocabulary captures something deeper than the desire to travel. It expresses a judgement about the quality of governance, the reliability of institutions and the perceived possibilities available at home. People do not leave functioning societies simply because they enjoy leaving them. They move because they are responding to incentives, constraints and aspirations. Moralising about their choices gets us nowhere. For me,

the more important question is how these movements affect African economies and how their benefits can be shared more fairly. At present, Africa is not capturing enough of the value.

Too often, the global market for African skills resembles the commodity economy with which we are already familiar. African states invest public resources in training doctors, nurses and other professionals, and wealthier countries recruit them once they qualify. The skills are developed here; much of their productive value is realised elsewhere. Some destination countries have adopted ethical recruitment frameworks, particularly in health care, but recruitment pressures remain. At the other end of the labour market, African domestic and construction workers in parts of the Gulf and Middle East can face recruitment abuses, restrictive sponsorship arrangements, passport confiscation and inadequate consular protection.

As a former Minister of Mines and Steel Development, let me draw a connection that deserves more attention. Several of you have studied mining frontiers and so-called critical minerals. The global race for lithium, cobalt, copper and rare earths is drawing labour into extraction zones across the continent, sometimes under informal, dangerous and weakly regulated conditions. A development model that exports both raw minerals and skilled labour risks reproducing old patterns of unequal exchange through new commodities. Retaining skills requires economies built on value addition, industrial policy and regional value chains that create attractive opportunities for skilled Africans across the continent.

This is where intra-African labour mobility becomes a strategic asset. Shortages of nurses, teachers or engineers in one country alongside qualified people struggling to find suitable work in another is a coordination problem. A Ghanaian engineer working in Rwanda, a Kenyan teacher in Namibia or a Nigerian doctor in The Gambia represents African skills circulating within an increasingly integrated African economy. Making that circulation work requires mutual recognition of qualifications, portable social protection, fair recruitment and reliable labour market information, to which I return in my proposals. The more responsive objective should therefore be brain circulation, creating conditions in which Africans can move, acquire knowledge and experience and continue to contribute to the societies and economies from which they originate. That requires better institutions at home, but it also requires African states to negotiate collectively with destination countries over labour mobility, skills partnerships, professional recognition and the protection of African workers abroad.

Moreover, labour mobility is gendered, and gender cannot be treated as a supplementary chapter in migration governance. Women sustain a significant share of informal cross-border trade across Africa, moving through markets, transport corridors and border posts, and they face specific forms of harassment, extortion and gender-based violence along the way. How free movement systems treat these women is an important measure of whether they serve the people who depend on them. So, if migration policy is designed without understanding how women experience mobility differently, then it is sim-

ply incomplete; it is governing an imagined migrant rather than the migrant who exists. The African Common Position on Migration and Development framework by the AU already provides an important approach that recognises that the drivers of migration are connected to development, while also linking migration to peace and security, human rights, gender, public health, environmental pressures and access to social services. What is required is translating that framework into coordinated African policy.

When protection ends: Displacement and the bridge to mobility

Africa has been innovative in its legal response to displacement. The 1969 OAU Refugee Convention broadened the refugee definition to include people fleeing external aggression, occupation and events seriously disturbing public order. The 2009 Kampala Convention made Africa the first region to adopt a binding treaty specifically addressing internal displacement. Uganda, Ethiopia, Chad and Kenya host substantial refugee populations, often with inadequate international responsibility-sharing.

However, our systems remain much better at responding to displacement than at managing its aftermath. Protection has a beginning, when people are registered, sheltered and fed. We think much less about how it ends, and about who these people become once the humanitarian spotlight moves on. West Africa provides an important example. After the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, refugee status formally ceased for Sierra Leoneans at the end of 2008 and for Liberians in June 2012. ECOWAS

states then sought to use the regional free movement framework as a pathway to local integration: former refugees could, in principle, remain as ECOWAS citizens with residence rights instead of choosing between return and prolonged uncertainty. As such, regional citizenship became a bridge out of refugee protection.

However, implementation revealed the distance between legal status and lived security. Research among former Liberian refugees in Nigeria shows that the end of refugee status did not necessarily bring secure incorporation. Some struggled to obtain or renew documents, to access formal employment and to establish a secure legal position for themselves and their families. Responsibility shifted from a humanitarian system to national and regional administrations that were often poorly equipped to manage the transition.

The lesson is that regional mobility rights can provide a bridge out of refugee status, and a possible route for people displaced by climate pressures who fall outside conventional refugee protection, but only if they translate into documents, employment, business registration, recognition of qualifications and a path to permanent residence or naturalisation. The question is urgent because the war in Sudan, conflicts across the Sahel and eastern DRC, and climate-related pressures will leave many people unable to return for prolonged periods. Camps cannot provide a long-term answer, and encampment can itself function as a form of bordering by restricting movement and access to economic life.

External pressures: Whose border is it?

Let me turn to the pressures that come from outside the continent.

Over the past decade, European policy has extended migration control beyond Europe's territorial borders through funding, training and agreements with countries of origin and transit. Niger's 2015 antismuggling law became one of the clearest examples, transforming the transport economy around Agadez until the Nigerien authorities repealed it in November 2023. Partnerships with Tunisia, Mauritania and others have placed migration management alongside development cooperation and financial support, and the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, in application since 12 June 2026, strengthens screening, border procedures and returns.

Across the Atlantic, the US has restricted entry from a growing number of countries. Since 1 January 2026, nationals of several African countries, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, Somalia and Sudan, face full entry restrictions, while partial restrictions apply to Nigeria, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and others. Justified on national security, screening and visa-overstay grounds, these measures fall, subject to limited exemptions, on students, families, professionals and businesspeople.

These developments raise three points about African agency.

1. *Africa's bargaining position is stronger when countries negotiate collectively.* Bilateral agreements on returns, readmission or border control can fragment African positions. The AU and RECs offer a stronger platform for common positions.

2. *External migration priorities should not undermine Africa's own integration agenda.* Policies aimed at reducing onward movement towards Europe also constrain mobility between African countries. Agadez illustrates the tension, because for generations the city has been a crossroads linking communities and economies across the Sahara, beyond a gateway to the Mediterranean. Africa's external partnerships should preserve the regional mobility arrangements African states have spent decades building.
3. *Our position internationally is strengthened by greater consistency within Africa.* African governments rightly object to restrictions placed on their citizens abroad. Those arguments carry more weight when African states also expand visa-free travel, protect migrants from xenophobic violence and make regional free movement meaningful in practice.

A policy agenda: Ten proposals

Let me now turn to the ten proposals across the continental, regional and national levels.

At the continental level

1. *Link the Free Movement Protocol to the AfCFTA.* A coalition of willing states should drive the Protocol towards the fifteen ratifications it needs, on a clear and public timeline, with phased implementation beginning with entry, followed by residence and establishment. Every head of state who celebrates the AfCFTA should be asked whether they have ratified the Free Movement Protocol.
2. *Make the African Passport and digital identity real.* The AU should support universal birth registration and access to national identity documents, and accelerate wider issuance of the African

Passport, with robust data protection so that digital and biometric systems facilitate mobility rather than surveillance.

3. *Turn continental labour standards into national law.* The Pan-African Parliament adopted the Model Law on Labour Migration in Africa in November 2025. Member states should now use it to strengthen national legislation on fair recruitment, migrant workers' rights and access to social protection, in line with international labour standards.
4. *Negotiate collectively with external partners.* Individual states will continue to negotiate bilateral agreements, but within common AU principles on returns, readmission, visa facilitation and legal pathways that protect African mobility interests.

At the regional level

1. *Secure a durable ECOWAS–AES mobility settlement.* The ability of citizens of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to move, reside and work in coastal West Africa, and of other West Africans to do the same across the Sahel, should not rest on temporary political assurances. A durable framework would protect traders, pastoralists, students, workers and families from future political disputes.
2. *Build the infrastructure of labour mobility.* Free movement means little if qualifications, pensions and professional rights stop at the border. RECs should accelerate mutual recognition of qualifications in health, education, engineering and ICT, share labour market information and make social security genuinely portable. In West Africa, this means implementing the ECOWAS General Convention on Social Security.
3. *Clean up the corridors.* Joint border posts, published and enforceable fee schedules, accessible complaint mechanisms and sanctions for extortion could trans-

form everyday movement without another treaty being signed. Women cross-border traders, who experience these barriers most directly, should be central to designing and monitoring the reforms.

At the national level

1. *Dismantle internal barriers to citizenship.* Regional free movement will remain incomplete while citizens face exclusion within their own countries. Nigeria, for example, should continue the shift from indigeneity towards residence as the basis for access to public services, employment and political participation.
2. *Make mobility part of the durable-solutions toolkit.* National refugee and migration frameworks should create workable pathways from refugee status, including after cessation, into residence, employment and, where appropriate, naturalisation, and should use regional mobility deliberately for people who cannot return, including those displaced across borders by climate pressures.
3. *Turn brain drain into brain circulation.* Skills partnerships with destination countries should include investment in the training systems from which workers are recruited. Governments should also make it easier for diaspora professionals to invest, teach, advise and return and reduce the barriers that prevent skilled Africans from working across African borders.

Finally, a word to the research community. African migration data remains fragmented, uneven and too often generated through research agendas set outside the continent. Institutions such as CODESRIA, the Centre for Migration Studies at Legon and the African Migration Observatory in Rabat need sustained investment to produce the

evidence that African policymakers require, and policymakers need mechanisms through which that evidence can shape decisions.

Closing and questions for the Institute

Chair, distinguished laureates, let me conclude.

Pan-Africanism was shaped by people who crossed borders as students in London and Paris, workers in mines and ports, and exiles who found refuge in Accra, Dar es Salaam and Lusaka. The founders of our continental project understood that African unity would be built through Africans moving, meeting and making common cause.

The young Africans entering our labour force over the coming decades will move. They will move to cities, across national borders

and, for some, beyond the continent. Our task is to govern that mobility democratically, with rights, protections and opportunities, and not leave its terms to smugglers, traffickers, xenophobic politics and external priorities. Well-governed mobility can be a foundation of African prosperity, regional integration and a more meaningful Pan-African citizenship.

Actionable recommendations for scholars

I will leave you here today with three actionable recommendations.

1. First, African scholarship on migration must become more directly connected to public policy without sacrificing intellectual independence: the reality of migration is too consequential for scholarship to remain entirely within academic circles.
2. Second, as African scholars you must build stronger intellectual networks across linguistic and regional divisions on the continent: anglophone and francophone scholars have too often studied African migration in parallel. Lusophone and Arabic speaking scholarship has frequently remained even further removed from these conversations. That fragmentation mirrors some of the institutional divides within the continent itself.
3. Third, we should take seriously the intellectual and philosophical resources available within Africa itself. How can knowledge produced ‘from below’ by migrants, traders, pastoralists and displaced communities be incorporated into the formal governance of mobility at the AU, RECS and national levels.

I thank you for your attention, and I look forward to learning from our discussion.

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