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Shifting the narrative on African migration:

The numbers, the root causes, the alternatives – get them right!



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Cover photo: Spanish Civil Guard officers use a boom lift while African migrants sit on top of a border fence as they attempt to cross into Spanish territories, between Morocco and Spain's north African enclave of Ceuta, Spain, August 30, 2019.

Photo: Reuters / TT Bild.

SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE ON AFRICAN MIGRATION:

The numbers, the root causes, the alternatives – get them right!

The overall message of this policy note is that negative public opinion in Europe is a major obstacle to holistic and sustainable policies relating to African migration. It argues for a shift in wording and perspective away from politicised opinions about immigration, or misplaced ideas of humanitarian responsibilities, towards a more constructive and pragmatic focus on labour migration management.

JESPER BJARNESSEN, THE NORDIC AFRICA INSTITUTE

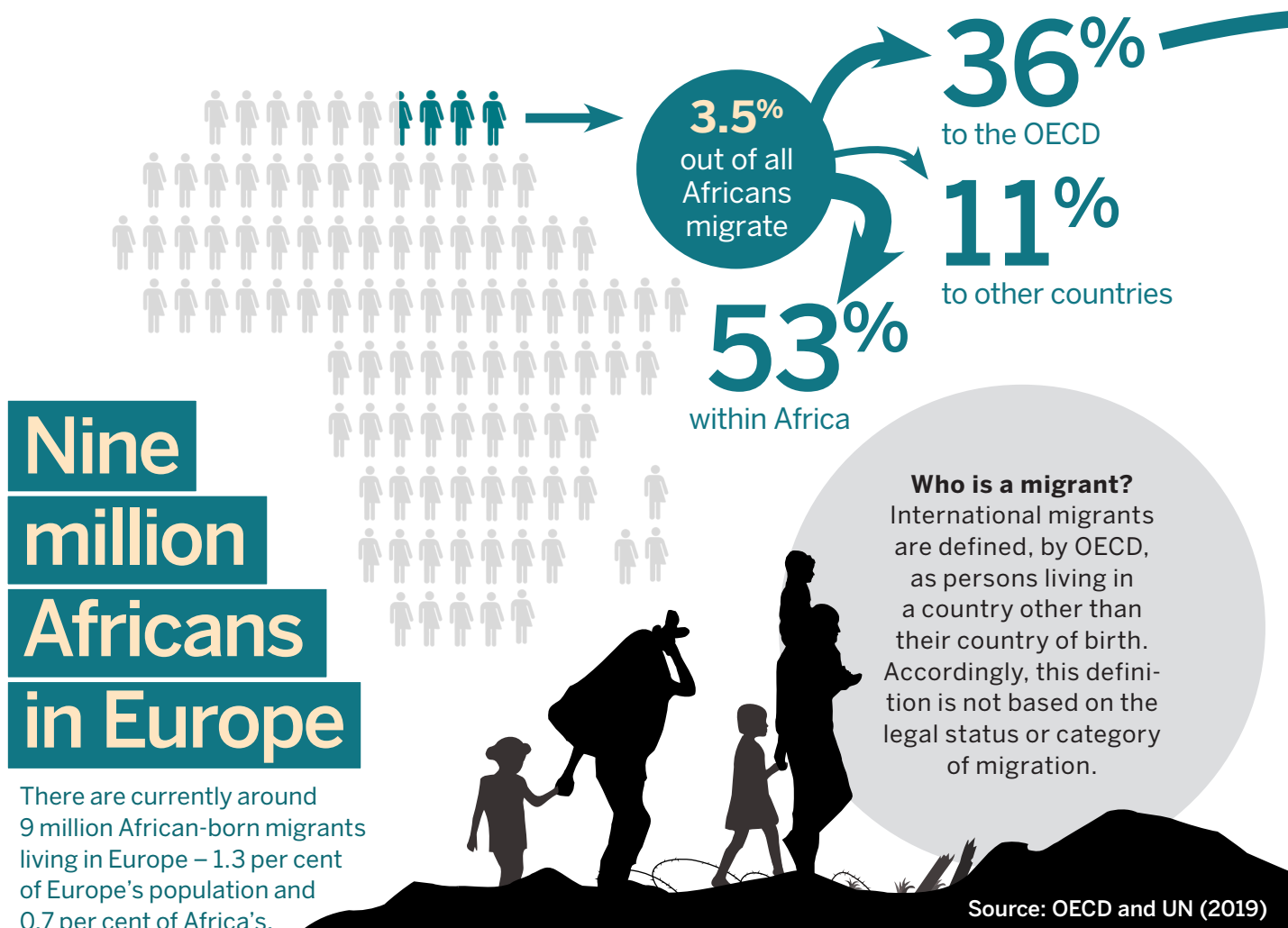
African migration remains at the top of political agendas across Europe. Through the EU-led focus on addressing the “root causes” of African migration, and the UN-led Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), African migration is increasingly being linked to sustainable development. It has proven difficult, however, to mobilise support for longer-term policy solutions, and the lion’s share of European funding still targets border-control measures and the repatriation of African migrants from

Europe. The main challenge facing European decision makers and policy implementers in this regard is not lack of ideas – there are plenty of good policy ideas in the UN GCM, in the EU Agenda on Migration, and in a host of national political agendas. The main stumbling block of these initiatives is the negative public opinion towards African migration, which stems from a fear of unregulated immigration to Europe and a new “refugee crisis”. By shifting the narrative on African migration, decision makers can redirect political will towards more



Photo: Phil Behan, UNHCR

Items from a Tunisian migrant boat abandoned at Lampedusa Port, Italy.



sustainable and longer-term solutions to the problems relating to irregular migration from Africa. Such a shift would also harness the untapped potential of South-North migration to meet the needs of host countries' domestic labour markets, while simultaneously serving the interests of migrants and their home communities.

Get the numbers right

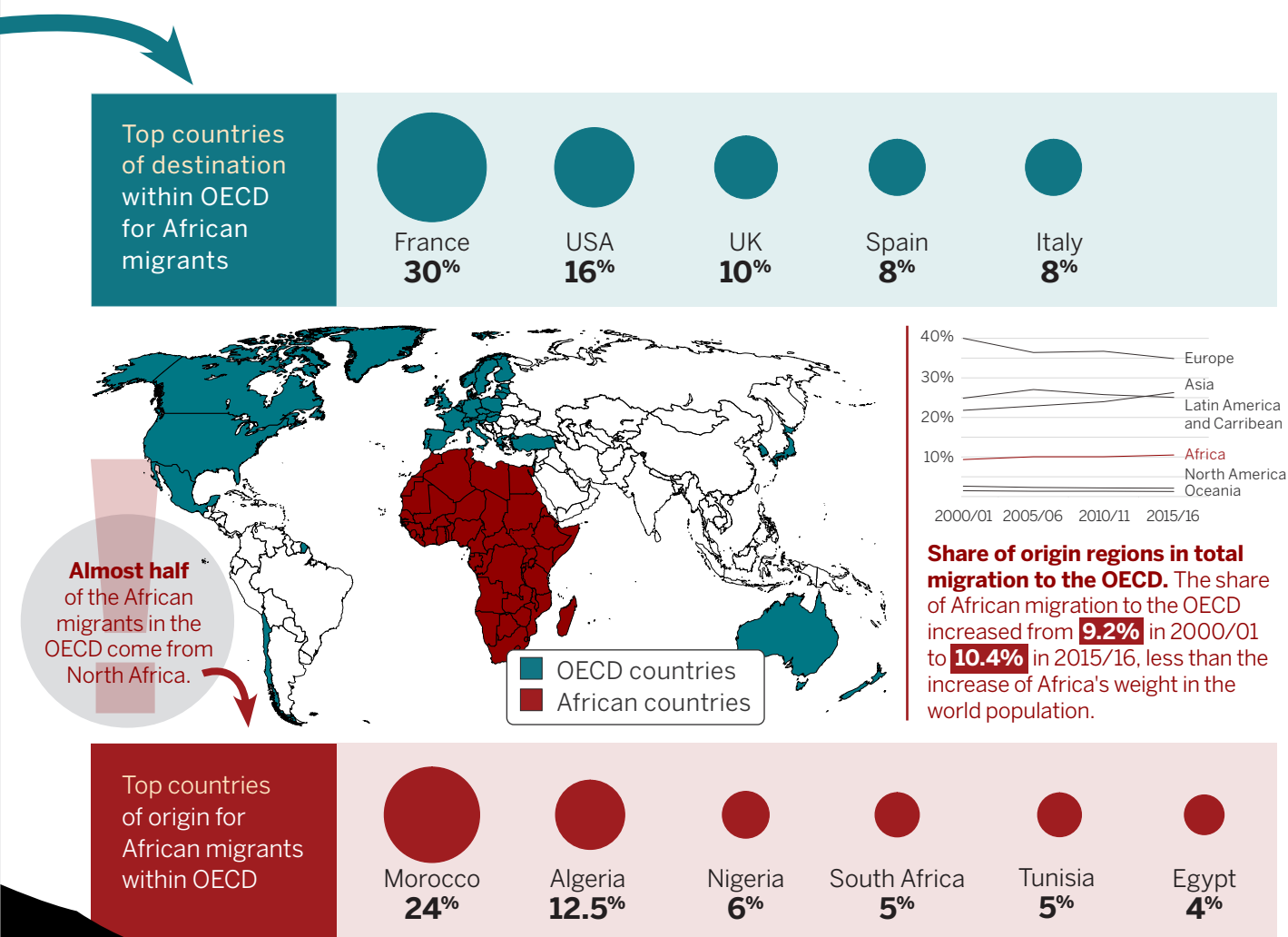
Current political debates across Europe tend to be informed by highly selective and sometimes misleading notions of the scale of migration from Africa to Europe. To shift the narrative on African migration, it is important to correct these misconceptions. The overall message in this regard is twofold: that African migration to Europe has been fairly constant over the past decade relative to the total African population, with a significant drop in the number of arrivals across the Mediterranean since 2015; and that most African migrants who enter Europe do so legally.

There are currently around 9 million African-born migrants living in Europe. On average, 400,000 African citizens enter the EU each year, and this number has

risen steadily over the past decade in absolute terms. However, the rising figure should not be misinterpreted as an indication that African migrants are becoming increasingly obsessed with leaving the continent. First and foremost, the majority of African international migrants remain on the continent, and most of them never leave their sub-region. Secondly, the total percentage of African migrants in relation to the African population has not increased significantly over the past 60 years. In other words, the growing number of African migrants is not driven by an increased fixation with leaving the continent, but is primarily an effect of population growth.

Thirdly, in a global comparison, the proportion of African migrants is quite low. Africa is home to more than 17 per cent of the world population, yet only 15 per cent of the world's international migrants are born in Africa.

Fourthly, the number of African immigrants settling legally in the EU dropped significantly between 2008 and 2012 – from 442,000 to 270,000. Since then, the number has remained more or less stable, with



288,000 legal arrivals in 2016. At the same time, even in the midst of the European refugee crisis, the number of illegal crossings by sub-Saharan African nationals using the Mediterranean routes has been relatively stable over the past decade, until the recent drop in the total number of arrivals in 2018, due to the changing strategies of EU externalisation policies.

Taken together, when it comes to African international migrants, the numbers demonstrate that international migration is mainly directed towards the immediate sub-region or other parts of the continent; that the total percentage of African migrants in relation to population has remained remarkably stable over the past generation; and that the proportion of African migrants in relation to the global migrant stock is quite low.

Get the motivations right

If we get the numbers right on African migration, there should also be an opportunity to correct certain basic misconceptions about why some African nationals are so determined to invest their resources – and sometimes to risk their lives – to reach Europe or oth-

er parts of the global North. While the political debates surrounding xenophobia and racism have tended to polarise public opinion further, shifting the narrative on African migration could potentially contribute to the setting of a new agenda on national integration in Europe as well. In this regard, it is important to recognise and understand the motivations and contributions of the most stigmatised migrants. Irregular migration is no one's first choice. People who leave their homes in search of better opportunities would rather do so in the safest way possible.

Fears are often raised that migrants from the global South will become a burden on host societies. Migration, we should remember, is a means to an end. Most migrants are driven by the motivation to work, study or join their families. This means that very few migrants expect to receive financial support from their host societies. And while some African migrants do rely on social services in Europe, the vast majority – whether or not they have migrated legally – do not. They contribute to their host societies not only through their labour, but also by paying taxes, etc.

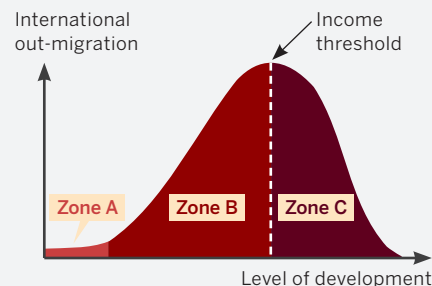
To challenge the disproportionate attention devoted to the costs and challenges that migrants from the global South place on European host societies, it is important to shift the narrative towards the contributions they make. The money that African migrants make abroad has long been recognised as an important resource for sustainable development in their countries of origin. In 2018, sub-Saharan African migrants in the EU sent back more than 41 billion euros in remittances – almost the equivalent of the EU’s total official development assistance to the region. These figures are independent of employment status, which means that they include money earned by irregular migrants. By retaining ties to their home communities, migrants also contribute through skills and knowledge sharing – so-called “social remittances”.

In public debates across the global North, fears continue to be raised that immigrants will “steal our jobs”. These fears are based on a series of misunderstandings about European labour markets. Contrary to popular assumption, there is a growing demand for mid- to low-skilled labour in Europe. In Denmark, for example, vacancies in the private sector are at their highest since 2010. In the past 10 years, there have been labour shortages in the industrial sector; construction; retail and transportation; information and communication; and finance, insurance and real estate. Overall, the unemployment rate in Denmark (as in the other Nordic countries) has been falling steadily since 2013; and with an ageing population across Europe, the demand for foreign labour is bound to increase in the future. This demand is not for the most highly skilled specialists (as is often assumed), since the highest educated are already migrating legally, and integrating into European labour markets.

One of the main challenges to actively recruiting migrant labour from the global South (apart from public opinion) is the European requirement for language and educational skills. These requirements are intended to enable permanent naturalisation and integration into the host society, as stipulated by standardised citizenship tests. These intentions are clear when one compares what is required of a highly skilled specialist and a low-skilled worker. For example, if an American researcher wishes to settle in Sweden, she is not obliged to complete a mandatory language course before taking up a teaching post at the university. By being more pragmatic over the requirements placed on migrants in terms of the skills they need to fulfil their professional commitments – regardless of the work sector – European migration management could reduce the costs of generic skills and language training; integrate migrants more efficiently into the labour market; and be more competitive in attracting the migrant labour it needs.

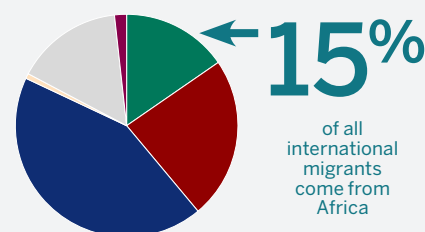
Finally, research on migratory patterns shows that there is a direct connection between migration management and the length of a migrant’s stay abroad. The main lesson from these insights is that the more difficult it is to enter a country, the longer the migrant is likely to stay. In contexts where legal entry is relatively easy – as it is in most African states, and as it was in Europe until the mid-1980s – most migrants prefer to travel more regularly between the home and

The Migration Hump



Migration theory has established a generalised understanding of the correlation between income level and migration, which confirms that the highest migration rates occur not at the lowest levels of development (Zone A), but rather at the intermediary level (Zone B), where income levels are still significantly lower than in the host country but high enough to finance the migration endeavour. The same reasoning shows that once a relative income threshold is reached, migration rates tend to decrease with continued rise in income level (Zone C). This model is usually referred to as the “migration hump” because of its inverted U shape.

Proportionally few African migrants



Share of global migrant stock by region of origin:	Share of world population:
Africa 15%	17%
Europe 24%	10%
Asia 43%	59%
Oceania 1%	0.5%
Latin America and the Caribbean 16%	8%
Northern America ... 2%	5%

Source: UNDESA (2019)

the host country, and to return to the country of origin sooner. The current circulation of mid- to low-skilled workers between Asia and the Middle East shows that when legal pathways to temporary labour migration are available, most migrants prefer to work on shorter contracts, and then return home.

Get the “root causes” right

European governments are currently investing heavily in combating the so-called “root causes” of African migration to Europe. Their policy is based on the assumption that if living and working conditions in the sending countries are improved, the incentive to migrate will decline. This policy is flawed and politically risky. First of all, even if increased development investments in the main sending regions were to succeed in raising the general standard of living, it is unlikely that the small percentage of African citizens who migrate would significantly change their outlook. Secondly, albeit with some important variations, most experiences have shown that an increase in household income tends to lead to more, not less, migration in the short and medium term. Migration is a costly affair, and is usually not available to the poorest. The African continent would have to experience an unprecedented economic uplift for it to reach the so-called “migration hump”, where increased income begins to lead to less migration.

Thirdly, regardless of the potential rise in income levels through targeted development investments, the “root causes” approach fails to recognise that migration has always been about seeking better opportunities elsewhere. This means that so long as income levels and living standards remain as unevenly distributed across the globe as they are today, families and individuals in the world’s poorest regions will find it worth investing in migration. In that sense, the fundamental driver of South-North labour migration is inequality, not poverty.

Get the alternatives right

The short-term challenges of the current crisis in European migration management will not be met by development investment. Irregular migration into the EU is still a political hot potato that is juggled by heads of state and a panoply of ministries and special appointees at the EU and national level. Development actors have a part to play in these negotiations, but their main role should be to think more long term and holistically about African migration.

Shifting the narrative on African migration away from European immigration politics requires clearer reasoning about the different needs, rights and chal-

lenges of aspiring economic migrants, compared to people fleeing war or climate-related disasters. It is important to understand that the vast majority of sub-Saharan African irregular migrants to Europe are aspiring labour migrants, and that their asylum claims are a reflection of the lack of legal options for pursuing labour migration to the EU. By not providing other options, the EU is contributing to irregular migration and the criminalisation of aspiring labour migrants. This does not absolve African states, smugglers, traffickers or the migrants themselves of their share of responsibility for the current European migration management crisis; but in order to construct sustainable solutions, greater consideration must be given to legal pathways for labour migrants with different skills levels.

Conclusion: Get the perspectives right

In short, shifting the narrative on African migration is a prerequisite for getting to grips with inclusive, pragmatic and transparent migration management. Shifting the narrative implies moving public debate from difficult political and moral discussions about Europe’s humanitarian responsibilities towards a more technical and practical discussion of labour migration management. In such a discussion, the needs and requirements of European labour markets, and the accompanying rights of its workers, are more relevant than whether or not Europeans have a moral responsibility towards African migrants.

This shift would also enable a more straightforward consideration of the human rights of all migrants. The Sustainable Development Goals agenda refers to the legal principle of universal human rights – not to a moral or humanitarian responsibility. On this basis, the current multilateral agendas for migration management already offer a toolbox of more sustainable solutions to global migration management. ■

Recommended readings



OECD Migration Data Brief No 5, June 2019
 IOM World Migration Report 2020
 UN DESA International Migration Report 2019
 UNDP “Scaling the Fences. Voices of Irregular African Migrants to Europe”
 Carling, Jørgen & Marta Bivand Erdal (2018) Is ‘Sustainable Migration’ a Valuable Concept?
 PRIO Policy Brief 5. Oslo: PRIO.



About this policy note

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About the author

Jesper Bjarnesen is an anthropologist working mainly on migration and mobility through wartime and peace in West Africa. Other interests is wartime displacement, intergenerational relations, rural-urban connections, informal labour recruitment, transnational migration and urban land rights.



About the institute

The Nordic Africa Institute conducts independent, policyrelevant research, provides analysis and informs decisionmaking, with the aim of advancing research-based knowledge of contemporary Africa. The institute is jointly financed by the governments of Finland, Iceland and Sweden.