

# REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND MOBILITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: AN ASSESSMENT

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## Abstract

Regional integration is increasingly recognised as a crucial catalyst for economic and social development in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This region, characterised by diverse cultures, languages, and economic statuses, has long grappled with the challenges and opportunities presented by cross-border interactions. The purpose of this research is to provide an assessment of regional integration and its influence on mobility within SSA. Drawing on empirical data and case studies, it examines the migration patterns in SSA countries and the effectiveness of regional organizations, such as the African Union and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in facilitating the movement of goods, services, capital, and people across borders as well as addressing challenges to mobility. Furthermore, the research explores the role of political, social,

and economic factors in shaping regional integration efforts and their implications for intra-regional migration flows. By offering a comprehensive assessment, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding regional integration and mobility dynamics in Sub-Saharan Africa, informing policy interventions aimed at promoting inclusive growth and sustainable development across the continent.

**Keywords:** migration, mobility, regional integration, regional organisation, sub-Saharan Africa.

## Introduction

Africa is a vast and diverse region characterized by its rich cultural heritage, endowing natural landscapes, and complex socio-economic dynamics. The area is home to over one billion people, consisting of a multitude of ethnicities, languages, and traditions (Worldometers, 2025). Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is a vast region with diverse communities, all connected by a deep cultural heritage and a shared history. Despite the natural geographic barriers delineating their

territories, these peoples have forged enduring bonds, fostering socio-cultural, economic, and political connections that transcend borders, both before and after the colonial arbitrary artificial boundaries imposed on them by European powers. This cohesion has fueled intra-regional migration and free movement in SSA, amplifying the interconnectedness among the constituent nations.

In recent times, the mobility of persons, goods and services in SSA is associated with certain social and political dynamics, of which the most important is the search for opportunities and employment that impel border crossings, thus resulting in the reconfiguration of such borders in terms of social and cultural identities. In 2022, sub-Saharan Africa accounted for the majority of internal displacements across the continent, with conflict and violence being the primary drivers. The Democratic Republic of the Congo experienced over 4 million displacements, while Ethiopia saw more than 2 million, making them the hardest-hit countries. Somalia ranked third in the region, with 621,000 people displaced due to conflict. In terms of disaster-induced displacements, Nigeria led with approximately 2.4 million cases, followed by Somalia at 1.2 million, Ethiopia at 873,000, and South Sudan at 596,000 (McAuliffe & Oucho 2024). This has intensified migration within the region, further straining resources and increasing the burden on infrastructure and social services in SSA (Adepoju, 2008). Consequently, tensions have escalated, occasionally manifesting as border conflicts between nations. In response, some countries have resorted to drastic measures such as

mass expulsions of migrants labelled as foreigners, as a means of addressing the challenges posed by migration (Adepoju, 2000).

Intra-regional migration in SSA is more intense in western and southern sub-regions, as there is a constant flow of people along these two corridors. Although evidence in various literature suggests that economic factors are the main drivers of migration, it bears noting that this situation has been exacerbated by the mass media and the ease of cross-country transportation. Similarly, Africa's marginalization by globalization, driven by colonial legacies, unequal trade relationships, and structural global economic imbalances, has perpetuated economic disparities within the region. These disparities have driven internal migration within SSA as individuals seek better opportunities in urban centres and resource-rich areas (Tukon, 2024). While barriers to the movement of financial services, trade, transportation, and communication have been eliminated across borders, the absence of proportionate foreign direct investment to spur job opportunities and labour migration has resulted in the emergence of migrant trafficking (Attoh, 2021). This situation has left vulnerable regions susceptible to exploitation.

One of the key ways through which African nations have sought to address these challenges and unlock the benefits of migration is through regional integration. Since attaining independence, countries in SSA have increasingly recognized the importance of regional integration as a vital strategy to overcome the challenges of underdevelopment and improve the well-being of their citizens. Africa is

renowned for its extensive fragmentation, with over one hundred and sixty-five borders separating South African nations alone (Akukwe, 2002). Regional integration has presented opportunities for Africa to consolidate its resources, fostering economies of scale that can drive competitiveness and economic growth. Moreover, a unified Africa can better position itself in the global economy, while also establishing robust institutions capable of addressing regional conflicts and creating a conducive environment for expanded business activities. By fostering regional integration, Africa stands to build strong institutional capacities to tackle political crises within the region, paving the way for sustainable development and prosperity.

This study is motivated by the need to evaluate the dynamics of regional integration and its impact on mobility within sub-Saharan Africa. It aims to assess the migration trends prevalent in the SSA region, scrutinizing the roles played by various Regional Economic Communities (RECs) including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in facilitating the free movement of goods, services, capital, and individuals across national borders. Free movement is defined as the ability of citizens from partner states to enter each other's territories without the need for a visa. Member states are obligated under the protocol to implement a standardized identification system for citizens, promote fair conditions for the free movement of labour, and

synchronize the recognition of academic institutions, certifications, labour laws, policies, and programs (EAC, 2025). This research dissects the multifaceted social repercussions, both beneficial and adverse, stemming from regional integration agreements on the movement of people within SSA.

## **Migration Patterns in Sub-Saharan Africa**

### ***West African Migration Trends***

Trends and patterns of migration in West Africa during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods were mainly rural to urban and regional. The phenomenon of migration exhibited diverse forms of intra-regional trade movements. These included nomadic journeys across the savannah zone, seasonal or permanent labour migrations from the inland Sahel regions to coastal areas in a north-south direction, movements of fishermen along the Atlantic Ocean within the Gulf of Guinea, and migrations prompted by conflicts and human trafficking, resulting in refugee flows (Adepoju, 2004).

Migration in the pre-colonial era was defined by several factors: the trans-Saharan trade linking West Africa and North Africa, tribal movements to new territories through either conquest or peaceful settlement, and the nomadic travels of transhumant herders across the savannah region (Agyeman & Setrana, 2014). During the era of European dominance, new migration routes emerged. Initially, the trans-Atlantic slave trade displaced more than twelve million West Africans, relocating them to agricultural lands across Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean Islands. Moreover, colonial activities shaped migration patterns, driven

by cash crop farming along the coasts, construction and urbanization of cities like Abidjan, Accra, Cotonou, Dakar, Ibadan, Kano, Kumasi, and Lagos (Agyeman & Setrana, 2014). Cessay (2017) noted that migration primarily flowed from Sahel countries to thriving mines, plantations, and coastal urban centres in Nigeria, Ghana, and Cote d'Ivoire, facilitating the exchange of skills within the region. Most West African labour migrants during the colonial period and the early years of independence went to the cocoa and coffee farms and the mining areas in Ghana and Ivory Coast.

In 1960, migrants made up 12.3% of Ghana's population and 17% of Ivory Coast's by 1965. Togo and Nigeria were the main sources of migrants to Ghana, while Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta) and Guinea supplied migrants to Ivory Coast. After 1965 Ghana shifted from being a migrant-receiving country to a migrant-sending one due to economic challenges and political unrest. The Aliens Compliance Order in 1970 led to the expulsion of West African immigrants, especially Nigerians and Togolese, from Ghana. Consequently, by 1970, many Ghanaians had started seeking jobs in other West African countries. Ghanaians emigrated to newly independent countries such as Nigeria, Uganda, Botswana and Zambia, to assist in national development. Ghanaian professionals also served in public services in Gambia and Sierra Leone (Anarfi, Awusabo-Asare & Nsowah-Nuamah, 2000).

In the 1970s, rising oil prices and Ghana's economic downturn led to Nigeria replacing Ghana as a primary destination for migrants, alongside

Ivory Coast. By the early 1980s, approximately 300 Ghanaians were migrating to Nigeria daily, resulting in over 1.5 million Ghanaians residing there before their expulsion in 1983 (Agyeman & Setrana, 2014). Since then, Nigeria has reverted to its previous role and, along with Ghana, has become a significant sender of migrants in West Africa.

Until the end of Félix Houphouët-Boigny's presidency in 1993, Ivory Coast attracted numerous West African migrants, notably from Burkina Faso, Mali, Liberia, Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria, to fill the void in domestic labour. These migrants, comprising about 4 million of the total population of 14 million in 1994, primarily worked in the agricultural and service sectors, undertaking tasks that the local populace tended to avoid. The political upheaval in Ivory Coast following Houphouët-Boigny's rule, including two coups in 1999 and 2001 and a civil war from 2002 to 2007, led to refugees fleeing to neighbouring countries and the expulsion of long-time immigrants, thereby making refugee movements constituting the migration system in West Africa (Nnoli, 1999).

Migration in West Africa also involves irregular movements of people facilitated by porous borders and interconnected ethnic and tribal networks spanning national boundaries. Human trafficking has surged in the region, particularly affecting young women who are smuggled to Gulf countries, where they are coerced into various forms of forced labour and sexual exploitation, sparking significant concern among regional authorities.

Today, the proliferation of smartphones, access to new media, and improved transportation

infrastructure within the sub-region have spurred migration (Ukachi & Attoh, 2020). For instance, despite the geographical distance between Nigeria and the Ivory Coast, direct bus services from Ejigbo in Osun State, Nigeria to Abidjan and Yamoussoukro are available. Additionally, dedicated parks for long-distance buses and taxi cabs to ECOWAS member countries are available in Mile 2 and Mazamaza areas of Lagos State. Road journeys from Kano to Niger, Chad, Mali, and Burkina Faso are also feasible, contributing to the establishment of diverse West African communities engaging in business activities within the sub-region. Key host countries for migrants from West Africa now include Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal, while major sending countries comprise those within the Sahel region such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, as well as coastal states like Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Togo, Guinea Bissau, and Benin.

### ***East African Migration Trends***

Migration and trade have long characterized East Africa's geography. People move within the region seeking improved job opportunities, better pastures for their livestock, and refuge from ecological challenges like drought and environmental degradation. Moreover, political conflicts and civil unrest also drive migration in the sub-region. As a result, East African corridors witness significant movements of individuals fleeing poverty and seeking safety.

The historical structures and events before, during, and after colonization have significantly influenced the migration patterns in the sub-region.

Historically, labour migrants from the region predominantly sought opportunities in industries like sisal, tea, coffee in Tanzania, sugar and tea in Kenya, and cotton in Uganda (Spaan & Van Moppes, 2006). The sending countries include Burundi, Rwanda, as well as non-EAC members like Mozambique and countries in the Horn of Africa such as Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia. Tanzania and Kenya stand out as major destinations for migrants, while Uganda serves as both a sending and receiving country (Spaan & Van Moppes, 2006).

Irregular migration in Eastern Africa typically follows four main pathways: the southern route leading to Southern Africa, particularly South Africa; the Horn of Africa route involving movements within the region; the northern route heading toward North Africa and Europe; and the eastern route targeting the Arabian Peninsula, especially Saudi Arabia (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). These journeys, often facilitated by smugglers, are fraught with danger. For instance, migrants travelling the southern route face numerous challenges, such as unexpected fees demanded by brokers, insufficient resources for essentials like food, and exposure to various forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, and psychological harm (IOM, 2023).

The surge in mobility in the area has been intensified by armed conflicts and civil wars, such as those involving Al-Shabaab and conflicts in the Great Lakes regions, Sudan, Somalia, and Burundi (Mberu, 2006). High youth unemployment rates also drive migration in East Africa. Besides, illegal

border crossings by people of the same tribe and ethnic groups from different countries contribute to the region's migration system. Factors like common language, shared cultural affinity, colonial history, and the East African Economic Community facilitate migration, especially among Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania (Mberu, 2006).

Again, improvements in information and communication technology and the ease of transportation have encouraged migration along the East African corridors, where heavy movement of people and goods occurs. Marjidi (2018) posits that Uganda has been noted to be the most tolerant migration regime in the region because of its Refugees Act of 2006, which promotes free movement and the right to employment.

### ***Southern African Migration Trends***

Mobility within the Southern African region has deep historical roots, predominantly characterized by labour migration dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. Migration stands out as the pivotal force that amalgamated the various colonies within the sub-region into a unified labour market. Over several decades, South Africa has been a magnet pull for labour, particularly from its neighbouring countries, serving the needs of its mining, agricultural, and service sectors.

Between 1940 and 1980, both governmental and private recruitment agencies played a significant role in sourcing an estimated 1.5 million labour migrants from neighbouring nations such as Malawi, Lesotho, Angola, Mozambique, and Swaziland to bolster South Africa's workforce in mines and plantation farms (IOM, 2024).

Subsequently, from 1990 to 2000, the official recruitment channel, managed by the Employment Bureau of Africa (TEBA), facilitated the migration of approximately 1.7 million labourers from Botswana, Mozambique, Lesotho, and Swaziland to South Africa (Spaan & Van Moppes, 2006).

In recent times, as at 2013, the Southern African region witnessed a substantial influx of migrants, totalling over 4 million individuals, excluding irregular migrants. South Africa was the primary destination, hosting approximately 2.4 million migrants in 2010 to more than 4 million migrants by 2019, while Zimbabwe accommodated around 1.5 million migrants (IOM, 2020). The population of international migrants in the country grew substantially, rising from approximately 2 million in 2010 to more than 4 million by 2019.

South Africa stands as a beacon for international migrants, drawing individuals from diverse backgrounds seeking new opportunities. Notably, since the 1990s, post-apartheid South Africa has emerged as a magnet for a spectrum of migrants, encompassing highly skilled professionals and labourers alike. These migrants constitute nationals from different countries of the world, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ghana, Zambia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and Kenya, as well as from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations like Italy, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Also, migrants from Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, and China contribute to the rich tapestry of South Africa's

immigrant community (Crush, Peberdy & Williams, 2006).

The Southern African sub-region has benefited immensely from the ease of transportation, especially from migrants in the West African sub-region. South African Airways flies frequently from Abidjan to South Africa, daily from Lagos and daily from Accra to South Africa. The traffic in that corridor is quite heavy, especially for migrants and business people who offer goods and services and return to their countries of origin (Crush, Peberdy & Williams, 2006).

### ***Migration Trends in the Horn of Africa***

Migration within the Horn of Africa is a complex phenomenon shaped by a myriad of factors. Conflict and political instability, such as the civil war in Somalia, have led to a large-scale displacement of people both internally and externally, with many seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. Environmental challenges like droughts and desertification also contribute to rural-to-urban migration as communities search for better livelihood opportunities (IGAD, 2021). Economic migration is prevalent, driven by disparities within the region and limited job prospects in rural areas, prompting movement to urban centres and countries with stronger economies, including Gulf states and Europe.

This region is also an important transit point for migrants from other regions of Africa or Asia destined for Southern Europe and the Middle East. So far, three transit corridors or routes have been identified. They are the East African route, which is a land route that links North with Italy and Malta

via Sudan, Libya and/or Egypt; the Gulf of Eden route, which connects migrants heading to Yemen from Somalia. They cross the Gulf of Eden via Bossaso and Puntland; and the Red Sea route: the route is used by migrants destined to Italy, Malta or Yemen. From this region, transit migrants cross the Red Sea and the Suez Canal to Italy or Malta, or from Djibouti, they cross to Yemen through Obock (IGAD, 2021).

Historical and cultural ties also influence migration, such as the connections between Ethiopia and Eritrea, despite periods of conflict. Furthermore, the Horn of Africa hosts significant refugee populations, both from within the region and neighbouring countries like South Sudan and Yemen, leading to the establishment of refugee camps in countries like Ethiopia and Kenya. Transhumance, practised by pastoralist communities, involves seasonal movements of livestock across borders. At the same time, the region also serves as a hub for human trafficking and smuggling, fueled by economic desperation, conflict, and exploitation (Geiger & Pécoud, 2014).

### **An Assessment of Regional Economic Communities' Approaches to Mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Mobility across sub-Saharan Africa is influenced by a myriad of factors, including socioeconomic conditions, political dynamics, cultural norms, and the impacts of climate change. This movement encompasses various groups such as seasonal cross-border labourers, traders, agricultural workers, and nomadic communities seeking viable pasturelands for their livestock due

to changing environmental conditions (Adepoju, 2001). Economic downturns in several countries, coupled with the activities of militant groups like Boko Haram, the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), Al-Shabaab, and Al-Qaeda, have intensified migratory pressures in the region. Consequently, some of these population movements have escalated into border disputes between and among neighbouring states.

In response to these challenges, many sub-Saharan African nations have resorted to large-scale expulsion of migrants as a means of managing migration problems. However, one significant approach devised by African leaders to address mobility challenges and foster regional integration is the framework of Regional Economic Communities (RECs). According to Adepoju (2001), these RECs serve as foundational pillars for economic cooperation, peacebuilding, and stability across Africa, implementing policies set forth by the African Union. RECs in Africa have adopted several approaches implemented by the African Union. The Intra-Regional Forum on Migration in Africa (IRFMA) has provided a space for interregional cooperation on migration and a unique platform for RECs to share information and discuss regional policies for better regional migration governance (Adepoju, 2001).

Regional integration plays an important role in facilitating the seamless inclusion of a region into the global economy. Effective regional integration is a strategy to enhance economic growth in the SSA. Experience globally has shown that regional cooperation unions have the potential to facilitate

labour migration, especially those that provide in their agreements for the free flow of skilled labour and rights of establishment in member countries (Mberu, 2006). Drawing inspiration from successful models such as Latin America Free Trade (LAFTA), Caribbean Community (CAICOM), Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Central American Common Market (CACM), as well as cooperation agreements like those between African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries and European Union (EU) nations (Adepoju, 2001), it becomes evident that fostering subregional and regional economic cooperation and integration in Africa is imperative.

The establishment of RECs has been very beneficial in promoting mobility in sub-Saharan Africa. Their strategies are deeply influenced by the distinct political, economic, and social landscapes within their respective regions. The policies implemented by the RECs have accelerated mobility between and among the sub-regions as people take advantage of the protocols to transact quick business across borders.

### ***The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)***

In 1975, the creation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) marked an important moment aimed at fostering collaboration and unity among member nations across economic and cultural spheres. Central to its mission was the aspiration to forge an economic and monetary union, transcending individual national boundaries to achieve comprehensive integration of member state economies. This overarching

ambition, as enshrined in Article 3 of the Revised Treaty, underscores the core mandate of ECOWAS: “to advance cooperation and integration towards the realization of an economic union in West Africa. This union is envisioned not only to uplift the living standards of its populace but also to sustain and fortify economic equilibrium, nurture inter-state relations, and contribute significantly to the progress and prosperity of the African continent as a whole (Asante, 1990).”

ECOWAS has introduced a series of legislative and policy measures aimed at effectively managing migration. One significant initiative is the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, along with four supplementary protocols. The primary aim of the 1979 Protocol was to eliminate barriers to free movement within the sub-region. It delineated a phased approach over fifteen years for full protocol implementation, structured into three phases: Phase I: Right of entry, Phase II: Right of residence, and Phase III: Right of the establishment (Bolarinwa, 2015). Phase One, enacted in 1980, ensured free entry of Community citizens without visas for 90 days, heralding an era of unrestricted movement among ECOWAS member nations. Phase Two, the right of residence, grants citizens of member states the ability to reside in another member state, issuing a residence card or permit, with or without employment privileges. Phase Three, the right of establishment, permits nationals of ECOWAS member states to establish themselves in a different country within the region, accessing economic activities as per the host member state's legislation

for its nationals. To facilitate the smooth implementation of Phase Three, the 1990 Supplementary Protocol was introduced, outlining the specifics of rights of residence and underscoring the principle of non-discrimination against nationals and companies from other member states, except, where justified by public order, security, or health concerns (Bolarinwa, 2015).

To facilitate seamless cross-border travel within the sub-region, certain member nations of the ECOWAS have adopted a unified passport. Moreover, the utilization of the ECOWAS Brown Card is prevalent in the area, serving to facilitate the international movement of commercial vehicles and providing assistance to victims of motor accidents caused by ECOWAS citizens residing within the sub-region.

In the pursuit of enhancing migration protocols and policies, ECOWAS has undertaken significant institutional reforms. Notably, in 2008, after the adoption of the ECOWAS Common Approach to Migration, the Free Movement of Persons (FMP) Directorate was established (Carciotto & Agyeman, 2017). Comprising three primary divisions - the Cross-Border Cooperation unit, the Migration and Free Movement unit, and the Tourism unit - this directorate operates under the aegis of the ECOWAS Commission. Its core mandate encompasses monitoring member nations and offering guidance and education to ensure the comprehensive enforcement of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement and Establishment (Carciotto & Agyeman, 2017).

The Community has taken proactive measures to tackle challenges that are related to labour migration, human trafficking, and forced mobility through its Humanitarian and Social Affairs Directorate (Carciotto & Agyeman, 2017). This directorate serves as an important entity in promoting and regulating human mobility throughout the region. It actively addresses concerns about labour migration, human trafficking, and forced mobility, ensuring comprehensive attention and effective solutions.

Above all, ECOWAS has implemented a range of strategies aimed at effectively regulating migration across the sub-region. These initiatives include handling irregular migration, combatting the scourge of human trafficking, aligning migration policies among member states, safeguarding the rights of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, and devising comprehensive action plans to address migration and development challenges.

### ***The Southern African Development Community (SADC)***

In 1980, the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) was established, laying the groundwork for the establishment of the present-day Southern African Development Community (SADC). Originating with the participation of ten nations—Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Swaziland—SADCC's primary objectives were multifaceted (Oucho, 1998). It aimed to reduce economic reliance on apartheid-era South Africa, foster genuine and fair regional integration, and

mobilize resources to advance the implementation of national, interstate, and regional policies, leveraging historical context and geopolitical dynamics within the subregion.

The evolution from SADCC to SADC occurred in 1992 with the signing of the Windhoek Treaty. In 1994, South Africa's inclusion followed its transition to majority rule. Subsequently, Mauritius joined the Community in 1995, the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) and Seychelles became members in 1998, and Madagascar became a member in 2005 (SADC, 2020). It was expelled in 2009 after a military coup and was later readmitted; further solidifying SADC's regional presence and influence (Dodson & Crush, 2015). The treaty was followed by special protocols on aspects of regional cooperation and some provisions for the movement of people across borders. By July 1994, member states had agreed to abolish visa requirements for travel by nationals in SADC countries.

In August 2008 the SADC Free Trade Area was established, after its formation. In the same year, it joined the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa and the East African Community to form the African Free Trade Zone, including all members of each of the organizations. The African Free Trade Zone consists of twenty-six countries and the objectives are to ease access to markets within the zone and to end problems arising from the fact that several of the member countries belong to multiple groups (Dodson & Crush, 2015).

In the SADC, several key legal instruments are in place to administer migration management.

Among these, the Draft Protocol on the Facilitation of Movement of Persons stands out, initially endorsed in 2005 under the Organ on Peace, Defence, and Security of SADC (Carciotto & Agyeman, 2017). This protocol, revised in 2005, primarily focuses on streamlining the movement of SADC citizens throughout the sub-region, envisaging a visa-free regime. However, it falls short of ensuring equitable access for SADC citizens to host societies' labour markets. Its overarching aim is to foster policies aimed at progressively dismantling barriers to regional movement, both into and within State Parties' territories.

To tackle labour migration challenges across the sub-region comprehensively, the Employment and Labour Sector of SADC has implemented a series of initiatives (SADC, 2020). In 1994, South Africa's government collaborated with the National Union of Mine Workers to implement a strategy that allowed migrant workers to participate in local and national elections, eventually paving the way for them to gain citizenship. This initiative saw the government conferring residency status on approximately 90,000 former refugees from Mozambique and 124,000 individuals from SADC nations, primarily Lesotho, who had been residing in South Africa since 1986 (Crush, Peberdy & Williams, 2006). In addition, about 51,000 miners were excluded from the stipulations of the 1996 Aliens Control Act. Immigrants who had been in the country for over five years were also provided with the opportunity to obtain permanent residency if they desired (Crush, Peberdy & Williams, 2006).

Similarly, the SADC Labour Migration Action Plan (2013–2015) and the Labour Migration Policy Framework (LMPF), alongside the Protocol on Employment and Labour (2014), constitute significant milestones (Crush, Peberdy & Williams, 2006). These documents mandated SADC member states to develop national labour migration policies by 2019, thereby promoting harmonization and coherence in the management of labour mobility within the region.

Furthermore, recognizing the need to facilitate economic activities while addressing security concerns, SADC has adopted additional protocols (SADC, 2020). These include the Protocol on Transport, Communications, and Meteorology, as well as the Protocol on Firearms, Ammunition, and Other Related Materials, aiming to facilitate cross-border travel for economic endeavours while concurrently managing associated security risks.

### *The East African Community (EAC)*

The EAC, which comprises six countries in the African Great Lakes region (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda), was founded in 1967. Although it collapsed in 1977, it was revived on 7th July, 2000. It is a regional economic group for free trade among the member states and for the enhancement of regional integration. In 2010, the EAC launched its common market for goods, labour and capital within the region, to create a common currency and eventually a full political federation to bolster economic integration and development (Adedeji, 2002).

The provisions of the common market address migration-related issues within the sub-

region. The primary goal of the protocol is to broaden and strengthen the collaboration among member states by eliminating barriers to the movement of goods, individuals, labour, services, and capital, alongside facilitating rights related to establishment and residency (EAC, 2024). This protocol facilitates the free movement of individuals and labour within the sub-region, ensuring rights of residency and establishment for citizens across member states of the Community. Member states are obligated under the protocol to implement a standardized identification system for citizens, promote fair conditions for the free movement of labour, and synchronize the recognition of academic institutions, certifications, labour laws, policies, and programs.

The rights entailed in establishment and residency, as outlined in the protocol, grant citizens the freedom to initiate and pursue economic endeavours as self-employed individuals, and to relocate with their families to a country of residence other than their country of origin (EAC, 2024). For instance, the 17th Ordinary Summit of the EAC Heads of States held in 2016 launched the EA e-Passport. The EA e-Passport marks a significant milestone in the quest for seamless travel and enhances regional integration within the EAC. This advanced travel document leverages cutting-edge technology to streamline border crossings, strengthen security measures, and promote greater mobility among member states (EAC, 2024).

Furthermore, in January 2024, the Directors of Labour and Employment from the EAC Partner States considered and approved the EAC Policy and

Legal frameworks governing labour migration in the region. The Policy whose implementation Plan covers 2025-2030, has ten key priority areas viz, Labour Migration Governance; Harmonisation of Labour Migration Policies; Protection and Empowerment of Migrant Workers; Access to Social Protection and Social Security Benefits; Mutual recognition of Academic and Professional Qualifications. Other priority areas are Recognition of Skills Obtained through Informal Training; Promotion of Fair and Ethical Recruitment Practices; Remittances by Migrant Workers; Exchange of Young Workers; and Labour Market Information Systems (EAC, 2024). In a nutshell, the policies aim to advocate for the protection of migrant workers; strengthen labour migration governance and maximise the benefits accruing from labour migration (EAC, 2024).

### ***The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)***

Established in 1996, the IGAD emerged as the successor to the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD), an initiative dating back to 1986. Originating from nations bordering the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region—namely Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya—IGADD was conceived to combat the region's pressing environmental crises (Akinyeye, 2008). The catalyst for its inception was the devastating droughts of 1974-1984, which unleashed famine, economic turmoil, and the looming threat of desertification across the area. Backed by the United Nations, IGADD evolved into IGAD, headquartered in Djibouti, with a core

mission to foster economic collaboration, tackle natural and man-made disasters, particularly drought, and ensure food security and peace throughout the subregion (Akinyeye, 2008).

During the 45th Ordinary Session of the IGAD Council of Regional Ministers meeting held in Addis Ababa in 2012, the pioneering regional migration policy was adopted (IGAD, 2021). Distinguished as the inaugural framework of its kind among the RECs in Africa, this policy draws inspiration from both the AU Migration Policy Framework and the Berne Initiative on the International Agenda for Migration Management. The IGAD regional migration policy framework is envisioned as a compass, intended to steer member states toward the formulation of their National Migration Policies (NMPs). These NMPs are designed to harmonize migration management practices both regionally and nationally, fostering a cohesive approach to address the complexities of human mobility (IGAD, 2021).

In this comprehensive policy document, seven critical areas of concern stemming from human mobility within the region are delineated. These include the destabilizing impact of spontaneous and unregulated population movements on member states' stability and security, the imperative for regional legislative and policy frameworks to safeguard migrants' rights, and strategies for crisis prevention, management, and resolution (IGAD 2021). Also, the policy recognises the nexus between migration, poverty, and conflict, as well as the emergent dynamics of migration intertwined with climate change and environmental

adaptation. Gender considerations in migration dynamics and the plight of vulnerable groups navigating the realities of migration are also highlighted as focal points demanding attention (IGAD 2021). In addressing these multifaceted concerns, the policy document offers a series of targeted recommendations. These recommendations serve as guiding principles, furnishing IGAD member states with actionable directives to navigate the complexities of migration management effectively.

Similarly, IGAD validated the Second Phase of the Migration Action Plan (MAP) in 2023. The 2023 MAP is a revised version of the first MAP (2015-2020). It identifies nine priority areas that reflect the complexity and multidimensionality of migration in the region and aim to address its economic, governance, social, and security aspects. Swiss Development Cooperation supported the development of the Migration Action Plan (2024-2028) (IGAD, 2024).

In essence, adopting the IGAD regional migration policies represents a crucial step towards fostering regional cooperation and coherence in addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by human mobility across the IGAD region.

### **Challenges Hindering Effective Mobility Within sub-Saharan Africa**

Despite the efforts of various Regional Economic Communities to promote free movement in sub-Saharan Africa, several recurrent challenges continue to obstruct the seamless flow of people, goods, and services across the region. These

obstacles include security concerns, infrastructural deficiencies, political and economic disparities, administrative inefficiencies and health concerns, all of which contribute to the limited success of policy implementation.

A major challenge to adversely affecting mobility in sub-Saharan Africa is the existence of multiple regional organizations comprising the same countries. The overlap in membership and institutional frameworks has hindered integration efforts. Countries belonging to ECOWAS, SADC, EAC, and IGAD are part of multiple unions that often have differing or conflicting ideologies, goals, and objectives. The multiplicity of regional groupings has caused unnecessary rivalry and competition among the regional organizations (Asiwaju, 2003). In the same light, the policies proposed by RECs at the regional level contradict the actions taken by member states at the national level. While African leaders advocate for a liberal approach to migration at the regional level, national policies tend to be more protectionist and restrictive regarding migration governance (Dokubo, 2009). For instance, the 1991 Abuja Treaty, the Constitutive Act of the African Union (AU), and the AU Vision 2063 encourage member states to progressively achieve Free Movement of Persons (FMP) through bilateral or regional measures (AU, 2024). Despite ECOWAS, EAC, SADC, and IGAD adopting liberal migration policies to facilitate the movement of people and protect migrant rights, African citizens still face numerous barriers to free movement on the continent. For instance, the Xenophobic reactions to immigrants, especially in

South Africa, and recently Côte d'Ivoire, reinforce the feeling that immigrants are unwanted, migrants are seen by nationals as carriers of diseases, hijackers of jobs and perpetrators of crimes. Most countries view migration as a threat rather than an opportunity to grow their economies through higher production.

Most RECs in SSA lack the institutions necessary to enforce regional migration policies, leading to significant challenges in managing migration. Many member states have not integrated or domesticated regional agreements into their national legislation, perceiving migration management as primarily within national sovereignty. Consequently, despite their need for migrant labour, these nations have historically favoured a restrictive and protective stance on migration, especially concerning unskilled and semi-skilled workers. This national or protectionist perspective negates the regional approach, which tends to be more liberal and inclusive. For instance, the IGAD does not have a migration protocol like other regional bodies. Although IGAD was among the first to adopt a regional migration policy framework in 2012, by September 2017, only Uganda and Kenya out of the eight IGAD member states had drafted national migration policies as required (Oucho, 2015). Cooperation on migration policies among IGAD countries is minimal. Similarly, the SADC lacks a protocol for the free movement of persons and has insufficient institutions to ensure member states' compliance with regional migration policies. Even after ratifying the free movement protocol, member

states are not obligated to implement it. In the EAC, some member states struggle to fully implement the free movement protocols despite their ratification. Restrictive domestic labour laws in some SADC and EAC countries impede the free movement of workers, and the labour agreement primarily benefits professionals, excluding other labour market segments (Segatti, 2011).

A debilitating barrier to effective mobility in SSA is the economic disparity among its countries. These economic differences create imbalances in mobility advantages. According to Akinyeye (2008), wealthier countries often hesitate to fully open their borders to poorer nations due to concerns about labour market oversaturation and the strain on social services from neighbouring, less affluent nations. Also, weaker countries are not enjoying the benefits accruing from the open market policies. For instance, in West Africa, the ECOWAS initiative is hindered because, apart from Nigeria and Ghana, other member countries have insufficient industrial and economic foundations to leverage a shared market effectively (Akinyeye, 2008). Opening up weaker economies to stronger ones through trade liberalization often results in job losses and social unrest. Likewise, it leads to revenue declines for the weaker states, which lack adequate alternatives. The influx of cheaper imports from more robust economies, combined with the absence of standardized industrial policies, further hampers industrial growth in these weaker nations. These factors collectively serve as deterrents to regional integration and mobility.

To achieve effective integration and mobility, enhancing the communication and transportation infrastructure is essential. These include building highways and railways to connect different countries within a community, enabling the smooth movement of people and goods. In many sub-Saharan African nations, poor infrastructure between countries hampers this free and safe movement. Similarly, many regional groups lack proper systems to manage irregular migration and curb cross-border activities of criminal organizations. This gap is often exploited, leading to issues like human trafficking, cross-border fraud, money laundering, and kidnapping, which hinder free movement within the region. In West Africa, for instance, Boko Haram operates across multiple countries, complicating control efforts. As a result, despite the ECOWAS free movement protocol, member states maintain border patrols due to ongoing instability and insecurity in several areas. Also, inadequate border facilities and logistics infrastructure result in long delays and inefficient processing of travellers and goods, which often lead to congestion and delays at key border crossings.

Moreover, the turbulent political landscape across sub-Saharan Africa has cast a shadow over the ease of movement within the region. The recurring waves of political unrest have shattered the tranquillity of many nations, prompting the imposition of stringent border controls and heightened security measures. The threatening presence of terrorist and religious fundamentalist groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Shabaab in East Africa further compounds the challenges to

mobility. These extremist groups frequently target key transportation hubs and border regions, instilling fear in travellers and traders. Terrorism not only undermines the safety of the populace but also undermines the efficacy of regional migration policies and agreements. For example, in 2016, Kenya threatened to withdraw from international migration protocols and close the expansive Dadaab Refugee Camp, harbouring over 350,000 inhabitants. This decision was precipitated by a string of terrorist activities allegedly orchestrated by the Al-Shabaab sect operating from within the camp. Therefore, the prevailing security dilemma engenders a hesitancy among member states to fully embrace the concept of open borders (Williams, 2019). Similarly, border disputes between nations like Senegal and Mauritania, Ghana and Togo, Angola and Zambia, Sudan and South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda, Kenya and Djibouti, Guinea and Liberia, and Botswana and Namibia only aggravate hostility to free movement. These disputes often culminate in the forcible expulsion of community citizens, blatantly disregarding established protocols on the free movement of persons and stymieing progress towards their ratification and implementation.

Health concerns from countries are part of the challenges of free mobility in sub-Saharan Africa. Public health crises, such as the Ebola outbreak and the COVID-19 pandemic, have unfortunately disrupted mobility within sub-Saharan Africa, leading to stringent travel restrictions and border closures that highlight the vulnerability of existing mobility frameworks to health

emergencies. During these crises, immediate responses often involve travel bans and border closures to prevent disease spread, as seen and experienced during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa and the COVID-19 pandemic. All countries in the sub-region closed land, sea and air borders and some limited internal movement and barred citizens from reentry. At the height of restrictions in April 2020, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that 21,000 migrants were stranded in Central and West Africa. Policy inconsistencies arise as countries implement differing restrictions, hampering regional integration and cooperation (IOM, 2021).

Lastly, the migration policies of most RECs' member states are heavily influenced by the European agenda, often neglecting the unique needs, priorities, and aspirations of their citizens. Rather than crafting policies in tandem with their socio-cultural conditions, political histories, and regional interests, many nations replicate what they see elsewhere. While various regional initiatives aim to promote an international migration regime and encourage dialogue and cooperation between and among states, the focus tends to be imitating rather than innovating. International organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), funded by the European Union, have played a significant role in supporting African governments in developing the so-called "good practices" aimed at combating irregular migration and bolstering border security. For instance, IGAD, with its focus on addressing environmental challenges and man-made disasters in the region, also dedicates attention

to migration-related issues. Among its primary concerns are internal displacement and refugee flows (Thouez & Channac, 2005). Given the prominence of IGAD countries as migration corridors to the EU, the regional body has garnered support from European and UN agencies to combat human trafficking, smuggling, and irregular migration. Consequently, IGAD adopted a migration policy framework in 2012 to guide its efforts in addressing these complex challenges (Carciotto & Agyeman, 2017). However, while such support is valuable, African nations must assert their agency and craft policies that truly serve their populations, rather than merely mirroring external agendas.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The interregional movement of people is a defining characteristic of migration patterns in sub-Saharan Africa, and the impetus for migration within this region is multi-layered, consisting of economic motivations, socio-cultural affinities among neighbouring countries, and political instability, among other factors. This study has elucidated the prevailing trends and migration patterns within sub-Saharan Africa, underscoring a critical assessment of the contributions made by selected Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in facilitating seamless mobility across the region.

Several African countries have implemented regionalism to enhance intra-continental trade. Unlike other global regions, Africa has experienced a unique process of nation-building and regional

integration, advancing both simultaneously. While individual countries developed their frameworks for trade and labour migration, regional economic communities also established mechanisms to facilitate the flow of goods, services, labour, and capital across borders. Ensuring the free movement of people is essential for improving labour mobility to regions where it is most needed, and RECs have made notable strides in this area. Every REC examined in this study has adopted some policies to simplify the movement of people, although the level of commitment and execution of these policies varies across different RECs. For instance, EAC and ECOWAS issue common passports to their citizens. The EAC has also advanced towards mutual recognition of professional qualifications for accountants and architects, while ECOWAS is working towards harmonizing education certificates. ECOWAS has dedicated bodies, such as the Free Movement of Persons Directorate and the Humanitarian and Social Affairs Directorate, to ensure the implementation of migration policies and protect labour migrants' rights.

However, there is a notable disparity between the migration policies enacted by RECs in SSA and the actual practices of individual member states. While RECs such as ECOWAS, the EAC, the SADC, and IGAD promote liberal migration policies that emphasize the free movement of people and the protection of migrant rights, national governments often take a more conservative and restrictive stance. Despite regional agreements aiming to ease migration, African citizens frequently face significant barriers when attempting

to move across borders within the continent. Particularly within the SADC, migration is typically regarded as a matter of national sovereignty, leading countries to adopt stringent, protectionist measures rather than aligning with the more open regional frameworks. This reluctance to delegate migration governance to supranational entities accentuates the tension between regional integration objectives and national interests.

African leaders can enhance mobility within sub-Saharan Africa by clearly defining their priorities and strategies on migration. By taking full responsibility for these initiatives and supporting a regional migration policy framework rooted in shared African heritage, values, and the concept of African citizenship, they can ensure that policies are grounded in the continent's realities and geared towards long-term solutions. There is a need to realign national laws and employment codes with subregional treaties to facilitate intra-regional labour mobility, establishment and settlement within the region.

It is crucial to establish an effective supra-national institution with the authority to oversee member states. The absence of strong supra-national bodies capable of enforcing compliance and imposing sanctions hampers regional integration, political transformation, and policy reform. Therefore, creating a supra-national authority that can implement and enforce regional integration agreements through a robust technical and administrative framework is essential.

Also, the capacity of African countries in terms of human and financial resources must be

strengthened to manage demographic changes, create jobs, and alleviate migration pressures. Borderland communities should be integrated into states through the provision of social amenities such as light, good roads, schools and hospitals, as well as support cross-border access to goods and services. Often, the focus is on economic and political aspects, overlooking the critical demographic dimension. Rapid population growth exacerbates poverty and increases emigration pressures.

To enhance the effectiveness of their advocacy efforts and engagement with sub-regional and regional bodies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) need to deepen their collaboration and forge stronger strategic alliances with RECs. They should advocate for the establishment of binding legal frameworks and protocols concerning migration, as existing agreements often lack enforceability. Additionally, NGOs and CSOs should promote the harmonization of migration policies and encourage member states to prioritize regional cooperation over national interests. Efforts should be directed towards expanding the scope of regional initiatives, enhancing the flow of information, and improving their capacity for data collection and dissemination. Reducing redundant initiatives and aligning efforts around a unified agenda is also crucial for maximizing impact.

Adhering to the established regional agreements and the African Union's updated Migration Policy Framework (2018-2027), these

aforementioned recommendations aim to facilitate the successful integration of migrants into their host nations, simultaneously supporting sub-Saharan Africa in reaching its economic goals.

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