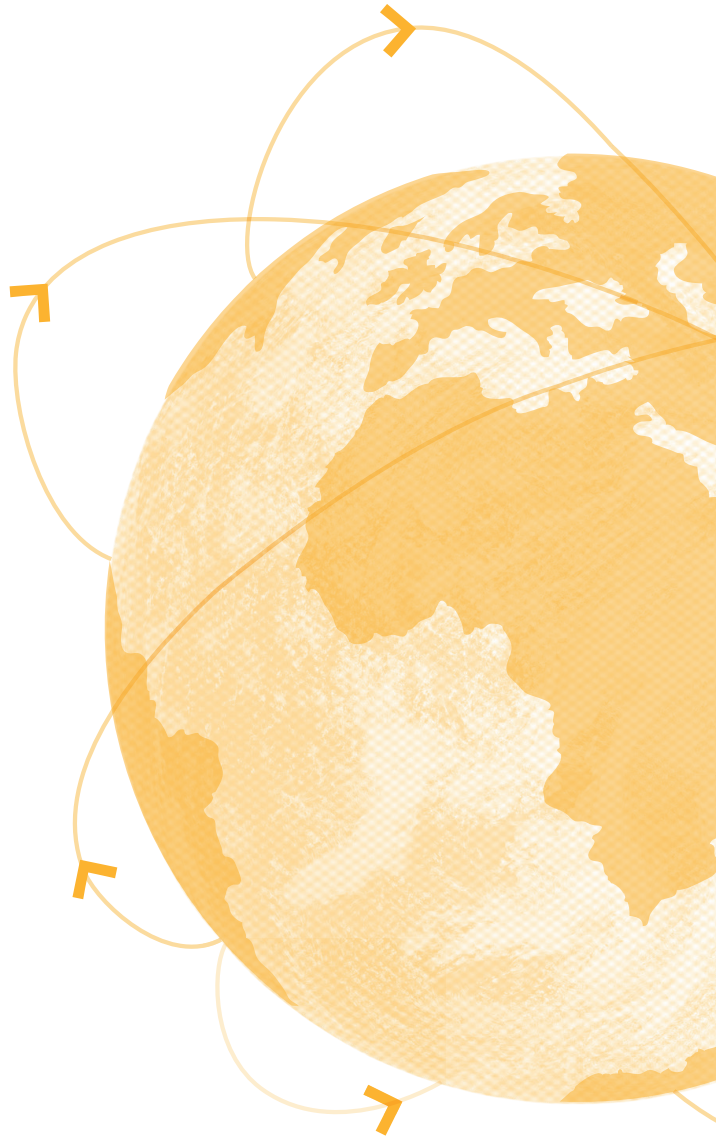




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# Migration Outlook 2026

## Pan-Africa

**Six migration issues to look out for in 2026**

Origins, key events and priorities for  
Sub-Saharan Africa

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Six migration  
issues to look  
out for in 2026

## Six migration issues to look out for in 2026

### 1 Regional integration and labour mobility frameworks present opportunities for more structured migration governance

The majority of African migration remains intra-continental. Estimates indicate that over 31 million Africans live outside their country of birth globally, out of which 21 million live in another African country. In the context of sustained demographic growth, well-governed labour mobility holds potential to support skills circulation, remittance flows, trade integration and economic diversification. Regional initiatives such as IGAD's Free Movement of Persons Protocol and SADC's labour migration frameworks support both circular and longer-term labour mobility. Similarly, in West Africa, the ECOWAS National Biometric Identity Card (EMBIC) is being rolled out as an integrated biometric identification technology to improve security, streamline cross-border transaction and promote seamless access for citizens across the sub-region. Even if implementation remains uneven, regional free movement protocols and labour migration strategies provide institutional foundations, creating significant pull factors within the region. In 2026, the extent to which regional and continental frameworks, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the African Union Free Movement Protocol (AU FMP), are operationalised will determine whether labour mobility functions primarily as a coping mechanism or increasingly as a structured driver of economic integration and resilience.

## **2 Protracted conflict continues to drive large-scale displacement with limited prospects for durable solutions**

Protracted conflict and insecurity are expected to continue driving large-scale internal displacement and cross-border movements across Sub-Saharan Africa in 2026. Large-scale crises in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central Sahel, Somalia and parts of Ethiopia continue to generate significant internal displacement and cross-border movements. Although some returns have been recorded in specific contexts, these remain fragile and closely linked to short-term security improvements rather than comprehensive political settlements. In several countries, displacement has become cyclical, with repeated movements triggered by shifting territorial control and localised insecurity. Limited reconstruction capacity, limited access to basic services and constrained humanitarian assistance further restrict prospects for durable solutions. Displacement dynamics in 2026 are therefore likely to remain protracted and regionally interconnected. Conflicts in neighbouring regions may also have an impact on migration dynamics in Africa, particularly the escalation in Iran and the neighbouring Arab world since end of February 2026 on East and Horn of Africa. The impact of these escalations cannot be assessed at the time of writing; however, it cannot be ruled out that migrants from Africa going to the Gulf countries may wish to seek alternative destinations in 2026, including in Europe.

## **3 Climate and environmental pressures increasingly shape displacement and internal mobility dynamics**

Climate variability and environmental stress are expected to play an increasingly central role in shaping displacement and internal mobility dynamics in 2026. Recurrent drought in Ethiopia and Somalia, severe flooding in South Sudan and Sudan, and flood incidents in parts of West Africa, such as Nigeria, illustrate the growing interaction between environmental shocks, food insecurity and livelihood insecurity. Recovery capacity remains limited, and is further exacerbated by

ongoing conflicts, persistent migration pressures, and gaps in humanitarian and development assistance. In 2026, environmental pressures are likely to remain a persistent driver of internal displacement and short- to medium-term mobility.

## **4 Funding constraints place growing strain on refugee hosting and protection systems**

Persistent funding constraints are expected to place growing strain on refugee-hosting countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, many of which already host some of the world's largest refugee populations, including Uganda, Ethiopia and Sudan. At the same time, humanitarian financing has declined significantly, leading to reductions in food assistance, health services and protection programming. New arrivals from ongoing conflicts are adding further pressure to already strained systems. In response to financial constraints, governments may prioritise self-reliance approaches and revisit existing processes. If funding gaps persist into 2026, protection environments are likely to tighten further, socio-economic pressures in host communities may intensify, and the risk of secondary movements within regions could increase.

## **5 Tightened migration measures lead to route diversification without reducing mobility**

Continued tightening of border controls across key migration routes is expected to further reshape routes in 2026, without fundamentally reducing overall mobility levels. Recent patterns show that intensified controls do not necessarily reduce overall mobility but instead redirect movement towards alternative, often longer and riskier routes. As structural drivers such as conflict, demographic growth, and limited labour absorption persist, restrictive enforcement measures are likely to continue reshaping routes rather than addressing underlying drivers. Route diversification and heightened protection risks are therefore expected to persist in 2026, such as the route from Mauritania to the Canary Islands being diverted to start from The Gambia or Guinea.

## **6 Implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum expected to reinforce the external dimension of EU-Africa migration cooperation**

The external dimension of migration governance between Africa and Europe is expected to intensify in 2026, particularly in the context of the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and related policy frameworks, with increased cooperation in areas such as border management and return and readmission. At the same time, divergences in policy priorities are likely to continue shaping cooperation dynamics. European actors increasingly emphasise containment, return effectiveness and deterrence, while many African governments prioritise development gains, remittances, labour mobility and free movement. Migration diplomacy between Africa and Europe is therefore likely to remain complex in 2026, shaped by competing policy objectives amidst politically sensitive discussions.

## Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) enters 2026 with migration dynamics that are both structurally embedded and increasingly shaped by overlapping crises. The region hosts some of the world's largest displacement situations, with tens of millions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees across conflict-affected contexts, while at the same time remaining home to one of the fastest - growing populations globally. Demographic growth, protracted conflict, climate variability and uneven economic performance continue to drive high levels of internal, intra-regional and extra-continental mobility. At the same time, financial constraints, tightening border regimes and shifting geopolitical priorities are redefining the policy environment in which mobility is governed.

Although migration from Africa often features prominently in global debates, most movements originating in Sub-Saharan Africa remain intra-continental. More than 21 million Africans reside in another African country, and regional labour mobility corridors continue to link Sahelian countries with coastal West Africa, the Horn of Africa with the Gulf, and Southern Africa with neighbouring countries. This underscores the region's dual role as an origin, transit and destination area within global migration systems.

This Regional Migration Outlook focuses on SSA, in line with ICMPD's regional delineation with North Africa covered by ICMPD's Mediterranean (MED) Regional Outlook. While the primary geographic scope of this report is SSA, migration dynamics do not follow strict regional boundaries. Where relevant, linkages are made to inter-regional dialogue frameworks, notably the Rabat and Khartoum Processes, which connect Sub-Saharan and North African countries and Europe and shape cooperation along key migration routes.

The outlook provides analysis at three interconnected levels. First, it presents a continental overview of migration and relevant trends affecting SSA as a whole. Second, it zooms in on two sub-regions that are of particular interest for ICMPD's work: East and the Horn of Africa, and West and

Central Africa. While Southern Africa is not treated as a standalone focus region in this outlook, its role as a destination, transit area and labour mobility corridor is considered where relevant. The outlook thereby aims to maintain a whole-of-route perspective, recognising that migration and migration governance are complex, with interconnected dynamics at play across countries of origin, transit and destination. Policy developments in one part of a route, whether related to border management, labour mobility partnerships, return and reintegration frameworks or regional free movement protocols, can have ripple effects along the entire corridor. Understanding these interdependencies is essential to assessing how migration dynamics in SSA may evolve in 2026.

This Regional Migration Outlook identifies six key trends that are expected to shape migration dynamics and policy discourse across SSA in 2026. These trends reflect structural drivers, evolving governance responses and shifting geopolitical contexts that are likely to influence both mobility patterns and the broader narrative surrounding migration in the year ahead. Together, they provide a forward-looking framework for understanding how displacement, labour mobility, regional integration and external cooperation may interact in shaping migration governance across the region.

# Focus regions

## Focus regions

In light of the diversity of migration dynamics across SSA, the following country and regional analyses are selectively included to illustrate key trends and policy developments shaping mobility in 2026. The selection reflects contexts of particular relevance as countries of origin, transit or destination, in line with the scope and format of this Outlook.

### Continental level - major events to look out for in 2026

The African Union Summit, that took place in Addis Ababa from 11–15 February 2026, provides an early indication of continental political priorities shaping the policy environment for the year ahead. The AU Theme of the Year for 2026 — “Assuring Sustainable Water Availability and Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063” — signals a renewed continental focus on water security, service provision and resilience as foundations for long-term development.<sup>1,2</sup> Although the theme does not explicitly target migration policy, it is closely linked to structural drivers of mobility, including livelihoods, food security and climate stress. By elevating water and sanitation as a continental priority, policy linkages between climate adaptation, resilience building and displacement management are reinforced.

At the same time, electoral dynamics will be a major source of political uncertainty in 2026, with 11 presidential elections expected across the

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1 African Union, 39th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union Concludes in Addis Ababa, 15 February 2026, accessed 17 February 2026, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20260215/39th-ordinary-session-assembly-african-union-concludes>

2 African Lii, Decision on the African Union Theme of the Year 2026 “Assuring Sustainable Water Availability and Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063”, 16 February 2025, accessed 3 February 2026, <https://africanlii.org/en/akn/aa-au/doc/decision/2025-02-16/912/eng@2025-02-16>

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continent, including five in East Africa. Africa-focused political analysis suggests that “roughly half can be expected to be competitive, while the outcomes in the remainder are predictable”<sup>3</sup>, reflecting uneven democratic trajectories and institutional capacity. Several of these elections will take place in countries that are already significant countries of origin or asylum (Uganda, Ethiopia, Zambia, The Gambia, South Sudan) or that sit along key migration routes (Benin, Republic of the Congo, Djibouti). Whether these contests lead to greater stability or renewed tensions will influence both displacement patterns and the scope for structured migration cooperation with regional and external partners.<sup>4</sup>

These continental developments point to a policy environment in 2026 shaped by overlapping political, environmental and economic pressures, while also facing global uncertainty, a constrained funding space and rising social expectations<sup>5</sup>. Against this backdrop, migration and displacement dynamics are likely to remain closely intertwined with broader debates on resilience, governance and development, reinforcing the need for integrated and regionally anchored policy responses.

## West Africa - Côte d’Ivoire

With more than 8 million migrants, the country hosts the largest number of migrants in West Africa, mainly from neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea<sup>6</sup>. In a region still marked by security instability, Côte

3 J. Siegle and H. Wahila, Africa’s 2026 Elections: Navigating Complexity to Deliver for Citizens, 13 January 2026, accessed 3 February 2026, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/en-elections-2026/>

4 T. Amare, Africa in 2026: Global uncertainty demands regional leadership, 14 January 2026, accessed 3 February 2026, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/01/africa-2026-global-uncertainty-demands-regional-leadership>

5 T. Amare, Africa in 2026: Global uncertainty demands regional leadership, 14 January 2026, accessed 3 February 2026, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/01/africa-2026-global-uncertainty-demands-regional-leadership>

6 Africa Center for Strategic Studies, African Migration Trends to Watch in 2025. Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 3 February 2025, accessed 27 February 2026, African Migration Trends to Watch in 2025 – Africa Center

d’Ivoire remains a relatively open country to refugees and asylum seekers, reflected in July 2025 with the granting of refugee status to asylum seekers from Burkina Faso (69,000) and Mali (1,500) who registered since 2021<sup>7</sup>.

Emigration to countries offering employment opportunities remains a characteristic of the migration profile of Côte d’Ivoire, mainly to European and North American markets and Gulf countries. Recognising this situation, the government has introduced measures to facilitate the re-integration of returnees into the local and national economy. “By 2025, nearly 2,300 migrants will have benefited from voluntary return assistance from Côte d’Ivoire, with the support of our technical and financial partners,”<sup>8</sup> stated a representative of the Ministry of National Cohesion, Solidarity, and the Fight Against Poverty during the national celebration of International Migrants Day on 18 December 2025, since this celebration was an opportunity to recognise migrants’ direct contribution to the country’s socioeconomic development. In addition to facilitating the integration of voluntary returnees into the economy, the government is also committed to supporting its nationals who voluntarily choose to return to Côte d’Ivoire. This approach emerged in 2023, when Ivorian migrants suddenly found themselves in distress situations in Tunisia, and the Côte d’Ivoire government mobilised all the relevant national actors (and financial resources) to organise the voluntary return of approximately 1,500 Ivorians and support their reintegration.<sup>9</sup> Focusing on welcoming returnees, Côte d’Ivoire also seeks to limit irregular migration and related risks, such as human trafficking and smuggling.

7 African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, Communiqué de presse sur l’octroi du statut de réfugiés pour des demandeurs d’asile burkinabés et maliens par la République de Côte d’Ivoire, Novembre 2025, accessed 23 February, <https://achpr.au.int/fr/news/communique-de-presse/2025-11-25/communique-de-presse-sur-loctroi-du-statut-de-refugies-pour>

8 Ministère de la cohésion nationale, de la solidarité et de la lutte contre la pauvreté, La Côte d’Ivoire célèbre la contribution des migrants ivoiriens au développement socio-économique, 18 December 2025, accessed 23 February 2026, <https://solidarite.gouv.ci/actualite/actudetail/la-cte-d-ivoire-clbre-la-contribution-des-migrants>

9 Rabat Process, The Abuja Knowledge Paper on Sustainable Reintegration, January 2026, accessed 26 March 2026, <https://www.rabat-process.org/en/activities/publications/the-abuja-knowledge-paper-on-sustainable-reintegration>

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Thus, from a policy perspective, the country's government is seeking to strengthen migration governance to make it "more effective and inclusive." It focuses on the following areas: (i) a sustainable return and reintegration policy; (ii) particular attention to border management; and (iii) particular attention to issues of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. To this end, Côte d'Ivoire has already launched a series of national strategies such as: (i) the National Strategy on Return and Reintegration, the National Strategy on Labor Migration, the National Policy on Integrated Border Management, and the National Strategy to Combat Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants (2022–2025)<sup>10</sup>.

The outlook for 2026 therefore points to a possible increase in the number of asylum seekers from countries directly affected by security instability in the Sahel, but also an increase in the number of returning migrants who have benefited from voluntary return programmes supported by Côte d'Ivoire, with a positive impact on the local and even national economy.

## West Africa - Nigeria

In Nigeria, conflicts and insecurities in North-East, North-West, North-Central as well as climate events such as flooding have displaced millions of people internally. In May 2025, torrential rains triggered flooding in Mokwa, western Nigeria, leaving at least 161 people dead and over 3,000 displaced. These recent floods underscore Nigeria's climate vulnerability. In 2024 alone, floods affected 34 of 36 states, displacing nearly 900,000 people and damaging over 1.3 million hectares of farmland. Rural-to-urban migration continues, increasing demand on housing, health, and education services.<sup>11</sup>

10 Koaci, Côte d'Ivoire: Gouvernance migratoire, le gouvernement accélère ses réformes et présente des résultats probants des IGM 2025, 26 janvier 2026, accessed 23 February 2026, [https://www.koaci.com/article/2026/01/26/cote-divoire/societe/cote-divoire-gouvernance-migratoire-le-gouvernement-accelere-ses-reformes-et-presente-des-resultats-probants-des-igm-2025\\_193869.html](https://www.koaci.com/article/2026/01/26/cote-divoire/societe/cote-divoire-gouvernance-migratoire-le-gouvernement-accelere-ses-reformes-et-presente-des-resultats-probants-des-igm-2025_193869.html)

11 IOM, World Migration Report 2024, accessed 25 March 2026, <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024>

Primary drivers for migration include unemployment, insecurity, limited opportunities, and climate stress. These challenges have increased risks for irregular migration, human trafficking, exploitation, and overstretched urban services. Despite cautious optimism regarding 3.8 %–4.6 % GDP growth and stabilizing inflation (projected approximately 16 % in 2026), the cost of living remains high<sup>12</sup>. Slow and moderate growth has continued to limit access to stable and formal employment for many young people.

Currently, over 2.1 million Nigerians reside abroad, with broader estimates including second- and third-generation populations reaching 17–20 million.<sup>13</sup> Diaspora remittances exceeded \$20 billion in 2024, supporting household income, education, health, and local investment. Furthermore, Nigerians abroad contribute skills, networks, and potential investments, but brain drain in critical sectors like healthcare remains a concern.<sup>14</sup> Outward migration is heavily concentrated among skilled professionals, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, IT, engineering, and finance. Canada remains a top destination for skilled professionals due to established immigration pathways like Express Entry and Provincial Nominee Programs (PNP).<sup>15</sup>

In 2025, the Federal Government of Nigeria adopted a new revised National Migration Policy. It aims to improve data collection and migration management, align with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Global Compact for Migration, enhance protection for migrants and returnees, and support coordination with the National Agency for the

12 Nigerian Economic Summit Group, Macroeconomic Outlook Report 2026. 2026, accessed 15 January 2026, <https://www.nesgroup.org/research/publication/nesg-macroeconomic-outlook-report-2026>

13 T. Abeku, NiDCOM confirms 20m Nigerians abroad as migration dialogue emphasises protection, 14 May 2025, accessed 25 March 2026 <https://guardian.ng/news/nidcom-confirms-20m-nigerians-abroad-as-migration-dialogue-emphasises-protection/>

14 Punch, Nigerians abroad hit 2.1 million, remit \$21 bn – IOM, 15 August 2025, accessed 25 March 2026 <https://punchng.com/nigerians-abroad-hit-2-1-million-remit-21bn-iom/>

15 The Guardian, Which Country Do Nigerians Immigrate to the Most?, 20 December 2025, accessed 25 March 2026, <https://guardian.ng/nigerian/which-country-do-nigerians-immigrate-to-the-most/>

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Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission, including strengthening preventive measures, protection, and reintegration programs.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Nigeria has officially joined other ECOWAS Member States in launching the ECOWAS National Biometric Identity Card (ENBIC), aimed at enhancing regional integration, economic prosperity, business facilitation, and security across West Africa, with the card serving as a secure and standardised identity tool reinforcing Nigeria's commitment to regional cooperation. At the inter-regional level, Nigeria held the chairmanship of the Rabat Process in 2025, thereby assuming a more prominent role in migration governance, in particular by championing the benefits of migration, addressing the issue of missing migrants, and combating human trafficking, as well as supporting sustainable reintegration.<sup>17</sup>

Looking ahead, Nigeria's migration outlook for 2026 is expected to remain shaped by continued, high-volume outward migration, often referred to as "Japa," driven by economic pressures, currency instability, and a search for better opportunities, despite some improvements in the local economic outlook.<sup>18</sup>

In 2026, Nigeria is projected to experience a net emigration of approximately 3,000 people, which is more people leaving than arriving, indicating a trend towards a shift to net emigration.<sup>19</sup>

16 The Nation Newspaper, FG validates national migration policy to curb brain drain, insecurity, 29 April 2025, accessed 25 March 2026 <https://thenationonlineng.net/fg-validates-national-migration-policy-to-curb-brain-drain-insecurity/>

17 Rabat Process, Nigeria: Rabat Process Chair in 2025, accessed 20 March 2026, <https://www.rabat-process.org/en/about/current-chairmanship#:~:text=Nigeria%20currently%20serves%20as%20Chair%20of%20the%20Rabat,time%20assuming%20the%20Chairmanship%20of%20the%20Rabat%20Process>

18 The Nation Newspaper, FG validates national migration policy to curb brain drain, insecurity, 29 April 2025, accessed 25 March 2026 <https://thenationonlineng.net/fg-validates-national-migration-policy-to-curb-brain-drain-insecurity/>

19 World Bank, Net migration Nigeria, 2026, accessed 18 March 2026, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.NETM?locations=NG>

Against this backdrop, the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Person (NCFRMI) will prioritise implementation of the 2025 National Migration Policy and improve inter-agency coordination and expand migration data collection that will support evidence-based policy-making. Also, as part of implementation of the new migration policy, NCFRMI is expected to prioritise promotion of diaspora investments and skills transfer initiatives and strengthen protection for Nigerian migrants abroad; enhance Internal Displacement and Urban Planning Responses through the development of policies to integrate IDPs into host communities and strengthen urban infrastructure in high-migration areas, reflecting a broader effort to manage both the opportunities and vulnerabilities that migration presents for Nigeria in 2026.

## East Africa - Ethiopia

Ethiopia remains a pivotal country in the Horn of Africa's migration and displacement landscape in 2026, characterised by large-scale internal displacement, significant refugee hosting and sustained outward labour migration. Internal displacement remains one of the most pressing concerns. Although the number of new movements declined for a third consecutive year in 2025, an estimated 2.4 million people were living in internal displacement at the end of 2024, and Ethiopia continues to rank among the countries with the highest levels of conflict-related internal displacement globally (see Figure 2). Violence and insecurity in Oromia, Amhara and Somali regions continue to drive repeated and protracted displacement. In addition, drought and climate variability contribute to mobility pressures, and while Ethiopia and the Horn at large saw fewer floods than in 2024, droughts and other climate-related disasters have hindered many from considering return.

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Durable solutions remain limited, and humanitarian needs persist amid significant funding shortfalls.<sup>20,21,22</sup>

Despite funding cuts, Ethiopia maintains an open-door policy to refugees and asylum-seekers and hosts over 1 million refugees and asylum-seekers, primarily from South Sudan (43 %), Somalia (32.1 %), Eritrea (15.1 %) and Sudan (8.8 %).<sup>23</sup> As of 2025, Ethiopia is Africa's third-largest host of refugees and asylum seekers. This approach aligns with Ethiopia's pledges at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum under the *Makatet* ("Inclusion" in Amharic) vision, which seeks to integrate refugees into national systems and promote social cohesion.<sup>24</sup>

Ethiopia is also a country of origin and transit along the Eastern Route towards the Gulf via Djibouti and Yemen. The Mixed Migration Centre identifies Ethiopian nationals as consistently forming one of the largest groups traveling this route, primarily driven by economic pressures, unemployment and income insecurity. Movements along the Eastern and Southern routes are associated with high protection risks, including smuggling, trafficking,

exploitation and violence in transit.<sup>25,26</sup> Recognising the increasing risks that people are taking in the search for security and opportunities for livelihoods, Ethiopia, together with Kenya, Mozambique and Zambia issued a joint statement in December 2025 calling for protection, anti-trafficking measures, asylum access and cross-border protection along the Southern Route.<sup>27</sup>

Economically motivated labour migration remains prominent in Ethiopia's mobility landscape. Outward migration is closely linked with youth unemployment and limited formal job creation, and largely entails low-skilled labour migration, including domestic work in the Gulf countries and wider region.<sup>28</sup> In recent years, Ethiopia has strengthened oversight of recruitment processes and migrant preparation to formalise labour mobility and reduce exploitation risks, including through bilateral labour agreements and mandatory pre-departure training requirements.<sup>29</sup>

Ethiopia's migration outlook for 2026 will continue to be shaped by overlapping pressures of persistent internal displacement and sustained refugee hosting amid funding gaps and climate vulnerability, as well as continued outward labour migration. The scale of internal displacement and the

20 IDMC, Global Report on Internal Displacement, May 2025, accessed 4 February 2026, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2025/>

21 IOM, Assessing the Evidence: Climate Change and Migration in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2025, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://ethiopia.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl996/files/documents/2024-11/climate-change-and-migration-in-ethiopia.pdf>

22 Addis Standard, UN projects \$2 billion for Ethiopia's 2025 humanitarian responses, faces \$496 million funding gap, 7 March 2025, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://addisstandard.com/un-projects-2-billion-for-ethiopias-2025-humanitarian-response-faces-496-million-funding-gap/>

23 UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, Ethiopia, 2025, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/eth>

24 UNHCR, Ethiopia Country Refugee Response Plan, 12 June 2025, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/118683>

25 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), QMMU 2025 Q4, Eastern and Southern Africa, Q4 2025, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/QMMU-2025-Q4-Eastern-and-Southern-Africa.pdf>

26 ILO, Ethiopian Labour Migration Landscape: Trends, Challenges, and Approaches to improving labour migration governance in the country, 25 September 2023, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/ethiopian-labour-migration-landscape-trends-challenges-and-approaches>

27 KNHCR, Joint Statement on Protection of Migrants along the Southern Migration Route, 18 December 2025, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://www.knchr.org/Articles/ArtMID/2432/ArticleID/1241/Joint-statement-on-protection-of-migrants-along-the-Southern-migration-route>

28 ILO, Ethiopian Labour Migration Landscape: Trends, Challenges, and Approaches to improving labour migration governance in the country, 25 September 2023, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/ethiopian-labour-migration-landscape-trends-challenges-and-approaches>

29 MIGNEX, Migration-relevant policies in Ethiopia, November 2022, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://www.mignex.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/d053c-mbp-migration-relevant-policies-in-ethiopia-v1.pdf>

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sustainability of protection responses will depend on security stabilisation, humanitarian financing and economic reform progress. Ethiopia is expected to hold its seventh general election in June 2026, an event that may influence policy continuity, governance capacity and reform momentum.

### East Africa - Uganda

Uganda remains a central actor in regional migration and displacement dynamics in East Africa. According to UNHCR data, Uganda is home to nearly 1.9 to 2 million refugees and asylum-seekers as of late 2025, primarily from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan, making it one of the largest refugee-hosting countries globally. This sustained influx has placed increasing pressure on basic services and natural resources, settlement infrastructure and social cohesion in host communities. Climate vulnerability, including recurrent flooding and drought in northern Uganda, adds to livelihood stress in refugee-hosting areas.<sup>30</sup>

Uganda's refugee response is characterised by its settlement model, which grants refugees the right to work, freedom of movement and access to public services. At the same time, the scale and protracted nature of displacement, combined with declining international humanitarian funding, have placed growing strain on national systems and host communities.<sup>31</sup> In December 2025, the Government announced it would suspend refugee status determination for new arrivals from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, citing resource pressures and concerns over misuse of the asylum system.<sup>32</sup>

30 IMPACT Initiatives, Kenya and Uganda, Impact of Climate Hazards on Livelihoods and Access to Services among refugees and host communities, November 2025, accessed 26 January 2026, [https://repository.impact-initiatives.org/document/impact/077a3de6/REACH\\_UGA-KEN\\_Dec-2025\\_Impact-of-Climate-Hazards\\_Final-Report.pdf](https://repository.impact-initiatives.org/document/impact/077a3de6/REACH_UGA-KEN_Dec-2025_Impact-of-Climate-Hazards_Final-Report.pdf)

31 UNHCR, Uganda Country Profile 2026, accessed 26 January 2026 <https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/uganda>

32 S. Okiror, Uganda stops granting refugee status for Eritreans, Somalis and Ethiopians, 4 December 2025 accessed 26 January 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/dec/04/aid-cuts-africa-uganda-stops-refugee-status-eritreans-somalis-ethiopians>

Alongside its role as a host country, Uganda is also a significant country of origin for labour migration. A young and rapidly growing population, coupled with limited formal employment opportunities, continues to drive mobility within the East African Community (EAC) and toward Gulf countries, particularly in low- and medium-skilled sectors.<sup>33</sup> Labour migration has become an important livelihood strategy for Ugandan households, contributing to income diversification and remittance inflows, whereby remittances account for approximately 3 % of Uganda's GDP. Uganda's National Migration Policy underscores the development importance of outward labour mobility toward national development while recognising the risks migrants are exposed to, and aims to enhance systems to facilitate legal migration, to regulate recruitment agencies, implement labour agreements and enhance pre-departure training, amongst other things.<sup>34</sup> As of April 2026, Uganda is also set to assume the Chairmanship of the Khartoum Process, positioning the country to play a more prominent role in shaping dialogue on migration and mobility between the EU and countries of the Horn of Africa.<sup>35</sup>

The January 2026 presidential election extended President Yoweri Museveni's tenure into a seventh term. While for some this suggests policy continuity, structural challenges, including high graduate unemployment and underemployment continue to shape outward migration aspirations.<sup>36,37</sup>

33 Migration Data Portal, International Migration Statistics Report, East African Community, 2023, accessed 26 January 2026, <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl251/files/2023-04/EAC%20International%20Migration%20Statistics%20Report%20Edition%20One.pdf>

34 Uganda Ministry of Internal Affairs, The National Migration Policy, 2025, accessed 26 January 2026, [https://www.immigration.go.ug/sites/default/files/NATIONAL%20MIGRATION%20POLICY%202025.15th%20August%202025\\_CL%20-%20Final\\_signed%20copy.pdf?](https://www.immigration.go.ug/sites/default/files/NATIONAL%20MIGRATION%20POLICY%202025.15th%20August%202025_CL%20-%20Final_signed%20copy.pdf?)

35 UG Diplomat, Uganda calls for Humane Migration Response at Khartoum Process talks, 7 March 2026, accessed 18 March 2026 <https://ugdiplomat.com/uganda-calls-for-humane-migration-response-at-khartoum-process-talks/>

36 B. Mwaniki, Museveni's Seventh Term and the Big Question for Uganda's Democracy, 17 January 2026, accessed 29 January 2026, <https://democracyinafrica.org/musevenis-seventh-term-and-the-big-question-for-ugandas-democracy/>

37 J. Musenze, 'We need change, not just as young people but as a country': Uganda's youth on 40 years of Museveni, 23 January 2026, accessed 29 January 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2026/jan/23/uganda-museveni-young-people-election-president>

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From a migration perspective, the continuation of constrained political space and persistent youth unemployment may reinforce outward labour migration or asylum-seeking for politically active or marginalised groups.

Looking ahead to 2026, Uganda's migration outlook is likely to be shaped by financial pressure, declining humanitarian funding and protracted displacement situations. The late-2025 suspension of refugee status determination for certain nationalities reflects a broader recalibration of protection management amid resource constraints. If funding gaps persist, and with continued instability in the region, further prioritisation of self-reliance approaches and administrative tightening is likely, and reduced assistance may heighten socio-economic pressure in host districts and contribute to secondary movements within the region.

## East Africa - Sudan

Sudan is facing a volatile migration situation driven by ongoing conflict, further compounded by climate-induced challenges and limited access to basic services, resulting in the world's largest internal displacement crisis. By the end of 2025, an estimated 9.1 million individuals were internally displaced in Sudan. Of the total displaced population, almost 7 million individuals (76 %) were displaced after the outbreak of conflict in April 2023<sup>38</sup>. Cross-border monitoring reports further indicate that approximately 4.5 million<sup>39</sup> have fled Sudan to neighbouring countries since April 2023, placing significant pressure on neighbouring countries' protection systems.

At the same time, despite ongoing conflict and severe livelihood constraints, Sudan continues to host over 850,000 refugees and asylum seekers, with

38 IOM, Displacement Tracker Matrix (DTM) Sudan Displacement and Return Snapshot (Update 2). 2026, accessed 19 February 2026. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/dtm-sudan-displacement-and-return-snapshot-2>

39 IOM, Displacement Tracker Matrix (DTM) Sudan: Cross-Border Monitoring Report (2). 2026, accessed 19 February 2026. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/dtm-sudan-cross-border-monitoring-report-2>

approximately 97 % originating from South Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia<sup>40</sup>. Protracted conflict, economic constraints, widespread food insecurity and limited access to basic services leads to dependence on humanitarian assistance for a considerable proportion of the population.

The estimated number of IDPs in Sudan decreased by 21 % from the peak of 11.58 million recorded in January 2025 which is closely linked with return movements.<sup>41</sup> As of December 2025, 3.5 million people have reportedly returned to and within Sudan with different motives.<sup>42</sup> While the majority of returns were recorded within Sudan, the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) reported 585,176 return movements from neighbouring countries by the end of 2025.<sup>43</sup> The vast majority of formerly displaced households have moved back to their areas of origin<sup>44</sup>. Notably, around 90 % of returnees cited improved security at their place of origin or intended destination as the primary reason for return.<sup>45</sup> Even after the promising trend in return numbers, overall returns remain limited due to persistent insecurity and unfavourable socio-economic conditions.

40 World Bank, Sudan's Crisis: Navigating Disparities, Resilience, and Recovery for Refugees, IDPs, and Host Communities, 25 January 2026, accessed 19 February 2026 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/120676>.

41 IOM, Displacement Tracker Matrix (DTM) Sudan Displacement and Return Snapshot (Update 2). 2026, accessed 19 February 2026. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/dtm-sudan-displacement-and-return-snapshot-2>

42 IOM, Displacement Tracker Matrix (DTM) Sudan Displacement and Return Snapshot (Update 2). 2026, accessed 19 February 2026. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/dtm-sudan-displacement-and-return-snapshot-2>

43 IOM, Displacement Tracker Matrix (DTM) Sudan Displacement and Return Snapshot (Update 2). 2026, accessed 19 February 2026. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/dtm-sudan-displacement-and-return-snapshot-2>

44 IOM, Displacement Tracker Matrix (DTM) Sudan Displacement and Return Snapshot (Update 2). 2026, accessed 19 February 2026. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/dtm-sudan-displacement-and-return-snapshot-2>

45 IOM, Displacement Tracker Matrix (DTM) Sudan Displacement and Return Snapshot (Update 2). 2026, accessed 19 February 2026. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/dtm-sudan-displacement-and-return-snapshot-2>

If no ceasefire is reached, the conflict is likely to remain the main driver of migration through 2026. Continued internal displacement and cross-border movements are therefore expected, including further arrivals of Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries. Similar to internal movements observed in 2025, some displaced people may return in areas where security conditions improve. However, recurring conflict in unstable or contested areas is likely to trigger new waves of displacement. In addition, climate-related shocks, including flooding and drought, are likely to continue contributing to displacement and compounding humanitarian pressures across affected regions.<sup>46</sup> As a result, movements are expected to remain fluid and unpredictable, within a fragile context across both rural and urban areas.

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<sup>46</sup> IOM, Displacement Tracker Matrix (DTM) Sudan, Natural Hazard Displacement Overview 2025, 10 December 2025, accessed 9 February 2026, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/natural-hazard-displacement-overview-2025>

# Migration trends in the region

# Migration trends in the region

## Continental level

Sub-Saharan Africa enters 2026 with high and structurally embedded mobility, shaped by demographic growth, uneven economic performance, protracted crises and evolving policy responses. Africa's total population in 2025 surpassed 1.5 billion, and SSA remains the primary driver of global population growth; of the eight countries that will account for more than half of the global population growth until 2050, four are in SSA: the DRC, Ethiopia, Nigeria and the United Republic of Tanzania.<sup>47</sup> Over the next 30 years, the total population of those located in SSA is projected to see an increase of 79 %, reaching 2.2 billion in 2054.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Africa has the youngest population – in 2024, around 40 % of the population in SSA was aged 15 or younger<sup>49</sup>, and in 2023, the youth NEET (not in employment, education or training) was at 21.9 %<sup>50</sup>, underscoring both the pressures of labour markets to absorb such growth, and the potential it has if employment and mobility opportunities can be harnessed effectively.<sup>51</sup>

47 UNECA, As Africa's Population Crosses 1.5 Billion, the demographic window is opening; getting the dividend requires more time and stronger effort, 12 July 2024, accessed 12 February 2026, <https://www.uneca.org/stories/%28blog%29-as-africa%E2%80%99s-population-crosses-1.5-billion%2C-the-demographic-window-is-opening-getting>

48 UNDESA, World Population Prospects 2024, accessed 12 February 2026, [https://population.un.org/wpp/assets/Files/WPP2024\\_Summary-of-Results.pdf](https://population.un.org/wpp/assets/Files/WPP2024_Summary-of-Results.pdf)

49 Statista, Population of Africa 2023, by age group, accessed 12 February 2026, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1226211/population-of-africa-by-age-group/#:~:text=The%20youngest%20continent%20in%20the,to%20lowering%20the%20median%20age>.

50 ILO, Global Employment Trends for Youth, August 2024, accessed 12 February 2026, [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Sub-Saharan%20Africa%20GET%20Youth%202024\\_0.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Sub-Saharan%20Africa%20GET%20Youth%202024_0.pdf)

51 ACSR, Youth and Migration, accessed 12 February 2026, <https://www.acsr-au.org/work/youth-and-migration/>

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Relatedly, according to the OECD, Africa will experience a doubling in its urban populations from 704 million to 1.4 billion people by 2050, further compounding pressures, as over half of the urban population in SSA lives in under-served informal settlements, with limited decent income, access to education or basic infrastructures and services.<sup>52</sup>

Economic conditions continue to shape mobility decisions. Growth in SSA is expected to accelerate to an annual average rate of 4.4 % in 2026–27 from 3.5 in 2024, with 30 of 47 countries seeing an upward trend in forecasts, with Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire at the forefront. However, this growth is expected to remain insufficient to reduce extreme poverty, improve income distribution, or absorb rapid labour-force growth. Financial constraints, high debt burdens and declining official development and humanitarian assistance limit governments' capacity to expand social protection and employment programmes.<sup>53</sup> Against this backdrop, migration, particularly internal and intra-regional mobility, continues to function as a household risk-management and income-diversification strategy, especially for young people facing limited opportunities.<sup>54,55</sup>

Within this context, economically stronger or more diversified countries increasingly act as regional labour attractors, particularly in West Africa. Analysis indicates that a substantial share of migration in West Africa is linked to temporary, seasonal and permanent worker mobility, with countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria serving as key destinations within

52 OECD, Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2025, 2025, accessed 13 February 2026, [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/03/africa-s-urbanisation-dynamics-2025\\_005a8aa0/2a47845c-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/03/africa-s-urbanisation-dynamics-2025_005a8aa0/2a47845c-en.pdf)

53 World Bank Group, Africa's Pulse, An Analysis of Issues Shaping Africa's Economic Future, October 2025, accessed 12 February 2026, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/8322b452-2d9c-4708-9fa7-425245c58a7d/content>

54 ILO, Global Employment Trends for Youth, August 2024, accessed 12 February 2026, [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Sub-Saharan%20Africa%20GET%20Youth%202024\\_0.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Sub-Saharan%20Africa%20GET%20Youth%202024_0.pdf)

55 ACSRM, Youth and Migration, accessed 12 February 2026, <https://www.acsrn-au.org/work/youth-and-migration/>

ECOWAS.<sup>56</sup> This has also been thanks to targeted policies, such as the adoption of the ECOWAS Protocol relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment in 1979, as well as to infrastructural developments and increasing production of cash crops, the development of the mining sectors and oil discovery.<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, recognising the potential that migration can hold for the continent is paramount, in terms of driving economic growth, fostering investment through remittances, and increasing skills transfers. The AU's 2018 Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community relating to Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment (AU FMP) will play a pivotal role in this regard. However, while free movement regimes have seen progress at the regional level, the AU FMP has not entered into force yet, resulting in persisting practical barriers to mobility, and limiting the opportunities to fully unlocking the potential for trade-related mobility, labour migration and consequently for integration on the continent, as also foreseen by the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA).<sup>58,59</sup>

56 W. Willians, Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, African Migration Trends to Watch in 2025, 3 February 2025, accessed 29 January 2026, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/migration-trends-2025/>

57 IOM, Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean, 2020, accessed 13 February 2026, <https://publications.iom.int/books/migration-west-and-north-africa-and-across-mediterranean>

58 ICMPD, Study on the Challenges and Opportunities for the ratification and implementation of the AU Free Movement Protocol, June 2025, accessed 13 February 2026 <https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/66414/file/AU-FMP-Opportunities-and-Challenges-EN-2025.pdf>

59 UCT News, Travel between African countries is still hard: fresh ideas to get movement flowing, 21 October 2025, accessed 12 February 2026, <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2025-10-21-travel-between-african-countries-is-still-hard-fresh-ideas-to-get-movement-flowing>

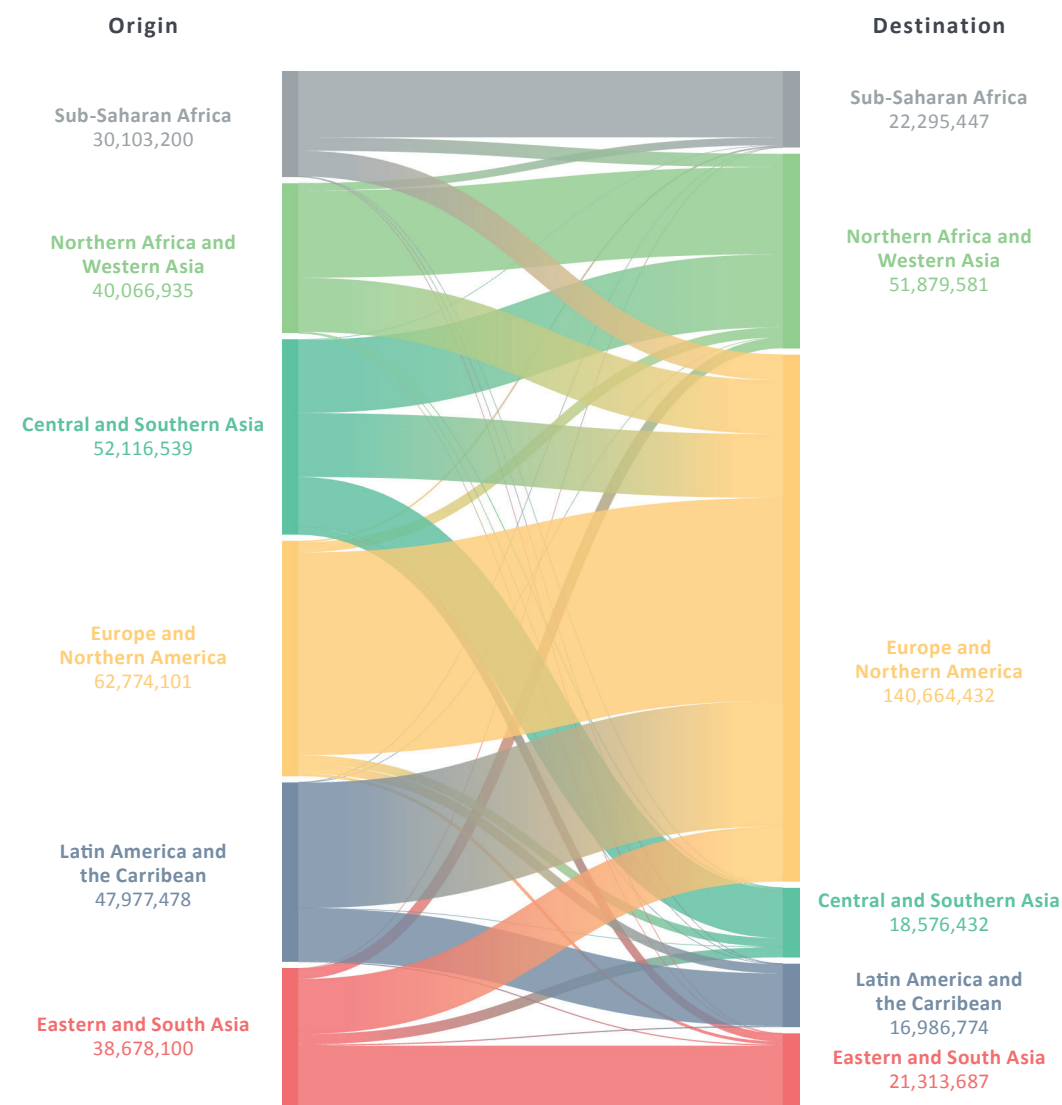
The reality is that “the majority of African mobility remains intra-continental, shaped by overlapping drivers such as conflict, climate change, economic disparities, and evolving policy frameworks”<sup>60</sup>. While dynamics and migration patterns vary across regions, most migration flows take place within the continent, with 21 million Africans living in another African country. Nonetheless, emerging migration routes outside the continent offer increasing opportunities, including increasingly popular labour migration from Africa to the Gulf countries and the wider region of the Arab world, as well as to South America.<sup>61</sup>

At the same time, recent geopolitical developments, including escalating tensions involving Iran and the neighbouring Arab region since early 2026, may introduce additional uncertainty into established labour migration corridors towards the Gulf. While the impact remains difficult to assess at the time of writing, potential disruptions to labour markets or migration routes in the region could influence destination choices, including a possible diversification toward alternative destinations such as Europe.

60 SIHMA, African Migration Trends, Q2 2025: Regional Dynamics and Global Implications, 26 August 2025, accessed 3 February 2026, <https://sihma.org.za/Blog-on-the-move/african-migration-trends-q2-2025-regional-dynamics-and-global-implications?lang=en&utm>

61 IOM, Strategy for Africa 2025-2029, 2025, accessed 3 February 2026, <https://publications.iom.int/books/iom-continental-strategy-africa-2025-2029>

Figure 1: Estimated International Migrant Population by Region of Origin and Destination, Based on UNDESA International Migration Stock 2024<sup>62</sup>



Source: UNDESA, International Migration Stock 2024.

62 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, International Migrant Stock, accessed 25 February 2026, [https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock?utm\\_source](https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock?utm_source)

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Similarly, migration from SSA to Europe has fluctuated. After rising between 2021 and 2023, irregular arrivals fell sharply in 2024 due to reduced crossings along the Central Mediterranean route, and while movements toward Italy and Greece picked up again in 2025, the increase has not caught up with previous years. Analyses show that these patterns reflect stricter controls and enforcement along migration routes, rather than a reduction in overall mobility, with migrants moving along longer, more fragmented and riskier routes.<sup>63,64</sup> For example, Reuters reporting from early 2026 shows that tighter controls in Mauritania reduced departures to the Canary Islands, but migrants shifted to more distant and riskier launch points such as The Gambia and Guinea.<sup>65</sup>

At the same time, migration from SSA to Europe is not solely characterised by irregular movements. Available data indicate that a significant share of African migrants enter Europe through **regular pathways**. Between 2014 and 2023, approximately 4.6 million African citizens immigrated to the EU, with around two-thirds arriving through legal channels. These flows increasingly include labour migrants and international students, alongside other forms of regular admission. While still smaller in scale compared to other migration categories, labour migration from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe has grown in recent years, reflecting both rising demand in European labour markets and expanding migration aspirations among young populations in the region.<sup>66</sup>

63 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), Mixed Migration Review 2025, accessed 4 February 2026, [https://mmr2025.mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/MMR\\_2025\\_Online.pdf](https://mmr2025.mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/MMR_2025_Online.pdf)

64 P. Grant, Mixed Migration Centre, Keeping Track in Africa, 20 November 2025, accessed 13 February 2026, <https://mixedmigration.org/publications/mmr/2025/keeping-track-migration-africa-2025/>

65 C. Devereux and B. Suarez, Reuters, Migrants using more distant, riskier departure points to Canaries after Mauritania crackdown, Red Cross finds, 14 January 2026, accessed 4 February 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/migrants-using-more-distant-riskier-departure-points-canaries-after-mauritania-2026-01-14/>

66 Martens Centre, African Migrants to Europe, 2025, accessed 18 March 2026, <https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/African-Migrants-in-Europe.pdf>

**Forced displacement** remains a defining feature of mobility in SSA. The 2025 Global Report on Internal Displacement estimates that 38.8 million people were internally displaced in SSA at the end of 2024 due to conflict or disaster-related movement, accounting for nearly half of the global total (around 47%), with several countries experiencing both conflict and disaster displacement, such as DRC, Mozambique, Nigeria and Sudan.<sup>67</sup> It is worth noting that in the case of Sudan, the number of estimated IDPs decreased to approximately 9 million in December 2025, compared to the peak of approximately 11.5 million by the end of 2024, which can be attributed to increased return movements, but not necessarily to a stabilisation of the situation in the country.<sup>68</sup> In several contexts, displacement is increasingly protracted with millions of people uprooted for several years, and in some conflicts, displacement is being used as a “weapon of war”, by obstructing humanitarian support, or targeting displaced persons, which should be protected under international law. The situation is further exacerbated by the funding cuts to official development assistance, which is straining governments and organisations’ abilities to respond.<sup>69</sup>

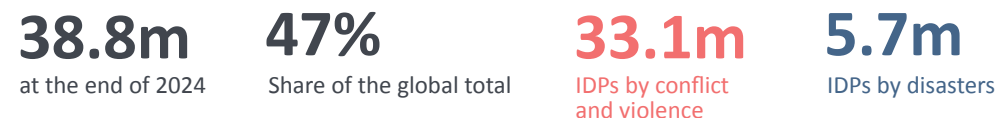
67 IDMC, Global Report on Internal Displacement, May 2025, accessed 4 February 2026, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2025/>

68 UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, Sudan, accessed 19 February 2026, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sudansituation>

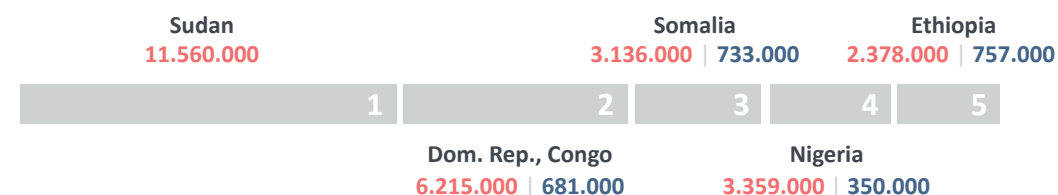
69 O. Maunganidze and A. Mbiyozo, ISS Today, Displacement as a weapon of war: targeting Africa’s most vulnerable, 21 August 2025, accessed 4 February 2026, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/displacement-as-a-weapon-of-war-targeting-africa-s-most-vulnerable>

Figure 2: Total number of IDPs in Sub Saharan Africa at the end of 2024

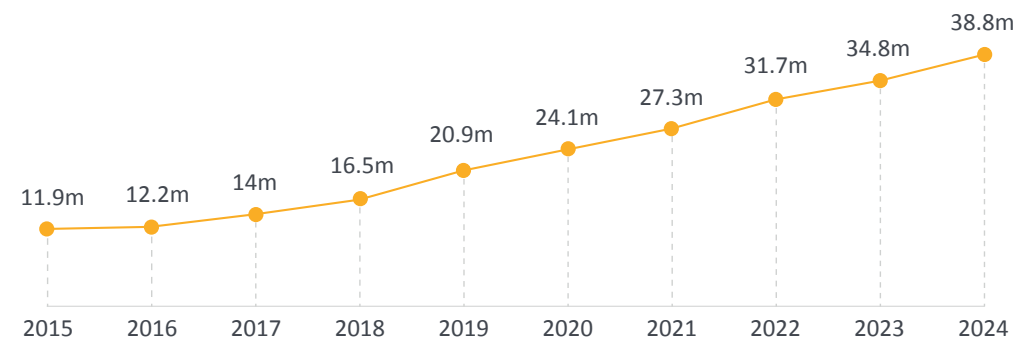
Internally displaced people (IDPs)



Countries with the most IDPs



Total number of IDPs (2015 – 2024)



Source: IDMC GRID Report 2025.

In 2026, migration in SSA will remain structurally high and predominantly intra-regional, driven by demographic expansion, protracted conflict, climate vulnerability and limited labour-market absorption. Persistent humanitarian funding gaps are likely to further strain refugee-hosting countries and displacement responses, increasing pressure on already fragile local systems.

Although economic growth is projected to improve in parts of the region, it is unlikely to absorb the growing labour-force growth, reinforcing internal and regional mobility as key livelihood strategies, particularly for young people. At the same time, intensified border controls along routes toward Europe are expected to redirect rather than reduce movements, contributing to more fragmented, adaptive and risk-prone migration patterns.

## West and Central Africa

### Regional migration dynamics in West and Central Africa

West and Central Africa is a region with highly complex migration trends, opportunities and challenges, encompassing over half a billion people across more than 20 countries with diverse economic, political and environmental contexts<sup>70</sup>. The region has experienced a long history of migration driven by economic opportunities, conflicts and environmental factors, with millions of people moving both within and outside the region. As of mid-2020, approximately, 7.6 million international migrants reside in the region. Of these, nine out of ten (6.7 million) were from another country in the sub-region. West and Central Africa is still undergoing a demographic transition and has a very young population (62% of the population), resulting in a high propensity for young people to move.<sup>71</sup> These intra-regional movements are mixed with internal mobility within countries, particularly in the Central Sahel and Nigeria, where forced displacements are fuelled by conflicts and climate disasters.

About 70 % of the migration flows across West and Central Africa involve temporary, seasonal, and permanent migration of workers, with economic hubs such as Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria the key destinations. Côte d’Ivoire, illustratively, hosts more than 8 million migrants from Burkina Faso,

70 World Bank Group, Western and Central Africa, accessed 25 March 2026, <https://www.world-bank.org/ext/en/region/afr/western-and-central-africa>

71 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: West Africa, 2025, accessed 17 January 2026 <https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/QMMU-2025-Q3-West-Africa.pdf>

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402,000 from Mali, and 112,000 from Guinea. In addition to heavy-handed governance, the loss of jobs due to a lack of protection of a country's natural resources is another main driver in this region. It is estimated that illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing is costing countries in the region around 0.26% of their GDP. This is estimated to result in an annual loss of 30,000 livelihoods, while pushing another 140,000 people deeper into poverty.<sup>72</sup>

The Central African region has seen a 48% increase in forced displacement since 2020 with a notable rise in the number of IDPs and refugees. The Lake Chad Basin and the Central Sahel are major areas of conflicts, contributing to the displacement of populations. Chad hosts nearly half of the region's refugee population with a significant number of refugees from Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR). Also, Central Africa sees limited voluntary intraregional movement between countries, as most economic opportunities are extra-regional to West Africa. These figures confirm that West and Central Africa remains a displacement-affected region with overlapping crises in Sudan, the Central Sahel, and the Lake Chad Basin continuing to drive population movements. In the first quarter of 2025 alone, more than 1.1 million people were newly displaced, mainly due to the ongoing conflict in Sudan.<sup>73</sup>

Across the Sahel region, transnational kinship networks, seasonal labour mobility, trade routes have shaped the patterns of movement. The region is considered as both a point of origin and transit with significant movement towards North Africa and Europe. Traditionally, northbound migration has been driven by economic opportunities, with many Sahelian migrants working in Libya and Algeria in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and domestic work. Libya was for many years a major labour destination, with migrants from Chad, Mali, Niger, and Sudan making up a significant portion

72 Africa Center for Strategic Studies, African Migration Trends to Watch in 2025, 3 February 2025, accessed 27 February 2026, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/migration-trends-2025/>

73 UNHCR, UNHCR highlights forced displacement trends, protection risks, and solutions in West and Central Africa, 12 June 2025, accessed 17 January 2026, <https://www.unhcr.org/africa/news/press-releases/unhcr-highlights-forced-displacement-trends-protection-risks-and-solutions-west>

of the country's workforce. However, migration in the Sahel has undergone profound shifts in recent years, due to a combination of security concerns, economic pressures, environmental challenges, and external interventions. Coups in countries including Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have prompted international concern and led to a change in their position towards migration management. The gradual withdrawal and exclusion from multilateral cooperation along with regional violent extremism, transnational crime, and other security challenges have led to increased border controls and restrictions on movement across the region.<sup>74</sup>

In the area of outbound movement, recent evidence shows a southward shift in departure from West and Central Africa towards the Canary Island in Spain. Increasing numbers of boats are now leaving from The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Guinea, signalling the emergence of new embarkation points as smuggling networks adapt to intensified controls further north. However, serious protection risks persist along the West Atlantic and Central Mediterranean routes, including trafficking, abuse, and deaths at sea.<sup>75</sup> Between January and March 2025 alone, 10,500 individuals arrived in the Canary Islands, with Malians comprising the largest share. According to Eurostat, more than 10,000 Malians sought asylum in Europe in 2024, the majority via this route, citing conflict and insecurity as the main drivers of their displacement. UNHCR's route-based approach, operational in Mali, Senegal, and Mauritania, aims to respond to these needs by reinforcing asylum systems, strengthening access to protection, and providing safe alternatives along this corridor.<sup>76</sup>

74 Migration Policy Institute, On Shifting Sands in Africa's Sahel Region: Tensions between Security and Free Movement, 20 August 2025, accessed 23 January 2026, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/sahel-migration-trends>

75 IOM Global Data Institute Displacement Tracking Matrix, The Gambia — Departure Areas Monitoring Tool — Movements to the Canary Islands (May- June 2025), accessed 23 January 2026, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/gambia-departure-areas-monitoring-tool-movements-canary-islands-may-june-2025>

76 UNHCR, UNHCR highlights forced displacement trends, protection risks, and solutions in West and Central Africa, 12 June 2025, accessed 17 January 2026, <https://www.unhcr.org/africa/news/press-releases/unhcr-highlights-forced-displacement-trends-protection-risks-and-solutions-west>

## Persistent instability and protracted displacement across the Sahel

Worsening economic conditions and heightened conflicts and insecurity in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Sudan continue to drive displacement across and between the regions. Since April 2025, an estimated 38,000 Burkinabe have fled to Koro, Mali, including 2,373 in July and 14,269 in August alone. Over the same period, the number of Malian refugees in asylum countries increased modestly, rising from 330,348 in May to 335,430 in August 2025 (+2%). In Chad, the Sudanese refugee population increased by 12% between April and August 2025, totalling 876,552.<sup>77</sup> The UNHCR reports that over 12.1 million people are forcibly displaced in West and Central Africa with Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Cameroon hosting the majority of IDPs. According to UNHCR data there was an estimated total of 190,591 refugees and asylum seekers registered in the coastal countries of Côte d'Ivoire (76,888), Ghana (25,743), Togo (60,106), and Benin (27,854) as of April 2025.<sup>78</sup>

In late August 2025, inter-ethnic clashes linked to a land dispute in north-western Ghana resulted in 31 deaths and the displacement of an estimated 50,000 people. Around 14,000 people have crossed into Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, including 13,000 in Côte d'Ivoire, mostly from the Birifor ethnic group. Since 16 September, about 8,000 Ghanaians have returned home from Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>79</sup>

77 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: West Africa, Q3 2025, accessed 17 March 2026 <https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/QMMU-2025-Q3-West-Africa.pdf>

78 UNHCR Operational Data Portal, RBWCA - Principal Refugees, IDPs and Stateless Persons - August 2025, 17 September 2025, accessed 30 January 2026, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/118662>

79 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: West Africa, Q3 2025, accessed 17 March 2026 <https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/QMMU-2025-Q3-West-Africa.pdf>

## Economic opportunities as drivers of labour mobility

The labour migration trends in West and Central Africa are characterized by a significant number of intra-regional and neighbouring country movements. The region's migration intensities are evolving, especially in comparison to other sub-regions in Africa. The main labour migration routes are mostly directed towards the relatively more developed coastal countries in the southern part of the region, to neighbouring countries, and often historically rooted<sup>80</sup>. Many labour migrants moved from the Sahelian countries, in some instance with families, to the plantations in Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria. While Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire mainly attract labour migrants from Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso and the Niger to their Cocoa farms, Senegal and The Gambia provided work on their cotton and groundnuts farms for migrants from the rest of the continent. Nigeria's oil discovery and exploration also made the country attractive for many West African migrants.<sup>81</sup> Citizens of ECOWAS are able to move, reside and work in other ECOWAS countries, although they are confronted with challenges.<sup>82</sup> Some Member States have worked or are working on migration policies to have a holistic approach to managing migration across the West Africa community.

80 United Nations University Series on Regionalism, Regional Integration and Migration Governance in the Global South, chapter on Contemporary Labor Migration in West and Central Africa: The Main Patterns, Drivers and Routes, 30 August 2020, accessed 05 February 2026, [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-43942-2\\_2](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-43942-2_2)

81 Global Compact for Migration Objectives, Migration Across West Africa: Development-related Aspects. Section 3 Migration and Development, 2021, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/ch21-migration-across-west-africa.pdf>

82 ICMPD and IOM, A Survey on Migration Policies in West Africa Second edition 2016, accessed 16 February, 2026, [A%20Survey%20on%20Migration%20Policies%20in%20West%20Africa.pdf](https://www.icmpd.org/publications/A%20Survey%20on%20Migration%20Policies%20in%20West%20Africa.pdf)

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Recent examples include Sierra Leone, which adopted a National Migration Policy in 2022, Ghana, which validated a revised Labour Migration Policy in 2023, and Nigeria, which validated its National Migration Policy in 2025 — reflecting a growing, if uneven, trend toward more structured national migration governance across the region.<sup>83,84,85</sup>

### Return Migration

Despite complex challenges, IDP returns are significantly outpacing refugee returns. In 2025, DRC represented by far the largest IDP return movement in the region, with close to 2 million IDP returnees, followed by CAR with 71,274 IDP returns recorded, the two largest IDP return movements in the region<sup>86</sup>. In contrast, refugee returns remained more limited; with 23,751 refugees returned to Nigeria, and 4,375 refugees returned to CAR<sup>87</sup>. Also, in 2025, expulsion of over 34,000 migrants from Algeria to Niger was reported by the NGO Alarme Phone Sahara<sup>88</sup>. In response to the growing crisis, IOM cooperated with affected governments and partners to expand its existing voluntary return activities, which notably led to the return of more than 9,500 persons

83 IOM, Government of Nigeria validates the 2025 National Migration Policy, 30 April 2025, accessed 25 March 2026, <https://nigeria.iom.int/news/government-nigeria-validates-2025-national-migration-policy>

84 Sirrealoaded, Sierra Leone Government Launches National Migration Policy, 27 January 2022, accessed 25 March 2026, <https://sierraloaded.sl/news/sierra-leone-launches-national-migration-policy/>

85 IOM, Ghana Labour Migration Policy Validated, 9 January 2019, accessed 25 March 2026, <https://www.iom.int/news/ghana-labour-migration-policy-validated>

86 UNHCR, Refugee Data Finder, accessed 24 April 2026, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/data-summaries>

87 UNHCR, Refugee Data Finder, accessed 24 April 2026, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/data-summaries>

88 Alarme Phone Sahara, Assamaka, Niger: More than 34,000 people deported from Algeria to Niger in 2025, 31 December 2025, accessed 24 April 2026, <https://alarmephonesahara.info/en/news/assamaka-niger-more-than-34-000-people-deported-from-algeria-to-niger-in-2025>

from Algeria<sup>89</sup>. Similarly, Mauritania expelled more than 18,000 migrants between January and July 2025, provoking concerns over human rights and sparking diplomatic frictions with Mali and Senegal, even as new bilateral agreements were introduced.<sup>90</sup> It should be noted that majority of these movements are intra-continental, with returns from Europe representing a small share of the total.

### Climate stress as a risk multiplier for human rights, forced displacement and conflict

Climate Change and environmental degradation are not standalone concern, but create systemic vulnerabilities, increasingly influencing migration patterns. In many contexts, climate-related pressures directly contribute to both mobility and forced displacement, within and across borders. At the same time, they can intensify the vulnerabilities and protection needs of people who are already displaced for a wide range of reasons, not necessarily linked to climate impacts. When displacement occurs in communities already hosting large numbers of displaced people, it can further exacerbate resource scarcity and increase pressure on livelihoods, land, and basic services.

Climate impacts can also worsen existing social and political vulnerabilities and contribute to tensions and conflict. Rising temperatures and increased climate variability place growing pressure on fragile ecosystems and natural resources, heightening competition between pastoralist and farming communities and undermining human security, safety, and health.

89 IOM, IOM Chief Visits Algeria to Strengthen Partnership on Migration Management, 8 January 2026, accessed 24 April 2026, <https://mena.iom.int/news/iom-chief-visits-algeria-strengthen-partnership-migration-management>

90 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: West Africa, Q3 2025, accessed 17 March 2026 <https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/QMMU-2025-Q3-West-Africa.pdf>

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Finally, when the destabilising effects of climate change remain unaddressed, they can create significant barriers to safe, dignified and durable return by further compromising the long-term habitability of certain regions while increasing pressure on already overstretched ecosystems and communities.

The situation in West and Central African countries illustrates this risk multiplier effect. In 2025, floods forced over 20,000 people to move to seek safety across the DRC, Nigeria, Cabo Verde and Ghana. Of these, 73 per cent were in the DRC, 24 per cent in Nigeria, while 3 per cent in Ghana and Cabo Verde combined<sup>91</sup>. The West African Sahel is increasingly experiencing the convergence of climate stress and conflict, which heightens insecurity and leads to forced displacement.

In Nigeria and Burkina Faso, environmental stresses caused by floods intensify resource competition among natural resource-dependent groups, further fuelling displacement and violence. Extremist factions exploit these vulnerabilities, with insurgents and militias deepening societal instability.

Over time, conflicts driven by environmental stresses shift toward political and sectarian violence, highlighting climate change as a “threat multiplier” rather than a direct cause of conflict or displacement.<sup>92</sup> Simultaneously, in increasingly fragile contexts, mobility itself becomes unevenly distributed. While some people move in anticipation of climate risks or are forced to relocate due to sudden shocks, others remain unable to do so because of limited resources or capacities- often affecting women and those with fewer economic means - or are unwilling to leave due to strong social and cultural attachments to their lands.

91 OCHA, West and Central Africa: 2025 Monitoring of the flooding situation - As of 21 August 2025, accessed 10 April 2026, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/democratic-republic-congo/west-and-central-africa-2025-monitoring-flooding-situation-21-august-2025>

92 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), Quarterly Mixed Migration Update.: West Africa, Q3 2025, accessed 17 March 2026 <https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/QMMU-2025-Q3-West-Africa.pdf>

In the absence of adequate and anticipatory on-site adaptation strategies, these populations may face heightened exposure to environmental hazards, human rights risks and conflict dynamics.

In this context, policy responses could usefully address the intersectional factors and vulnerabilities that may lead to situations of forced immobility, displacement, and conflict in the context of climate change, including through anticipatory adaptation strategies such as strengthened on-site resilience measures and safe mobility pathways. This objective is underlined by the Cádiz Action Plan<sup>93</sup>, which calls for increased efforts to prevent vulnerabilities linked to climate change and food insecurity and encourages integrating climate change and forced displacement into national development strategies and cooperation initiatives. Among forward-looking initiatives, ECOWAS Regional Climate Strategy illustrates this endeavour.

### Additional pressures to migration governance through external factors

The US administration enacted a travel ban imposing full and partial restrictions on countries such as Togo and Sierra Leone and is considering expanding it to nearly 40 African states – including Senegal, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Mauritania, and Niger – which may face full or partial restrictions.<sup>94</sup> This has been followed by pressure from the US government on Africa governments including those in West and Central Africa to receive deported migrants from the US. Before a July 2025 meeting hosted by the US President with leaders of Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Gabon, US Media reported that confidential requests have been made to

93 Rabat Process, Cadiz Action Plan, accessed 12 March 2026 <https://www.rabat-process.org/en/about/cadiz-action-plan>

94 Reuters, Trump administration weighs adding 36 countries to travel ban, memo says, 16 June 2025, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-administration-weighs-adding-36-countries-travel-ban-memo-says-2025-06-15/>

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these five countries asking them to accept third-country deportees.<sup>95</sup> With some West and Central African countries resisting such pressure to receive migrants, close monitoring of the implication on geopolitical and strategic cooperation for migration governance, border management and security issues will be essential in 2026.

The US administration has also drastically cut foreign aid, terminating an estimated 85 % of contracts managed by USAID, worth more than \$27 billion; whilst European donors are also cutting international aid. France and Germany reduced foreign aid funding for 2025 by 11% and 9.5% respectively; and Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland are enacting multi-year donor funding cutbacks. This leaves a hard-to-fill gap, with potentially serious and unintended consequences for how governments around the world manage migration.<sup>96</sup> While the African Development Fund's record \$11 billion ADF-17 replenishment, secured in December 2025 and directed toward 37 low-income and fragile African countries, offers some structural counterweight, it remains substantially insufficient to compensate for the scale of the aforementioned cuts. Protection and assistance gaps in West and Central Africa are therefore likely to persist and deepen in 2026.<sup>97</sup>

The United Nations have reported that a staggering 55 million people across West and Central Africa were expected to suffer crisis levels of hunger or worse, during the lean season from June to August 2025 as funding cuts to

95 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: West Africa, Q3 2025, accessed 17 March 2026 <https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/QMMU-2025-Q3-West-Africa.pdf>

96 Migration Policy Institute, Can Innovation Help Blunt the Impact of Foreign Aid Cuts on Migration Management Programs?, April 2025, accessed 17 February 2026, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/foreign-aid-cuts-migration-management>

97 African Development Bank, African Development Fund mobilises a historic \$11 billion, marking a new era of African ownership and investment-led development, 16 December 2025, accessed 19 March 2026, <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/press-releases/african-development-fund-mobilises-historic-11-billion-marking-new-era-african-ownership-and-investment-led-development-89755>

humanitarian operations continues amid rising violence and displacement.<sup>98</sup> Also, UNHCR has maintained that progress towards incremental levels of resettlement is now at risk of slowing down due to 50% reduction in its regional budget between 2024 and 2025 leading to a prioritization of life-saving assistance.

Looking ahead to 2026, migration dynamics in West and Central Africa are expected to remain shaped by persistent insecurity in the Sahel, climate variability and uneven economic opportunities. Internal displacement and cross-border movements are likely to continue, particularly in conflict- and climate-affected areas. At the same time, intra-regional labour mobility within ECOWAS is expected to remain a central feature, supported by existing free movement frameworks. Increasing externalisation pressures, including strengthened border controls and return-related cooperation, may further influence mobility patterns and governance approaches. Overall, migration in the region is likely to remain dynamic, reflecting both continued vulnerabilities and its long-standing role as a space of mobility and regional integration.

## East and Horn of Africa

### Regional migration patterns shaped by displacement and crises in the East and Horn of Africa

East Africa and the Horn of Africa are dynamic regions in terms of mobility. Covering 20 countries and with a population of over 522 million<sup>99</sup>, the region is particularly characterised by mobility. While this mobility often stems from exogenous causes (conflicts, consequences of climate change), resulting in dynamic intra-regional migration, irregular migration and displacement represented a significant volume of mobility in 2025.

98 UN News, Aid cuts push millions in West and Central Africa deeper into hunger, 16 January 2026, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/01/1166776>

99 Worldometer, Population de l'Afrique de l'Est (en direct), accessed 27 February 2026, <https://www.worldometers.info/fr/population-mondiale/afrique-de-l-est-population/>

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The region recorded one of the highest numbers of displacements world-wide in 2025, with approximately 24 million displaced persons, including 5.7 million refugees and asylum seekers and 18.8 million internally displaced persons in March 2025.<sup>100</sup> These figures can be explained by the resurgence, intensification, and perpetuation of certain intra-state conflicts in 2025.

Somalia remains one of the least developed countries in the world and continues to require foreign financial and military aid to secure national and regional stability, however such support from international partners has gone down.<sup>101</sup> Somalia has been plagued by security instability for several years, mainly due to limited political power base, extended only to the capital Mogadishu and a few satellite towns. Since 2023, especially between April 2023 and July 2025, Somalia experienced a “volatile and complex security environment marked by persistent conflict, political fragmentation and humanitarian crisis.”<sup>102</sup>

One of the main security challenges are the activities of the Al-Shabaab (a terrorist organisation affiliated with Al-Qaeda) that gained ground, most notably with the offensive in April 2025.<sup>103</sup> This unstable climate provoked more than 6,000 security incidents (according to the Conflict and Humanitarian Data Centre of the International NGO Safety Organisation) and at least 711 355 forced displacements during that short period of time.<sup>104</sup>

100 OCHA, Eastern Africa: Humanitarian Snapshot (As of March 2025), 10 April 2025 accessed 10 January 2026, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/sudan/eastern-africa-humanitarian-snapshot-march-2025#:~:text=Attachments,in%20more%20than%2010%20locations.>

101 Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Somalia at Risk of Becoming a Jihadist State, 17 November 2025, accessed 23 February 2026 <https://africacenter.org/publication/asb45en-somalia-risk-jihadist-state/>

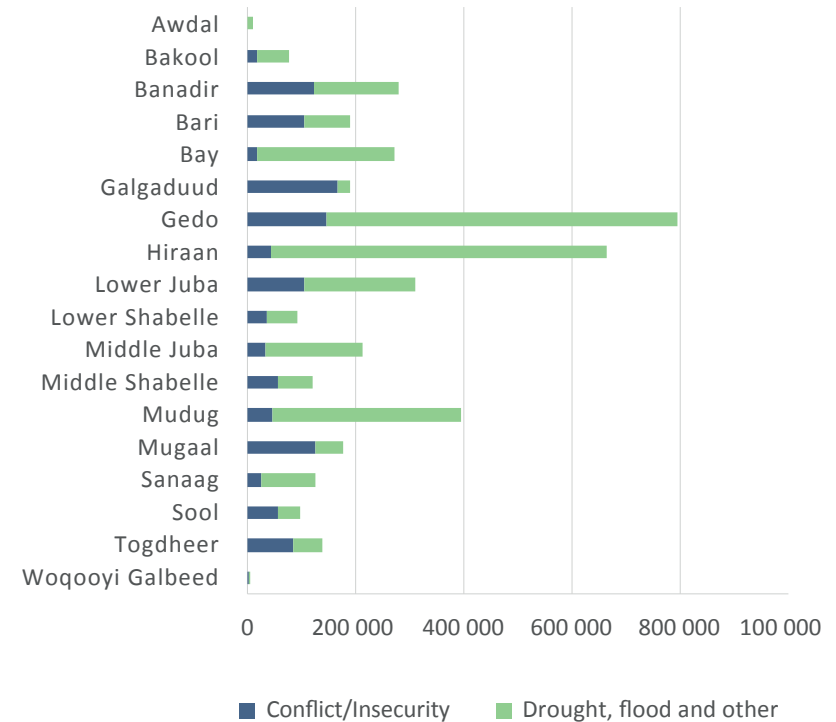
102 European Union Agency for Asylum, Security situation in Somalia: recent events, October 2025, accessed 23 February 2026, <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-somalia/security-situation-somalia-recent-events>

103 Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Somalia at Risk of Becoming a Jihadist State, 17 November 2025, <https://africacenter.org/publication/asb45en-somalia-risk-jihadist-state/>

104 European Union Agency for Asylum, Security situation in Somalia: recent events, October 2025, accessed 23 February 2026, <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-somalia/security-situation-somalia-recent-events>

These displacement numbers relate only to conflicts and security pressures and do not include climate-induced mobility. However, the latter has shown to be a more prominent cause for displacement as the graph below illustrates.<sup>105</sup>

Figure 3: Distribution of newly displaced individuals in Somalia due to conflict/insecurity vs drought, flood and other drivers- 2023 and 2025



Source: UNHCR PRMN Displacement Data set.

105 European Union Agency for Asylum, Security, Somalia: Security Situation (report), May 2025, accessed 23 February 2026: <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/publications/coi-report-somalia-security-situation-3>

The conflict in Sudan has significantly impacted both the country and region's migration trajectories; almost 7 million persons are internally displaced since the start of the conflict in April 2023<sup>106</sup>, and together with those displaced before the conflict the number of displaced persons reaches 9 million; of which 4 million people have fled to neighbouring countries.<sup>107</sup> In addition, the recent security issues in the DRC have further impacted the migration landscape within the region in 2025. Between 2024 and 2025, due to intensified conflicts, particularly in two key regions within the country, North Kivu and South Kivu, the DRC experienced an increase of IDPs, reaching 8 million persons.<sup>108</sup> East African countries were particularly affected, with Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and Tanzania receiving almost 1.1 million Congolese refugees or asylum seekers; in Burundi alone, 119,000 people entered the country by mid-2025.<sup>109,110</sup>

106 IOM, DTM Sudan: Cross-Border Monitoring Report (2). 2026. Accessed 19 February 2026.

<https://dtm.iom.int/reports/dtm-sudan-cross-border-monitoring-report-2>

107 IOM, DTM Sudan: Cross-Border Monitoring Report (2). 2026. Accessed 19 February 2026.

<https://dtm.iom.int/reports/dtm-sudan-cross-border-monitoring-report-2>

108 Mixed Migration Centre, DR Congo's endless war and its impact on mixed migration in 2025, accessed 10 January 2026, <https://mixedmigration.org/mmr-article/drc-congo-war-impact-migration-2025/>

109 Mixed Migration Centre, Report: Keeping track in Africa, 20 November 2025, accessed 10 January 2026, <https://mixedmigration.org/publications/mmr/2025/keeping-track-migration-africa-2025/>

110 Mixed Migration Centre, DR Congo's endless war and its impact on mixed migration in 2025, accessed 10 January 2026, <https://mixedmigration.org/mmr-article/drc-congo-war-impact-migration-2025/>

## Decrease and diversification of irregular migration routes amid stricter border controls

According to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX), irregular border crossings at the EU's external border "fell by over one-quarter (26 %) in 2025".<sup>111</sup> Regarding flows from SSA, the most notable decrease has occurred on the Western African route which could be explained by recent partnerships between the EU and key African countries (Morocco, Senegal and Mauritania).<sup>112</sup> The Eastern Mediterranean migration route towards Europe registered a decrease, albeit less pronounced. It should also be noted that this Eastern route includes alternative, so-called secondary, migration routes. In this regard, the corridor connecting Libya to the island of Crete remained active and even tripled in 2025.<sup>113</sup> In addition, the migration route linking the Horn of Africa via Somalia and Djibouti to the Gulf countries, which is still considered one of the most used irregular routes, provides an alternative route into Yemen (particularly to Ta'izz) which might explain the increase by 34 % from 178,300 to 238,000 between 2024 and 2025.<sup>114</sup>

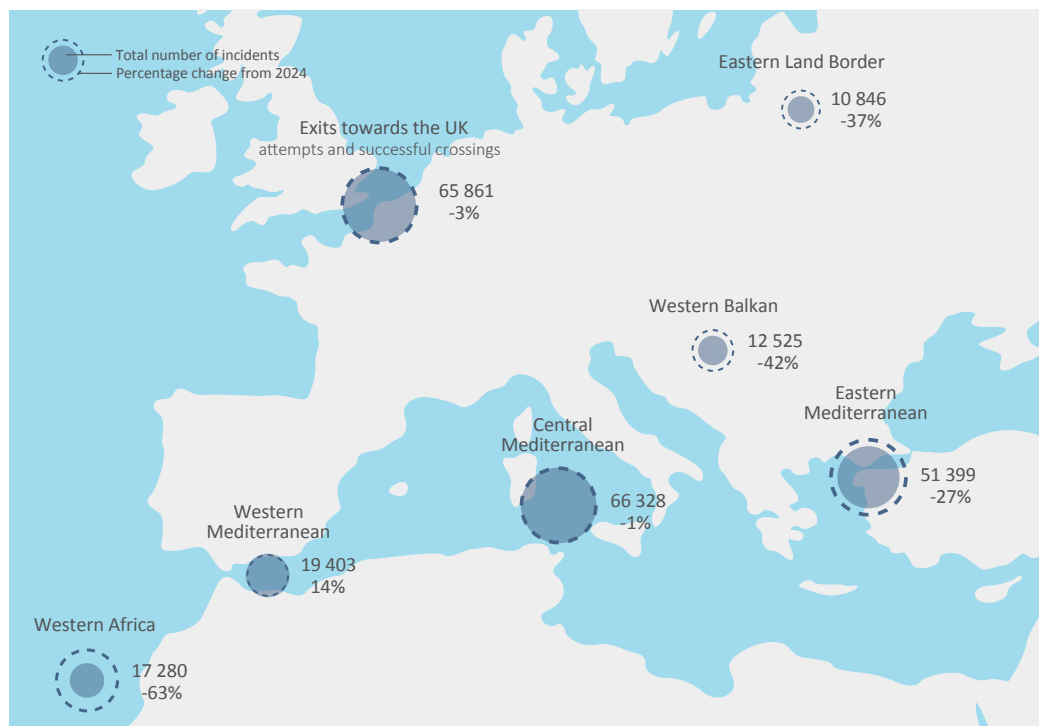
111 Frontex, Frontex: Irregular border crossings down 26% in 2025, Europe must stay prepared, accessed 3 March 2026, <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-irregular-border-crossings-down-26-in-2025-europe-must-stay-prepared-lyKpVb>

112 ICMPD, Migration Outlook 2026, <https://www.icmpd.org/publications/icmpd-migration-outlook>

113 Frontex, Frontex: Irregular border crossings down 26% in 2025, Europe must stay prepared, accessed 3 March 2026, <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-irregular-border-crossings-down-26-in-2025-europe-must-stay-prepared-lyKpVb>

114 IOM, Migration along the Eastern route, Report, 1 September 2025, accessed 10 January 2026, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/migration-along-eastern-route-report-60-january-june-2025-publication-1-september-2025>

Figure 4: Number of irregular border-crossings January – December 2025 <sup>115</sup>



Source: Frontex.

## Climate variability as a persistent driver of displacement

In the last decade, climate-induced challenges have severely affected multiple countries in the region. Drought, flooding, and extreme heatwaves have become prominent drivers of migration. These climate stressors threaten the livelihoods of rural populations, especially those who rely on farming and pastoralism.

<sup>115</sup> Frontex, Frontex: Irregular border crossings down 26% in 2025, Europe must stay prepared, accessed 3 March 2026, <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-irregular-border-crossings-down-26-in-2025-europe-must-stay-prepared-lyKpVb>

As a result, climate-related challenges, combined with food insecurity and economic instability, have led to seasonal and temporary migration as a coping mechanism, which can add to rising displacement levels.<sup>116</sup>

Across the region, both drought and flooding continued to drive displacement over the last decade. Although patterns vary by country and hazard type, repeated climate shocks continue to increase vulnerability and displacement pressures.

**In Sudan,** the number of flood-triggered movements decreased in 2025 compared to 2024. In 2024, 189,415 individuals were displaced by flood incidents, while 30,175 people were displaced in 2025, as of November. Despite this decrease, the floods remained the key driver of climate induced displacement in 2025 in Sudan.<sup>117</sup> This implies that, despite year-to-year variability, structural exposure to flood risk continues to shape displacement patterns.

**In South Sudan,** repeated flooding over the past decade has displaced thousands of people. As of October 2025, overall flood exposure remained below the peaks recorded in 2021, 2022, and 2024; however, it was still above the historical average. In 2025, approximately 335,000 people were displaced by flooding across affected areas in South Sudan, with many seeking safeties on higher ground.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>116</sup> Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), The intersection of mobility, environmental and climate change, and conflict in the East and Horn of Africa, August 2025, accessed 9 February 2026, [https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/The-Intersection-of-Mobility-Environmental-and-Climate-Change-and-Conflict-in-the-East-and-Horn-of-Africa\\_FINAL.pdf](https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/The-Intersection-of-Mobility-Environmental-and-Climate-Change-and-Conflict-in-the-East-and-Horn-of-Africa_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>117</sup> IOM, Displacement Tracker Matrix (DTM) Sudan, Natural Hazard Displacement Overview 2025, 10 December 2025, accessed 9 February 2026, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/natural-hazard-displacement-overview-2025>

<sup>118</sup> OCHA, South Sudan: Floods Snapshot, 23 October 2025, accessed 9 February 2026, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-floods-snapshot-23-october-2025>

**Ethiopia** continues to face serious climate pressure, with rising temperatures, irregular rainfall, and more frequent extreme weather events. Prolonged drought between 2020 and 2023 resulted in the displacement of around 613,000 people.<sup>119</sup> Heatwaves and drought circumstances continued in 2025, strongly affecting pastoralist and farming communities and maintaining high levels of climate-related stress and displacement risk.

**In Somalia** recent droughts have affected over 8 million people, of whom 4.4 million are food insecure<sup>120</sup>, contributing to displacement and increasing vulnerability. During 2025, around 680,000 people were internally displaced by a combination of conflict and drought.<sup>121</sup> DTM projects that roughly 130,000 additional people could be displaced between December 2025 and March 2026 due to continued drought conditions.<sup>122</sup>

The available data suggests that climate-related displacement remained a significant issue in the region in 2025, and it will continue to do so in 2026. These patterns indicate that climate-related hazards continue to act as a persistent factor shaping displacement and mobility across the region. The frequency and recurrence of climate hazards create an additional layer of

119 OCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview Ethiopia, February 2024, accessed 9 February 2026, [digitallibrary.un.org/record/4043313/files/1402188-EN.pdf](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4043313/files/1402188-EN.pdf)

120 The Horn Economic and Social Policy Institute (HESPI), Climate Change Context Analysis Summary Report of the IGAD Region, September 2025, accessed 9 February 2026, [https://hespi.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Climate\\_Change\\_Context\\_Analysis\\_Report\\_IGAD\\_Region.pdf](https://hespi.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Climate_Change_Context_Analysis_Report_IGAD_Region.pdf)

121 OCHA, Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026, January 2026, accessed 9 February 2026, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/somalia/somaliahumanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2026>

122 Own calculations based on IOM, Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), Multi-Hazard Displacement Projections

December 2025 –March 2026, accessed 9 February 2026, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/somalia-multi-hazard-displacement-projections-q1-2026-december-2025-march-2026?close=true>

challenges for recovery efforts in affected areas. Given that environmental stress is not an isolated driver of migration but is closely linked to socio-economic pressures, it may cause short-term movements to become prolonged as affected populations seek longer-term solutions.

The World Bank report projects that by 2050 up to 105 million people could be forced to move across the entire Africa continent due to climate-related factors with 85 million expected to move in SSA<sup>123</sup>, underscoring the role of climate pressures as key drivers of displacement. In this context, climate-induced mobility is increasingly being recognised within regional cooperation agendas. The Kampala Ministerial Declaration on Migration, Environment and Climate Change (KDMECC) reflects regional efforts to address the impacts of climate change on migration, and coordination within this framework continued in 2025 to support further progress. Similarly, the Cairo Ministerial Declaration<sup>124</sup>, endorsed at the Second Khartoum Process Ministerial Conference in 2025, highlights the importance of cooperation in addressing climate-related mobility and tackling the root causes of forced displacement, including environmental degradation. In parallel, the African Union's adoption of the Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy marks a significant step toward strengthening water security. This area is heavily influenced by climate change and directly affects livelihoods and mobility and is particularly relevant in the context of the African Union's 2026 Theme of the Year focusing on water governance and sustainable water management. Together, these initiatives show the region's continued commitment to addressing climate pressures and their impact on displacement and humanitarian movements.

123 Own calculations based on Clement, Viviane, Kanta Kumari Rigaud, Alex de Sherbinin, Bryan Jones, Susana Adamo, Jacob Schewe, Nian Sadiq, and Elham Shabahat, Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration, The World Bank, 13 September 2021, accessed 9 February 2026, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36248>

124 Khartoum Process, Cairo Ministerial Declaration, 9 April 2025, accessed 9 February 2026, <https://www.khartoumprocess.net/resources/political-documents/cairo-ministerial-declaration/download>

The region's migration outlook for 2026 will be influenced by current climate patterns (droughts, floods and extreme weather) that could continue to drive displacement across the region. While the scale of movements will vary depending on the severity of hazards, high exposure and limited coping capacity suggests that climate-related displacement is likely to remain significant. These pressures are likely to further increase humanitarian needs and reinforce the importance of linking climate adaptation more closely with migration and displacement responses. Furthermore, in 2026, presidential elections are expected to take place in key countries of origin or/and asylum (Ethiopia, South Sudan) and in key countries in the Eastern migration routes (Somalia, and Djibouti). The uncertain outcome of these elections, together with a security climate shaped by a major armed conflicts resurgence in 2025 (in Somalia and Sudan) may result in renewed tensions that could impact the region's displacement patterns, leading to an increase in irregular migration towards Europe and the Gulf. However, escalating tensions in Iran and the neighbouring Arab region since February 2026 introduce uncertainty into this outlook, as both migration routes towards the Gulf and Gulf state engagement in the Horn may be significantly affected. Analysts have noted that Gulf states such as the UAE and Qatar, key partners for Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia, are likely to begin focusing inward on their own security, potentially reducing the level of coordination with Horn of Africa states compared to recent years.<sup>125</sup> This, combined with existing Western aid cuts, is difficult to assess at the time of writing but risks compounding an already constrained external support environment for East and Horn of Africa in 2026.

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<sup>125</sup> The Conversation, Gulf attention is turning inward: why the Iran war could destabilise the Horn of Africa, 9 March 2026, accessed 19 March 2026, <https://theconversation.com/gulf-attention-is-turning-inward-why-the-iran-war-could-destabilise-the-horn-of-africa-277855>

# | Migration policy developments

## Continental level

At the continental level, the 39th Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly (11–15 February 2026) set the strategic tone for the year ahead, reaffirming Agenda 2063 as the guiding framework for inclusive growth, resilience and continental integration. The Summit endorsed the **Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy** and adopted “Assuring Sustainable Water Availability and Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063” as the Theme of the Year, elevating water security as a cross-cutting priority linked to climate resilience, public health, food systems and socio-economic transformation. Leaders also reiterated commitments to accelerating AfCFTA implementation, strengthening peace and security mechanisms and enhancing Africa’s position in global governance. While not framed explicitly as a migration policy, the emphasis on water security and climate resilience underscores growing recognition of environmental stress as a structural driver of displacement and vulnerability, reinforcing the need to consider linkages between climate adaptation, development planning and mobility governance.<sup>126,127</sup>

Another area that is likely to continue to receive heightened policy attention is that of **missing migrants**. According to the IOM *Missing Migrants Project*, approximately 18,000 deaths and disappearances have been recorded in the Africa region since 2014, reflecting risks on Mediterranean, Atlantic and trans-Saharan routes, though this figure is widely considered an underestimate due to limited reporting. Restrictive border measures and a lack of safe

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126 African Union, 39th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union Concludes in Addis Ababa, 13 February 2026, accessed 17 February 2026, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20260215/39th-ordinary-session-assembly-african-union-concludes>

127 AMCOW, Press Release: Africa Adopts the Water Vision 2063 and Policy: A Continental Compass for Prosperity, Peace and Resilience, 6 October 2025, accessed 27 January 2026, <https://amcow-online.org/africa-adopts-the-water-vision-2063-and-policy-a-continentalcompass-for-prosperity-peace-and-resilience/>

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legal pathways push migrants onto increasingly hazardous routes, amplifying mortality risks.<sup>128</sup> Despite the scale of the issue, policy responses remain uneven, with persistent gaps in prevention, search and rescue, case resolution, identification and support to families.<sup>129</sup>

Within this evolving landscape, partner countries of the Rabat and Khartoum Processes have increasingly prioritised stronger dialogue and regional cooperation to prevent migrants from going missing, improve search and identification, and ensure adequate support to affected families.<sup>130,131</sup> Central to these efforts is a commitment to place families' rights - particularly the right to know the fate and whereabouts of missing loved ones - at the heart of policy responses.

A major step forward was the launch of the Network of National Focal Points for Missing Migrants in July 2024<sup>132</sup>, led by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), in collaboration with Switzerland and The Gambia. As of March 2026, the Network brings together 26 partner countries from the Rabat Process region and has convened five online meetings and one in-person exchange in Banjul in July 2025. It offers a dedicated platform to advance

128 IOM, Missing Migrants Project Data Portal, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/africa>

129 IOM, Africa Migration Report (Second edition). Connecting the threads: Linking policy, practice and the welfare of the African migrant. IOM, Addis Ababa, 2024, accessed 27 January 2026, [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/pub2023-132-r-iom-au-africa-migration-report-second-edition\\_0.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/pub2023-132-r-iom-au-africa-migration-report-second-edition_0.pdf)

130 Rabat Process, Outcome: Advancing cooperation on missing migrants in the Rabat Process region, 4 October 2025, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://www.rabat-process.org/en/activities/technical-meetings/thematic-meeting-on-missing-migrants>

131 Both the Cadiz Action Plan and the Cairo Action Plan address the issue of missing migrants. Under the Rabat Process, partners committed to strengthening transregional coordination, sharing information with families in line with dataprotection rules, and improving identification efforts along migration routes. In parallel, Khartoum Process partners committed to addressing the issue of missing migrants along the migration route.

132 Rabat Process, Kick-off meeting of the Network of National Focal Points for Missing Migrants, 24 July 2025, accessed 10 March 2026, <https://www.rabat-process.org/en/activities/technical-meetings/kick-off-meeting-of-the-network-of-national-focal-points-for-missing-migrants>

policy and operational cooperation on tracing missing migrants and upholding families' rights. In 2026, missing migrants is likely to feature more prominently in regional and intercontinental dialogues as part of broader efforts to strengthen protection frameworks and promote route-based cooperation.

**Shaping migration narratives** has likewise become an explicit policy priority for the AU, to move away from a stigmatised image of migration always linked to irregularity and risk, and towards the benefits of migration, and the potential it holds for the continent. Already in 2020, the African Migration Report sought to challenge the narrative, reminding of the need to “protect the millions of people who have been forcibly displaced by conflict and disaster and create opportunities for Pan-African solidarity rather than constrain them.”<sup>133</sup> More recently, initiatives such as the AU Media Fellowship, were designed to enhance skills, promote collaboration and build media capacity to report on migration. In 2026, the programme received over 100,000 applications.<sup>134</sup> Through the AU–EU Continent-to-Continent Migration and Mobility Dialogue (C2CMMD), partners also launched the “Migration in Africa – Myths and Realities” training manual in November 2025, which was developed with IOM and experts from the African continent, targeting media practitioners and communicators in civil society organisations and NGOs, and reflecting efforts to reshaping the narrative on migration in Africa.<sup>135</sup>

133 IOM, African Migration Report: Challenging the Narrative, 2020, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://publications.iom.int/books/africa-migration-report-challenging-narrative>

134 African Union, Press Release: AU Media Fellowship Attracts Over 100,000 Applications, Advancing Pan-African Storytelling, 29 January 2026, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20260129/au-media-fellowship-attracts-over-100000-applications-advancing-pan-african>

135 ICMPD, “New tools and study launched to strengthen migration governance and advance free movement in Africa”, 21 November 2025, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://www.icmpd.org/news/new-tools-and-study-launched-to-strengthen-migration-governance-and-advance-free-movement-in-africa>

## Cooperation with the European Union under the new Pact on Migration and Asylum

Cooperation on migration between the EU and AU remains anchored in the commitments reaffirmed at the 7th AU–EU Summit that took place on 24–25 November 2025 in Luanda, which emphasised a “whole-of-government” approach to overcome the challenges and to seize the opportunities of migration. The Summit also reemphasised the commitment to deepening cooperation and dialogue on migration and mobility and reiterated the importance of existing continental and regional migration dialogue frameworks.<sup>136</sup> However, divergences in priorities persist. African stakeholders continue to emphasise development gains, remittances and regional free movement, while EU policy increasingly prioritises deterrence of irregular migration, border management and return migration. Some analysts argue that the EU’s policy response not fully acknowledges the wealth of evidence on the migration-development nexus in tackling the so-called ‘root causes of migration’, not always embedded in conceptual clarity and measurable benchmarks.<sup>137</sup>

The EU Pact on Asylum and Migration, adopted in 2024 and moving into implementation in June 2026, aims to establish common procedures for irregular arrivals, integrate asylum and return decision-making, to introduce a unified border procedure as well as a mandatory solidarity mechanism among EU member states to share responsibilities for asylum seekers and migrants.

136 Consilium Europa, Joint Declaration AU-EU Summit, 2025, accessed 27 January 2026, [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/5tdhb1f4/joint-declaration\\_au-eu-summit.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/5tdhb1f4/joint-declaration_au-eu-summit.pdf)

137 ETTG, The EU-Africa migration agenda, realising a new partnership, September 2024, accessed 28 January 2026, <https://ettg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Migrations-ETT-G-Brief-September-2024.pdf>

It also aims to strengthen the “external dimension” of EU migration policy by embedding cooperation with third countries on asylum, migration management, returns and addressing drivers of irregular migration, effectively extending EU border and migration control beyond EU territory.<sup>138,139</sup>

In January 2026, the European Commission also presented its first European Asylum and Migration Management Strategy, a five-year blueprint building on the Pact. The Strategy emphasises a “whole-of-route” approach, combining prevention of irregular migration and smuggling, stronger external borders, enhanced cooperation with international partners, improved protection pathways and expanded legal migration channels. It also integrates objectives such as stepping up migration diplomacy, reinforcing border security systems, adapting asylum procedures and supporting labour and talent mobility.<sup>140</sup> However, analyses caution that embedding labour mobility within a broader security and deterrence framework risks creating mismatched expectations between partners. Framing mobility primarily through border management and return objectives may limit its economic and developmental potential and may not fully satisfy the expectations of African governments interested in negotiating expanded labour migration opportunities.<sup>141</sup>

**Labour mobility** thus remains an area of growing, yet contested, interest. Structured labour mobility schemes and skills partnerships are expanding within EU–Africa cooperation, reflecting demographic pressures in Europe

138 European Commission, Pact on Migration and Asylum, 21 May 2024, accessed 28 January 2026, [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en)

139 ODI, The EU Africa migration agenda – driving a new migration partnership forward, 24 May 2024, accessed 28 January 2026, <https://odi.org/en/insights/the-eu-africa-migration-agenda-driving-a-new-migration-partnership-forward/>

140 European Commission, Commission presents a five-year strategy on migration, 29 January 2026, accessed 16 February 2026, [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-presents-five-year-strategy-migration-2026-01-29\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-presents-five-year-strategy-migration-2026-01-29_en)

141 ETTG, The EU-Africa migration agenda, realising a new partnership, September 2024, accessed 28 January 2026, <https://ettg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Migrations-ETT-G-Brief-September-2024.pdf>

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and employment needs in Africa.<sup>142</sup> Furthermore, OECD projections suggest that labour shortages in ageing economies will continue to shape external demand for migrant workers in 2026, even as asylum systems and return frameworks tighten. For SSA, this creates a complex environment in which intra-regional mobility remains dominant, while external labour opportunities expand selectively under increasingly managed and security-oriented frameworks.<sup>143</sup>

However, progress remains uneven not only because of differing priorities between European and African partners, but also due to fragmentation within the continent itself. While the AfCFTA has advanced rapidly, the AU FMP has seen slower ratification and limited implementation, and Regional Economic Communities (REC) vary significantly in the depth of their mobility. Limited mutual recognition frameworks, administrative capacity constraints and inconsistencies between national legislation and continental commitments further complicate progress. As a result, labour mobility cooperation, both internal and external, risks being constrained by internal misalignment, limiting the full realisation of mobility's integration and development potential.<sup>144</sup>

142 ICMPD, Innovative pathways to strengthen EU-Africa cooperation for skills mobility, 21 October 2024, accessed 28 January 2026, <https://www.icmpd.org/news/innovative-pathways-to-strengthen-eu-africa-cooperation-for-skills-mobility>

143 OECD, International Migration Outlook, 2025, accessed 19 February 2026, [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/11/international-migration-outlook-2025\\_355ae9fd/ae26c893-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/11/international-migration-outlook-2025_355ae9fd/ae26c893-en.pdf)

144 A. Bisong, ECDPM, Labour mobility as a key element of the AfCFTA: What role for the AU's Free Movement Protocol? December 2022, Accessed 29 January 2026, <https://ecdpm.org/application/files/5216/7119/6114/Labour-Mobility-Key-Element-AfCFTA-Role-AU-Free-Movement-Protocol-ECDPM-Briefing-Note-153-2022.pdf>

Comparative table: Free Movement Progress Across RECs

REC	Visa Liberalisation	REC Protocol Ratification Status	AU FMP Ratification Status
<b>AMU</b>	Limited (Some bilateral agreements)	Not applicable (No REC-wide protocol)	None of the AMU countries have signed the AU FMP
<b>CEN-SAD</b>	No community-wide implementation	Draft agreement on Free Movement and Establishment of Persons exists, but not adopted	<b>Signed:</b> Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, the Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo  <b>Ratified:</b> Mali, Niger, São Tomé and Príncipe
<b>COMESA</b>	Partial (Visa on arrival by some states)	Visa Protocol is in force, but only covers the right to entry; Free Movement Protocol signed by four and ratified by two Member States. It requires seven ratifications to enter into force.	<b>Signed:</b> The Comoros, Congo, Djibouti, Kenya, Malawi, Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe  <b>Ratified:</b> Rwanda
<b>EAC</b>	Visa-free entry for Partner States	EAC Common Market Protocol (CMP) in force since 2010, newer states implementing roadmap	<b>Signed:</b> DRC, Kenya, Uganda, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania  <b>Ratified:</b> Rwanda
<b>ECCAS</b>	Visa requirements for nationals of other Member States	Free Movement Protocol annexed to ECCAS founding treaty, however not being implemented, due to visa requirements	<b>Signed:</b> Angola, Central African Republic, Chad, DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon  <b>Ratified:</b> Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Full (Visa-free for citizens, 90 days; plans to abolish limit)	ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol in force since 1979	<b>Signed:</b> Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo
<b>IGAD</b>	No community-wide implementation	Draft protocols on Free Movement & Transhumance, but not in force	<b>Signed:</b> Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda
<b>SADC</b>	Partial (Some bilateral easing, not full)	Protocol on Facilitation of Movement ratified by seven countries (required 11 to enter into force)	<b>Signed:</b> Angola, the Comoros, DRC, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zimbabwe

Source: ICMPD Study on the Challenges and opportunities for the ratification and popularisation of the AU FMP, and lessons learned from the Regional Economic Communities, the European Unions and free movement regimes from around the world, June 2025.

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**Return and reintegration** is a key priority for the EU. In March 2025, the European Commission proposed a regulation establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals.<sup>145</sup> However this is an area of clear divergence of interest between the two continents, as readmission agreements are perceived as controversial in Africa with heavy stigmatisation and exclusion of returnees, and lack of reintegration assistance.<sup>146</sup>

While the EU has concluded legally binding readmission agreements with a number of third countries, formal EU-wide readmission treaties with African states remain limited. In practice, cooperation and exchange on return and readmission between European and African partners often takes place through non-binding arrangements, including through regional dialogue, such as the Rabat and Khartoum Processes. Sustainable reintegration has emerged as a growing policy priority across the continent, driven by significant return flows from North Africa and the Sahel over the last decade. In early 2025, the Khartoum Process convened a thematic meeting on safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration in Ethiopia, underscoring the importance of holistic reintegration approaches addressing economic, social and psychosocial dimensions.<sup>147</sup> In January 2026, Switzerland assumed the Chairmanship, signalling an interest in reintegration and development, including through a first thematic meeting scheduled in May 2026, designed to explore how reintegration programmes can contribute to local and national development and how development cooperation can, in turn, support sustainable reintegration and effective migration governance. These efforts also build on the

<sup>145</sup> European Commission, Migration: Commission proposes new European approach to returns, 11 March 2025, accessed 28 January 2026, [https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/migration-commission-proposes-new-european-approach-returns-2025-03-11\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/migration-commission-proposes-new-european-approach-returns-2025-03-11_en)

<sup>146</sup> ETTG, The EU-Africa migration agenda, realising a new partnership, September 2024, accessed 28 January 2026, <https://ettg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Migrations-ETT-G-Brief-September-2024.pdf>

<sup>147</sup> Khartoum Process, Thematic Meeting on Safe and Dignified Return & Sustainable Reintegration: A Partnership Approach to Lasting Solutions for Returnees and their Communities, 24 February 2025, accessed 23 February 2026, <https://www.khartoumprocess.net/activities/technical-meetings/khartoum-process-thematic-meeting-safe-and-dignified-return-sustainable-reintegration-a-partnership-approach-to-lasting-solutions-for-returnees-and-their-communities>

*Abuja Knowledge Paper on Sustainable Reintegration*,<sup>148</sup> a flagship Rabat Process publication developed in 2025 under the Nigerian Chairmanship, which outlines how partner countries can strengthen reintegration governance in a sustainable and development-oriented manner. For the Swiss Chairmanship, key priorities are expected to be reintegration, protection and asylum, with particular attention to missing migrants and to the protection of unaccompanied children, as well as combating migrant smuggling through a coordinated, route-based and human rights-centred approach.<sup>149</sup>

From the perspective of SSA countries, effective return policies are closely linked to the availability of sustainable reintegration support, including access to livelihoods, skills development and community-based assistance, reflecting the multidimensional approach to sustainable reintegration emphasised in international return and reintegration programming.<sup>150</sup>

In 2026, migration governance in SSA is likely to reflect a continued balancing act between protection commitments, labour mobility ambitions and intensifying external cooperation pressures. Implementation of the EU Pact and related strategies, alongside AU reform and financing efforts under Agenda 2063<sup>151</sup>, will test the institutional and financial sustainability of migration governance frameworks at continental and national levels. Progress on free movement, climate adaptation and labour mobility frameworks is expected to remain gradual, constrained by uneven implementation, administrative capacity gaps and tightening funding space.

<sup>148</sup> Rabat Process, The Abuja Knowledge Paper on Sustainable Reintegration, January 2026, accessed 26 March 2026, <https://www.rabat-process.org/en/activities/publications/the-abuja-knowledge-paper-on-sustainable-reintegration>

<sup>149</sup> ICMPD, In Focus: Switzerland assumes 2026 Chairmanship of Rabat Process, 5 February 2026, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://www.icmpd.org/news/switzerland-assumes-2026-chairmanship-of-rabat-process-to-prioritise-protection-and-asylum-tackle-human-trafficking-and-return-and-reintegration>

<sup>150</sup> IOM, Reintegration Handbook, 2022, accessed 18 March 2026, <https://reintegrationhb.iom.int/>

<sup>151</sup> African Union, 39th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union Concludes in Addis Ababa, 15 February 2026, accessed 17 February 2026, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20260215/39th-ordinary-session-assembly-african-union-concludes>

## West and Central Africa

### Labour mobility: a driving force of regional cooperation within the ECOWAS

ECOWAS adopted the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment in 1979 (Protocol A/P.1/5/79). This was followed by the formulation of several agreements and supplementary protocols aimed at fostering free movement of labour and goods within the ECOWAS geographical space. This Protocol is expected to be implemented at three different phases.<sup>152</sup> Phase one (1) related to right of entry and abolition of visa as enshrined in Article 3, which implies that member states are expected to allow free entry of citizens of member countries without visa. Whereas on the other hand, Phase two (2) and three (3) emphasize the granting of citizens of member states the right of residence and right of establishment in other ECOWAS countries that they may choose to migrate.<sup>153</sup>

In 2014, ECOWAS adopted the ENBIC to operationalize the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and secure mobility and migration governance within the ECOWAS Community. It is designed to facilitate legal cross-border movement, enhance identity verification, reduce document fraud, and promote socio-economic participation across Member States. As part of the process of accelerating the implementation of ENBIC, the ECOWAS Commission, through the Directorate of Free Movement has undertaken advocacy, sensitization and technical support to promote compliance with agreed technical specifications and standards. With Nigeria's formal implementation of ENBIC in 2025, making it the sixth ECOWAS Member State to do so, other West African countries are expected to continue the roll of ENBIC in 2026.

<sup>152</sup> UNECA, Ecowas Free Movement of Persons, accessed 16 February 2026, <https://archive.uneca.org/pages/ecowas-free-movement-persons>

<sup>153</sup> Initiative Prospective Agricole et Rurale (IPAR), Migration and regional integration policy in west Africa: Sierra Leone' case, 2022, accessed 23 February 2026, [Migration-and-regional-integration-policy-in-west-Africa-Sierra-Leone-case-Publie-le-18-fevrier-2022-.pdf](https://www.ipar.org/IMG/pdf/migration-and-regional-integration-policy-in-west-Africa-Sierra-Leone-case-Publie-le-18-fevrier-2022-.pdf)

Despite these efforts, implementation has progressed unevenly due to challenges including limited political commitments, inadequate funding and infrastructure constraints in some ECOWAS Member States. However, while six countries have deployed the ENBIC and others are at advanced stages of preparation, a more coordinated and sustained approach is required to ensure full regional rollout.

The ECOWAS Labour Migration Strategy and Action Plan (2025–2035) was validated and adopted in May 2025. It outlines the region's approach to managing migration trends and patterns. The strategy emphasizes the importance of socio-economic, political and environmental factors in migration, with a focus on intra-regional migration and economic development. It aims to address challenges such as inconsistent policy implementation and migration related risk, while also capitalizing on the benefits of labour migration for economic growth and cultural exchange. The Strategy is also designed to align with broader continental efforts, including the AU FMP and the AfCFTA.<sup>154</sup>

In 2025, the ECOWAS Regional Strategy for the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons and other Related Criminal Offences (TIP+ Strategy) was adopted: This Strategy seeks to ensure that fundamental law enforcement and social services are accessible in Member States to safeguard individuals at risk of trafficking in persons and actual victims of human trafficking, and related criminal offences including violence against persons covering vulnerable migrants, internally displaced persons and migrants on the move. It emphasizes the need to strengthen foundational protections, particularly for vulnerable groups, including women, elderly, persons with disabilities, and children, in the ECOWAS Member States. In 2025, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria started the development of their National TIP+ Strategy document. These processes will be concluded in 2026 with Guinea, The Gambia and Cabo Verde planning similar policy development process in 2026 for counter-trafficking interventions in their countries.

<sup>154</sup> ECOWAS Commission, ECOWAS Labour Migration Strategy and Action Plan (2025-2035), draft report, May 2025, accessed 23 January 2026, [https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/44767-doc-ECOWAS\\_Draft\\_Labour\\_Migration\\_Strategy.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/44767-doc-ECOWAS_Draft_Labour_Migration_Strategy.pdf)

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The Economic Community of Central Africa States (ECCAS) founding treaty of 1983 includes commitments to facilitate the free movement of citizens from ECCAS Member States. A Protocol on Free Movement and Rights of Establishment of Nationals of Member States was also included in Annex 7 of the Treaty, enumerating rights to free movement, residence and establishment, which were to be applied within 4 to 12 years of the Protocol coming into effect. However, decisions and policies undertaken by ECCAS to promote effective implementation of the Protocol have not been fully implemented.

### Legal pathways shaped by bilateral cooperation with key partners and regional dialogue

In response to the challenges of irregular migration, frequently motivated by socio-economic factors, the government of Senegal pledged to strengthen its relationships with international partners to regulate and streamline labour migration whilst promoting regular and safe alternatives. Some of the key partners are European and include Spain and France.<sup>155</sup> Since 2021, Spain and Senegal's bilateral cooperation efforts have intensified, with a particular focus on addressing joint challenges including irregular migration. Two agreements and a joint declaration on combating irregular migration have been signed during the Spanish head of government's most recent visit to Dakar in 2021.<sup>156</sup> In 2024, bilateral cooperation is strengthened on circular migration, designed to prevent irregular migration. Indeed, the « *Declaracion Conjunta entre el Reino de Espana y La Republica de Senegal* » signed on 29 August 2024, specifies the conditions for regular and structured mobility of Senegalese nationals to Spain.

155 RTS, Migration circulaire : un premier groupe d'ouvriers agricoles sénégalais s'envole pour l'Espagne, 17 March 2026, accessed 25 March 2026, <https://www.rts.sn/actualite/detail/a-la-une/migration-circulaire-un-premier-groupe-douvriers-agricoles-senegalais-senvole-pour-lespagne>

156 DECLARACIÓN CONJUNTA ENTRE EL REINO DE ESPAÑA Y LA REPÚBLICA DE SENEGAL, Dakar, 29 August 2024, accessed 26 February 2026, <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/presidente/actividades/Documents/2024/290824-Declaracion-conjunta-Espana-Senegal.pdf>

France remains one of the main European partners to have implemented robust legislation formalising and structuring labour mobility with six Western African countries. A series of bilateral agreements on labour migration govern bilateral relations between France with Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, the Republic of Congo, Gabon, and Senegal. These bilateral agreements facilitate mobility from these countries of origin to France and vary to meet the different needs of the countries of origin and those of the French market while providing special arrangements modalities as the following: exchange programmes for young professionals, multi-year residence permits, and residence permits for workers.<sup>157</sup>

This trend towards the organisation and expansion of labour migration through bilateral agreements between SSA and European countries is expected to continue in 2026, driven by labour market demand and growing policy interest in structured and mutually beneficial mobility pathways.

Labour migration also features strongly in the regional dialogue with Europe, which is structured through the Rabat Process. The dialogue is guided by the Cadiz Political Declaration and Action Plan (2023–2027),<sup>158</sup> placing a strong focus on key thematic areas such as (i) development benefits of migration and the root causes of irregular migration; (ii) regular migration and mobility; (iii) protection and asylum; (iv) irregular migration, migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings; and (v) return, readmission and reintegration. Under the Cadiz Action Plan implementation, labour mobility has emerged as one of the Dialogue's most forward-looking areas, with partner countries consistently identifying Area 2 of the Cadiz Action Plan (Regular migration and mobility) as a priority for future cooperation. While Nigerian and Swiss Chairmanships (2025-2026) focused their thematic programmes on other

157 Ministère de l'Intérieur, Direction générale des étrangers en France, Les accords bilatéraux relatifs à la mobilité professionnelle, 30 July 2025, accessed 26 February 2026, <https://www.immigration.interieur.gouv.fr/Immigration/Les-accords-bilateraux/Les-accords-bilateraux-relatifs-a-la-mobilite-professionnelle>

158 Rabat Process, Cadiz Political Declaration and Action Plan, accessed 19 February 2026, <https://www.rabat-process.org/en/about/cadiz-action-plan>

priorities, labour mobility remains central for partner countries and is expected to continue shaping the Dialogue’s forward agenda in the coming years.

## East and Horn of Africa

### Cooperation to address irregular migration

Irregular migration continues to be a major challenge across the East and Horn of Africa. It is driven by insecurity, conflict, and the search for better living conditions and livelihood opportunities. Despite the risks migrants encounter along irregular routes, thousands of people continue to embark on these journeys<sup>159</sup> each year, indicating the persistence of strong structural drivers and limited access to safe and regular migration pathways.

IOM DTM data indicate that in 2024 approximately 446,200 movements were tracked along the Eastern Route, the most used route in the region.<sup>160</sup> In the first three quarters of 2025, 351,000 movements were recorded, compared with 283,100 during the same period in 2024, representing an increase of roughly 24%. Mortality indicators remain high, with 890 deaths or missing persons reported in the first nine months of 2025 alone.<sup>161</sup> These data underscore both the scale and the danger of irregular transit flows.

In 2025, policy developments to address irregular migration have been shaped largely by stricter enforcement of national entry and asylum rules in the region rather than the development of new frameworks.

159 IOM, A Region on the Move 2023–2024: East, Horn and Southern Africa, 2025, accessed 10 January 2026, [dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/iom\\_nairobi\\_aregionon-themove2024\\_ch3excluded\\_print\\_draft1.pdf?iframe=true](https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/iom_nairobi_aregionon-themove2024_ch3excluded_print_draft1.pdf?iframe=true)

160 IOM, 2025. A Region on the Move 2023–2024: East, Horn and Southern Africa, 2025, accessed 10 January 2026, [dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/iom\\_nairobi\\_aregionon-themove2024\\_ch3excluded\\_print\\_draft1.pdf?iframe=true](https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/iom_nairobi_aregionon-themove2024_ch3excluded_print_draft1.pdf?iframe=true)

161 IOM, Displacement Tracking Matrix, Migration along the Eastern Route (January–September 2025), 19 December 2025, accessed 10 January 2026 [https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/Q3\\_2025\\_RDH\\_Nairobi\\_Eastern\\_Route\\_Report.pdf?iframe=true&utm](https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/Q3_2025_RDH_Nairobi_Eastern_Route_Report.pdf?iframe=true&utm)

Rising displacement levels<sup>162</sup> also prompted strengthened border controls and tighter asylum procedures. However, continuing instability coupled with tightened policies across the region may lead to increased reliance on irregular routes and smuggling networks. In response to this growing pressure, cooperation among countries in the East and Horn of Africa places a particular importance on addressing the root causes of irregular migration, combat smuggling and trafficking networks, and expand access to regular migration options.

In 2025, regional efforts to counter human trafficking and smuggling of migrants continued to advance. For example, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) supported bilateral cooperation between Ethiopia and Uganda to strengthen joint action against trafficking, smuggling, and related transnational crime.<sup>163</sup> The “Better Migration Management (BMM)” programme facilitated a regional multi-agency forum in Nairobi, bringing together representatives from Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti to strengthen cooperation on implementing SOPs for Investigating and Prosecuting Trafficking in Persons (TiP) and Smuggling of Migrants (SoM). The forum reinforced participating countries’ commitment to harmonised investigations and more coordinated crossborder action against trafficking and smuggling.<sup>164</sup> Meanwhile, the East and Horn of Africa Anti-Trafficking (EHAAT) Network, which unites over 100 civil society organisations continued its efforts to protect

162 Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Africa’s Conflicts Compound Forced Displacement, 22 September 2025, accessed 22 February 2026, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/africa-conflicts-compound-forced-displacement/ps/africacenter.org/spotlight/africa-conflicts-compound-forced-displacement/>

163 IGAD, Ethiopia–Uganda Bilateral Workshop Advances Joint Action Against Human Trafficking and Smuggling, accessed 22 February 2026, <https://igad.int/ethiopia-uganda-bilateral-workshop-advances-joint-action-against-human-trafficking-and-smuggling/>

164 CIVIPOL, Strengthening Regional Cooperation through SOPs: Regional Forum in Nairobi Builds Momentum for Cross-Border Collaboration, 4 June 2025, accessed 22 February 2026, <https://www.civipol.fr/fr/news/strengthening-regional-cooperation-through-sops-regional-forum-nairobi-builds-momentum-cross>

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migrants and survivors of human trafficking across the region.<sup>165</sup> These initiatives signify the continuous institutional coordination and multi-actor engagement in addressing irregular migration.

These initiatives are closely aligned with the objectives of the Khartoum Process, which continues to serve as a key inter-regional dialogue platform linking countries of origin, transit and destination along the East and Horn of Africa migration routes, with a focus on addressing irregular migration, strengthening protection frameworks and enhancing cooperation along the route. In November 2025, the Joint Thematic Meeting of the Rabat, Khartoum, and Niamey Processes reaffirmed the shared responsibility of African and European partners to strengthen prevention, protection, and prosecution efforts.<sup>166</sup> This recognition highlights the continued importance of inter-regional cooperation in responding to irregular migration, a trend that is expected to continue in 2026 as well.

### Strengthening migration governance: the pivotal role of the RECs (Regional Economic Communities)

A considerable share of population movements in Africa occurs within the continent. Estimates indicate that over 31 million Africans live outside their country of birth globally, out of which 21 million live in another African country. Migration is predominantly intra-continental: only around 25% of African migrants move to Europe, while most continue to reside within the African continent.<sup>167</sup>

165 Freedom Collaborative, Ethiopia Hotline for Human Trafficking (EHAAT), accessed 22 February 2026, <https://www.freedomcollaborative.org/ehaat>

166 Rabat Process, Joint Thematic Meeting of the Rabat, Khartoum and Niamey Processes, 17 December 2025, accessed 22 February 2026, <https://www.rabat-process.org/en/activities/technical-meetings/joint-thematic-meeting-of-the-rabat-khartoum-and-niamey-processes>

167 United Nations. "Migration Dynamics, Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Africa, accessed 16 February 2026," <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/migration-dynamics-refugees-and-internally-displaced-persons-africa>

The drivers of this mobility are varied and include security concerns, environmental pressures and economic disparities. Among these causes, labour-related mobility remains particularly significant, for example, countries such as Somalia and Djibouti recorded some of the lowest employment rates of the region, respectively 27.5% of the working population over 15 years for Somalia of age and 23.7% for Djibouti.<sup>168</sup>

IGAD, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), EAC and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) cover a large majority of in East, Horn and Southern Africa (EHSA) and play a growing role in facilitating and regulating mobility along key intra-regional labour corridors<sup>169</sup>. The formal basis for cross-border movement is shaped by the legal and policy frameworks of these RECs, together with the partial implementation of free movement arrangements and emerging labour mobility initiatives. The DESA Migrant Stock data of 2024 shows that migration in the EHSA region is strongly shaped by membership in RECs and regional mobility frameworks. In the EHSA region EAC and SADC record the largest intra-REC movements, with approximately 4.6 million and 3.6 million migrants respectively. Cross-REC flows are even more significant, particularly between EAC–COMESA (5.1 million) and IGAD–EAC (3.9 million), while IGAD shows the highest outflows to external destinations (4.7 million). Although COMESA has fewer intra-REC movements within EHSA (2.7 million), it plays a key connecting role across major corridors, notably COMESA–SADC (3.1 million) and COMESA–EAC (3 million). Overall, these patterns noted in 2024 underscore the importance of coordinated governance along RECs.<sup>170</sup>

168 Joint Research Centre, Atlas of Migration 2025, accessed 26 February, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/350468d3-df7e-11f0-8439-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

169 IOM, A Region on the Move 2023–2024: East, Horn and Southern Africa, 2025, accessed 10 January 2026, [dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/iom\\_nairobi\\_aregionon-themove2024\\_ch3excluded\\_print\\_draft1.pdf?iframe=true](https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/iom_nairobi_aregionon-themove2024_ch3excluded_print_draft1.pdf?iframe=true)

170 IOM, A Region on the Move 2023–2024: East, Horn and Southern Africa, 2025, accessed 10 January 2026, [dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/iom\\_nairobi\\_aregionon-themove2024\\_ch3excluded\\_print\\_draft1.pdf?iframe=true](https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/iom_nairobi_aregionon-themove2024_ch3excluded_print_draft1.pdf?iframe=true)

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Within this context, regional initiatives such as IGAD's Free Movement of Persons Protocol and SADC's labour migration frameworks support both circular and longer-term labour mobility. The third IGAD Ministerial Conference on Labour, Employment and Labour Migration in October 2025 emphasised the importance of strengthened regional cooperation and coordination towards labour migration governance.<sup>171</sup> Similarly, the EAC, with the support of the International Labour Organisation through the Better Regional Migration Management programme, is working to strengthen labour migration governance and skills recognition.<sup>172</sup>

Efforts at the continental level are seeking to find alignment with regional dynamics, including through initiatives such as the AU FMP and the Joint Labour Migration Programme. Challenges related to the ratification of the AU FMP continue to feature on the AU's agenda, including at the 5th Ordinary Session of the Specialised Technical Committee on Migration in November 2025.<sup>173</sup> These developments are further supported by frameworks such as the AfCFTA, which is expected to facilitate mobility, enhance skills recognition, and strengthen cross-border collaboration.

### Legal Pathways: a cooperative approach strengthened by strategic bilateral agreements and regional dialogue

Labor mobility challenges are not limited to efforts within the region alone. In fact, since 2024, the EU-funded research project Linked4Skills<sup>174</sup> supported the

171 IGAD, Ministerial Communiqué for the 3rd IGAD Ministerial Conference on Labour, Employment and Labour Migration, 2025, accessed 22 February 2026, <https://igad.int/ministerial-communique-for-the-3rd-igad-ministerial-conference-on-labour-employment-and-labour-migration/>

172 ILO, The East African Community Advances towards Regional Frameworks in Social Protection and Skills Mobility, 23 June 2025, accessed 20 January 2026, <https://www.ilo.org/about/newsroom/east-african-community-advances-towards-regional-frameworks-social>

173 African Union, 5th Ordinary Session of the Specialized Technical Committee on Migration, Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, accessed 22 February 2026, <https://au.int/pt/node/45599>

174 Linked4Skills, Human Resource Inventory in Health, STEAM, and Construction in Seven Origin Countries, Working Paper 4/2025, 14 January 2025, accessed 15 March 2026, [https://link4skills.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/NEW\\_HR-Inventory-at-origins\\_NOV25.pdf](https://link4skills.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/NEW_HR-Inventory-at-origins_NOV25.pdf)

development of several Migration Skills Corridors' connecting specific countries of origin to European labour markets. Whilst this initiative does not target any specific country in the region, in 2025, the promotion of legal pathways to migration became a central focus of cooperation between Eastern African and European partners resulting in strategic bilateral partnerships.

Although Ethiopia<sup>175</sup> has also initiated its cooperation on this matter with Italy, Kenya remains the country in the region most active in forging robust partnerships with several European countries. Kenya's unemployment rate remains relatively low in comparison with other countries in the region, rising to 5.4% of the working population in 2025<sup>176</sup>. However, the proportion of young people - aged between 15 to 24 years old - continued to record the highest proportion of the unemployed<sup>177</sup>, which fluctuates at 15% in 2025 according to the World Bank<sup>178</sup>; although local sources may indicate a higher rate. Furthermore, it should be noted that the local economy remains largely supported by informal employment as stated in the recent Economic Survey of the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (83.6% in 2024)<sup>179</sup>.

175 October 27, 2025, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies of the Italian Republic, on the one hand, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Skills and Labour of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, on the other hand. This MoU aims at offering regular and safe alternatives to irregular migration routes to come to Italy for work purposes. Ministro del Lavoro et delle Politiche Sociali, Italia-Etiopia, firmato il Memorandum d'Intesa su Migrazione e Mobilità, 11 November 2025, accessed 26 February 2026, <https://integrazionemigranti.gov.it/it-it/Ricerca-news/Dettaglio-news/id/4492/Italia-Etiopia-firmato-il-Memorandum-dIntesa-su-Migrazione-e-Mobilita->

176 World Bank Group, Unemployment total, 2025, accessed 26 February 2026, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=KE>

177 Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Kenya, National Skills Development Policy, 2023, accessed 26 February 2026, [https://labour.go.ke/sites/default/files/2024-09/Kenya%20-%20National%20Skills%20Development%20Policy%202023\\_0.pdf](https://labour.go.ke/sites/default/files/2024-09/Kenya%20-%20National%20Skills%20Development%20Policy%202023_0.pdf)

178 World Bank Group, Unemployment, youth total (% of the total labour force ages 15-24), 2025, accessed 26 February 2026, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=KE>

179 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, Popular version, Economic Survey 2025, accessed 26 February 2026, <https://www.knbs.or.ke/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/2025-Economic-Survey-Popular-Version.pdf>

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In response to these challenges, the Kenyan government has recently concluded a number of labour migration agreements with key partners, ensuring that skills development is integrated into these agreements.

**Austria – Kenya:** In September 2024, a Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Kenya and the Government of the Republic of Austria on cooperation in the field of mobility and migration has been signed on “Skills alignment: Design and tailor education and training programs in Kenya to match Austria’s labour market demands”.<sup>180</sup>

**Denmark – Kenya:** defined by the 2021–2025 strategic framework, the cooperation between Kenya and Denmark is based on three pillars of which the first is the most relevant “Green, sustainable, and inclusive growth,” as it focuses on promoting “sustainable and inclusive economic growth and decent jobs with an emphasis on youth, as well as market opportunities for Danish companies and investors with relevant solutions.”<sup>181</sup> Their cooperation also strengthened around a Strategic Sector Cooperation, which provides an opportunity to enhance the transfer of skills, expertise, and knowledge between Danish and Kenyan partners.<sup>182,183</sup>

180 Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Kenya, Skills Gap Report, A rapid assessment of the Skills Development Priorities in the Global Labour Market, March 2025, accessed 26 February 2026, [Skills Gap Report - A Rapid Assessment of Skills Development Priorities in the Global Labour Market \(1\).pdf](#)

181 The Second Pillar focuses on “Democratic governance, human rights and equitable access to services, while the Third Pillar revolves around “Resilience, peace and stability”.

182 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Strategic Sector Cooperation, accessed 25 February 2026, <https://kenya.um.dk/en/about-denmark-in-kenya/sector-cooperation>

183 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Strategic Framework Denmark- Kenya Partnership 2021-2025, accessed 25 February 2026, <https://um.dk/media/ut3n5st0/strategic-framework-kenya.pdf>

In January 2025, this strategic partnership focused on maritime education and training with the launch of phase 1 of the 2025–2027 maritime cooperation between the two countries.<sup>184</sup>

**Germany – Kenya:** a partnership on migration and mobility for structured cooperation on labour mobility was further developed in 2025. Indeed, a joint implementation committee between the two countries was established to oversee practical avenues for cooperation, including: structuring employment and training pathways for Kenyan workers in Germany, skills development and matching job supply and demand, and supporting direct engagement between job seekers and German companies.<sup>185</sup>

Reinforcing the EU-African cooperation on skills mobility and legal pathways resulted in high-level engagement in 2024 and in 2025. Back in 2024, the Rabat Process and the Khartoum Process - held a joint thematic meeting on innovative pathways to reinforce EU-Africa cooperation for skills mobility in Lisbon.<sup>186</sup> Among the key takeaways, “fostering partnerships to create opportunities for youth and migrants, addressing Africa’s youth unemployment and Europe’s labour shortages while promoting the exchange of skills, ideas, and cultures for mutual benefit” was emphasized as it appears as a strategic domain for strengthened cooperation.

184 Danish Maritime Authority, The maritime sector cooperation with Kenya, accessed 25 February 2026, <https://www.dma.dk/growth-and-framework-conditions/strategic-sector-cooperation/sector-cooperation-with-kenya>

185 Kenyan Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Kenya and Germany hold inaugural joint committee meeting on Migration and Mobility Partnership, 27 August 2025, accessed 25 February 2026, <https://www.labour.go.ke/kenya-and-germany-hold-inaugural-joint-committee-meeting-migration-and-mobility-partnership>

186 ICMPD, Innovative pathways to strengthen EU-Africa cooperation for skills mobility, 21 October 2024, accessed 23 February 2026, <https://www.icmpd.org/news/innovative-pathways-to-strengthen-eu-africa-cooperation-for-skills-mobility>

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In December 2025, the Khartoum Process organised a thematic meeting on legal pathways: “from Policy to Practice: Advancing Legal Pathways for Migrants, with a Focus on Women and Youth held in Aswan (Egypt)”.<sup>187</sup> Built around Domain 2 of its Cairo Action Plan<sup>188</sup>, this meeting’s main goal was to promote regular migration and mobility, especially for women and youth, through strengthened skills development, matching, and recognition systems. The key recommendations that emerged from this high-level discussion include: i) advancing interoperable, skills- and learning-outcomes-based recognition systems, including Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL); ii) integrating gender- and youth-responsive safeguards across all legal mobility pathways; iii) tailoring communication strategies especially for women and youth, leveraging trusted intermediaries in particular for digital outreach.

Against this background, joint efforts to address irregular migration can be expected to gain further importance and additional momentum in 2026, as structural drivers of displacement and mobility remain significant. While stricter border controls and tighter asylum procedures introduced in recent years may disrupt certain corridors, they are more likely to redirect flows than substantially reduce them. Regional cooperation on counter-smuggling and returns is expected to intensify; however, without expanded legal migration pathways and improved livelihood opportunities, the underlying drivers of irregular movement are likely to persist.

In 2026, the RECs are likely to continue serving as the backbone of labour mobility in Africa, functioning as key migration routes that structure intra-regional movements, that are shaped by labour demand, geographic proximity, and long-standing mobility networks. Regional and continental

policy frameworks will further regulate and facilitate cross-border mobility within and between these corridors. Given the ongoing efforts in 2025 and the strengthening of the coordination with RECs within the African Union Commission, the facilitation of free movement across RECs is expected to remain a central agenda item in 2026. Moreover, African and European stakeholders’ interests and efforts to improve labour migration governance in 2025 suggest that labour mobility and legal pathways will remain a priority area for migration policy development in 2026.

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<sup>187</sup> Khartoum Process, Thematic Meeting – From Policy to Practice: Advancing Legal Pathways for Migrants, with a Focus on Women and Youth, 19 December 2025, accessed 23 February 2026, <https://www.khartoumprocess.net/activities/technical-meetings/thematic-meeting-from-policy-to-practice-advancing-legal-pathways>

<sup>188</sup> Domain 2: “Promote regular migration and mobility, in particular of young people and women”, Khartoum Process, Cairo Action Plan, April 2025, accessed 17 February 2026, <https://www.khartoumprocess.net/resources>

**Conclusions**

## Conclusions

Migration dynamics across SSA in 2026 are expected to remain structurally significant, predominantly intra-regional and closely intertwined with broader political, demographic and environmental developments. Protracted conflicts, particularly in Sudan and the Horn of Africa, the DRC and parts of the Sahel, and are likely to continue driving large-scale internal displacement and cross-border movements. Climate variability and environmental stress are expected to compound existing vulnerabilities, reinforcing displacement pressures and shaping internal mobility patterns in fragile contexts.

At the same time, humanitarian funding constraints may test the resilience of refugee-hosting countries and national protection systems. While several countries maintain progressive legal and policy frameworks, implementation capacity may remain uneven in the absence of predictable financial support. Under such conditions, socio-economic pressures in host communities could intensify, and the risk of secondary movements within and beyond the region may increase.

Externally, not least based on the deepened cooperation between SSA countries and the EU in recent years, migration governance in the region is also likely to be shaped by the operationalisation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which fully applies in June 2026, and related cooperation areas, particularly in areas such as border management, return and readmission, and anti-smuggling efforts. However, divergencies in policy priorities will persist and will continue to influence the tone and direction of inter-regional and inter-continental dialogue, including differing emphases on containment, legal pathways and development-oriented mobility.

This outlook however also highlights that migration across SSA is not only defined by crisis. The majority of movements remain intra-continental and closely linked to labour markets, trade corridors and regional integration processes. RECs, alongside continental frameworks such as the AfCFTA and the AU FMP, provide institutional foundations for more structured labour

mobility governance, and consequently for socio-economic integration on the continent. The degree to which these frameworks are operationalised will influence whether mobility in 2026 will function primarily as a coping mechanism or increasingly as a driver of integration and resilience.

The effectiveness of migration governance in 2026 will depend not only on managing risks, but also on the ability of national, regional and inter-regional actors to pursue coordinated and forward-looking partnerships that recognise mobility as a structural feature of the continent. Strengthening policy coherence across humanitarian, development and economic domains - alongside security considerations - will be essential to moving beyond reactive or deterrence-oriented approaches. Ensuring that measures adopted along migration routes are aligned, development-sensitive and grounded in regional cooperation frameworks will be central to shaping more sustainable and mutually beneficial mobility outcomes in the year ahead.

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