

# Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Africa–EU Partnership on Migration and Mobility: A Developmental Perspective from West Africa

by Aderanti Adepaju

## ABSTRACT

The far-ranging effects of COVID-19, and subsequent impacts on migration drivers, trends and governance, have already produced significant implications for the Africa–EU partnership on migration and mobility. The socio-economic consequences of the pandemic have been particularly deep in West Africa, with Nigeria being one of the most affected countries. The region is also one of the most relevant African contexts in terms of cross-border human mobility, with well-established migratory patterns both at a regional and inter-regional level. As COVID-19-induced restrictions and the related economic consequences continue to unfold, the partnership between the EU and the countries in Western Africa will have to recalibrate the balance between improving the livelihoods of local populations, fighting irregular migration and facilitating regular channels, so as to tap into the developmental potential of migration. While the current crisis presents new challenges for both Africa and Europe, the two parties would benefit from focusing their efforts on making migration part of the post-pandemic economic recovery and longer-term socioeconomic development.

*European Union | West Africa | Migration | Refugees | Coronavirus*

**keywords**

# Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Africa–EU Partnership on Migration and Mobility: A Developmental Perspective from West Africa

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## Introduction

The partnership between Africa and the European Union on migration and mobility has accrued a growing relevance, as migratory trends continue to connect the two regions and the need to align the efforts of origin, transit and destination countries for effective migration governance is increasingly acknowledged on both sides. While the two parties converge in broad principles, such as fostering the developmental benefits of migration or addressing the risks entailed in irregular migration, African and European perspectives also diverge on a range of migration-related issues, hindering the efforts put in place so far to develop a comprehensive and balanced partnership. Furthermore, each African region displays different migration and mobility patterns, in both intra-regional and inter-regional terms. West Africa presents a number of significant peculiarities: it is more integrated than other African regions, counting on a free circulation regime and established informal mobility patterns across national borders; Nigeria, one of the prominent African economic hubs, plays a key role in migratory movement both within and out of the region; and, finally, West Africa is one of the main contexts of origin for migration towards Europe.

High rates of youth unemployment have long been identified as one of the key drivers of migration (regular and irregular) from Nigeria, and indeed from Africa.<sup>1</sup> In many cases, strict visa regimes and limited regular migration opportunities seem to have fuelled the increase in the incidence of irregular migration – sometimes

<sup>1</sup> Aderanti Adepaju and Arie van der Wiel, *Seeking Greener Pastures Abroad. A Migration Profile of Nigeria*, Ibadan, Safari Books Ltd., 2010.

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under the impression that potential migrants would easily get jobs and citizenship in destination countries. Furthermore, displacements due to conflicts and natural disasters have resulted in an increasing number of youth seeking asylum in Europe and North America. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions and the limitation of human mobility across the world, would therefore bear significant implications for the drivers, trends and governance of migration within West Africa, on the African continent as well as between Africa and Europe.

Countries in West Africa have suffered from the heavy socioeconomic impact of COVID-19. Nigeria has been especially hard hit: the challenges posed to the economy by measures implemented to limit the spread of the virus during 2020 have been coupled with the crisis of the key oil sector. The informal sector, which accounts for a large share of Nigerian economic output and employment, has also been severely affected. As the analysis in the following pages on the effects of COVID-19 on public health and socioeconomic conditions shows, the pandemic has once more underlined the close links between migration and development. On the one hand, the reduction in migrant remittances has highlighted the benefits of migration for contexts of origin, while the realisation – or rather, the acknowledgment – of the key role played by migrant workers in essential sectors such as food production and distribution or care work has revealed the benefits of migration for societies and economies in destination countries. On the other hand, the strongly felt economic impact of the pandemic has led to deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in many countries in Africa, with significant implications for drivers of migration. At the same time, sustained relevance of irregular migration channels and migrant smuggling in a context marked by COVID-19-induced movement restrictions has pointed out the limitations of policy approaches mainly oriented at reinforced borders, while underlining the risks, dangers and vulnerabilities involved in irregular forms of migration.

The pandemic is thus poised to broadly affect (current and future) migration drivers and trends in West Africa and Nigeria. The dialogue with the EU for a new – and more balanced – migration and mobility partnership will be influenced as well. In the upcoming period, the Africa–EU migration cooperation agenda would therefore need to take into consideration the impact of the pandemic on both origin and destination contexts as well as the implications deriving from such impact for migration drivers, trends and governance. Inward-looking and short-term approaches might prevail in a context of crisis. However, this paper argues that Africa and Europe, as two regions closely connected through migration and many other issues of common concern, should avoid falling into the trap of allowing the new challenges brought by the altered socioeconomic and migratory context to feed into further divergence. Efforts should instead focus on finding compromise so as to make migration part of the post-pandemic economic recovery and longer-term socioeconomic development in both regions.

## 1. Policy priorities and approaches governing the Africa–EU partnership on migration and mobility

As a phenomenon spanning across borders and geographies, migration has social, political and financial effects on destination, transit and origin countries, while linking these different contexts to one another through various degrees of interdependency. To align the efforts of all players, cooperation between destination, transit and origin countries has become an important component of migration management. Cooperation between the European Union and African countries has been no exception in this regard, with policy dialogues and partnership frameworks on migration and mobility at the bilateral and inter-regional level proliferating in the last two decades. The second half of the 2010s has seen the issue area acquire an increasingly central place within the broader EU–Africa partnership agenda, mainly driven by the EU’s further prioritisation of cooperation with countries of origin and transit in Africa oriented at stemming irregular migration flows. Migration and mobility thus form an important part also of the EU’s 2020 comprehensive strategy with Africa that outlines the key areas in which the bloc aims to deepen its partnership with Africa in the upcoming period.<sup>2</sup> Besides migration and mobility, the strategy includes four other partnership areas, namely, green transition and energy access; digital transformation; sustainable growth and jobs; and peace and governance.

As far as intercontinental migratory movement is concerned, African countries are typically regarded as countries of origin, and EU member states are considered destination countries, while a mix of African and European countries act as transit countries. Therefore, Africa–EU relations in this policy area have conventionally focused both on the facilitation of regular migration and on the restriction of irregular migration, mostly out of Africa towards Europe. Nonetheless, the latter aspect has so far been the main priority for the EU and has largely dominated the overall cooperation agenda in practice.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in its engagement with countries in Africa, the EU has been increasingly connecting cooperation in the realm of irregular migration, including on border control, return and readmission, with measures on regular migration and mobility. For example, in response to what was considered Nigeria’s lax attitude towards European migration policies, particularly with regard to the return and readmission of Nigerians staying irregularly in European countries, the EU announced pending procedural changes that would mean stricter visa regimes for nationals of Nigeria.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, *Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa* (JOIN/2020/4), 9 March 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0004>.

<sup>3</sup> Tsion Tadesse Abebe, “Migration Policy Frameworks in Africa”, in *ISS Africa Reports*, No. 2 (December 2017), <https://issafrica.org/research/africa-report/migration-policy-frameworks-in-africa>.

<sup>4</sup> “EU Plans to Impose Visa Restrictions on Nigerians”, in *SchengenVisaInfo News*, 21 February 2020, <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/?p=10180>.

Seen from the lens of the EU, the trajectory of policy considerations on migration is clear: European countries seek to control the inflow of migrants and rely on African countries to limit the outflow from their own territories. Consequently, European countries have hitherto adopted a two-pronged approach to further their migration goals in the framework of EU-Africa relations: on the one hand, funding voluntary returns, for example through voluntary return programmes run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM),<sup>5</sup> and limiting the admission of asylum seekers from Africa into EU territory, while on the other hand providing financial and technical support to refugee-hosting countries in Africa. And while mentions of developing regular migration channels have resurfaced in the 2020 EU Pact on Migration and Asylum,<sup>6</sup> in practice those remain on a small scale in terms of ambitions and scope. For instance, some EU countries primarily offer permits to highly skilled migrants with very few regular channels available for those in the low-skill categories. Such policy choices are adopted despite the fact that African migration can have immense mutual benefits, depending on how host countries govern migrants' access to labour markets and their ease of integration into local communities.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, while EU development assistance aims at addressing migration drivers in Africa so as to deter migration, it has been shown that development shapes income, education, aspirations and demographic structure in ways that encourage emigration.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Europe should look beyond deterrence as a means to reducing irregular migration flows from Africa.

African countries, on the other hand, have felt the positive impact of migration and the contribution of intra-continental human mobility to development. Thus, the crux of African policies has been tied to harnessing migration and mobility for the advancement of citizen wellbeing and the development of national (and regional) economies. As an example, the African Union's (AU's) Migration Policy Framework for Africa is focused, amongst other things, on the importance of boosting the benefits of migration for development, without neglecting to include irregular migration – an issue highly prioritised by the EU – among its key focus areas.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> One such programme is, for example, the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrants Protection and Reintegration. See, European Commission, *Towards Sustainable Reintegration: EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration Three Years On*, 20 December 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/all-news-and-stories/towards-sustainable-reintegration-eu-iom-joint-initiative-migrant-protection\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/all-news-and-stories/towards-sustainable-reintegration-eu-iom-joint-initiative-migrant-protection_en).

<sup>6</sup> European Commission, *A New Pact on Migration and Asylum* (COM/2020/609), 23 September 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0609>.

<sup>7</sup> Masood Ahmed and Kate Gough, "African Migration to Europe Is Not a Crisis. It's an Opportunity", in *CGD Commentary & Analysis*, 12 February 2018, <https://www.cgdev.org/node/3126231>.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Clemens and Hannah Postel, "Deterring Emigration with Foreign Aid: An Overview of Evidence from Low-Income Countries", in *CGD Policy Papers*, No. 119 (February 2018), <https://www.cgdev.org/node/3126142>.

<sup>9</sup> African Union, *Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018–2030)*, May 2018, [https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/35956-doc-2018\\_mpfa\\_english\\_version.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/35956-doc-2018_mpfa_english_version.pdf).

The development-oriented approach adopted in the AU Migration Policy Framework draws on the observation that migration and mobility, especially when regulated and managed well, have the potential to generate benefits for both origin and destination countries. Some examples from the Nigerian context can be given to confirm this point: the Central Bank of Nigeria reports that in 2019 Nigerians spent an estimated 9.01 billion US dollars on personal travel allowances, covering expenses for various purposes including education, tourism and health.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, remittances from Africans, including Nigerians, account for a significant share of economic resources supporting development in home countries, and records show that remittance inflows have frequently surpassed official development assistance in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>11</sup>

While development can be considered as the fil rouge that connects the different dimensions of migration governance, the AU's Migration Policy Framework adopts a comprehensive approach built on eight key pillars: migration governance; labour migration and education; diaspora engagement; border governance; irregular migration; forced displacement; internal migration; and migration and trade.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it can be said that the AU and African countries have attempted to focus on the positive outcomes that are mutually beneficial for origin and destination countries without neglecting the risks and dangers involved in irregular forms of migration and forced displacement situations.

Cooperation between the EU and Africa on migration has thus had to find common ground between the interests of countries of destination in Europe and those of origin in Africa. The overall partnership agenda is composed of different aspects of migration governance, such as the development of regular pathways for migration and short-term mobility, the monitoring of irregular channels and providing responses to forced displacement situations, as well as promoting development through migration, for instance by facilitating regular migration and advancing productive reintegration programmes for returnees. There are significant points of convergence particularly in terms of broad principles, such as on the need for boosting the developmental benefits of migration or for addressing the risks entailed in irregular migration, which provides room for enhanced dialogue and deepened collaboration. However, policy priorities of European and African actors also show divergence when it comes to such aspects of cooperation as the expansion of regular pathways or return and readmission, requiring effort for striking a – sometimes delicate – balance between the interests and approaches prioritised by each party.

<sup>10</sup> Central Bank of Nigeria, *Annual Report 2019, 2020*, <https://www.cbn.gov.ng/Out/2020/RSD/CBN%202019%20ANNUAL%20REPORT-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> World Bank, "COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens", in *Migration and Development Briefs*, No. 32 (April 2020), p. 7, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/33634>.

<sup>12</sup> African Union, *Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018–2030)*, cit.

The EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum endorses, among other objectives, "comprehensive governance at EU level for better management and implementation of asylum and migration policies", "mutually beneficial partnerships with key third countries of origin and transit" and "developing sustainable legal pathways for those in need of protection and to attract talent to the EU".<sup>13</sup> These segments of the Pact can be read both as an effort to control irregular movements and, at the same time, to promote legal channels of migration and mobility so as to improve development conditions in contexts of origin and destination, relying on cooperation with third states towards those ends. The comprehensive approach to migration governance promoted by the Pact and the explicit emphasis the document places on the importance for international partnerships to yield mutual benefits could therefore potentially broaden common ground on which closer engagement between Africa and the EU could be built. Yet, how and to what extent these policy (and partnership) objectives would be put into practice remains to be seen.

## 2. The impact of COVID-19 on Nigeria and West Africa

West Africa – and Nigeria in particular – has felt the effects of COVID-19 both in terms of health and from a socioeconomic point of view. Economic repercussions have been exacerbated by the anti-contagion measures, such as mobility restrictions, lockdowns and border closures. Travel restrictions and the lockdown introduced by the federal government in Nigeria have hit such key economic sectors as tourism and the travel industry, while the informal sector has been struggling to cope with the new economic conditions. Furthermore, the crucial oil sector has been battered by the drop in oil prices during the first months of the pandemic.

The effects on both socioeconomic conditions and cross-border human mobility have a significant bearing on patterns and drivers of migration. This section examines the health effects, provides a brief overview of the measures introduced to contain the spread of the virus, and analyses the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on West Africa and Nigeria in particular, before examining the implications of these developments for migration within and from the region.

### 2.1 Health-related effects

On 14 February 2020, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Africa was recorded in Egypt. Ten days later, the first confirmed case in sub-Saharan Africa was reported, when an Italian contractor who flew into the commercial city of Lagos, Nigeria, from Milan via Istanbul, tested positive for the virus, illustrating the high degree of interdependence between countries and regions in a context of global

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, *A New Pact on Migration and Asylum*, cit., p. 2.

connectivity.

By the end of May 2020, all 54 countries on the African continent had confirmed COVID-19 cases and the number of confirmed infections had reached over 1.1 million. Nonetheless, after more than a year since the detection of the first case, the records of confirmed cases and deaths from COVID-19 in many African countries remain much lower than in many other parts of the world, particularly Europe and the Americas. As of 15 June 2021, almost 5 million cases and over 130,000 related deaths have been reported in the African continent since the beginning of the health crisis. The transmission of the virus in Europe and America has been much more pronounced, with over 53 million and 69 million cases respectively.<sup>14</sup>

**Table 1** | Incidence of COVID-19 in West Africa, June 2021

Country	Population (est.)	Number of total COVID-19 cases	Number of deaths
Nigeria	206,139,589	167,292	2,118
Senegal	16,743,927	42,437	1,158
Ghana	31,072,940	95,059	794
Côte d'Ivoire	26,378,274	48,047	308
Gambia	2,416,668	6,045	181
Liberia	5,057,681	3,109	99
Sierra Leone	7,976,983	4,879	82
Niger	24,206,644	5,469	193
Burkina Faso	20,903,273	13,469	167
Guinea	13,132,795	23,535	168
Benin	12,123,200	8,140	103
Guinea-Bissau	1,968,001	3,825	69
Togo	8,278,724	13,731	128
Cape Verde	549,935	32,039	283
Mali	19,660,000	14,385	524

Source: Compiled by author from Google News, *Coronavirus (COVID-19)*, data as of 22 June 2021, <https://news.google.com/covid19/map?hl=en-NG&gl=NG&ceid=NG%3Aen>.

West African countries do not appear among the worst impacted in the continent in terms of the number of detected cases (the top five being South Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, Ethiopia and Egypt).<sup>15</sup> Although Nigeria recorded a significant number of cases compared with other countries in West Africa (also considering each country's total population), at the continental scale, Nigeria's reported death rate

<sup>14</sup> European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, *COVID-19 Situation Update Worldwide, as of Week 21, Updated 10 June 2021*, <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/geographical-distribution-2019-ncov-cases>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



remains considerably lower than, for example, that of South Africa.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the death rate in neighbouring West African countries Gambia, Liberia and Senegal has been higher (see Table 1).

As elsewhere, Nigeria has also witnessed ebbs and flows in terms of the transmission of the virus since Spring 2020. From the detection of the first case in Nigeria in February 2020 to 21 June 2021, 163,797 out of a total of 167,292 people who tested positive for the coronavirus (nearly 98 per cent) have fully recovered after receiving treatment.<sup>17</sup> In overall terms, even though the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that Africa's "fragile health systems" could exacerbate the pandemic,<sup>18</sup> the low death rate in Nigeria shows that the 2014 Ebola outbreak in neighbouring West African countries had prepared the country for a health crisis. The Ebola experience helped improve the country's health incidence management system to respond rapidly to public health emergencies, also illustrated by the creation of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC).

## *2.2 Measures introduced to contain the spread of the virus*

As elsewhere in the world, governments in the region introduced lockdowns and travel restrictions to contain the spread of the virus. For example, by mid-March 2020, the Nigerian government had closed its borders to more than a dozen states where more than 1,000 coronavirus cases had been recorded at that time, including China, Italy, Iran, South Korea, Spain, Japan, France, Germany, the United States, Norway, the UK, the Netherlands and Switzerland.<sup>19</sup> This was in line with travel restrictions imposed by other African countries, such as Tunisia, Sudan, Djibouti and South Africa, which had closed their borders to travellers from countries with a high number of cases, or from all countries. Soon afterwards, by the end of March 2020, the Nigerian government had closed all its land and aerial borders to travellers. A two-week lockdown was then imposed by the central government in three Nigerian states, where most of the recorded cases had been observed: Abuja (the capital), Lagos and Ogun. The lockdown was extended indefinitely and all inter-state travel within the country was banned.

Regionally, the IOM reported that, of the 352 Points of Entry assessed in ECOWAS in July 2020, 66 per cent (231) were completely closed and 26 per cent were considered open to the transport of goods and/or return of nationals only.<sup>20</sup> As a result of these

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) website: *COVID-19 Nigeria*, accessed on 22 June 2021, <https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng>.

<sup>18</sup> World Health Organization (WHO) Africa, *Africa Records Over 500,000 COVID-19 Cases*, 8 July 2020, <https://www.afro.who.int/node/12986>.

<sup>19</sup> Stephanie Busari and Bukola Adebayo, "Nigeria Bans Entry for Travelers from 13 Countries as It Announces Five New Cases of Coronavirus", in *CNN*, 18 March 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/18/africa/nigeria-coronavirus-travel-restrictions-intl/index.html>.

<sup>20</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Migration and COVID-19 in West and Central Africa. Examining the Impacts of COVID-19 on Travellers Across the Region*, December 2020, <https://>

restrictions, significant shifts in migration flows across the region were observed. Despite such disturbances to mobility, the number of travellers registered across West and Central Africa witnessed a 7 per cent increase between 2019 and 2020 (September) in Chad, Mali, Niger and Nigeria.<sup>21</sup>

In the region, Ghana became the first country to exit lockdown in April 2020, with the president citing Ghana's improved testing and contact tracing capacity as well as its growing treatment and quarantine infrastructure.<sup>22</sup> In Nigeria, the lockdown lasted until the start of May 2020. By that time there had already been reports of widespread economic decline, and an increase in crime in some states.<sup>23</sup> During those initial months, only the movement and disbursement of food items<sup>24</sup> and the travel of essential workers were permitted, and all places of worship, schools and bars were ordered to shut down, further deepening economic and social distress. The government responded to the widespread complaints about the socio-economic hardships caused by the lockdown by providing palliative measures, such as the distribution among the most vulnerable of 77,000 metric tons of food.<sup>25</sup> However, the distribution strategy was not clearly defined, leading to widespread riots and looting after the lockdown ended and as citizens discovered large warehouses of undistributed items.<sup>26</sup>

As the number of new cases began to decrease, Nigeria slowly eased restrictions on movement, social gatherings and social institutions such as schools and places of worship. In June 2020, the internal travel ban was lifted, by July repatriation flights began within the country, and at the beginning of September 2020 the airports were opened to resume international travel, while flights from countries like Brazil, Turkey and India remained still blocked.<sup>27</sup> Other West African countries also began to ease travel restrictions. For instance, Senegal reopened its air borders and resumed international flights in July 2020.

dtm.iom.int/node/8141.

<sup>21</sup> IOM, *COVID-19 – Flow Monitoring Registry. Mobility Trends, January-September 2020, West & Central Africa*, 5 November 2020, <https://migration.iom.int/node/10116>.

<sup>22</sup> Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, "President Akufo-Addo Addresses the Nation on Efforts to Combat the Spread of the Coronavirus pandemic" (video), in *Facebook*, 19 April 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/nakufoaddo/videos/537986040429488>.

<sup>23</sup> "Nigerian Police Deploy Units to Tackle Lockdown Crimewave", in *Reuters*, 13 April 2020, <https://reut.rs/3ebO4GG>.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Kalu, "COVID-19 in Nigeria, A Disease of Hunger", in *The Lancet*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (1 June 2020), p. 556-557, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(20\)30220-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(20)30220-4).

<sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria: Protect Most Vulnerable in COVID-19 Response*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/node/340766>.

<sup>26</sup> Percy Dabang and Angela Ukomadu, "In Nigeria, Looters Target Government Warehouses Stocked with COVID-19 Relief", in *Reuters*, 9 November 2020, <https://reut.rs/3eFM1eB>.

<sup>27</sup> "Nigeria Bans Travellers India, Brazil, Turkey over COVID-19 Fears", in *Reuters*, 2 May 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigeria-bans-travellers-india-brazil-turkey-over-covid-19-fears-2021-05-02>.

While business trips and travel for tourism between Nigeria and Europe had initially been affected as tourist destinations were shut down and face-to-face meetings were replaced by virtual meetings all over the world, these forms of mobility have resumed more rapidly. As travel restrictions have been eased and bans have been increasingly replaced by health measures (including certificates of pre-departure COVID-19 tests, quarantine measures or health declarations),<sup>28</sup> flights between Europe and Nigeria have resumed, with aviation experts projecting an increase in international air traffic of about 35 per cent.<sup>29</sup>

These far-reaching limitations to mobility have more significantly impacted those who depend on mobility for survival (for example, migrant workers and cross-border traders). The IOM's Flow Monitoring Surveys conducted in West and Central Africa demonstrate a chain reaction whereby mobility restrictions translated into losses of income, and thus a reduction in the outflow and inflow of remittances, which, "in turn, negatively impacted access to food and housing, livelihood activities, and education enrolments".<sup>30</sup> As also underlined by the IOM, the latter kind of effect has the potential to drive further migration, while in a context of limited venues for mobility, this could mean a surge of demand for smuggling services.

### 2.3 Socioeconomic impact of COVID-19

While the health-related effects of the pandemic have been relatively moderate, the economic impact of the measures put in place to contain the spread of the virus has been particularly harrowing in countries across Africa. The impact has been two-fold, affecting both macro-economic conditions and micro-economic circumstances of individuals and groups. Considering that socio-economic conditions and high rates of youth unemployment are among the key drivers of migration from Nigeria, and indeed from Africa,<sup>31</sup> the additional economic stress generated by the pandemic is expected to further drive migration within and out of Africa.

The COVID-19 pandemic has ground economic activity to a halt in countries across the world and posed an existential threat for many economies, including that of Nigeria – Africa's largest economy and biggest crude oil producer. Demonstrating the far-reaching economic impact of the pandemic, the IMF projected a 3.2 per cent contraction for the Nigerian economy in 2020 – a significant fall from the

<sup>28</sup> IOM, *First Comprehensive Global Analysis of COVID-19 Travel Restrictions, Border Closures Weighs Future Impacts on Mobility*, 8 April 2021, <https://www.iom.int/node/113171>.

<sup>29</sup> Wole Oyebade, "Air Travel Targets 35% Traffic as European Carriers Resume", in *The Guardian Nigeria News*, 18 November 2020, <https://guardian.ng/?p=1267861>.

<sup>30</sup> IOM, *Migration and COVID-19 in West and Central Africa. Examining the Impacts of COVID-19 on Travellers Across the Region*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Aderanti Adepoju and Arie van der Wiel, *Seeking Greener Pastures Abroad*, cit.

previously anticipated 2.2 per cent growth.<sup>32</sup> A recent report released by the National Bureau of Statistics reports a contraction of 1.92 per cent in real terms at the end of 2020.<sup>33</sup>

The drop in oil prices in March 2020 to about 30 US dollars per barrel<sup>34</sup> – the biggest fall since the 1991 Gulf War – also profoundly impacted on the Nigerian economy. This was deeply evidenced by the currency devaluation at the end of June, as investors reacted to the tumbling oil prices. The effects were particularly bleak as Nigeria’s oil exports make up about 90 per cent of the country’s total export earnings. The prolonged disruption of economic activities also impacted Nigeria’s oil production – cargo ships full of millions of barrels of Nigerian crude oil had nowhere to go as oil prices crashed worldwide. There was simply no market for a commodity that had become almost unusable given the halt in oil-production activities all around the world.

The economic effects of the pandemic were not just felt in the crucial oil industry, but also in other economic sectors, with relevant consequences for employment. Tourism has been one such sector. According to a report from the International Air Transport Association (IATA), African airlines were estimated to lose nearly 6 billion US dollars in revenue in the first year of the pandemic, due to low passenger demand following the spread of coronavirus on the continent.<sup>35</sup> This gravely impacted island nations like Mauritius and Seychelles that rely heavily on travel and tourism for revenue and job creation, and popular West Africa tourist destinations like The Gambia, Senegal and Ghana.

Tourism, travel and hospitality sectors in Nigeria, crucial for job creation,<sup>36</sup> were no exception. In the first two months of the lockdown, Nigeria’s fledgling travel industry lost more than 180 billion Naira, and some 24,000 jobs were cut.<sup>37</sup> Employers ceased salary payments for their employees – whose jobs they nevertheless saved – as they waited for the economic situation to improve. These developments have raised fears that the travel industry could collapse by the time

<sup>32</sup> International Monetary Fund (IMF), *World Economic Outlook Update, January 2021: Policy Support and Vaccines Expected to Lift Activity*, January 2021, p. 4, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/01/26/2021-world-economic-outlook-update>.

<sup>33</sup> Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), *Nigerian Gross Domestic Product Report (Q4 & Full Year 2020)*, February 2021, p. 3, <https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/download/1229>.

<sup>34</sup> Pippa Stevens, “Oil Plunges 24% for Worst Day Since 1991, Hits Multi-Year Low After OPEC Deal Failure Sparks Price War”, in *CNBC*, 8 March 2020, <https://www.cnbcm.com/2020/03/08/oil-plummets-30percent-as-opec-deal-failure-sparks-price-war-fears.html>.

<sup>35</sup> International Air Transport Association (IATA), *Aviation Relief for African Airlines Critical as COVID-19 Impacts Deepen*, 23 April 2020, <https://www.iata.org/en/pressroom/pr/2020-04-23-02>.

<sup>36</sup> According to Official ESTA data, Nigeria ranks tenth among the countries most dependent on tourism, with 66 jobs for every 100 visitors the country receives. See, Duncan Madden, “Ranked: The 10 Countries Most Dependent on Tourism”, in *Forbes*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/duncanmadden/2020/04/02/ranked-the-10-countries-most-dependent-on-tourism>.

<sup>37</sup> Ruth Olurounbi, “Coronavirus: Nigeria’s Travel Industry Shaky After N180 Billion Loss from Pandemic”, in *The Africa Report*, 23 April 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/26578>.

the pandemic ends.

The hit taken by the informal sector, which offers income and employment opportunities for many Nigerian citizens, accounting for an estimated 65 per cent of the total economy,<sup>38</sup> has been an additional factor causing the loss of jobs. Activities ranging from agricultural production to small-scale businesses contribute to the informal sector. While such businesses do not receive government support to remain afloat, they have nonetheless been impacted by the reduced availability of revenue from a government-fuelled economy. The effects of the lockdown on the economy have been devastating for many of these businesses as well as their owners' and employees' livelihoods, as the disappearance of disposable income has led to difficulties in hiring the kind of casual labour that has hitherto fuelled the day-to-day living of many citizens.

After the severe socio-economic effects in the first months of the health crisis, African countries have gradually begun to open up, while continuing to manage the spread of the disease and easing the impact of the pandemic on their economies. While small businesses are struggling to survive the ongoing economic hit, the federal government has provided a Naira 75 billion micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) Survival Fund to support vulnerable MSMEs in meeting their payroll obligations and to safeguard jobs in the sector.<sup>39</sup> In 48 hours, 174,574 business owners registered for the Survival Fund,<sup>40</sup> highlighting the severity of the economic impact on this key economic layer. Additionally, in an effort to shore up foreign reserves and incentivise dollar remittances, the Central Bank of Nigeria introduced the "Naira 4 Dollar" scheme.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the vigorous efforts to revive the economy, the road ahead is likely to be steep. A World Bank report predicts the worst recession in the past four decades for Nigeria.<sup>42</sup> Many businesses have been affected, thousands of people lost their jobs during the pandemic, and the Naira as a means of foreign exchange has taken a massive hit. The financial sector is fragile and the real economy is weak; consumers' disposable income has shrunk. The consequences of the pandemic have also weighed upon the fiscal capacity of the Nigerian government, constraining its ability to meet its basic obligations, such as paying salaries to public officials, while

<sup>38</sup> Leandro Medina, Andrew Jonelis and Mehmet Cangul, "The Informal Economy in Sub-Saharan Africa: Size and Determinants", in *IMF Working Papers*, No. 156 (2017), p. 5, <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781484305942.001>.

<sup>39</sup> "How to Apply for Federal Government's N75 Billion MSME Survival Fund", in *MSME Africa*, 12 September 2020, <https://msmeafricaonline.com/?p=2372>.

<sup>40</sup> Chike Olisah, "FG Says 174,574 Successfully Register for N75 Billion MSME Survival Fund in 48 Hours", in *Nairametrics*, 25 September 2020, <https://nairametrics.com/?p=251749>.

<sup>41</sup> Central Bank of Nigeria, *Introduction of the CBN's "Naira 4 Dollar Scheme" for Diaspora Remittances*, 5 March 2021, <https://www.cbn.gov.ng/out/2021/ccd/naira4dollar.pdf>. The scheme was originally intended to expire on 8 May 2021 but has now been extended indefinitely.

<sup>42</sup> World Bank, "Nigeria in Times of COVID-19: Laying Foundations for a Strong Recovery", in *Nigeria Development Updates*, June 2020, p. 2, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/34046>.

continuing to subsidise various aspects of the economy, as it has done in the past. The private sector, which has always been dependent on a booming public sector, has also ground almost to a halt, impacting the livelihood of millions of citizens within and outside the country.

Such destabilisation has created a strong push factor for many Nigerians, and citizens of other countries in West Africa whose livelihoods have been affected in similar ways, even as the corresponding pull factors in traditional destinations, including Europe, also wane in the face of the pandemic.

### 3. The impact of COVID-19 on mobility and migration

As travel restrictions and border closures gradually spread around the world in the spring of 2020, people intending to travel internationally were the first to be affected. In Africa – as elsewhere – the consequences were felt both by people who were caught by the pandemic abroad and willing to repatriate, and those planning to travel abroad. For example, it was reported that thousands of African students were stranded in France and other countries because they could not make their way home before borders were sealed.<sup>43</sup>

Many Nigerian nationals stranded abroad, including trafficking survivors, sought repatriation, but swift border closures caught them unprepared. In the case of trafficking survivors (predominantly women), before the onset of COVID-19, women who were trafficked or being exploited by their employers overseas could contact local human rights advocacy groups, who would then notify Nigerian officials to arrange their journey home, usually “under the radar”. However, border closures and lockdowns put a pause to activists’ work, leaving these women stranded in “safe houses”, where available.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, restrictions on public life also led to closures of embassies and consulates, so that many prospective travellers could no longer make travel plans for their intended activities – including business, education and even healthcare needs. This has impacted regular migration, also through the disruption of visa regimes.<sup>45</sup> Even as borders have reopened, those intending to travel have often not been able to process the documentation required.

<sup>43</sup> John Paul Ging, “Thousands of Foreign Students Stranded in France Because of COVID-19”, in *AfricaNews*, 9 August 2020, <https://www.africanews.com/2020/08/09/thousands-of-foreign-students-stranded-in-france-because-of-covid-19>.

<sup>44</sup> Shola Lawal and Corinne Redfern, “COVID-19 Lockdowns Left Nigerian Trafficking Survivors Stranded. Now They’re Looking for a Way Home”, in *Time*, 17 July 2020, <https://time.com/5864964>.

<sup>45</sup> IOM, “Travel Restrictions and Mobility”, in *COVID-19 Analytical Snapshots*, No. 3 (30 March 2020), [https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19\\_analytical\\_snapshot\\_3\\_-\\_travel\\_restrictions\\_and\\_mobility\\_0.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19_analytical_snapshot_3_-_travel_restrictions_and_mobility_0.pdf).

These difficulties have also impacted on the ability of migrant workers to reach their intended destinations, an effect which was particularly visible in the case of seasonal workers who play key roles in, for example, the agricultural sector. For instance, in April 2020, 2,371 people from West African countries (mostly Nigerians, Guineans, Cameroonians and Malians) travelling through Niger towards Algeria and Libya (a popular transit route for seasonal workers) were lodged in the IOM's six transit centres in Niger.<sup>46</sup> Seen through a wider lens, the IOM stated that COVID-induced limitations on the mobility of prospective migrant workers "in agrifood systems" could impact the entire global food supply chain and prices.<sup>47</sup>

Asylum seekers have felt the consequences of the restrictions themselves: in many cases they were stranded at borders, remaining vulnerable to persecution and abuse. Border closures have negatively affected quick and efficient processing of their claims, and have pooled them with other travellers who have been banned entry into relevant destination countries, relegating asylum-seekers' claims to routine travel entry claims.

The number of asylum applications in the EU was significantly lower in 2020 than the preceding year, while figures for the months preceding the health crisis (65,692 in January and 61,421 in February 2020) accounted for a third of the total of 422,000 applications lodged from the beginning of the year until end of November 2020, revealing a sharp decline with the outbreak of COVID-19 and the resultant travel and health restrictions as well as the suspension of asylum procedures in many EU countries.<sup>48</sup> In the context of West Africa, by the end of March 2020, registration of asylum seekers was halted in Benin, Guinea Bissau and Nigeria. Other countries in the region imposed limitations and restrictions on where cases could be filed and how to determine who is considered a refugee, with Chad and Ghana only examining what they termed "critical cases".<sup>49</sup>

While border closures have resulted in limited mobility for those seeking to use regular channels, the pandemic has also had significant impact on irregular migration. The impact has been twofold. On the one hand, despite mobility restrictions and border closures, borders remain porous to a certain extent, and human movement across these borders continues, enhancing health risks in the context of a global pandemic. Uncontrolled cross-border movement with limited health checks can lead to increased transmission of the virus in cross-border

<sup>46</sup> Giacomo Zandonini, "Hundreds of Migrants Stuck in Niger amid Coronavirus Pandemic", in *Al Jazeera*, 9 April 2020, <https://aje.io/p5ra3>.

<sup>47</sup> IOM, "COVID-19: Policies and Impact on Seasonal Agricultural Workers", in *IOM Issue Briefs*, No. 1 (27 May 2020), [https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/seasonal\\_agricultural\\_workers\\_27052020\\_0.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/seasonal_agricultural_workers_27052020_0.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> "COVID-19 Travel Restrictions Continue to Affect the Number of Asylum Applications in EU", in *Schengen Visa Info News*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/?p=23346>.

<sup>49</sup> UNHCR, "Impact of COVID-19 on the Protection of Displaced and Stateless Populations West and Central Africa", in *UNHCR Protection Notes*, 15 April 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/75706>.

communities and beyond. Such effect was, for instance, observed in Arlit, an important transit point in Niger. Continuing mobility despite border closures meant that migrants arrived and moved through Arlit without border controls, health checks or preventive quarantine measures, creating “a major public health issue” for the local community, according to the city’s mayor Abderahmane Maouli.<sup>50</sup> Similar public health effects were observed in the past. Unchecked cross-border movement played a significant role in the spread of the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa. Considering the limited access to healthcare and health monitoring in many cross-border communities in West Africa, this remains a significant threat.

On the other hand, the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic has further increased the drive to migrate, while restrictions on cross-border movement act as a barrier to using regular channels, leading migrants to resort to irregular and risky forms of movement – often mediated by smugglers. The desire to emigrate is visible even amongst those in relatively comfortable sectors of the economy. For example, more and more Nigerians seek residency and citizenship in countries like Canada. Their numbers have reportedly tripled in recent years, and further increases can be anticipated post pandemic.<sup>51</sup> The less socially mobile sections of society continue to seek greener pastures wherever they can find them, even in a harsh travel environment. As travel restrictions increased so have migrant numbers, as smugglers launched new travel corridors. Thousands of migrants (mostly West African) have been found at the Niger-Libya and Niger-Algeria border after having been abandoned by smugglers whose efforts to circumvent the border controls and restrictions had failed.<sup>52</sup> Migrant smugglers have also found ways to profit from the situation by continuing to provide even more dangerous routes for those willing to dare. For instance, smugglers in Libya are reportedly now accommodating new passengers from neighbouring countries, but also from farther areas of origin including Eritrea, Ghana, Mali and Nigeria.<sup>53</sup>

Drawing on the mobility-related lessons learned from the pandemic, new policy interventions aimed at discouraging irregular migration and its facilitation by smugglers must take into account that restrictions of safe and regular migration pathways, rather than reducing cross-border movement in absolute terms, merely compound the uncertainty and danger experienced by people travelling irregularly.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Giacomo Zandonini, “Hundreds of Migrants Stuck in Niger amid Coronavirus Pandemic”, cit.

<sup>51</sup> Kareem El-Assal, “Nigerian Immigration to Canada is Booming”, in *CIC News*, 21 April 2020, <https://www.cicnews.com/?p=14172>.

<sup>52</sup> Aimée-Noël Mbiyozo, “Migrant Smugglers Are Profiting from Travel Restrictions”, in *ISS Today*, 20 July 2020, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/migrant-smugglers-are-profiting-from-travel-restrictions>; IOM, *IOM Steps Up Response for Migrants Stranded in Niger Amidst COVID-19 Lockdown*, 1 April 2020, <https://www.iom.int/node/108735>.

<sup>53</sup> Aimée-Noël Mbiyozo, “Migrant Smugglers Are Profiting from Travel Restrictions”, cit.

<sup>54</sup> Gabriella Sanchez and Luigi Achilli, “Stranded: The Impacts of COVID-19 on Irregular Migration and Migrant Smuggling”, in *MPC Policy Briefs*, No. 2020/20 (May 2020), <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/67069>.



## Conclusion: The way forward for Africa–EU migration partnership in a post-pandemic world

The impact of COVID-19 on Africa has been staggering. While health-related effects have been relatively moderate especially when compared with other regions of the world, the social and economic consequences have been far-reaching. Socio-economic conditions and high rates of youth unemployment acted as major drivers of migration in Africa already before the pandemic. Therefore, beyond generating broad consequences on development in the continent, the pandemic has also reinforced many African citizens' drive to migrate, both within and outside of Africa.

The restrictions on mobility within and between countries introduced by different governments as a response to the health emergency have disrupted economic activity, trade and human mobility at a domestic, international and global scale. Seen from a migration-development nexus perspective, the limitation of cross-border human movement has influenced, and will continue to influence, the policy goals of migration for development, pursued by many African governments and included in the Migration Policy Framework for Africa. Sustained restrictions on movement have also meant the narrowing down of regular migration and mobility channels, while continued – and potentially growing – demand to cross the borders has led to a proliferation of irregular avenues, affecting the safety and well-being of migrants and asylum seekers.

The effects of the pandemic on migration and short-term mobility as well as on economies and labour markets of countries of origin (in Africa) and destination (in Europe) will also have implications for cooperation between the two parties. Given the underlying divergence in policy priorities that already existed before the pandemic, focusing on finding compromise should be the utmost priority for both sides in the upcoming period.

At a time when governments on both sides have focused their attention on challenges at home, particularly in terms of cushioning the economic effects of the pandemic and moving towards recovery, falling into the trap of side-lining the objective of fostering migration cooperation that generates benefits to both parties should be avoided. Instead, migration should be reconsidered as part of post-pandemic economic recovery and longer-term development in both regions. Furthermore, in light of changing patterns of migration and mobility, i.e., further limitation of regular migration and mobility channels and a move towards growing irregular migration, the partnership priorities will have to be revisited in order to effectively address the current trends as well as the interests of the two regions in the face of an evolving migratory context.

The priority of the EU when it comes to cooperation with Africa is likely to remain on migration management that mainly aims at curbing irregular flows through

efficient border control and the rolling out of effective return, readmission and reintegration programmes. While developing and expanding regular migration channels (also) through talent partnerships with countries of origin are among the objectives of the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, it remains to be seen whether the economic slowdown in Europe might translate into reluctance when it comes to putting this objective into practice. For African countries the priority in the upcoming period will be to find more ways to enhance domestic development, particularly for out-of-work youth. While health-related restrictions on movement constrain the options for labour mobility within and outside the region, harnessing migration for socioeconomic development – at both the macro and the micro level – will continue to be a priority for Africa, also in its partnership on migration and mobility with the EU.

While policy priorities tend to diverge on certain dimensions, the aim should be to work towards a partnership agenda that is built on compromise, and that addresses the realities of the current migratory context. This will have to begin with a detailed post-COVID needs assessment, not only to identify the exigencies of each region and their member states, but to seek ways in which solutions can be achieved for each side, while thinking about how the two parties can be part of these solutions. These solutions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they can be designed in ways that meet the needs and priorities of both sides.

For example, funding tools such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa could be channelled towards meeting the further prioritised objective of African countries to foster domestic development, particularly through a focus on creating economic opportunities for out-of-work youth, as suggested under the EU's new strategy with Africa. These resources could be used to address domestic labour and employment deficits and provide entrepreneurial opportunities for citizens, especially for groups vulnerable to human trafficking and migrant smuggling, such as children, youth and women.

Essentially, policy interventions predominantly focused on border controls and law enforcement measures by themselves are insufficient to “close” irregular migration routes off or to develop effective responses to migrant smuggling. This is the case because in a context of continuing demand for migration, restrictions lead to shifting routes, often more dangerous journeys and a remodelling of the smuggling operations. Responses to irregular migration and smuggling would therefore need to be complemented with measures aiming to improve the socioeconomic conditions in the contexts of origin and those enhancing regular migration opportunities.

Economic recovery and revitalisation so as to adapt to the realities and exigencies of a post-pandemic world is a shared goal. Cooperation between the two regions could be part of achieving this goal if, instead of adopting inward-looking and short-term approaches, effort is directed towards seeking how Africa and Europe can work together so as to revive their economies and advance the well-being of their citizens by better managing interdependences in a post-pandemic future.

Moving in such direction could pave the way for reimagining labour migration and mobility as part of the Africa–EU partnership agenda. For instance, when determining how to rebuild the European economy, particularly the health sector, parties can explore the role of African health workers in providing the necessary labour to fill identified gaps. This could be done through the arrangement of circular migration programmes that will provide benefits for the citizens and economies of each region.

Additionally, as African governments reopen their borders, they can work with their European partners to re-create a two-way migration channel that promotes reciprocal development: meaningful and sustainable reintegration of returning irregular migrants could be ensured through safe and smooth transition processes, while contextually sensitive and properly furnished return and reintegration programmes could contribute to domestic development. At the same time, return and reintegration efforts can be eased into robust domestic development programmes supported by the Trust Fund and other available resources. Such an approach would increase the political buy-in of cooperation initiatives in the area of return on the side of African governments. Otherwise, a narrow focus on return and reintegration – as distinct from youth employment and entrepreneurship that entertains a higher priority – could be met with resistance from African governments hard-pressed to find solutions to looming domestic crises. Investment in initiatives aiming at creating synergies between return, sustainable reintegration and development in countries of origin can be complemented by programmes simultaneously aiming at fostering a labour migration channel for African citizens to engage validly in the European labour market. Besides positively integrating migration, be it through return and reintegration, or through circular labour migration schemes, into post-pandemic recovery and development agendas, this would also form the basis for revitalising a hard-hit migrant labour market – and harnessing the developmental effects of (financial and social) remittances.

The pre-COVID partnership agenda on migration and mobility appears to have the necessary ingredients for constructive post-COVID cooperation. However, it will require genuine dialogue, consideration and compromise to ensure that the operation of the redesigned partnership is mutually beneficial. This will entail changing the narrative of stopping migratory flows from Africa, while also acknowledging the benefits of African migration to Africa as well as to European destinations.

These are not new recommendations, but in a post-pandemic world, they have become prerequisites for a successful partnership.

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