

Policy Brief

Special Edition

“Of Borders and a Borderless Africa”: Deconstructing the Interplay of Migration, Securitization, and State Dynamics in Africa

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Executive Summary

The Migration is one of Africa's most pressing challenges. Driven by factors ranging from poverty, economic and political instability, conflicts and environmental degradation; internal and intra-Africa border migration flows play a significant role in shaping African societies. One of the many complex aspects of migration, 'securitisation of migration' is increasingly becoming topical among policy makers and academics because of concerns over territorial integrity and national security by various African states. This paradox, which this policy brief referred to as 'Of Borders and a Borderless Africa'¹ complicates human mobility and development in the continent. The policy brief critically examines the complexities of migration, securitisation, and state dynamics in Africa, shedding light on the paradoxical tension between border reinforcement and the vision of a borderless Africa. Highlighting the limitations of current securitisation frameworks, the policy brief demonstrates the need for a holistic approach to Continental migration governance rooted in human rights, development focus, and regional cooperation. Key recommendations for African states, regional bodies, migration policymakers and decision-makers include:

- ▶ **Reframing Migration Discourse:** Advocating for a shift from Eurocentric securitization, partly driven by the European Union (EU) agenda to a more comprehensive understanding of migration, emphasising its multidimensional nature and positive contributions to host African societies.
- ▶ **Enhancing Regional Cooperation:** Strengthening collaboration among African states and regional organisations to harmonise migration policies, facilitate legal pathways, and address common challenges such as human trafficking and irregular migration.
- ▶ **Promoting Rights-Based Approaches:** Prioritising the protection and well-being of African migrants, combatting discrimination and violence through awareness campaigns, legal reforms, and accountability mechanisms.
- ▶ **Addressing Migration Root Causes:** Investing in sustainable development strategies in both sending and receiving African countries to tackle poverty, conflict, and environmental degradation, fostering economic opportunities and social cohesion.
- ▶ **Advocating for International Solidarity:** Engaging in diplomatic efforts to promote greater international solidarity and responsibility-sharing, emphasising fair burden-sharing and protecting migrants' rights and dignity.

The Challenge: Understanding the Complexities of Migration, Securitisation, and State Dynamics in Africa

Migration is one of the most pressing issues facing Africa today.² The continent's historical, socio-economic, and political contexts have given rise to complex internal and cross-border migration patterns.³ The latest available international migrant data (2020) shows that around 21 million Africans were living in another African country, a significant increase from 2015, when around 18 million Africans were estimated to be living outside of their country of origin but within the region.⁴ Factors such as poverty, political instability, conflict, environmental degradation, and lack of opportunities continue to drive individuals and communities to seek better livelihoods and security elsewhere.⁵ Additionally, historical ties, colonial legacies, and regional disparities further exacerbate migratory flows within and across African borders.⁶ During the colonial period for example, South Africa's mining industry attracted workers from neighbouring countries like Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe.⁷ These historical labour migration patterns continue to influence current migration trends.⁸

The diverse and large-scale population movements across the continent are increasing the securitisation of migration in Africa. The perception of most African states is that large-scale movements of people particularly irregular migrants and refugees pose threats to national security, economic stability, and social cohesion. African governments are responding to the rapid migration with increased border controls and restrictive policies, to manage and mitigate perceived risks associated with migration flows.⁹

This policy brief critically engages with the phenomenon of migration securitisation in Africa. Additionally, it examines the influential roles played by international actors, including the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), in shaping the landscape of migration securitisation across the continent.

Drawing from the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, migration securitisation is conceptualised as a process whereby political actors construct migration issues as existential threats to state security, legitimising extraordinary measures to address perceived risks.¹⁰ This securitisation discourse is often reinforced by narratives of national identity, cultural homogeneity, and territorial integrity, shaping policies of border control, surveillance, and deterrence.¹¹ At the core of most of the current African continental and regional migration policies lies the paradoxical notion of "Of borders and a borderless Africa", reflecting the tension between aspirations for regional integration and the reality of entrenched borders and securitised practices.

The securitisation of migration in Africa has significant domestic and international policy implications. Many African states like South Africa, Botswana, Kenya, Morocco, Tunisia and Niger have responded to perceived security threats at the domestic level by implementing stricter border controls, adopting punitive measures against migrants, and prioritising security over human rights and development considerations. This securitised approach not only undermines the rights and dignity of migrants but also hampers regional integration efforts and exacerbates existing inequalities.¹²

Internationally, the influence of external actors, particularly the European Union (EU) and its migration policies, has shaped the discourse and practice of migration management in Africa. External funding, border management initiatives, and migration partnerships often come with conditions that prioritise border control and security cooperation, sidelining broader development and humanitarian concerns.

For African government policymakers and decision-makers in continental and regional organisations, the challenge lies in reconciling security imperatives with human rights, development, and regional cooperation principles. Failure to address migration holistically not only perpetuates the marginalisation of migrants but also undermines the long-term stability and prosperity of African societies.

Shortcomings of Current Approaches: A Critique of the Current Securitization Framework

Current approaches to migration governance in Africa, characterised by a heavy emphasis on securitisation, often overlook the underlying causes of migration and fail to address the rights and well-being of migrants.¹³ Historically, migration was often viewed as a natural phenomenon, facilitating cultural exchange, trade, and human mobility.¹⁴ However, in the post-colonial era, rising concerns over territorial integrity, national identity, and economic stability led to the securitisation of migration. African states began framing migration through a security lens, perceiving it as a threat to sovereignty, stability, and social cohesion.¹⁵

The securitisation of migration in Africa has led to the militarisation of borders, heightened surveillance, and the criminalisation of migrants, exacerbating vulnerabilities and human rights abuses.¹⁶ One of the primary shortcomings of securitisation framing is the narrow framing of migration as solely a security issue, neglecting its broader socio-economic and humanitarian dimensions.¹⁷ ¹⁸ Moreover, the securitised approach has facilitated the proliferation of smuggling and trafficking networks, exacerbating risks for migrants and further undermining their rights and dignity.

Cases from other African countries also reflect the shortcomings of current securitisation approaches in migration governance.¹⁹ Furthermore, the securitisation of migration has led to the criminalisation of irregular migrants, arbitrary detention, and deportation, further marginalising vulnerable communities and hindering their access to essential services and opportunities.²⁰ The securitisation of migration has also led to the closure of refugee camps, such as Dadaab and Kakuma, and the deportation of Somali refugees, raising concerns about the violation of international refugee law and humanitarian principles.²¹ It is also important to note that refugee camps are also an act of securitization. In these concentrated camps, Migrants and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are perceived as a 'security threat', which leads to restrictions preventing them from living outside camps among the locals. South Africa has faced significant challenges related to migration securitisation, further compounded by widespread xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment.²² While the country has implemented border control measures and immigration policies aimed at managing migration flows, these efforts have often been marred by human rights abuses and discriminatory practices. For instance, the periodic outbreaks of xenophobic violence targeting foreign nationals, particularly in informal settlements and urban areas, highlight the social tensions and vulnerabilities faced by migrant populations.²³

The securitised approach has also resulted in instances of violence, extortion, and abuse against migrants, particularly those from neighbouring countries like Benin and Niger. In West Africa, the lack of harmonisation and coherence in migration policies among countries within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has hindered regional cooperation and coordination. Disparities in legal frameworks, migration priorities, and enforcement practices have created challenges for intra-regional mobility and the protection of migrants' rights.²⁴

The fragmentation of migration policies across African states hampers regional cooperation and coordination. Inconsistencies in legal frameworks, differing migration priorities, and a lack of harmonisation impede efforts to address migration challenges collectively.²⁵ This fragmented approach also undermines the effectiveness of regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) and sub-regional bodies like the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in promoting coherent migration governance.²⁶

In addition, the dominance of external actors, particularly the EU, in shaping migration policies in Africa perpetuates a donor-driven agenda that prioritises security over development and humanitarian concerns.²⁷ Conditional funding and external partnerships often prioritise border control

measures and security cooperation, sidelining the needs and interests of African countries and communities.

Summarily, the current securitisation framework of migration in Africa is fraught with limitations and shortcomings that have significant implications for migrants, host communities, and regional stability. A major limitation is its narrow focus on border security and control and also viewing migrants as 'threats' rather than contributors to host society, which often overlooks the root causes of migration and fails to address the complex socio-economic, political, and environmental factors driving migration. Moreover, securitisation measures tend to prioritise deterrence and enforcement over human rights, leading to the criminalisation and marginalisation of migrants, particularly those in irregular situations.

Additionally, the securitisation framework perpetuates a cycle of securitisation that fuels fear, xenophobia, and discrimination towards migrants, exacerbating social tensions and undermining social cohesion. This is against the pan-African spirit of cooperation and free movement of people. Furthermore, securitisation measures often lack accountability and transparency, leading to abuses of power, corruption, and violations of migrants' rights. Overall, the current securitisation framework fails to effectively address migration challenges while exacerbating vulnerabilities and risks for migrants.

Beyond Borders: Recommendations for African Policymakers on Migration

The current policies are characterized by the paradox of "Of Borders and a borderless Africa". On the one hand, the securitisation of migration by many African states has led to reinforcing physical borders, militarising border areas, and emphasising exclusionary policies.²⁸ On the other hand, there is a growing recognition of the need for a borderless Africa—a vision of regional integration, mobility, and shared prosperity that transcends national boundaries and promotes Pan-African solidarity. This policy paper therefore calls for alternative approaches rooted in humanitarian principles and the protection of migrants' rights.

African government policymakers and decision-makers in continental and regional organisations play a pivotal role in shaping migration governance policies and practices. As key stakeholders, they possess the authority and mandate to drive meaningful change in migration governance frameworks. Their decisions and actions have far-reaching implications for migrants' rights, regional stability, and socio-economic development.²⁹ However, their current approaches are often constrained by political considerations, resource limitations, and the influence of external actors.³⁰

To overcome the shortcomings of current approaches, African policymakers must prioritise collaboration, coherence, and inclusivity in migration governance. This could involve reframing migration discourse to emphasise its multidimensional nature and addressing the root causes of migration through sustainable development strategies.³¹ The various innovative initiatives help create economic opportunities and improve livelihoods for both locals and migrants.³²

Additionally, policymakers can enhance regional cooperation by harmonising migration policies and facilitating legal pathways for migration. For instance, the African Union (AU) could be more proactive in promoting dialogue and cooperation among African countries to address common challenges and protect migrants' rights. Moreover, African governments can advocate for greater international solidarity and responsibility-sharing in addressing migration, highlighting the need for migration burden-sharing and equitable distribution of resources such as funding for refugee support programs, access to education and healthcare for migrants, and infrastructure development to support integration efforts.

For internally displaced persons (IDPs), this could include targeted support such as emergency shelter, food aid, and medical care, as well as long-term solutions like rebuilding infrastructure and providing livelihood opportunities to facilitate their reintegration into society. For refugees, equitable distribution of resources might involve increasing funding for refugee camps and settlements, ensuring access to education and healthcare, and creating pathways for legal integration into host communities. Addressing the needs of irregular migrants requires a focus on protection from exploitation and abuse, provision of legal aid, and the establishment of safe and legal migration pathways to reduce reliance on dangerous and illicit routes.³³

Finally, this policy brief reiterates the importance of adopting a balanced, rights-based approach to African migration governance. Such an approach should prioritise human rights, development, and regional cooperation while addressing the root causes of migration and promoting social inclusion and economic opportunity for all. More specifically, the policy brief recommends the following actions:

- ▶ **Reframing Migration Discourse:** Advocate for a shift from securitisation to a holistic understanding of migration as a multidimensional phenomenon with social, economic, and humanitarian dimensions.
- ▶ **Enhancing Regional Cooperation:** Strengthen collaboration among African states and regional organisations to harmonise migration policies, facilitate legal pathways for migration, and promote cross-border cooperation.

- ▶ **Promoting Rights-Based Approaches:** Prioritise the protection and well-being of migrants by upholding their rights, including access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and legal assistance. Combat discrimination, xenophobia, and violence against migrants through awareness campaigns, legal reforms, and accountability mechanisms.
- ▶ **Addressing Migration Root Causes:** Invest in sustainable development strategies particularly in sending countries that address the underlying drivers of migration, including poverty, conflict, political instability, environmental degradation, and lack of opportunities. Support initiatives that create economic opportunities improve livelihoods and enhance social cohesion, particularly in marginalised communities prone to outmigration.
- ▶ **Advocating for International Solidarity:** Engage in diplomatic efforts to advocate for greater international solidarity and responsibility-sharing in addressing migration. Call for fair and equitable burden-sharing among countries of origin, transit, and destination, emphasising the need for shared commitments to protect migrants' rights and dignity.

Endnotes

1. 'Of borders and a borderless Africa' embodies the vision of a continent where mobility is facilitated, barriers are dismantled, and communities are connected across national boundaries. However, this vision is often challenged by the persistence of securitised practices that prioritise territorial control and national security, hindering the realisation of a truly borderless Africa.
2. Rajan, S. I. (2020). Migrants at a crossroads: COVID-19 and challenges to migration. *Migration and Development*, 9(3), 323-330.
3. Castelli, F. (2018). Drivers of migration: why do people move?. *Journal of travel medicine*, 25(1), tay040.
4. IOM. (2020). Migration and Migrants: Regional Dimensions and Developments. <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2024-chapter-3/africa>
5. Bhanye, J. (2023). "Strategic, dual sense of place" among middle-aged migrants in the diaspora. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, 19(3/4), 376-390., and In 2022, sub-Saharan Africa experienced the highest number of internal displacements, predominantly due to conflict and violence. The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ethiopia were the most affected, with over 4 million and more than 2 million displacements, respectively. [UN DESA. (2022). World Population Prospects 2022. <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/MostUsed/>]
6. Van Hear, N., Bakewell, O., & Long, K.(2012).Drivers of migration. *Migrating out of Poverty RPC Working Paper*, 1.
7. Wentzel, M., & Tlabela, K. (2006). Historical background to South African migration. *Migration in South and Southern Africa: dynamics and determinants*, 71, 96.
8. Historical trade routes established in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region, during the colonial period, such as those connecting Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire, still facilitate migration of people seeking economic opportunities in this region.
9. Johannes, B., Dzingirai, V., & Chirisa, I. (2023). Transnational migrants on the margin: agency, aspirations, and perceptions for the future among Malawian migrants in Zimbabwe's Norton peri-urban. In *The Palgrave encyclopedia of urban and regional futures* (pp. 1876-1886). Cham: Springer International Publishing., and Such risks include national security threats from potential infiltration by militants, economic instability due to increased competition for jobs and services, deterioration of social cohesion and xenophobia, public health challenges in controlling infectious diseases, and the escalation of human trafficking and smuggling activities.
10. Floyd, R. (2007). Human security and the Copenhagen School's securitisation approach. *Human Security Journal*, 5(37), 38-49.
11. Huysmans, J. (2000). The European Union and the securitisation of migration. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 38(5), 751-777.
12. South Africa deported over 10,000 undocumented migrants in 2019, in 2020 Kenya restricted movement for over 200,000 refugees in Dadaab and Kakuma camps during the COVID-19 pandemic, Morocco fortified borders near Ceuta and Melilla leading to violence against migrants, Tunisia intercepted and returned over 75,000 Mediterranean migrants in 2023, and Algeria expelled over 16,000 migrants, including children and women, to Niger in 2022 alone. [Africa. (2019). Over 10,000 illegal migrants deported from South Africa in 2019. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/12/c_138384826.htm; Aljazeera. (2020). Kenya bans entry to two refugee camps hosting 400,000 people. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/29/kenya-bans-entry-to-two-refugee-camps-hosting-400000-people>; Gabrielli, L. (2024). The Fenced Off Cities of Ceuta and Melilla: Mediterranean Nodes of Migrant (Im) Mobility. *Migrations in the Mediterranean*, 289.; Norwegian Refugee Council. (2024). 10 things you should know about the Central Mediterranean migration route. <https://www.nrc.no/feature/2024/10-things-you-should-know-about-the-Central-Mediterranean-migration-route>]
13. Aslan, S. Y. (2022). Securitisation of Migration in the EU and Africa. *Insight Turkey*, 24(1), 153-172.
14. Bhanye, J. (2023). Temporality, Translocality, and Sedentariness: 'Complex And Varied'Perceptions For The Future Among African Irregular Migrants On The Margins. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Social Change*

(pp. 1-21). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

15. Global trends, including the rise of terrorism, transnational crime, and irregular migration flows, further influenced this evolution. As a result, migration became increasingly securitised, with African governments enacting stringent border controls, immigration laws, and security measures to address perceived security challenges.
16. In Libya, migrants face severe detention conditions and abuse; in Algeria, mass expulsions of migrants into the Sahara desert occur regularly; in Egypt, border militarisation has resulted in numerous detentions; and in Morocco, heightened surveillance and border fortifications near Ceuta and Melilla have led to violent confrontations with migrants attempting to cross. [Aljazeera (2023). Algeria expelling thousands of migrants across Niger border: HRW. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/9/algeria-abandons-thousands-of-migrants-at-niger-border-report>.]
17. Üstübcü, A., & İçduygu, A. (2018). Border closures and the externalisation of immigration controls in the Mediterranean: A comparative analysis of Morocco and Turkey—RETRACTED. *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 59, 7-31.
18. In North Africa, countries like Morocco and Algeria have reinforced border controls, leading to increased migrant vulnerabilities and human rights abuses, particularly among sub-Saharan African migrants attempting to cross into Europe.
19. The closure of borders in Nigeria in 2019 aimed at curbing smuggling and 'illegal' migration had unintended consequences, including disruptions to regional trade and increased hardship for cross-border communities.
20. As a major host country for refugees and asylum seekers in the East African region, Kenya has also been involved in the securitisation of migration, particularly in relation to border security and refugee management. While the country has established refugee camps and asylum procedures to accommodate displaced populations, these measures have often been characterised by overcrowding, insecurity, and limited access to basic services.
21. Macheru, G. W. (2020). *A Critical Analysis of the Legal Implications of Hosting Refugees by the Host State: a Case Study of Somalia Refugees in Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nairobi).
22. Moyo, K., & Zanker, F. (2020). Political contestations within south African migration governance. *Arnold Bergstraesser-Intitut. Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung*.
23. Ramogwebo, T., Hlongwane, J. S., Bhanye, J., & Matamanda, A. (2024). Doing Fieldwork Among Hard-To-Reach Populations: An Account of Local Female Researchers Studying Foreign Migrants in Downtown Bloemfontein, South Africa. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 23, 16094069241241150.
24. Nigeria's stricter immigration policies contrast with the more lenient approach of neighbouring countries like Cameroon and Chad, leading to irregular migration flows and vulnerabilities for migrants.
25. While Egypt enforces stringent visa regulations and security measures, Sudan allows relatively easier cross-border movement for many African nationals, creating a legal disparity. Similarly, Kenya has implemented strict refugee encampment policies, contrasting sharply with Uganda's more progressive and open refugee settlement approach. Additionally, while Morocco has fortified its borders and increased security measures, Mauritania has more relaxed entry requirements for African migrants.
26. Kabbanji, L. (2017). Regional management of migration in West Africa: the case of ECOWAS and UEMOA. *Migration, free movement and regional integration*, 95.
27. Mlambo, V. H. (2020). Externalisation and securitisation as policy responses to African migration to the European Union. *African Human Mobility Review*, 6(3).
28. Akamo., Jesutimilehin O. (2024). Beyond Securitisation's Legacy: Inclusive Perspectives to Governing Africa's Cyberspace. IPSS. Policy Brief Series
29. Policymakers in countries in the South, like South Africa, have the opportunity to advocate for more inclusive and rights-based migration policies within regional bodies like SADC, thereby promoting greater coherence

and cooperation among member states.

30. Policymakers in West African countries like Ghana and Senegal have the opportunity to advocate for more inclusive and rights-based migration policies within regional bodies like ECOWAS, thereby promoting greater coherence and cooperation among member states. This is because the ECOWAS region is more advanced than in any other regional grouping in Africa.
31. Countries like Ethiopia and Rwanda have implemented innovative initiatives to create economic opportunities and improve livelihoods, reducing the drivers of irregular migration. Ethiopia implemented the Jobs Compact, a \$500 million program that aims to create 100,000 jobs, with 30% of those jobs allocated to refugees [Ethiopian Embassy (2019). Ethiopia allows 1 million refugees to leave camps and work. <https://ethiopianembassy.be/?p=12729>]
32. Rwanda's Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP) is a social protection initiative that includes public works, financial services, and direct support to improve livelihoods and reduce poverty.
33. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Secretariat could be more proactive in promoting dialogue and cooperation among member states to address common challenges and protect migrants' rights, given the region's significant migration flows and historical complexities related to labour migration and economic disparities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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