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Research Paper

Africa's Migration: Redrawing Borders and Building Unity

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Abstract: Forced migration in Africa is more than a humanitarian crisis; it reshapes political, economic, and social structures by altering identities, redrawing borders, and challenging governance. This paper examines the historical roots of displacement, from precolonial mobility systems to disruptions caused by colonial-era borders and postcolonial state formation and analyses the political and economic shifts driven by migration. It explores security risks, opportunities for regional cohesion, and the role of the African Union's Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons (FMP) in fostering integration. Through historical analysis, case studies from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Kenya, and a legal and policy review, this study argues that Africa must transition from viewing forced migration as a destabilising force to recognising its potential to drive mobility, innovation, and unity. To achieve stability and prosperity, Africa must shift from restricting mobility to harnessing it for development and resilience. A border is just a line on a map until people are forced to cross it; then it becomes a question of survival, identity, and power. Borders define states, but people shape civilisations. The true test of Africa's future lies in how it embraces those forced to move.

Keywords:
1. Migration
2. Mobility
3. Displacement
4. Borders
5. Integration

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1. Introduction

Migration has long been a defining feature of African societies and a central mechanism through which economic systems, political authority, and social identities were formed. Before colonial intervention, mobility across regions facilitated trade, cultural exchange, and political organisation, producing interconnected communities whose identities were not confined to fixed territorial boundaries. Movement enabled access to grazing land, water, markets, and kinship networks, allowing societies to adapt to ecological variability and shifting economic

conditions. Rather than being viewed as disruptive, mobility was embedded within social norms and governance arrangements that regulated access to resources, mediated conflict, and sustained cohesion across wide geographic spaces (Herbst, 2000, pp. 35–38).

This long-standing relationship between mobility and social organisation was fundamentally disrupted during the colonial period. European imperial expansion introduced rigid territorial boundaries that prioritised administrative control and resource extraction over existing social and economic systems. Colonial administrations sought to regulate movement in order to facilitate taxation, labor control, and political surveillance, redefining mobility as a problem to be governed rather than a resource to be sustained (Mamdani, 1996, pp. 18–22). The borders formalized during the 1884–85 Berlin Conference disregarded ethnic, linguistic, and economic linkages, fragmenting communities whose livelihoods depended on cross regional movement. Migration, once normalized, was recast as a source of disorder and political tension, closely tied to emerging notions of sovereignty and territorial control (Herbst, 2000, pp. 58–62).

Following independence, most African states retained these colonial borders in the interest of political stability and territorial sovereignty. The decision to preserve inherited boundaries reflected concerns that reopening border questions could trigger widespread interstate conflict. While this approach contributed to relative territorial stability, it also entrenched governance frameworks that were poorly aligned with social realities on the ground. Restrictive citizenship regimes and migration controls constrained mobility across historically fluid spaces, redefining belonging in narrow legal terms (Mamdani, 1996, pp. 23–27). As a result, many Africans today encounter legal and political barriers when seeking livelihoods, safety, or social recognition beyond the boundaries of their states of origin. Migration increasingly became associated with illegality and insecurity rather than adaptation and resilience, reinforcing exclusionary practices within postcolonial states.

By situating contemporary migration within this historical context, it becomes clear that modern displacement is not solely a product of conflict or environmental stress, but also a legacy of colonial-era disruptions to mobility, social cohesion, and governance structures. Understanding these historical drivers is crucial to designing policies that transform migration from a source of marginalisation into an opportunity for regional integration, innovation, and stability.

1.1. Historical Context of Migration in Africa

Pre-colonial African societies were characterised by diverse patterns of mobility shaped by ecological conditions, economic specialization, and social organization. Seasonal migration allowed farming communities to respond to rainfall variability, while pastoral mobility enabled herding populations to sustain livestock across arid and semi-arid regions. Long-distance trade networks linked interior regions to coastal and trans-Saharan routes, facilitating the circulation of goods, ideas, and political influence over extended territories (Herbst, 2000, pp. 40-45). Communities such as the Somali, Fulani, Tuareg, and Maasai relied on movement across vast spaces to maintain livelihoods, social relations, and political authority. In these contexts, belonging was layered and flexible, allowing individuals to maintain multiple affiliations simultaneously.

Political authority in many pre-colonial societies was similarly adaptive. Governance often operated through overlapping systems of authority that accommodated movement rather than restricting it. Access to land and resources was regulated through customary institutions, negotiated arrangements, and kinship networks rather than fixed territorial ownership. These arrangements allowed populations to adapt to environmental stress and economic change

while limiting large-scale conflict. Mobility thus functioned as a stabilizing force within social and political systems rather than a destabilising one (Herbst, 2000, pp. 91–95).

Colonial rule disrupted these systems by introducing fixed territorial sovereignty, centralised administration, and exclusionary notions of citizenship. European colonial authorities sought to immobilise populations to enforce labour regimes, taxation systems, and administrative control. Borders divided single communities across multiple colonial territories, undermining established mechanisms of resource sharing and dispute resolution. The resulting disjuncture between imposed territorial governance and lived social realities embedded structural tensions that would later manifest as displacement, contested belonging, and conflict (Mamdani, 1996, pp. 28–32).

In the post-independence era, African governments largely reaffirmed colonial boundaries under the principle of "uti possidetis", prioritising territorial integrity over mobility. While this principle reduced the likelihood of border wars, it also institutionalised rigid distinctions between citizens and non-citizens that failed to reflect historical patterns of movement. Legal frameworks governing nationality and residence often reproduced colonial exclusions, marginalizing populations whose economic and social lives extended beyond national borders (Adepoju, 2008, pp. 4–6). Over time, the gap between formal territorial governance and everyday mobility widened, creating conditions in which migration became associated with illegality, marginalization, and social vulnerability rather than integration.

1.2. Current Migration Challenges

Contemporary migration in Africa is shaped by the convergence of armed conflict, environmental stress, and economic exclusion. Protracted conflicts, such as the Sudan civil war since 2023, the South Sudan conflict since 2013, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) armed conflict, which intensified since 2017, and the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia from 2020-22, with ongoing regional impacts, have displaced millions of people. Climate-related pressures such as droughts, floods, and desertification continue to undermine rural livelihoods. In many contexts, declining agricultural productivity, competition over land and water, and weak governance structures erode the viability of remaining in place, compelling households to migrate as a strategy of survival (UNHCR, 2023a, pp. 12–15).

Forced migration refers to population movements in which individuals are compelled to leave their habitual residences due to threats such as conflict, persecution, environmental disasters, or severe economic collapse. Refugees are persons who cross international borders to escape violence or persecution and are protected under international law, while internally displaced persons remain within their countries of origin but face comparable vulnerabilities. Although not all migrants affected by adverse conditions fall within formal legal categories, the defining feature of forced displacement is the absence of meaningful alternatives (IOM, 2023, pp. 21–24).

Africa currently faces a structural paradox in migration governance. On the one hand, continental initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) promote the free movement of goods and capital as a pathway to integration and growth. On the other hand, the movement of people remains heavily restricted, reflecting state concerns over security, employment, and sovereignty. This asymmetry undermines regional integration by limiting labor mobility and reinforcing informal migration pathways, exacerbating what can be described as a scramble for belonging among displaced and mobile populations (Adepoju, 2008, pp. 10–12).

Efforts to address migration through containment and border control have proven insufficient to address these challenges. Restrictive policies often divert migration into informal and dangerous routes, increasing exposure to exploitation, trafficking, and violence. At the same time, host communities, particularly in low-income and fragile settings, experience pressure on public services and labour markets. These pressures are frequently politicised, fueling resentment and xenophobia and deepening social divisions rather than fostering integration (UNHCR, 2023b, pp. 33–36).

To effectively address these migration challenges, African states and regional organisations must acknowledge the historical legacies of colonial borders and exclusionary governance that continue to shape mobility today. Policies should shift from securitisation and restriction toward frameworks that recognise mobility as a resource for economic development, social cohesion, and regional integration. Harnessing migration for innovation, knowledge transfer, and labor mobility can transform displacement from a source of vulnerability into an opportunity for shared development and stability.

This paper situates forced migration within these historical and contemporary dynamics, arguing that migration is neither inherently destabilising nor automatically beneficial. Its consequences depend on how mobility is governed and how inclusion is negotiated within political and institutional frameworks. By examining how forced migration is reshaping Africa's political, economic, and social landscapes, the paper explores whether existing governance approaches can move beyond exclusion and securitisation toward models that support stability, regional integration, and shared development.

2. Redrawing Africa's Map

Forced migration in Africa is not merely a humanitarian consequence of conflict and crisis. It is an active force reshaping political boundaries, demographic configurations, and regional power relations. Large-scale displacement alters how borders function in practice, how citizenship is negotiated, and how sovereignty is exercised. Borders that were originally designed to fix populations within territorial units are increasingly experienced as porous, contested, and selectively enforced. In the African context, this reality extends to the right to move, belong, and redefine political and social spaces, even within borders that were not drawn by Africans themselves. Redrawing Africa's map, therefore, is not about erasing history but about reimagining political and social arrangements to reflect lived realities, foster cohesion, and build unity across communities that colonial boundaries artificially divided. In this sense, migration not only reflects instability but actively participates in the reconfiguration of political space across the continent (Andreas, 2003, pp. 82–85). Today, this calls for unity, as Kwame Nkrumah asserted, "We must unite now or perish" (Nkrumah, 1963). This emphasises the necessity of coordinated responses to migration pressures and the reshaping of Africa's political and social landscapes.

Across Africa, forced migration has transformed borders from administrative lines into zones of negotiation, control, and survival. In some contexts, borders function as sites of exclusion and containment, while in others they become spaces of economic exchange and social continuity. These transformations affect relations between neighbouring states, particularly where displacement flows are protracted and transboundary. As populations move in response to violence, environmental stress, and economic marginalisation, the governance, function, and lived experience of borders are increasingly determined by patterns of human mobility rather than by formal legal demarcation alone.

2.1. Conflict-Driven Migration

South Sudan's trajectory illustrates how displacement and state formation have become deeply intertwined. Prior to and following independence in 2011, prolonged civil war, political fragmentation, and elite competition triggered repeated waves of displacement (Johnson, 2016, pp. 112–118). Millions of South Sudanese fled to neighboring Uganda, Kenya, Sudan, and Ethiopia, fundamentally altering demographic patterns across the region. Refugee hosting areas expanded rapidly, placing sustained pressure on land, public services, and local governance structures within host states (UNHCR, 2023b, pp. 41–44).

Although South Sudan emerged as the world's newest state, its borders remained fragile and contested. Territorial sovereignty was shaped less by effective governance than by the movement of people escaping violence. Displacement weakened state authority in peripheral regions and complicated efforts to consolidate political control. External actors, including neighboring governments and international partners, pursued strategic and humanitarian interests that further entangled migration with regional geopolitics. In this context, displacement was not simply an outcome of conflict but a factor that influenced peace negotiations, regional diplomacy, and resource allocation.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), forced migration is inseparable from long–standing disputes over citizenship and belonging. The experience of the Banyarwanda population in eastern Congo highlights how colonial era policies institutionalized ethnic hierarchies that continue to structure contemporary conflict (Newbury, 2011, pp. 146–150). Contestation over land rights, nationality, and political inclusion has driven repeated cycles of violence, displacing communities and undermining prospects for durable return. Migration in eastern Congo is therefore both a consequence of insecurity and a mechanism through which insecurity is reproduced.

Armed groups operating in the region exploit unresolved identity claims and weak state presence, drawing on displaced populations for recruitment, taxation, and control. The persistence of displacement erodes trust between communities and the state, complicating peace building efforts and regional cooperation. Despite multiple peace initiatives and international interventions, deep-rooted mistrust among local communities and neighboring states continues to undermine stability, ensuring that displacement remains embedded within broader conflict systems.

Further north, Libya has emerged as both a gateway and a graveyard within Africa's migration landscape. Its geographic position has made it a central transit point for migrants moving toward Europe, while prolonged state collapse has exposed migrants to severe abuses (Lutterbeck, 2018, pp. 540–543). Detention centers, often operating with minimal oversight, have become sites of exploitation, forced labor, and violence. Migrants are subjected to practices that blur the line between migration management and systematic abuse.

European policies that externalize border control to Libyan authorities have intensified these dynamics by prioritizing containment over protection. As a result, Libya's borders function less as regulatory spaces and more as zones of extraction and coercion. This case demonstrates how African migration routes are shaped not only by internal dynamics but also by external geopolitical interests, reinforcing unequal power relations that redefine how borders are governed and experienced.

2.2. Climate Change and Resource Pressures

Beyond armed conflict, environmental stress has become a significant driver of displacement across Africa. Climate-induced migration is particularly pronounced in regions where livelihoods depend heavily on land and water resources. In the Sahel, desertification, soil degradation, and prolonged drought have reduced agricultural productivity and pasture availability, pushing pastoralist communities southward into farming areas (Homer–Dixon, 1999, pp. 73–76). These movements intensify competition over scarce resources and strain traditional systems of conflict resolution.

The conflict between Fulani herders and farming communities in Nigeria illustrates how climate stress intersects with identity, governance failures, and historical grievances. As grazing routes shrink and water sources become scarce, migration becomes both a survival strategy and a trigger for violence. State responses have often been fragmented and securitized, focusing on military deployment rather than mediation or resource governance. Similar dynamics are evident in Mali and Chad, where environmental degradation compounds political instability and armed mobilization (ICG, 2023, pp. 6–9).

Climate change does not operate as an isolated cause of migration. Instead, it acts as a multiplier that intensifies existing vulnerabilities related to poverty, weak governance, and social exclusion. Displacement driven by environmental stress reshapes borders by increasing cross-regional mobility, altering settlement patterns, and complicating state efforts to manage territory and populations. These processes challenge conventional distinctions between environmental and conflict-driven migration, revealing their deep interconnection.

2.3. Border Militarization

As migration pressures grow, African states have increasingly turned toward border securitization as a governance response. Governments in countries such as Kenya, South Africa, and Morocco have invested in surveillance infrastructure, border fencing, and security deployments, often with financial and technical support from external actors (Frowd, 2018, pp. 121–125). These measures are commonly justified in the language of national security, counterterrorism, and crime prevention, framing migration as a threat to be contained.

Rather than reducing migration, border militarization frequently diverts movement into more dangerous and irregular routes. Migrants are pushed toward smugglers and traffickers, increasing exposure to exploitation and life-threatening conditions (Bigo, 2002, pp. 69–72). Restrictive border regimes also reinforce the marginalization of displaced populations by criminalizing mobility while leaving the structural drivers of movement unaddressed. The absence of a continent-wide commitment to free movement reflects the continued dominance of state-centric sovereignty over regional mobility aspirations.

At the same time, migration reshapes social and political identities across borders. Transnational communities sustained by shared language, kinship, and economic networks challenge rigid notions of citizenship and belonging. These communities facilitate trade, remittances, and information flows that connect multiple states simultaneously (Vertovec, 2009, pp. 13–17). While such networks can enhance regional integration, they can also provoke backlash in host societies, particularly during periods of economic stress and political uncertainty.

In South Africa, repeated outbreaks of xenophobic violence illustrate how migration intersects with unemployment, inequality, and political frustration. Migrants are frequently scapegoated for structural economic problems despite limited evidence that they are primary drivers of job losses or service shortages (ILO, 2023, pp. 58–61). Similar tensions exist elsewhere on the continent, where weak service provision and governance failures heighten resentment

toward newcomers. These dynamics demonstrate that forced migration redraws borders not only geographically, but also socially and politically, redefining who belongs and under what conditions.

To contextualize how forced migration reshapes borders, population distribution, and regional governance across Africa, Table 1 provides a comparative overview of displacement patterns, drivers of movement, and associated governance implications across key regions of the continent.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Forced Migration Patterns in Africa

Region	Estimated Displaced Population	Primary Drivers of Movement	Dominant Type of Movement	Main Host Countries or Areas	Key Governance and Security Implications
Horn of Africa	Over 18 million displaced	Armed conflict, political instability, drought, and food insecurity	Refugees and internally displaced persons	Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan	Protracted displacement strains host state capacity, regional security cooperation is required, and borders are increasingly securitized
Great Lakes Region	Over 15 million displaced	Citizenship disputes, armed groups, and land conflicts	Internally displaced persons and cross-border refugees	Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania	Regionalized conflict systems, contested nationality, and challenges to post-conflict reconstruction
Sahel	Over 10 million displaced	Climate stress, desertification, insurgency, and weak governance	Mixed forced and survival migration	Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria	Climate conflict nexus intensifies insecurity, displacement fuels recruitment into armed groups
North Africa	Over 5 million migrants and displaced persons	State collapse, conflict, transit migration	Transit migration and refugees	Libya, Tunisia, Egypt	Externalized border control, severe human rights risks, and geopolitical pressure from Europe
Southern Africa	Over 6 million migrants and displaced persons	Armed conflict, political instability, drought, and food insecurity	Refugees and internally displaced persons	South Africa, Botswana, Namibia	Xenophobia, urban pressure, securitization of migration discourse
East Africa Urban Centers	Millions of urban displaced populations	Conflict displacement, economic exclusion	Urban refugee and informal settlement growth	Nairobi, Kampala, Addis Ababa	Informal economies expand, pressure on housing and services, and integration challenges

3. Economic and Social Impacts of Forced Migration

Forced migration is often framed primarily as a humanitarian emergency or a security concern, leading to policy responses that emphasize relief, containment, or control. Within this framing,

displaced populations are frequently portrayed as economic burdens that strain public services, depress wages, and exacerbate social tensions in host communities. While such pressures are real, particularly in low-income and fragile states, this perspective obscures the more complex and dynamic economic and social effects of forced migration. Across Africa, displacement has simultaneously generated constraints and opportunities, reshaping labor markets, urban economies, and social relations in ways that require more nuanced analysis (World Bank, 2020b, pp. 3–6).

Forced migration alters economic systems not only through the immediate demand it places on host communities but also through longer-term processes of adaptation, entrepreneurship, and integration. Displaced populations often arrive with limited assets and legal protection, yet over time, they develop strategies to sustain livelihoods within constrained environments. These strategies interact with local economies, sometimes reinforcing existing inequalities but also creating new forms of economic activity. Understanding the economic and social impact of forced migration, therefore, requires moving beyond short-term cost assessments toward an examination of how mobility reshapes production, exchange, and social organization.

3.1. Economic contributions

Displaced populations across Africa have demonstrated considerable resilience and adaptability, often contributing to local economies despite operating under restrictive legal and social conditions. One of the most frequently cited examples is the Somali refugee and migrant community in Eastleigh, Nairobi. Over several decades, Eastleigh evolved into a major commercial hub driven largely by Somali entrepreneurs who established extensive trade networks linking East Africa with the Middle East and Asia (Foster, 2019, pp. 291–94). These networks supported wholesale and retail trade, facilitated access to imported goods, and generated employment opportunities for both migrants and Kenyan citizens. In this context, forced migration became intertwined with urban economic transformation.

Beyond urban commerce, migration has played a significant role in sustaining regional trade networks across Africa. In West Africa, migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire have long facilitated the circulation of agricultural produce, textiles, and consumer goods across borders, particularly within informal and semi–formal markets (Adepoju, 2008, pp. 15–18). These trading systems are especially important in contexts where formal employment remains limited, and state regulation is weak. Migrant traders often act as intermediaries between rural producers and urban consumers, contributing to food security and market integration across national boundaries.

Remittances further underscore the economic significance of migration. Financial transfers from migrants to households in countries of origin provide income support that can reduce poverty, smooth consumption, and finance education and healthcare. In several African countries, remittances constitute a significant share of household income and national foreign exchange earnings (World Bank, 2020a, pp. 7–9). Even when migrants are forcibly displaced, remittance flows can persist over time as individuals establish new livelihoods, illustrating the long-term economic linkages created by mobility.

At the same time, the economic impact of forced migration is uneven and highly context-dependent. Host countries with limited fiscal capacity often struggle to expand infrastructure, healthcare, education, and housing to accommodate large inflows of displaced populations. Uganda's relatively progressive refugee policies, which allow refugees to work, move freely, and access public services, illustrate both the opportunities and the constraints associated with hosting large refugee populations (UNHCR, 2023b, pp. 52–55). While refugees contribute to local markets, agricultural production, and service provision, the scale of displacement places

sustained pressure on land availability, public budgets, and local governance. These realities complicate claims that migration automatically generates economic benefits and highlight the central role of institutional capacity in shaping outcomes.

3.2. Social Impacts

Beyond economics, forced migration profoundly reshapes social relations, collective identities, and notions of belonging. Migration facilitates cultural exchange and social interaction, particularly in urban centers where diverse populations live and work in close proximity. Cities such as Nairobi, Kampala, and Johannesburg have been transformed by migrant communities whose languages, cuisines, religious practices, and social norms contribute to evolving urban cultures (Vertovec, 2009, pp. 19–22). These interactions can foster social dynamism and innovation, expanding cultural repertoires and social networks within host societies.

In some contexts, forced migration has supported social integration and cooperation between displaced populations and host communities. In Uganda, refugees from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have settled alongside local populations, participating in shared economic activities and social institutions. Access to land and the right to work have, in certain areas, reduced competition and enabled collaborative livelihoods, fostering coexistence rather than conflict (Crisp, 2004, pp. 12–15). Migrant communities can also function as social bridges, maintaining transnational ties that connect host societies to broader regional and global networks. However, social integration is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Rapid demographic change can intensify anxiety over employment, housing, and access to public services, particularly in urban areas characterized by high unemployment and inequality. These pressures are frequently politicized, with migrants framed as competitors or threats rather than as participants in shared economic systems. South Africa provides a stark illustration, where recurrent episodes of xenophobic violence reflect deeper frustrations related to inequality, unemployment, and limited state capacity (ILO, 2023, pp. 58–61). Migrants, especially those without secure legal status, become visible targets during periods of economic and political stress, reinforcing exclusion rather than cohesion.

Forced migration also raises complex questions about cultural preservation and identity. While cultural hybridization can enrich societies, it may also generate fears of cultural erosion among smaller or historically marginalized communities. Groups such as the San, the Dogon, and pastoralist societies across the Sahel face the risk that displacement and assimilation may weaken linguistic, cultural, and social traditions that are central to collective identity (Cohen, 2021, pp. 84–87). These concerns complicate normative assumptions that diversity and multiculturalism are always unproblematic, underscoring the need to balance integration with respect for cultural autonomy and self-determination.

Taken together, the economic and social impacts of forced migration resist simple categorization as either positive or negative. Forced migration can stimulate entrepreneurship, trade, and cultural exchange, while simultaneously intensifying competition over resources and challenging social cohesion. The outcomes depend less on migration itself than on the institutional, political, and economic frameworks that govern mobility and mediate inclusion within host societies. Effective migration governance therefore plays a decisive role in determining whether forced displacement contributes to resilience and shared development or to exclusion and social fragmentation. "It is clear that we must find an African solution to our problems, and that this can only be found in African unity. Divided we are weak; united, Africa could become one of the greatest forces for good in the world" (Nkrumah, 1963).

4. Security Risks of Forced Migration

Large scale forced migration in Africa presents significant security challenges for both countries of origin and host states. These challenges do not arise from mobility itself, but from the interaction between displacement, weak governance, resource scarcity, and political exclusion. In regions affected by protracted conflict and environmental stress, forced migration can intensify existing tensions, strain institutional capacity, and contribute to cycles of violence. Security responses that focus narrowly on containment and militarization frequently exacerbate these risks by deepening human insecurity and undermining social cohesion rather than addressing the structural causes of displacement (Bigo, 2002, pp. 65–68).

Forced migration alters security landscapes by redistributing populations across fragile political and economic environments. Sudden population movements can overwhelm local institutions that already lack the capacity to provide security, basic services, and dispute resolution. Where governance systems are weak, displacement amplifies grievances related to access to land, employment, and political representation. These pressures create conditions in which insecurity is reproduced, not only through violence but also through chronic instability and institutional erosion.

4.1. Conflict Triggers

Forced migration frequently functions as a conflict multiplier by aggravating preexisting political, social, and economic tensions. In contexts where governance structures are fragile, the sudden arrival of large displaced populations can disrupt livelihoods, strain local service provision, and intensify competition over land, water, and employment. These dynamics are particularly visible in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and parts of Central Africa, where displacement intersects with violent extremism, organized crime, and long-standing underdevelopment (Florquin and Berman, 2005, pp. 41–44).

Displaced populations, especially young people facing prolonged unemployment, limited education, and uncertain legal status, often inhabit environments characterized by insecurity and exclusion. In such contexts, armed groups exploit vulnerability by offering protection, income, or a sense of belonging. Boko Haram and Al Shabaab have capitalized on displacement dynamics by recruiting among populations affected by conflict and environmental stress, drawing on grievances linked to marginalization and state neglect (Campbell, 2013, pp. 29–33; Botha and Abdile, 2014, pp. 8–11). The availability of small arms and the porosity of borders further intensify these processes, enabling armed actors to operate across national boundaries with relative ease.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) illustrates how forced migration can both result from and contribute to insecurity. Prolonged displacement undermines local governance by weakening administrative authority, fragmenting community structures, and disrupting customary mechanisms of conflict resolution. As displaced populations move across provinces and into neighboring states, conflict dynamics become increasingly regionalized, drawing in external actors and complicating peace efforts (Newbury, 2011, pp. 158–162). In such settings, forced migration is not merely a symptom of insecurity but an integral component of conflict systems that perpetuate violence and instability.

Importantly, the security risks associated with displacement are not inherent to displaced populations themselves. Rather, they emerge from prolonged exclusion, lack of legal protection, and limited access to livelihoods. Where displaced people are denied rights and opportunities, insecurity becomes more likely. This distinction is critical, as policies that conflate migration with insecurity risk reinforcing the very conditions that armed actors exploit.

4.2. Border Policies

In response to perceived security threats, many African states have increasingly securitized their borders. This trend has been reinforced by external actors who provide funding, surveillance technologies, and technical assistance for border management. Libya, Kenya, South Africa, and Morocco have expanded border patrols, surveillance systems, and detention practices, framing migration as a matter of national and regional security (Andreas, 2003, pp. 90–93; Frowd, 2018, pp. 127–130).

While securitization is intended to assert state control, it often produces severe humanitarian and security consequences. Migrants and refugees are pushed toward irregular routes that expose them to trafficking, exploitation, and violence. Detention practices, particularly in transit countries such as Libya, have been associated with widespread human rights abuses, including forced labor, torture, and sexual violence (Lutterbeck, 2018, pp. 543–546). Such practices undermine international and regional commitments to refugee protection and erode the legitimacy of state authority.

The securitization of migration also risks destabilizing regional relations. Militarized borders can heighten tensions between neighboring states, particularly where displacement flows are transboundary and protracted. In the Horn of Africa, border closures and security operations have complicated cooperation among Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan, limiting the effectiveness of regional responses to shared security challenges (Mulugeta, 2014, pp. 150–153). Fragmented national approaches to border control reduce information sharing and weaken collective capacity to manage displacement.

African regional institutions have attempted to address these risks through cooperative security frameworks. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the African Union (AU) have deployed peace operations, facilitated mediation, and promoted policy coordination. These efforts reflect recognition that forced migration and insecurity are regional challenges that cannot be addressed unilaterally. However, their effectiveness remains constrained by limited resources, uneven political commitment, and divergent national priorities (Dzimiri, 2020, pp. 224–227).

Ultimately, treating migration primarily as a security threat obscures its underlying drivers and undermines long-term stability. Security strategies that fail to address conflict, political exclusion, and environmental stress are unlikely to reduce displacement. Instead, they risk deepening grievances and reinforcing cycles of insecurity. A more sustainable approach requires integrating human security, rights protection, and regional cooperation into migration governance, moving beyond militarized border controls toward frameworks that prioritize stability through inclusion. "Unite we must. Without necessarily sacrificing our sovereignties, we can forge a political union based on defence, foreign affairs and diplomacy, and a common citizenship, an African currency, a monetary zone and a central bank" (Nkrumah, 1963).

5. The Path Forward and Conclusion

5.1. Path Forward

Africa's migration challenge lies not in mobility itself, but in the conditions under which mobility occurs and is governed. Across the continent, millions of people are compelled to move because conflict, environmental stress, and economic exclusion leave them with no viable alternatives. The concept of forced belonging captures this condition by describing situations in which individuals are displaced from their homes yet denied meaningful rights, recognition, and long-

term security in places of refuge. Under such conditions, movement becomes a survival strategy rather than a choice. Moving beyond forced belonging, therefore, requires governance frameworks that transform displacement into structured, voluntary, and dignified mobility grounded in rights, inclusion, and shared responsibility.

A critical foundation for this transformation lies in Agenda 2063, particularly Aspiration 2, which envisions an integrated continent that is politically united and rooted in the ideals of Pan Africanism and Africa's Renaissance. This vision recognizes that continental unity cannot be achieved solely through economic integration or political cooperation among states. The movement of people is central to the realization of a shared African identity and a functional regional economy. When mobility is fragmented and securitized, it undermines the very principles of integration that Agenda 2063 seeks to promote (African Union, 2015, pp. 24–27). Migration governance must therefore be treated as a core pillar of African unity rather than as a peripheral or technical policy domain.

This Nkrumah-inspired push for unity is not only an internal African project; it also bears directly on how the continent engages the rest of the world. With the African Union now a member of the G20, Africa has an unprecedented opportunity to speak with one voice rather than as fifty-five separate and unequally positioned negotiating parties, a fragmentation that former colonial powers, and more recently other major economies, have long been able to exploit through divide-and-rule bargaining. A coherent, continent-wide migration regime would be one visible expression of a broader shift toward greater regulatory uniformity and simplification across African states. Such uniformity would make it easier for outside investors and trading partners to engage with Africa as a single, predictable market rather than negotiating dozens of bespoke regimes, and it would strengthen Africa's collective bargaining position in trade and investment negotiations, including efforts to secure fairer prices for natural-resource exports that have often been sold well below their true value. A unified approach to mobility, in other words, is not only about who may cross African borders; it is also part of the wider project of consolidating African agency in the global economy.

The African Union Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action for the period 2018–30 provides a comprehensive roadmap for managing migration through a rights-based and development-oriented approach. The framework emphasizes regular migration pathways, labor mobility, protection for migrants and displaced persons, and cooperation among states (African Union, 2018, pp. 11–15). It reflects an understanding that migration can contribute to development when it is well governed. However, implementation across member states has remained uneven. Limited institutional capacity, political hesitation, and the dominance of security driven approaches have constrained progress. In many cases, national policies remain misaligned with continental commitments, creating gaps between normative frameworks and lived realities.

The African Union Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons (AU-FMP) represents a concrete mechanism for operationalizing this vision. By enabling Africans to travel, reside, and work across borders, the protocol seeks to normalize mobility and reduce irregular migration by expanding legal pathways (African Union, 2022, pp. 6–9). It also aims to support labor market integration and regional economic development. Concerns regarding labor competition, security risks, and absorptive capacity are legitimate, particularly given disparities in economic development and state capacity across the continent. Nevertheless, prolonged reliance on restrictive migration regimes has often deepened informality, exploitation, and vulnerability, undermining both state authority and migrant protection. A phased and coordinated approach to implementation, supported by regional institutions and responsibility-sharing mechanisms, offers a more sustainable alternative to blanket restriction.

Making structured, rights-based, and cooperative governance concrete requires confronting the scale of economic divergence across the continent. Roughly sixteen African states have a gross national income per capita below $1,000, with Burundi as low as $260, while comparatively wealthy states such as South Africa, Botswana, and Libya exceed $6,000. This gap is far wider than in other regions that have liberalized movement: within the European Union, the largest divergence, between the Nordic countries and Bulgaria, is only around four to one. Applying a single, immediate, EU-style regime of unrestricted movement across such disparate economies risks channeling large and rapid population flows toward a handful of wealthier states, straining the absorptive capacity of the small and often vulnerable communities that would host them. A structured approach must therefore be graduated rather than uniform: liberalizing movement first and most fully among states with comparable income levels and labor-market conditions, such as within individual Regional Economic Communities, while phasing in wider continental mobility over time and pairing it with burden-sharing funds, infrastructure support, and transitional safeguards for receiving communities that face disproportionate pressure. Equally, easier mobility can impose costs on countries of origin, since those who leave are often young adults with above-average education and financial resources, raising the risk of brain drain in states that can least afford to lose scarce skilled labor. A rights-based framework should offset this through mechanisms such as circular and temporary labor migration schemes, diaspora and skills-transfer partnerships, and remittance- or destination-country-financed investment in the health, education, and training systems of sending states. Cooperative governance, in this sense, means calibrating the pace and design of liberalization to underlying economic realities, not simply removing restrictions uniformly across a continent whose members remain profoundly unequal.

Africa's migration governance agenda also aligns closely with global development commitments, notably Sustainable Development Goal Target 10.7, which calls for orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration, and Sustainable Development Goal 16, which emphasizes peace, justice, and strong institutions. These goals underscore the need to balance mobility with protection and state interests with human security (United Nations, 2015, pp. 18–20). Exclusionary migration policies weaken institutional legitimacy by pushing mobility into informal and unregulated spaces, while inclusive frameworks enhance development outcomes, social cohesion, and trust between states and populations.

Human rights instruments further reinforce this pathway. The 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa reflects the continent's recognition of mass displacement as a structural reality rather than an exception. By expanding the definition of refugees beyond narrow persecution-based criteria, the convention affirms collective responsibility and solidarity (African Union, 1969, pp. 2–4). Similarly, the 2009 Kampala Convention on Internally Displaced Persons establishes clear obligations for states to prevent displacement, protect displaced populations, and support durable solutions (African Union, 2009, pp. 5–7). Despite their progressive scope, implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in conflict-affected and resource-constrained contexts. Strengthening compliance with these instruments is therefore essential to reducing forced migration and mitigating its associated vulnerabilities.

Moving toward an Africa without forced belonging also requires addressing the root causes of displacement. Protection mechanisms and legal frameworks are insufficient if conflict, political exclusion, climate stress, and uneven development persist. Investments in peacebuilding, inclusive governance, climate adaptation, and equitable economic growth are

critical complements to migration policy reform. Regional cooperation can further support responsibility sharing by easing pressure on frontline states and reducing the likelihood that displacement flows will become destabilizing. Addressing forced migration in isolation from broader development and governance challenges risks treating symptoms rather than causes.

Ultimately, transforming forced belonging into voluntary and dignified mobility requires sustained political will, institutional reform, and regional solidarity. Migration will remain a defining feature of Africa's future. The central question is whether it will continue to be governed through exclusion and securitization or reimagined as a foundation for unity, resilience, and shared development.

5.2. Conclusion

Forced migration in Africa is not an anomaly but a structural outcome of the continent's historical, political, and economic trajectories. From colonial border making to contemporary conflicts, climate stress, and uneven development, displacement has remained a recurring feature of African societies. The challenge facing the continent is therefore not whether migration will occur, but how it is governed and whose interests it serves. When mobility is managed through exclusion, securitization, and fragmented policies, it deepens vulnerability and reinforces conditions of forced belonging.

This study has demonstrated that forced migration reshapes Africa's borders not only geographically, but also socially, economically, and politically. Displacement alters demographic patterns, reconfigures labor markets, and transforms notions of citizenship and identity. While migration can generate economic dynamism, entrepreneurship, and cultural exchange, it can also intensify competition over resources, strain public services, and fuel insecurity when governance frameworks are weak. These outcomes are not inherent to migration itself but are produced through institutional and policy environments that shape how mobility is experienced.

Current approaches to migration governance in Africa remain marked by contradiction. Continental integration initiatives promote the free movement of goods and capital, yet the movement of people continues to be constrained by restrictive border regimes and security driven responses. This imbalance undermines regional cooperation and fails to address the structural drivers of displacement. An overreliance on border control and containment often exacerbates human insecurity while doing little to prevent irregular movement.

A sustainable response requires a shift from reactive and exclusionary models towards structured, rights-based, and cooperative migration governance. Aligning national and regional policies with continental frameworks such as Agenda 2063, the African Union Migration Policy Framework, and the Free Movement of Persons Protocol offers a pathway to transforming displacement into dignified and voluntary mobility. Equally important is addressing the drivers of forced migration through conflict prevention, inclusive development, and climate resilience.

In conclusion, Africa's future unity and stability will be shaped in part by how it governs mobility. Migration can either reinforce fragmentation or contribute to integration, depending on the choices made by states and regional institutions. Moving beyond forced belonging toward secure and voluntary mobility is not only a humanitarian imperative but also a political and developmental necessity for the continent. "My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together." This assertion by Archbishop Desmond Tutu captures the ethical foundation upon which a just, integrated, and people-centred African migration order must ultimately rest.

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