

In Search of Opportunities

Voices of children on the move in West and Central Africa



#ChildrenUprooted

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Borders and movement in the region

Migration is one of the most pressing issues of our time. The issue looms large in our global narrative because the world is experiencing an unprecedented surge in population movement as people seek shelter from conflict, leave everything behind to escape poverty or lose their livelihoods due to climate change. But the depiction of this movement as a migration 'crisis' pounding on the gates of Europe is only part of the story. What it fails to reflect is the more common experience of the vast majority of migrants from West and Central Africa who do not attempt the perilous journeys to Italy, Spain or Greece.

Migration is nothing new. The desire to be safe with our families, to see our children grow up healthy, strong and educated, and to afford the next generation more opportunities than we have are universal aspirations that bind us together as human beings.

In order to secure these fundamental ambitions, humans have moved and sought better conditions in far-away places from time immemorial. Our ancestors moved to survive and flourish, and so we also follow in their footsteps. It is through compassionate understanding that the so-called 'migration crisis' can most effectively be addressed. Migrants do not generally set out to live off public services elsewhere; they are men, women and children striving for what humans have always yearned for: safety and a better life.



Children are especially affected by migration. Sixty five million children are currently on the move worldwide and hundreds of thousands are estimated to be unaccompanied, traveling without their families, often to find work and support the family at home with remittances. But there are also instances where children are moving with their families in a way that is planned – to open up a business or trying to access better education in another country. In most cases, migration involves uprooting children from lives that are settled, which can be hugely disruptive, stressful or even dangerous. With the number of people on the move rising both in the region and around the world, it is critical that we better understand the multitude of reasons why children are moving and to keep their best interests at the centre of our response.

Within the West and Central Africa region, the movement of people precedes any current geopolitical structure such as nation states or free trade zones. It is marked by ancient trade routes stretching from Ndjamena to Timbuktu. These trade routes paved the way for the flow of ideas, goods, hopes and dreams. Migrants have crossed this region for centuries and movement continues to this day, facilitated by frameworks like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) that allows legal regular migration within West Africa.

Each year, an estimated 12 million people cross borders in West and Central Africa. In fact, the vast majority of those people are not trying to get to Europe. More than 75 per

cent of them move *within* sub Saharan Africa, going from one country to another, either for economic opportunities or fleeing from conflict.

**75% of migrants
from the region are not
bound for Europe.**

It is African nations that are absorbing the majority of migrants and shouldering the burden of these millions of new arrivals. In countries where public services are sometimes stretched or inadequate, the predicted increase in migration will place these precarious systems under even greater strain, with potentially dire consequences for children. Demographic trends combined with displacement as a result of climate change could further amplify migration in the region and create greater stress on already overloaded systems.

This report aims to paint a more balanced picture of migration in West and Central Africa. By bringing out the voices of the children whose lives are shaped by migration, the report seeks to better understand the motivations for their movement, the methods they use and the challenges they face along the way. Ultimately, it asks the question: what can be done to provide children with care and protection before, during and after their move?

Drivers of migration

Poverty is often cited as a key driver of migration, but what does that mean? Not all migrants come out of poverty, and not all people living in poverty become migrants; this simplistic analysis is both inadequate and misleading. Countries like Burkina Faso and Niger have the highest percentage of people worldwide living on less than US\$2/day and yet, they are not the primary source countries in the region.

Poverty is fundamentally about the lack of economic opportunity, education, access to health care and access to information. These deprivations, when they are combined, create a deep sense of dissatisfaction, which can lead people to look for something better – elsewhere.

At the same time, poverty can create a vicious cycle where people are unable to move because they cannot access health care, education or information – the very things which they might be seeking in the first place. Undertaking any journey of migration, either to Europe or to another country, requires physical and mental strength to overcome the demands of travel. It also may require considerable financial resources and assets. This tends to favour the strong and healthy who are able to navigate the complex network of buses and transport, which is made easier by having the ability to read, write

and count. However, many migrants recount that they set out without enough funds, and tried to earn money as they travelled, while others described going into debt with the smugglers they had hired, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

Yet, it is clear that poverty is a powerful driver of migration in West and Central Africa. Countries with high levels of poverty are more likely to be a source of migration as people look to improve their lot in life. In interviews, migrants describe the feeling of 'having nothing to lose,' aware that by migrating they are taking a risk, but it is a gamble that might pay off.

**More than 12 million people
cross borders in West and
Central Africa each year.**

Until we can start to deal with the multiple root causes of poverty, and provide solutions in the form of economic opportunities, access to health care and access to quality education, we will likely continue to see people living in poverty who will be willing to risk their lives for a better future.

For Awa in Mali, migration is not her priority. She struggles to feed her baby and endures precarious conditions where she lives in Sikasso.

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European dream, desert nightmare

"I was beaten with sticks, with lead pipes and with a motorcycle chain. Every day they beat me and demanded money."

Malik remembers his ordeal of being tortured by kidnappers with a calmness and distance, but his voice suggests a very deep well of emotions. He has been back in the Gambia for a few months, and each day he struggles to forget what he has seen. His frame has a greater fragility than most 16-year-olds but his quiet presence indicates resilience and strength.

The humble compound where he now tells his story is part of the reason he left for Europe, left to go 'backway' to Italy through Libya. Chickens and goats pick through the garbage piles and dozens of family members live in crumbling houses that reflect a sense of resignation and hopelessness.

"I went to try to provide for my mother," said Malik. "I wanted to send her money and be a good son."

Boys like Malik can rapidly ascend a family hierarchy if they make it to Europe. The successful migrant commands the respect of the family, allowing young boys to surpass the influence of their older brothers and, in some cases, even their father.

Malik set out by bus at the age of 15. He had only a vague idea of where he was going and he slipped away without telling his family. Checkpoints, official and unofficial, chewed away at his funds as he made his way through Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso and Niger. By the time he reached Libya, he was out of money and out of luck. He was abducted by kidnappers who began regular beatings and ransom demands.

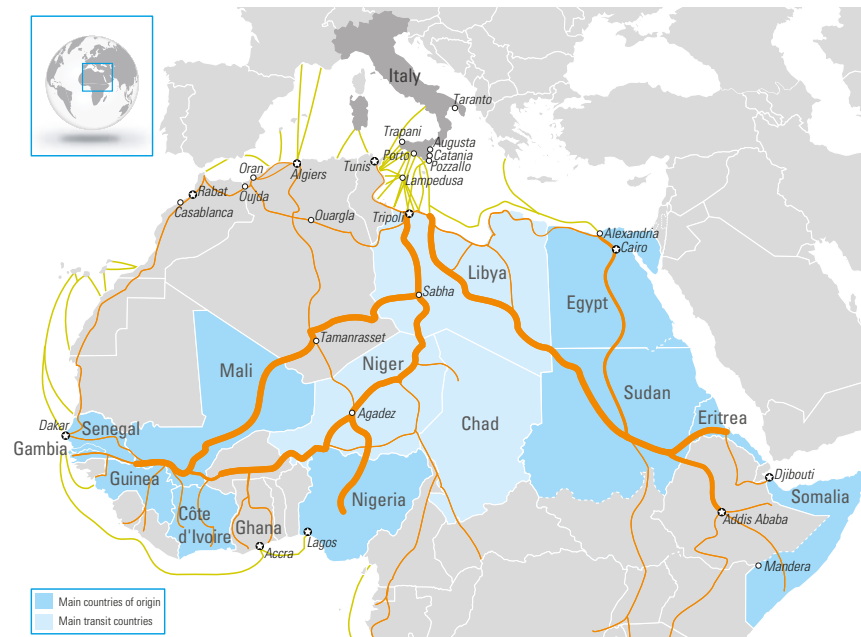
His family at home received the calls with panic and hopelessness. With no money to send, they could only listen to the cries of their boy and the angry shouts of his abductors. Months went by and Malik's health collapsed but the beatings did not relent. In the same desperate cell, a fellow Gambian migrant was in worse shape than Mohammed. He was dying but his ransom had just been paid and he was too weak to leave. In an act of kindness and humanity he pleaded with the guards to give Malik his freedom, he begged so that Malik could take his place.

Dazed and terrified, somehow Malik made his way home from Libya back to the Gambia. The generosity and kindness of his fellow migrant had saved his life. While his family was overjoyed to see him return, many boys like him face stigma and feel a sense of shame for not having made it to Europe. Malik's nightmare experience has discouraged him from ever trying to go 'backway' again.

"I tell boys about what I have seen," he says. "If I can stop one person from going then I will be doing something good."

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Central Mediterranean migration routes



Source: Adapted from European Union, Emergency Response Coordination Centre (EERC), Refugee Crisis – Central Mediterranean Route: ECHO Daily Map, 4 November 2016, <http://erccportal.jrc.ec.europa.eu/getdailymap/docId/1801>

Primary routes to Libya and Europe show focal points like Bamako in Mali. Dusty and battered buses come and go at all hours, taking migrants closer to their dream, or back home where they started.



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Climate change

It is one of the most bitter ironies that the countries that have done the least to cause climate change are going to suffer the most. Countries that have minuscule carbon footprints are going to be the first to suffer the consequences of flooding, drought and displacement. In West and Central Africa, the impact of climate change will be especially severe, with the region set to experience a 3 to 4 degree rise in temperature this century – more than one and a half times higher than anywhere else on the planet.

Across the Sahel, communities have endured fluctuations in rainfall and weather patterns for centuries and have moved or adapted accordingly. As climate change begins to have greater impact in these areas, some forms of agriculture or pastoral lifestyle may become unpredictable and ultimately unsustainable. When these means of providing begin to falter, people are unable to feed their families, unable to make a living, and unable to give their children a better life. As a result, occupations like farming or herding may cease to be viable in some areas.

With drought and temperatures intensifying in West and Central Africa, tensions in accessing scarce resources for cattle are also increasing hostilities in many rural areas, pushing greater numbers of people towards cities. But with more than 100 million people living in coastal cities less than one metre above sea level, even conservative estimates of a sea-level rise could result in the forced displacement of millions of climate refugees.

Climate change has the potential to set off a chain reaction, with drought driving displacement to urban areas, often in precarious settlements or marginal neighbourhoods that are in swamps or low lying areas. These areas are more vulnerable to flooding, which could cause waves of displacement as people seek safety for their families and children. Unless the long-term planning of governments and civil society is equipped to anticipate these climate shocks and subsequent migration, the unmitigated impact of these forces will create detrimental outcomes for children across the region.

Sub-Saharan Africa is predicted to experience a 3 to 4 degree rise in temperature during this century, more than 1.5 times greater than the rest of the planet.

Urbanization

In 2008, the world reached a tipping point: more people live in cities than in rural areas. This trend is set to continue – and intensify – and it is one of the main drivers for migration in West and Central Africa, with people crossing borders to get to urban centres.

Cities promise not only more jobs, but different jobs, more stable jobs – jobs that are not dependent on the amount of rainfall or the amount of crop yield. Urbanization is a big part of the story of migration, as people are crossing the borders of their own countries in order to seek the activities, economic opportunities and stability that comes from living in cities.

The arrival of people in cities can have mixed results for children, especially when there are breaks or gaps in the services for vulnerable children or when migrants are unable to access support because they are disorientated by their new environment and they are coping with the struggles of survival.

Despite the proximity of services, the risks and challenges for children in cities increase exponentially, as migrants arrive in new neighbourhoods, sometimes without friends or family, they can find it hard to access the support



systems that are offered. For migrants arriving in a new country where they do not speak the language, without systems in place to help them settle and assist them in coping with the bewildering challenges before them, children are at risk of missing out on crucial services like health care or education, even if the school or health centre is just around the corner.

The presence of good schools is no guarantee that migrant children will be enrolled. Migrants face a range of challenges as they settle in a new city, and the economic pressures of urban life can force children into work, sometimes in dangerous conditions, where they are more vulnerable to traffickers, smugglers and other criminals. In the cities, the erosion of the protective rural family unit can result in children falling through the cracks. Unknown and unnoticed, the vulnerable can become invisible in the cacophony of the modern city.

Yet urbanization can have multiple benefits for children, despite these serious risks. Going to school in a

neighbourhood with peers who have excelled in their studies can provide a glimpse of what is possible with education, in a way that would have been unlikely in the countryside. Interacting with people from different cultures and different countries can expand the horizons and curiosity of children with innumerable positive benefits.

Urbanization is not just the point-to-point process. Families that left rural areas 20 years ago now have children who have grown up in a city, who have been exposed to a range of ideas and opportunities. The rapid urbanization of the past 20 to 30 years is, in fact, amplifying the effect of migration as younger generations feel less connection to the rural life that their parents came from. In interviews, migrants described a sense of distance from their ancestral home. For these migrants, urbanization has untethered them and empowered them to explore other opportunities that might lie in a different or a bigger city, another country, or even another continent.



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In the swamps and on the margins

Sandrine and her nine-year-old son Chris form a vulnerable little family. Like many migrants, they left their home, yet have found it hard to get on their feet in their new city. The mother and son emigrated from Burkina Faso to Cote d'Ivoire in 2014 and they have struggled in a country where they face difficulties to access services and do not have a support network.

They live in a makeshift house under a tarp down by the swamp in San Pedro, in the south-west of the country. Their place floods when it rains and it is filled with mosquitos. Chris tries to stay away as much as possible.

“I do not like to come home because then I am not allowed to see my friends anymore,” he says. *“And my mom punishes me when I do something wrong.”*

Many migrants have succeeded in this community, but Chris and his mother are not so fortunate. For Sandrine, life is a constant struggle for survival and fear for her son.

“I’ve come to a point where I don’t know how to handle the situation or handle him,” she says. Sandrine admits that the stress she is under often makes her lose her temper and hit her son.

Even though they are living in an informal settlement, social services came with the police one day. Sandrine was told that she had to stop mistreating her son; otherwise he would be taken to a centre for his own protection.

The intervention of social services has allowed Sandrine to access some financial support, which helps her to cope better, and social workers visit regularly to follow up on Chris and help him adjust to life in Côte d'Ivoire.

Living on the margins of society, migrants like Sandrine sometimes find it daunting to access services that might help them to settle. Formalizing their status in a new country is crucial to access services like education and health care, especially when they are supported and welcomed. Without this support, they can remain in the shadows, and life soon becomes a daily battle for survival, bringing children into a world of suffering and vulnerability.

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Education

There is no doubt that education is one of the forces behind migration. It drives families to seek better opportunities for their children as a fundamental aspiration of migrants is to see their children learn and master skills that they never had themselves.

For some migrants who dream of getting to Europe, education was cited as the primary motivation for their journey. In interviews, young people described their plan to get to Europe, get a university degree then return home to share their skills. While other migrants are more motivated by the idea of earning money, the majority of migrants who travel to Europe have been through years of schooling and are capable of excelling in secondary schools if they are given the chance.



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