



Situation Report

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The perilous journeys of Sub-Saharan African emigrants to Europe: Why take the risk?

A brief history
of African
migration

In September 2005, the Spanish border police, armed with riot gear and rubber bullets, faced hundreds of sub-Saharan African emigrants prepared to risk their lives to get across the razor wire topped perimeter fence around Ceuta and Mellila, the two enclaves controlled by Spain, off the Moroccan coast and disputed by Rabat. The migrants were attempting to enter Europe (Tremlet 2005; Soudan 2005). The Spanish branch of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported to have found more than 500 of those would-be migrants abandoned in the Moroccan desert after being expelled from the two enclaves. According to MSF, African migrants had been 'abandoned to their fate' near El Aouina-Souatar, hundreds of kilometres south of the enclaves. The group included pregnant women and children¹

On 7th September 2007, ten North African would-be migrants drowned when their vessel capsized just off the Canary Islands. According to the same report, some 50 more had disappeared without trace off the Canaries about a month earlier, on 19th July.² In another development, Italian coastguards claimed to have rescued more than 400 migrants off the southern island of Lampedusa on 14th September 2007, including a group of 300 men, women and children crammed into a wooden boat.³

Africans have been migrating to Europe for decades. In recent years, however, a number of African emigrants embark on a risky journey through North Africa with the aim of reaching Europe via Spain, Malta or Italy as seen above. Focusing on migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, this report addresses a number of questions, including: Why are some emigrants choosing such hazardous journeys? What are the conditions in which they undertake this adventure? How are they received and perceived in their transit countries (in North Africa) and would-be destination countries in southern Europe? These are some of the issues this report will strive to address, concluding with some policy recommendations.

For centuries, Africans have moved between different parts of the continent as well as outside the continent. The outside movements have taken different forms at different historical conjunctures, for a multitude of reasons and through a variety of transit routes. The final destinations have also differed from time to time and have been influenced by the origin of migrants.

The first known organised and bulk movement of Africans abroad was a forceful one. This began with what is commonly known as the slave trade starting at the

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end of the fifteenth century (Segal 1998). African communities that were formed in the Americas as a result of these tragic events were 'victim' Diasporas (Cohen 1997 cited in Mohan & Zack-Williams 2002). Most of these African populations came from coastal areas of West Africa. This massive and forceful movement of selected able Africans over more than three centuries had terrible effects (some of which are still felt today) on the continent, including the facilitation of the invasion and total occupation of the continent by a number of imperial European nations from the last quarter of the 19th century.

During the colonial period, many Africans who resisted foreign rule, especially in territories under French occupation, were expelled from their countries and sent into exile. Following the exploitative nature of colonial administration and economy, many Africans were moved to other parts of the continent to work for the colonial administration. In North Africa, for example, many Moroccans were moved by the French to work on the agricultural farms of French settlers in Algeria, which was also under French occupation. Many of them later went to Algeria voluntarily as news on labour opportunities in northern Algerian cities such as Algiers and Oran spread rapidly to Morocco (de Haas 2005a:6, 2005b).

In the inter-war period (1920–1939), a number of Africans began travelling voluntarily to Europe, mainly for education. Their destinations were chiefly the metropolises of their respective colonial 'masters' (Mohan & Jack-Williams 2002:213). Also in this period, and well into the mid-1950s, an urgent need of manpower and cheap labour in France led to the active recruitment of tens of thousands of North African men, especially from Morocco, to work in factories, mines and the French army. But most of these workers returned to their countries (de Haas 2005a:6, 2005b).

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, Africans under British, French and Belgian occupations were armed by their different European masters and brought in huge numbers to Europe and Asia to fight the Germans and other 'enemy states'. Again, most of those, if not all, returned to their respective African countries when the war ended in 1945.

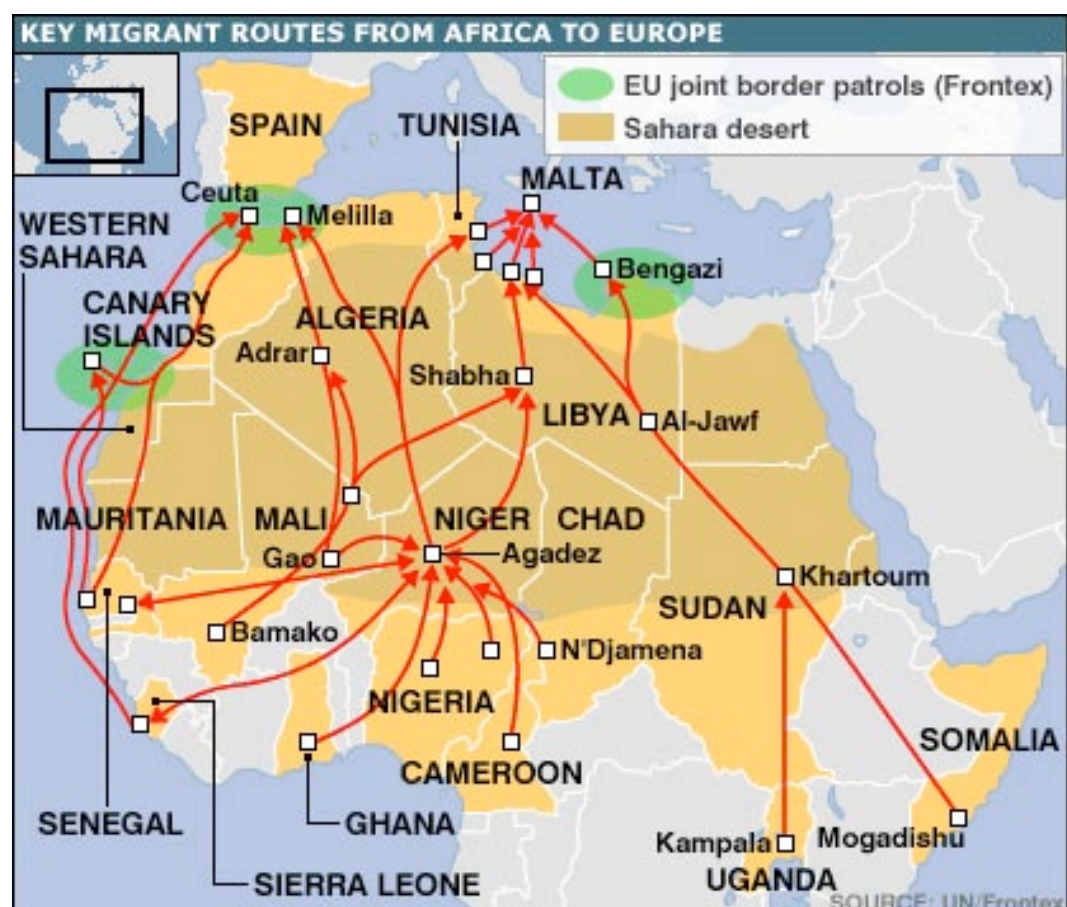
The end of the war and the economic boom that accompanied the reconstruction efforts in Europe led to a dire shortage of manpower in many European countries, and workers from many African countries were called upon to fill this gap. If most of those emigrants returned home, a significant number of them chose to remain in their host countries. This type of solicited migration continued until the early 1970s. It must be noted, however, that the bulk of these emigrants were from North Africa, and chiefly from Morocco and Algeria.

Since the mid-1990s, however, emigration from Africa has taken a different turn and, consequently, the perception of African emigrants in their host or would-be host countries has undergone a dramatic change. While the majority of African migrants still follow the traditional routes and methods of movement, a number of them have lately adopted a different method. This has raised concerns, not only among the authorities in their intended destination, but also in their countries of origin, as well as the countries of transit

This section of the report looks at the nature and characteristics of African emigration since the end of the Cold War. As seen above, up until 1990 and well into the decade, North Africa was the main source of African emigration to Europe and the wider Western world. Of all the North African countries, Morocco and Algeria provided the majority of these emigrants. For example, in responding to the great demand for low-skilled labour in Europe in the 1962–1972 decade, Morocco signed formal labour recruitment agreements with a number of European countries, including West Germany (1963), France (1963), Belgium (1964) and the Netherlands (1969). Between 1965 and 1972, the estimated number of Moroccans living in Europe increased from 30,000 to 300,000, and then to around 400,000 in 1975 (de Haas 2005a:8).

While it is true that some of these North African migrants came to Europe on temporary tourist visas, overstayed and then allowed their visas to expire without leaving the country, thereby becoming 'undocumented' immigrants, the majority of them entered their destination countries through the appropriate legal channels. However, owing to a number of factors in the 1990s, there was a shift in emigration trend from Africa. While still a major source of emigrants, most North African countries have in recent years become transit states for migrants from other African regions, trying to reach Europe. Most, if not all of these migrants go without the appropriate immigration documents and, thus, embark on very perilous journeys.

According to media reports (e.g. Soudan 2005),⁴ these migrants have three main departure points but many routes. The first point is the coasts of West Africa, where migrants from these areas (mainly Senegal, the Gambia and Guinea) travel by land – and recently also by sea – to northern Mauritania, Western Sahara and then southern Morocco from where they head for the Canary Islands, just off the coasts of Western Sahara in the Atlantic Ocean, or the disputed (with Morocco) Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla which they cross in fishing boats. Another group would travel from across the continent, but mainly from West Africa, through Agadez (Niger) or Gao (northern Mali), then to the Algerian city of Adrar, then into Morocco. Here again, the destination is Ceuta and Melilla or mainland Spain across the straits of Gibraltar. A third group would cross the Libyan deserts, through the cities of Koufra to Benghazi or Sebha to Tripoli or go to Tunisia. Malta, and the Italian islands of Sicily and Lampedusa are the concocted destinations of this group of migrants. Another development in these emigration routes and methods is that Sub-Saharan Africans are now joined by migrants from as far as South-East Asia.



Author's source: BBC online.

These regular movements of African migrants have prompted the targeted European countries and Spain in particular, to tighten their border controls, with Spain building strong and high border fences. The size of these fences was doubled around the coastal territories of the country in September 2005 when

hundreds of migrants attempted to scale the fences. Many migrants died during this tragic event and hundreds more have drowned over the years trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Spain, Italy or Malta.

Many of the overloaded boats making the perilous sea journeys have only an outboard motor fixed on the back. They have insufficient lifejackets and protective clothing for their passengers. In most cases, the boats only have a hand-held compass for guidance and have no phone or radios to summon help in an emergency (Mason 2006). In fact, as recently as September 2007, some 38 migrants were rescued after their boat capsized in the Atlantic Ocean, thanks only to a French journalist travelling with them who used his satellite phone to call for help.⁵

Reporting on the group of Sub-Saharan African migrants who tried to force their way into Spain in September 2005, François Soudan (2005:39), noted that most of them were young, aged between 20 and 30. However, this is generally true regardless of the year. About 60 per cent of them had completed secondary studies in their home countries, and 25 per cent of them were female. The average journey time from their home countries to the borders of Europe was about one and a half years and they came mainly from Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Côte d'Ivoire.

In addition to the dangers associated with their means of transport, migrants have to face bandits in the desert and the wrath of both the Moroccan and Spanish border guards. And even if they succeed in crossing to Europe, many are rounded up and sent back to their home countries. Before they are repatriated, however, the conditions in most of the centres where they are detained deprive them of any dignity or respect.⁶

But despite all this, some migrants still strive to reach Europe. Some try several times unsuccessfully but still keep on trying. This begs a number of questions: why do they take all this pain and risk in order to go to Europe? What can be done to reverse the trend if it must be? It is to these issues now that I turn in the next section.

Before dealing with the factors that lead some Sub-Saharan African migrants to embark on such dangerous journeys to Europe, it must be noted that the reporting of some Western media about African migrants is sensational and misleading. The impression some of these media give to their audiences is that all Sub-Saharan Africa has mobilised to enter Europe and that European and other Western countries are already flooded with 'illegal Sub-Saharan African migrants'. For example, the *International Herald Tribune*, claimed in its 25 May 2006 Late Edition that 'Spain is overwhelmed by a flood of illegal African migrants' (see also Clark 2005).⁷

Another impression the media propounds is that African migrants constitute a security risk in that they are likely to come with diseases and, most far-fetched, that they are likely to play to the advantage of anyone engaged in terrorism, organised crime and trafficking (Sandell 2007).

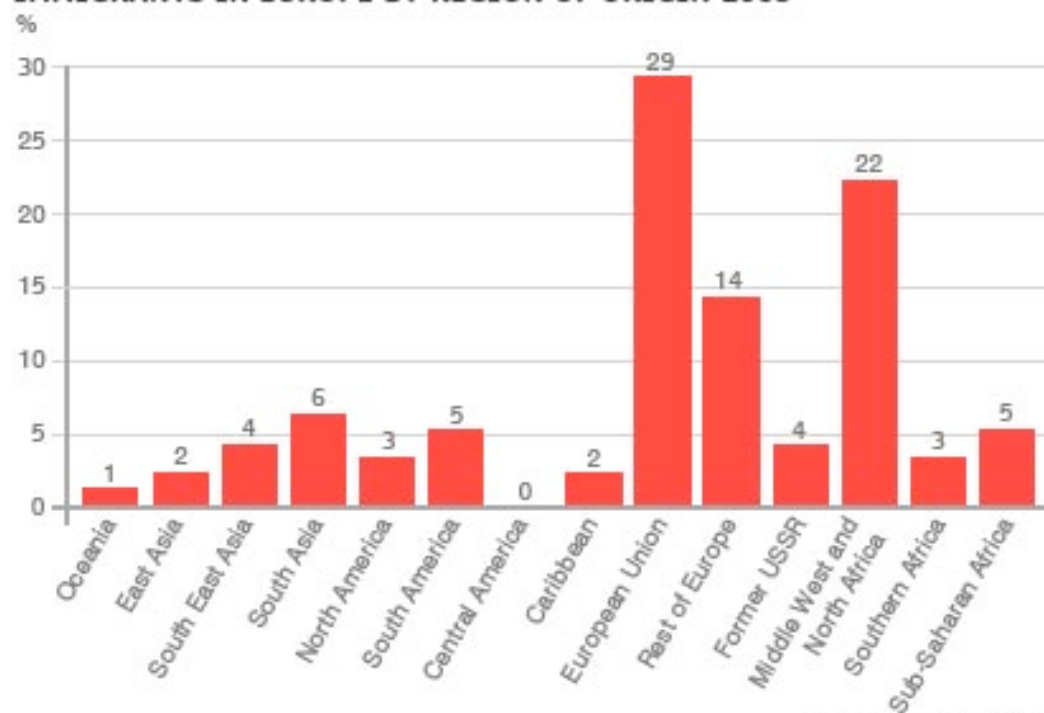
First, it must be noted that the number of Sub-Saharan Africans who embark on these journeys are a fraction of those who enter the West through the normal legal channels. Second, the combined number of Sub-Saharan Africans who go to the West through the normal channels and those found at the gates of Ceuta and Melilla is far less compared to emigrants from, say, North Africa and other parts of the world. It is, for example, reported that 'Spain has about 100 000 West and Central African legal residents compared with half a million Moroccans and 370 000 Ecuadorians. About 500 Romanians and Bulgarians reportedly cross the Pyrenees daily, many of them to stay in Spain, but they rarely make the news.'⁸

A 2007 report on migration by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that African migration to developed countries is marginal in relation to overall flows. With regard to the overall African migrant population, it is worth noting that about two-thirds of Africans in Europe are from

North Africa (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) and not from Sub-Saharan Africa, even though you have more countries and more people in this part of the continent than in North Africa.

In any continent, including Africa and Europe, most emigration flows are internal. As it is clear from the graph below, in 2005, the majority (29 per cent) of immigrants in the wealthy EU countries came from within the union, especially from the poorer member states newly admitted to the block. Only 8 per cent of immigrants in the EU countries came from Sub-Saharan Africa, well below the 22 per cent from the Middle East and North Africa, 14 per cent from other European countries, 12 per cent from Asia and the 10 per cent that came from the Americas.

IMMIGRANTS IN EUROPE BY REGION OF ORIGIN 2005



SOURCE: World Bank

Author's source: BBC online

Even more detailed in this regard is the recent World Bank-funded study of Ratha and Shaw (2007) on the South-South migration. The two authors estimate that migration of people from a developing country to another one account for at least 47 per cent (about 74 million) of all migration from the South (developing world). But considering all migration in the world, they classify the world into eight regions: Latin America & Caribbean, East Asia & Pacific, South Asia, Europe & Central Asia, Middle East & North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, High-income OECD countries (including the USA, Canada, Japan and EU of 15), and High-income non OECD countries, such as the Gulf Arab states.

Considering each of these regions both as a region of origin and destination for migrants, they found that of all the regions, Sub-Saharan Africa has the least percentage of its migrant population outside the developing world, with only 30.7 per cent of them in the North, compared to 86.8 per cent of Latin American and Caribbean migrants, 84.4 per cent from East Asia & Pacific, 80.3 per cent from the Middle East & North Africa, and 35.9 per cent of European and Central Asians.

Putting these in numbers, the authors found that of the 14.5 million Sub-Saharan Africans living outside their home countries, 10.2 million of them are residing in other Sub-Saharan African countries, with only 4 million in High-income OECD countries. Compare this to 6.7 million Middle Eastern and North African migrants in the same region, 13.7 million from Europe & Central Asia, 4.5 from South Asia,

and 22.3 from Latin America & Caribbean. But Sub-Saharan Africa is not only a source of migration; it is also the preferred destination of some 10.5 million people from other regions, including 0.27 million from high-income countries (Ratha & Shaw 2007:6; see also the table below).

Intra- and Inter-regional Migration (in millions of people)										
Migrants from	Migrants in									
	Latin America & Caribbean	E. Asia & Pacific	South Asia	Europe & C. Asia	Mid-East & N. Africa	S-S Africa	High-income OECD	High-income non-OECD	Total	South-north percent of total
Latin America & Caribbean	3.40	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	22.3	0.2	25.9	86.8
E. Asia & Pacific	0.06	2.54	0.11	0.04	0.01	0.02	9.7	5.3	17.7	84.4
S. Asia	0.01	0.29	7.60	0.02	2.11	0.09	4.5	5.6	20.2	49.9
Europe & C. Asia	0.07	0.01	0.00	27.81	0.01	0.00	13.7	1.9	43.6	35.9
Middle East & N. Africa	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.08	2.12	0.08	6.7	2.8	11.8	80.3
S-S Africa	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	10.02	4.0	0.5	14.5	30.7
High-income countries	1.84	0.32	0.05	1.03	0.64	0.27	28.7	1.1	34.0	0.0
Total	5.5	3.2	7.8	29.0	4.9	10.5	89.6	17.3	167.7	

Source: Ratha & Shaw 2007:6. Highlights of Sub-Saharan Africa added.

As for the argument that Sub-Saharan African migrants, legal or illegal, constitute a security risk in Europe in that they may bring diseases, these are mere assumptions which cannot be proven by any scientific evidence. In other words, no one making such assumptions can prove that an outbreak of a disease in any European country has been caused by the presence of African migrants.

The terrorism claim stems from the misconception of some analysts who wrongfully assimilate terrorism with Islam and then conclude that the presence of 'Muslim' African migrants in the West constitutes a security risk. For example, Sandell (2007) observes that 'since 2001, the religious element and the cultural notation attached to different religions have risen to the forefront of public debate about the pros and cons of international migration'. After noting that there was a concentration of Arab/Muslim immigrants from North as well as Sub-Saharan Africa in Europe, compared to the United States, he poses the question: 'What long-term consequences could result from the entry to the EU of a large majority of Muslim migrants (over 80%)?'

Referring to African migrants trying to enter Europe through the Spanish enclaves, a *New York Times* journalist wrote in the paper's 26 August 2007 online edition: 'They are perhaps the most stark component of a quandary Europe has had much trouble solving: how to continue to meet its international obligation to protect those fleeing war and persecution while keeping out those it fears will form a permanent underclass or, in the worst cases, *expose their countries to terrorism*' (emphasis added).⁹

As noted above, voicing such 'concerns' stems mainly from the wrong equation of terrorism with Islam and the cheap generalisation that some analysts make about the Muslim community even if the crimes in question were committed by a few Muslim individuals. Surely, the apparent popularity of such *misconceptions*, especially in *some quarters* of the Western world nowadays, can be attributed to media

manipulation of events. The fact of the matter is that the reporting of most of such media about crimes generally describes them as terrorism when the perpetrators are Muslim and call them differently when the authors are not Muslim. It seems that to such media, when a Muslim commits a crime, he or she must be motivated by his/her religion. But when someone else is found responsible for a similar crime, such as the massacre of 32 innocent students by a South Korean student at Virginia Tech University in the United States in April 2007, then psychological and personal explanations can be valid and no one hears anything about that person's religious affiliation. Following such media reporting and the discourse of some politicians, terrorism may be defined as 'a crime committed by a Muslim'.

Yet, in reality, most of what is reported nowadays as 'Islamic' terrorism or 'Islamic' terrorist organisations are actually criminal activities or political violence which have nothing to do with religion and which could easily be dealt with, had policy-makers distanced themselves from the cheap generalisations that the media make. It is also true that as much as 'Islamic' elements are engaged in such violence, so are adherents of other religions, a case in point for Sub-Saharan Africa being the atrocities committed by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda in the name of the Ten Commandments. But here again, it will be wrong to argue that the 'terrorist' activities in which the LRA has been engaged for the last twenty or so years is 'Christian' terrorism, Christianity as well as Islam have nothing to do with such criminal activities.

Why take all the risk?

As to why some Sub-Saharan Africans try to enter Europe illegally and through risky journeys, there are many assumptions that are advanced. The most popular explanation is that 'abject poverty' and 'civil wars' in Sub-Saharan Africa are the factors that push people to migrate to Europe by all means. The section below interrogates these assumptions, highlights their merits and weaknesses, and considers other factors such as perceived lack of development opportunities as opposed to abject poverty, and the wrongly idealised image many Africans have of Europe and its economic opportunities.

Abject poverty

When reading reportage in the media and even some 'expert' analyses of the movements of 'illegal' migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe, the explanations you often encounter read in the line of: 'African immigrants desperate to escape poverty and civil strife,' (Mason 2006), or 'the reasons ... are the same which drive illegal immigrants from ... Africa: poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunity,' (Saleh, 2007).¹⁰ But how plausible are these explanations?

Skeldon (1997¹¹ cited in de Haas 2005a:2) argues that there is a correlation between the level of economic development and patterns of population mobility in a country. In other words, where the level of economic development is high, people generally tend to be more mobile. Where this is low or non-existent, you either have low immigration movement or a chiefly inward-looking (internal and local) migration.

To Olsen (2002:125–150), citizens of poor countries with the lowest GNP generally do not migrate to the Western world, even though they may have high rates of population growth, which is thought by some (e.g. Zelinsky 1971) as a factor pushing people to migrate. Strikingly, the world's main labour exporters in recent years, if not always, have typically been upper-lower or lower-middle income countries, as espoused in the table above. This is what underpins the analysis of Martin and Taylor (1996) when they argue that a temporary increase in migration has been a usual part of the process of economic development.

To summarise all these arguments and put them simply, one may argue that since a certain threshold of wealth is necessary to enable people to assume the costs and risks of migrating (de Haas 2005a:4), very poor people generally do not migrate far from their homes.

If we apply this theory or observation to most of Sub-Saharan African migrants who embark on the perilous journeys through the North African desert to go to Europe, one may have reason to call the 'poverty' explanation to question. All

agree, including those who describe them as 'desperate people fleeing abject poverty in Africa,' that each of them would need an average of US\$2 000 to \$3 000 in order to undertake the journey and pay the guides, smugglers and the fare for the sea crossing (see for example Soudan, 2005:36–41).¹²

Clearly, a person who possesses such sums of money cannot be considered as 'desperately' poor in many Sub-Saharan African countries where these migrants originate. This sum is about double the yearly GDP per capita of the country of origin of the majority of these migrants, according to the latest UNDP Human Development report.¹³ In fact, numerous migrants were successful businessmen in their countries, or at least, were living decently before emigrating. This researcher has heard of and met emigrants in some European and North American countries who, before leaving their countries, were saving more money back home than what they could dream of in these countries and they greatly regretted the move. Some did return back home, whilst others stayed on for a number of reasons, including the fact that they had already spent the better part, if not all, of their wealth on trying to come to the West, with some having spent as much as \$10 000!

From the above, it is clear that the thesis of 'abject poverty' lacks pertinence as an explanatory variable for the motivations of these migrants. It may partially explain the case of a few people, but here again, it must be put in a wider context. The thesis becomes even more problematic when it is considered, as is the case with most of media coverage, as the main factor motivating them. One must therefore look for other explanations.

Without doubt, massive refugee flows across the borders is an inevitable consequence and a common feature of armed conflicts anywhere in the world. Hundreds of thousands are also displaced in the different regions of their own country as a result of armed conflicts. For example, by the end of 1994, as much as 80 per cent of all Liberians had been displaced as a direct result of the civil war which had started in the country in December 1989 (Adebajo 2002:140). But how do such events in Africa impact on the flow of 'illegal' African migrants to Europe or the North in general?

Statistics show that most of the movements resulting from such events are 'internal'. In other words, most African refugees flee to neighbouring African states and not beyond. Citing Liberia again, most of those who fled the country found refuge in neighbouring Guinea, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), of some 704 051 Liberian people who had fled their country by 1993, Guinea hosted 416 064 of them, while 250 863 crossed the eastern border of the country to Côte d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone provided refuge for a further 16 264. This is compared to only around 2 000 of them who had gone to the US by the end of the year and this stood at only 3 033 by the end of 1994 (UNHCR 2004:367).

Likewise, the thousands of Rwandan Tutsi refugees who fled the 1994 genocide did not go to either France or Spain, but crossed the border to neighbouring countries instead. This is true for all civil war situations in Africa. In fact, this is very logical, given that, as noted above, an emigrant needs some funds to meet the costs associated with the journey and people fleeing wars generally leave everything behind.

Thus, when some European countries were complaining about the influx of refugees and asylum seekers in their countries in the late 1990s, what they did not tell their citizens was that countries in Africa, such as Tanzania, Guinea and South Africa, had ten times more refugees than their countries had. For example, in hosting Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees, Guinea had, in 1998, the highest per capita refugee population in the world. As much as 10 per cent of its population were refugees from these two neighbouring countries and most of them had been there since the outbreak of hostilities in their countries (Annan 1998).

After all, most refugee populations in Europe were Europeans from the Balkans and not Africans. Looking at the countries of origin of most African migrants trying to reach Europe through North Africa, one realises that the majority of them come from peaceful countries such as Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana and Mali, as noted above. Certainly, all North African countries – apart from Algeria in the 1990s – are at peace; yet more migrants originate from this region than from Sub-Saharan Africa.

The only instance where armed conflicts in Africa have led to the migration of an increased number of Africans to the North in recent years is through the UNHCR refugee relocation programme called ‘resettlement’, which they implement in collaboration with some rich countries. This involves an organised and systematic transfer of refugees from a country where they had been offered asylum to a third one for the purpose of permanent settlement. Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States are the forerunners amongst the developed countries in receiving resettled refugees, although the United Kingdom has lately joined the trail. But it must be understood that, with or without war, such an organised way of immigration is an established policy in these countries, especially the first three. Again, Sub-Saharan Africans benefiting from this constitute a fraction of those settling in these countries through this programme from other parts of the world and, in any case, they are entering the destination countries legally, which excludes them from the category with which this report is concerned about.

What follows from this is that armed conflicts in Africa, albeit leading to massive displacements of people both within and outside their country, cannot be said to be a significant factor in pushing people to embark on perilous journeys to reach Europe.

If neither ‘abject poverty and desperation’ nor ‘armed conflicts’ can be plausibly considered as *main* factors motivating some African migrants to embark on risky journeys in order to reach Europe, what then can provide a more accurate explanation? Well, in my view, it is the combination of two interlinked factors that explain best this situation. These factors are a) the perceived lack of development opportunities in migrants’ country of origin, and b) an idealised image of their would-be destinations as unconditional *eldorados*.

There is no denial of the fact that most African countries where emigrants originate are poorer compared to their would-be destinations in Europe and North America. As I note below, African governments should do more to dispel the negative perceptions of their citizens with regard to development opportunities that exist in their countries. This said, a section of African youths, of which the emigrants that are the subject of this report, see Europe and North America as synonymous with wealth and comfort, a sort of earthly paradise. This is the result of two main factors.

First, you have Western television channels and the skyscrapers and signs of wealth and comfort they show about their countries, which are received through satellite connections throughout the world. These youths read in the media about the vast economic disparities between their countries and Western countries. The gap in these statistics¹⁴ is huge and this makes going to these countries more appealing and attractive, unless one is careful enough to scrutinise them.¹⁵

To show that the ‘lack of opportunities’ is to do more with *perception* than reality, it is worth pointing out what has already been noted, which is the fact that most of these migrants had accumulated some sums of money before leaving their countries. How would they have gained these sums if there was a ‘real’ lack of opportunities?

The other factor that contributes to the creation of this idealised image of the West in the minds of many African youths is what they make of the ‘achievements’ of their friends and/or relatives working in the West. Added to this is what some of those tell them when they talk to them on the phone and come to visit them during holidays, or the pictures they send them.

It is therefore the combination of these two factors (perceived lack of opportunities and the image of the West) that has led many youths and their parents to assume that a) there is no worth investing locally unless you have a lot of money and, consequently, b) that the surest way of investing is to emigrate to the West, or at least go out of the region where they can fetch more money with ease. Thus, as Mohan and Zack-Williams (2002:225) note, 'the decision to migrate is located at the household level whereby family members see migration as a form of portfolio diversification, which [in their view] spreads risks between various income-generating activities'.

Because of this, most of these migrants do not appreciate the idea of investing locally, at least in a long-term project. Because Western countries do not give visas to everyone that applies for one, a number of them take the risk of embarking on such adventures in order to get to their would-be destinations.¹⁶ What follows from this is that in order to deal with 'illegal migration' from Sub-Saharan Africa, especially the perilous one that is the subject of this report; one must address these two factors.

This report sought to highlight and analyse the movement of 'undocumented' African migrants through North Africa with the aim of reaching Europe. The report began by providing a historical background on African migration, which showed that, since the end of European colonisation in Africa, and well into the 1990s, North Africa has been the main source of African migrants to Europe and that for this, the majority of African immigrants working in the various European countries are from North Africa, especially Morocco.

But because studying the situation of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa is the main thrust of the report, emphasis was put on these emigrants, North Africa being considered as a mere passage or transit path for them. In search for explanations as to why some people decide to put their lives in danger in order to get to Europe, the report looked at the most common explanations in this regard, namely 'abject poverty' and 'armed conflicts' in countries of origin. However, a closer analysis of these two explanations showed their weakness, particularly when they are considered as the 'main factors' pushing the emigrants to embark on perilous journeys.

The report argued that the real explanations are to be found in the combination of two interconnected factors: perceived lack of development opportunities in their home countries and the idealised image they have of their would-be destinations. Therefore, any serious attempt to deal with this type of emigration must address these two factors.

Starting with the latter factor, namely the image they have of Europe, at least two observations can be made here. These observations must be brought home to the prospective emigrants and their parents or sponsors. First, albeit a significant economic gap exists between Africa and most of their concocted European destinations in favour of the latter, most of the statistics used to demonstrate this are misleading in that most of them compare the GNP or the average monthly or yearly income of workers in the Euro zone or some European countries and 'Africa'. But one can pose a number of questions here: whose monthly income in the Euro zone are we talking about? Is this the earning of the middle class European worker (which it is in most cases) or the working class? Is this the monthly income of African immigrants working in these European countries, which is the income the would-be migrants will most likely earn should they succeed in entering the zone?

The reality is that these statistics do not reflect those of African immigrants. Most of the latter, especially those without the proper legal documentations, live or work in very sorrowful situations, which are unbeknown to their friends and relatives back home. For example, according to Yukseker and Brewer (2006), 'African migrants and asylum seekers ... have some of the worst living conditions among transit or irregular migrants in Turkey' which, in the view of the two authors, are

mainly due to their unfavourable access to income earning opportunities, the paucity of social aid and the weakness of their social networks as well as their links with Turkish society. The present author has also observed similar situations in countries such as the US, the UK, Germany, Italy and France, and has heard of similar stories about African migrants in other Northern countries.

Canada has a selective immigration policy, based on a point system. This system entails the screening of potential immigrants to Canada for skills, qualifications and labour market suitability. This means that most immigrants who go to Canada, including those from Africa, are highly skilled and educated. This notwithstanding, Kazemipur and Halli (2001) found that 'immigrants in Canada are consistently overrepresented among the poor; that their poverty rates are particularly high in large cities, which have larger concentrations of immigrants; and that among the immigrants, the poverty rates are higher for visible minorities [including Africans], who are mostly recent immigrants'.

Contrary to what assimilation theorists claim, they found that 'the second-generation immigrants, who were expected to outperform their parents, had higher poverty rates.' According to the assimilation theory, while there may be gaps between the earnings of immigrants and indigenous people, this gap generally fades away with time (e.g. Wanner 2003). So, even with the assimilation theory, whose generalisability has been questioned by many studies (Gans 1992; Sanchez 1997), the timeframe given by most of the proponents of this theory for the gap to go away oscillates from 10 to 15 years (Kazemipur & Halli 2001:1130).

This said, it must be admitted that some established immigrants would earn more than 'many' of their counterparts who remain back home, and considering the statistics about the remittances of these immigrants to their home countries, it leaves no doubt about this in anyone's mind.¹⁷ But here again, it is worth noting that in order for these immigrants to be able to remit these funds to their parents (which seduce their friends and relatives back home), in most cases, they deprive themselves of any comforts of life, abandon all social activities, live in crowded shared rooms and reduce their life to a cycle of work and sleep. In other words, the situation of many African immigrants in Europe and North America is like that of a table lamp or candle – giving light to others (their parents and relatives back home) while burning themselves. This is not to deny that some do manage to help themselves, but this depends very much not only on the economic situation of their parents or relatives, but also on their determination to ignore some requests of the latter.

Because of these realities, some disappointed migrants do return back home. As Reyes (2001) notes, with regard to Mexican emigrants in the United States, some migrants do return home after disappointment at destination. Many stay on despite this disappointment – indeed only a few migrants are not disappointed at destination – for fear they may not be well received back home or because they may have spent all that they could rely on to restart their lives were they to return to their home country.

One such 'widely reported' case in point in Sub-Saharan Africa is that of a migrant from Guinea who had always dreamt of going to Europe. After spending more than a decade and close to \$10,000 trying to get a visa, he finally went in 2003 to France and then to Italy. But he went back home after seeing the conditions other migrants living in. Back in Conakry, these were his words to a BBC journalist:

Even a prison would be better – 16 people sharing a single grotty room, with just three beds I was so determined to go that I never would have believed someone who told me that going to Europe would be that hard. I would prefer to stay at home and be poor than be rich and live in those conditions I have always heard that Europe is a place where money grows on trees. But since I saw what life for the migrants in Europe is really like, I've decided to stay here and work. With all the money I've wasted trying to buy a visa, I could have stayed in Africa and done something.¹⁸

As regards the 'lack of opportunities' in migrants' home countries, it has been pointed out that this is more to do with perception than with reality for the majority of emigrants. There are of course a few people who may plausibly complain about a 'real' lack of opportunities. But in such cases, the situation is more about governments having discriminatory policies in recruiting for the public service, making this on the basis of nepotism, thereby discriminating against such people.

The main policy recommendation to such governments is that they should strive to eliminate those discriminatory policies in their recruitment processes and try to create more employment and development opportunities and restore the hope of such marginalised segments of their citizens. While it is true that they may not be able to stop everyone from going where they want to, such actions will doubtless go a long way into curbing this type of migration and dissuading those tempted from embarking on such perilous journeys.

The potential migrants themselves must understand that the mere fact that their minds are fixed on going abroad prevents them from investing their money in any long term project, which is generally necessary for any business to register a tangible growth.

In the final analysis, however, policy-makers, especially in Europe, must realise that more efforts need to be made to understand the reality and dynamics of the subject matter so that policy actions are not based on weak or misleading assumptions. Although one may not rule out a possible influx of migrants in an initial period, having less restrictions on the movement of migrants will surely prevent people risking their lives to go to their intended destinations and, in the long run, the initial influx may reduce significantly as people would know that they can return easily to their host countries should they deem that necessary. But in order for decision-makers to have the courage to take such actions, the figures, and thus the perceptions they have about migrants, especially from Sub-Saharan Africa, must be corrected as this report did.

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- 1 See BBC online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4319828.stm> of 7 October 2005 (16 September 2007).
 - 2 'Spanish rescue boats find bodies of 10 would-be immigrants off Canary Islands'. *International Herald Tribune*, 7 September 2007. See also <http://www.africasia.com/services/news/newsitem.php?area=africa&item=070916150140.6rer8vz4.php> (17 September 2007).
 - 3 See http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?click_id=68&set_id=1&artid=nw20070816223811648C161056 (17 September 2007).
 - 4 See also BBC Online. *Key facts: Africa to Europe migration*. www.bbc.co.uk (5 September 2007).
 - 5 See 'Journalist Saves African migrants.' *BBC News online*, 3 September 2007.
 - 6 For example, in a 35-page report released in February 2002, Human Rights Watch noted that the government of Spain was violating the rights of migrants and asylum seekers who arrive illegally on Spanish shores, arguing that the detention conditions fell 'below standards set in both national and international law and should spur a drive to improve the treatment of migrants in Spain and throughout Europe'. See 'Spain: The other face of the Canary Islands: Rights Violations against Migrants and Asylum Seekers', HRW, February 2002. In its Word Report 2007, the group wrote: 'The EU's response to the large-scale migration by sea to Spain, Italy, and Malta during the summer of 2006 revolved around securing borders, interception, and repatriation rather than ensuring that the rights of migrants and refugees are respected'.
 - 7 This kind of reporting had also influenced the thinking of many European citizens. For example, commenting on a report of BBC online, one reader from Exeter, England wrote: 'The Canaries must tighten up their border controls, otherwise the whole of Europe will be flooded with African migrants, who will come in without medical checks, background checks, putting a huge burden and threat to citizens from that country'. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5230586.stm> 31 July 2006 (17 September 2007).
 - 8 See 'African migrants reawaken ancient prejudices in Spain'. *Mail & Guardian* (South Africa) online at http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?area=/insight/insight__international/&articleid=275324# of 25 June 2006 (16 September 2007).
 - 9 See Ian Fisher, For African Migrants, Europe Gets Further Away. *New York Times* [online], 26 August 2007.
 - 10 See also John Thorne, 'Europe, Africa Seek to Limit Immigration'. *Washington Post* [online], 10 July 2006. Steve Bloomfield, an Africa correspondent of the British paper, *The Independent*, claims in the paper's 28 May 2007's online edition that 'Some leave because of conflict, most because of poverty.' Also, a reporter of Al-Jazeera followed the same line by arguing that 'Each year, tens of thousands of Africans decide to flee poverty and conflict as illegal migrants in search of a better life in Europe'. See Gabi Menezes, 'Senegal's migration gamble' www.aljazeera.net 27 July 2007 (2 October 2007).
 - 11 See Skeldon, R 1997. *Migration and Development: A Global Perspective*. Essex: Longman.
 - 12 See also the BBC report *op cit*.

- 13 According to this report, which was released in 2006 though based on the figures of 2004, the 2004 annual GDP per capita was \$1 154 for Nigeria, \$1 713 for Senegal, \$2 240 for Ghana, \$1 551 for Côte d'Ivoire, \$1 991 for The Gambia, while Guinea-Bissau had only \$722, Congo \$978, Mali \$998, Burundi \$677, Niger \$779 and Sierra \$561.
- 14 BBC report *op cit*.
- 15 For an interesting journalistic report on this, see Joseph Winter's 'African migrants' elusive dream' on *BBC online*, 26 April 2004 (2 October 2007). The author rightly notes that 'Many [would-be migrants] think that once they reach the "promised land" of the West, they will immediately become rich. The truth is often very different – sharing a room with 15 other people and working in factories, stacking supermarket shelves or cleaning the streets'.
- 16 In his report on African emigrants who tried to force their way through the Spanish border fences in September 2005, François Soudan (2005:40) notes that 25 per cent of them had unsuccessfully applied for a Schengen visa in their home countries, which led to the rest not to consider trying it.
- 17 For example, according to the latest *Migration and Remittances Factbook* of the World Bank, which was released in June 2007, Senegal received US\$633 millions in remittances in 2006, Nigeria \$3.329m, Ghana \$99m, Cameroon US\$31m, Côte d'Ivoire \$160m, and Mali \$177m in the same year. See www.worldbank.org/prospects/migrationandremittances (18 September 2007).
- 18 See 'European dream is a nightmare', BBC online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3600165.stm> 18 May 2004 (2 October 2007).