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Africans abroad: migration trends, patterns and determinants

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1. Introduction

Africa is known for its long history of migration within and beyond the vast continent. The number of people with African descent that live outside of the continent is estimated at close to 140 million, most in the Western Hemisphere¹. The bulk of these emigrants have lost their ties altogether with the country of origin. By contrast, migrants that left their country in recent decades have been able to keep in close contact with their relatives and maintain economic, social and political relationships with the country of origin, mainly due to the rapid pace of globalization and improvements in communications technology.

Recently, migration, and its role for development has received substantial interest that sparked an outpouring of empirical studies to identify and provide evidence on the channels in which the two are interlinked. Resurgence of interest is further fuelled by the global economic and financial crisis that crippled labor markets across major destination countries in the OECD where the midterm outlook is still fragile.

Most importantly, the change in the demographic structure in both origin and destination countries in the decades ahead is expected to generate huge labor market imbalances at a global level that could create substantial impetus for migration. Projections indicate that global labor deficit could reach the tune of 200 million in the next four decades. Only 15 percent of this deficit could be covered through migration amplifying the risk of sluggish growth, strain on the fiscal balance and the welfare of the elderly for most destination countries. Migrant sending countries will have labor surplus particularly among the young and less educated who will be hard pressed to emigrate². Attaining a balance in the respective regions becomes a serious policy challenge in the years ahead. This brief provides a perspective on patterns and trends of migration in Africa by focusing on who is likely to migrate where and why, and provides stylized facts that may be useful for policy making. The brief relied on a number of cross-country and household surveys to capture the patterns and trends of migration in Africa.

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2. Trends and patterns of African migration

In the last decades, emigration rates in Africa (share of emigrants in total population), particularly that of Sub Saharan Africa generally declined, partly due to rapid rate of population growth. In 2010, emigration rates in Africa were one of the lowest in the world.

The earliest attempt to document migration patterns in Africa pointed out that Africa, particularly Sub Saharan Africa, was characterized by huge wave of human movement that even exceeded the global average³. Nevertheless, while emigration from Africa increased substantially in the last decades in absolute terms incidence of emigration or the proportion of stock of emigrants in total population of the country of origin, is currently one of the lowest in the world though with marked variation across countries. According to recent data⁴ it is estimated that in 2010 the number of people living in countries other than their birth place would be around 215 million, of which 29 million are from Africa, which respectively is 3.2% and 2.9% of total population. Of the 29 million emigrants from Africa, about 2.3 million are recognized as being refugees displaced mainly by war, drought or other forms of natural disasters⁵.

Certainly this figure suggests a major improvement compared with the situation reported in the 1990s with five million refugees or early 2000 where 1 out of every 5 emigrant was a refugee⁶. One could attribute the decline in the number of refugees partly to the decline in the frequency of coups, guerilla insurgency, government collapse, and incipient unrest that could lead to major civil war, factors known to significantly generate a flood of refugees in Africa.

The trend in net migration overtime reflects the tumultuous history of the continent, particularly that of Sub Saharan Africa where migration rates have fluctuated widely in the last three decades and a half for most countries. Understandably countries that experienced large scale conflict and war contributed to the variations in the net movement of people from Africa.

Migration in Africa is typically South-South where cross-border movement of people plays the major role.

A marked feature of the movement of people across Africa, particularly, that of Sub Saharan Africa is intra-continental migration capturing approximately 65 percent of total emigration. Out of the 29 million stocks of emigrants from Africa in 2010, about 23% are from North Africa and the rest from Sub Saharan Africa. More than 90% of the emigrants from North Africa generally headed to countries outside of Africa.

What explains cross-country variations in the pattern of migration in Africa?

¹ Shinn (2008), “African migration and the brain drain”,

<http://sites.google.com/site/davidhshinn/Home/african-migration-and-the-brain-drain>.

² Koetel (2010)

³ Russel et al (1990)

⁴ For details on this data see Shimeles (2010). Data on migration certainly is scanty, especially in the case of Africa. Even though periodic household surveys have begun to appear since the 1990s rarely were these survey instruments used to capture incidence of emigration, particularly international emigration, except the Ghana Living Standard Measurement Survey of 2005. A comparison of emigration rate from the household survey for Ghana (6%)-Adams(2009)- with the data from the bilateral matrix (4.2%) indicate some close parallel with the former understating slightly the migration rate.

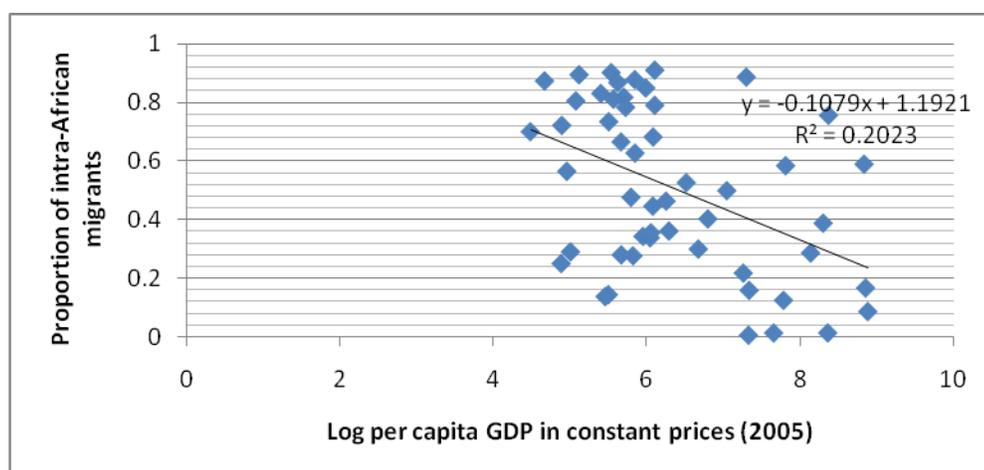
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Differences in living standard partly explain differences in emigration rates across African countries. Generally, poorer countries tend to have lower rates of emigration and most of the emigrants remain within the continent.

Prospects for a better life certainly constitute one of the most important factors behind people’s decision to migrate, but it is not sufficient.

Ability to migrate is also an important element which introduces a threshold effect on the decision to stay or emigrate⁷. The pattern of migration by African emigrants depicted in Figure 1 suggests that middle income countries tend to disproportionately migrate to destinations outside of Africa, whereas emigrants originating from poorer countries generally remained within the region.

Figure 1: Intra-African Migration and per Capita GDP (2006)



Source: Shimeles (2010)

Colonial ties still play an important role in the migration pattern in Africa, particularly with former colonies of France and Belgium.

Post independence Africa maintained close economic, political, cultural and linguistic relationships with former colonizers that continue to this day. Particularly France, Belgium and the United Kingdom cultivated special relationships with their former colonies in Africa that included privileges for travel, study and business opportunities. Figure 2 presents this trend where former colonial ties still continue to be the most favored destinations for emigrants from Africa.

The vertical axis plots the proportion of African migrants that migrated to the former colonizers and the horizontal axis measures proportion of emigrants to the most favored destination. If for all countries the two sets match, then the plot traces out the 45⁰ line. We can see that for some countries, particularly for emigrants to France, while for most others the favorite destination is different from former colonizers. Preliminary investigation of the earliest bilateral migration matrix data constructed for Sub Saharan Africa⁸ suggest similar pattern where intra-African emigration dominates in the early 1970s and trans-African emigration tends to be towards former colonizers.

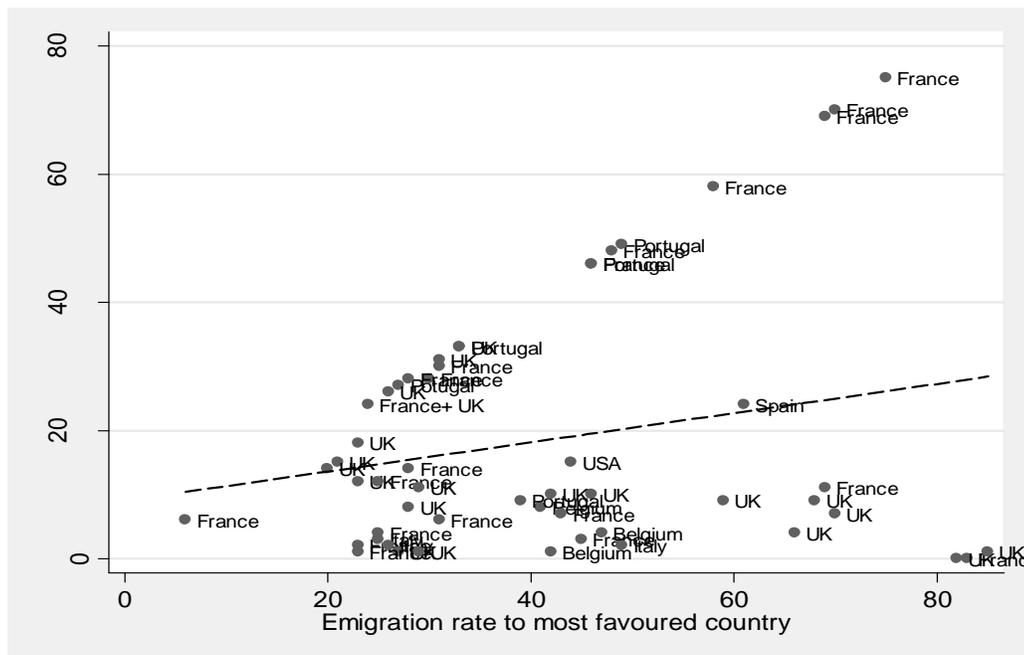
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⁵ UNPD (2010)

⁶ Hatton and Williamson (2003) and Lucas (2006)

⁷ See for example, HDR (2009) and Shaw (2007)

Figure 2: Colonial Link and Emigration Pattern in Africa



Source: Shimeles (2010)

“One of the hallmarks of emigration patterns in Africa is the tide by relatively well educated labor force over time. More than 10% of the variation in the emigration rates, controlling for country-specific circumstances and other covariates such as income, is explained by poor governance and socio-economic conditions.”

One of the hallmarks of emigration patterns in Africa is the tide by relatively well educated labor force over time. More than 10% of the variation in the emigration rates, controlling for unobserved country-specific circumstances and other covariates such as income, is explained by poor governance and socio-economic conditions.

Africa has the highest share of skilled emigrants to OECD countries. Moreover, while African countries have an overall higher unemployment rate than the OECD average, they face a severe shortage of skilled labor. So, what explains the growing influx of skilled African migrants to the West? The analysis suggests that bad governance conditions are one of the major driving factors behind skilled emigration from Africa, explaining about 10 percent of the overall variation with large individual coefficients even after controlling for differences in per capita income

levels, time changes and unobserved country specific effects. Improving political conditions, governance, and adhering to basic democratic principles can stem the tide of emigration by the educated and skilled Africans.

3. Socioeconomic characteristics of migrants in Africa

Economic theory suggests that migration is used as a strategy by an individual or a household to maximize the present value of future welfare given labor market and other institutional constraints. In the context of Africa, evidence suggests a strong role of the household and the community in making the rational decision based on careful evaluation of pay offs and costs⁹. Household surveys in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Senegal and Nigeria illustrate important demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of households in affecting migration decisions, which are summarized below.

⁸This data is due to Russel et al (1990)

⁹see for example Bigsten (1994) and Hoddinott (1993) for illustration on Kenya

“Migration as a risk diversification strategy seems to feature prominently in Africa.”

“In some cases, education of and wealth of the household are positively correlated with the probability of migration.”

“Networks play an important role in facilitating migration.”

“Migration often leads to occupational change and improvement of skill of migrants.”

Migration in Africa is predominantly a risk diversification strategy.

In all cases considered, the higher the size of the household, the higher is the probability of having either an internal or international migrant. This is consistent with early studies and illustrates how households in Africa use migration as a coping strategy in a risky environment.

In some cases, education and wealth of the household are positively correlated with the probability of migration.

Access to better information as well as sufficient resources to finance overseas trip play an important role in the rate of emigration in Africa. Poorer households tend to have low probability of having an internal/international migrant. Poverty at the household level per se, as one might expect, is not clearly associated with the decision to emigrate. This is consistent with the cross-country story reported above. Would this mean rapid rate of economic growth could lead to higher rate of migration in Africa? This question would be worth investigating.

Networks play an important role in facilitating migration.

In the four countries covered in the study, it was found that migration flows are distinctly concentrated in some geographic areas and among certain ethnic groups, suggesting an important role of networks and solidarity in facilitating migration.

Migration often leads to occupational change and improvement of skill of migrants.

Evidence from household surveys indicates that migration helped change occupations for the bulk of emigrants, often from agriculture to services or industry. Most acquired higher level of education following migration.

4. Conclusions: policy challenges and the way forward

Migration in Africa is part and parcel of the broader agenda for economic integration, fostering of intra-African trade and investment. The policy challenge often raised with respect to migration is whether it is possible to attain optimal welfare gains (in terms of both efficiency and equity considerations) for all involved. The empirical literature generally provides a favorable view of migration as it impacts positively the economy of country of origin through flow of remittances and in some cases skills and knowledge; and the country of destination by maintaining stable labor market conditions that is necessary for growth.

In the case of Africa, particularly Sub Saharan Africa, the bulk of emigration is south-south, often across borders, which in some ways can be regarded as an extension of the pattern of internal migration. It is not known to what extent such pattern of migration has impacted the economy of the country of origin as well as destination¹⁰. Migration episodes that responded to incentives for economic opportunities generally are part of the working of market forces in bridging excess demand in factor or goods markets thus allowing efficient allocation of resources and fostering greater economic integration.

¹⁰ See also Shaw (2007).

¹¹ A recent World Bank (2010b) report suggests that in Southern Africa region, generally wage rates follow that of South Africa with a lag. Certainly the degree of adjustment is higher for economies that are closely integrated with South Africa.

Despite the lack of evidence, it is plausible to expect that south-south migration is followed by increased trade flows and adjustment of labor markets in both sending and destination countries, which both play a crucial role in promoting growth and ensuring employment¹¹. The more formal and institutionalized flows of migration become, the greater economic integration will be and its benefits. Potential business opportunities include emergence of Diaspora bonds to finance public investment programs, increased volume of electronic money transfer and expanding rail, road and air traffic that could help the regional economy substantially. Evidently, the full benefits of such mobility of labor can be realized only if concerned national governments are able to jointly manage and coordinate the flow of migrants and protect their basic rights including access to employment and entrepreneurship.

There are incidents of extortion, abuse and exploitation of migrants bound to other parts of Africa as both legal and illegal migration became commercialized.¹² The inefficiencies in the financial system inhibit the flow of remittances thus reducing their potential impact on household welfare. There are also a wide range of issues on property rights, licensing of businesses and transfer of funds that African governments have not harmonized to encourage immigrants to engage in investment activities. Greater economic integration helps to stem the flow of migration and limits its size and composition to what is allowed by economic fundamentals. The regional economic unions such as the COMESA, ECOWAS, EEC, SACU, SADC, have been around for the greater part of post-independence Africa and yet their potential in managing migration flows is still not fully exploited.

¹² See Lucas (2006) and Shaw (2007).

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