

“When There Is No Migration, the Whole Region Has a Problem”: The Political Priorities of Migration Policies in West Africa

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Abstract

This paper considers the implications of migration to Europe for West African governments in relation to other forms of politically relevant mobilities. This helps to understand what governments in West Africa prioritize when it comes to migration policy. No doubt, there is an increasing European influence on the migration agenda. However, despite this influence, there are still other West African interests when it comes to migration governance. These are diverse, covering development and humanitarian concerns, and include pro-active diaspora policies, restrictive immigration regimes due to economic protectionism and security concerns, as well as protecting migrants and displaced people. Thus, different countries in the region have varying sets of political priorities, though underlined by a broader unpolitical nature of migration of the everyday. The paper is based on over 130 interviews with policymakers, politicians, civil society activists, and academic experts in Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and the Gambia in 2019. It adds to the literature on the agency of migration states in the Global South.

Keywords: diaspora relations, ECOWAS, internally displaced people, irregular migration, migration states, Nigeria, Niger, refugees, Senegal, The Gambia.

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INTRODUCTION

There has been growing research and policy focus on migration in West Africa. What has traditionally been deliberated on in terms of the predominant circular labor migration and the benefits and pitfalls for development (e.g., Adepoju, 2003, 2011; Awumbila et al., 2017) has increasingly become a discussion on the implications of irregular African migration toward Europe (e.g., Adam et al., 2020; Deridder et al., 2020; Gaibazzi et al., 2017; Mouthaan, 2019).

This change in perspective is tied to an increasing focus in European policymaking on migration in their external policies, notably in West Africa. The first common framework on migration cooperation with so-called “third countries” – outside the European Union (EU) – is from 2005, adapted in 2011 to the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM). One of the major outcomes of the GAMM was the possibility of mobility partnerships, which aim to improve direct coordination on migration, including legal pathways but also returns. The EU signed three out of nine such partnerships with African countries, namely Cape Verde (2008), Morocco (2013), and Tunisia (2014). Another format, with less commitment, but to signal a wish to advance cooperation on migration in the long run, was added through the Common Agenda for Migration and Mobility. To date, only two such agreements exist, both in Africa, namely in Nigeria and Ethiopia (both signed in 2015).

From the onset of the so-called “migration crisis” in Europe, the cooperation attempts gathered even more speed. By the summer of 2015, an unexpectedly high number of refugees and other migrants arriving in the EU led to newfound urgency in migration cooperation partnerships with third countries, especially in Africa. According to figures from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 1,032,408 refugees and other migrants arrived via the Mediterranean in 2015, with 3,771 reported as dead or missing (UNHCR, 2021b). By the end of the same year, the very first summit between African and European heads of state dedicated to migration took place in Valetta, Malta. At the summit, an EU Emergency Trust Fund for Stability and Addressing Root Causes of Irregular Migration and Displaced Persons in Africa (EUTF for Africa) was launched. By 2021, when it formally ended, though projects are still running, it was worth nearly €5 billion, funded mostly from EU development funds (88%), in addition to contributions from EU member states (EU, 2020). The EUTF was not renewed after 2020 and has been replaced by the EU Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) (for a critical discussion, see Pope and Weisner, 2023).

Not long after the launch of the EUTF, in 2016, the New Partnership Framework on Migration with Third Countries (NPF) was launched, in which all priority countries, chosen as a starting point for partnerships were in Africa (namely Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal). The NPF aimed to create more tailored approaches through migration compacts, including migration policies addressing areas like aid, trade, energy, and security. Throughout all these policy initiatives, European interest in migration governance centers on regulating migration flows

in the region generally and stopping irregular migration to Europe in particular. This interest is pursued through institutional and legal capacity building on issues such as “smuggling” persons, human trafficking, border control, and (forced) return cooperation. All these interests were supported by the EUTF projects that seek to address the “root causes” of migration, including lack of employment and conflict.

In West Africa, migration has both historically and post-independently been of vital importance to the region for regional development – for example, both Nigeria and Senegal have enshrined the right to migrate in their constitutions. Yet, the topic has also previously received little political attention, perhaps with the exception of periods of mass expulsions of immigrants from the region up to the 1980s, for example, in Nigeria and Ghana (Okyerefo and Setrana, 2018). This is because there is an everyday lived reality of migration that does not necessitate further policy development on migration governance (Arhin-Sam et al., 2022). Yet, as will be further explored below, the region has not been left untouched by the heightened attention and funds for migration policy development. In recent years, much has been written about the effects of European externalization policies in West Africa (Cham and Adam, 2021; Frowd, 2020; Jegen, 2023; Mouthaan, 2019; Opi, 2021; Strange and Oliveira Martins, 2019; Vives, 2017). Yet, what about other forms of migration and mobility in the region? What happens to West African policy interests in migration *despite* external influence from a very powerful actor?

A small but growing body of research has started pointing to the agentic role of Global South states in migration governance (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; Gazzotti et al., 2023; Zanker, 2023). The literature argues that despite the constraints and external influence from more powerful actors, like the EU, states are still managing to carve out their own responses – be it creatively or otherwise (El Qadim, 2014; Kandilige et al., 2023; Zanker and Altrogge, 2022). More than mere “passive recipients” of external policies, West African states show their domestic interests in pursuing certain migration policies – including the importance of remittances (e.g., Mouthaan, 2019), domestic legitimacy (Altrogge and Zanker, 2019), and how domestic interests interact with external interests (Adam et al., 2020; Frowd, 2020). Others have focused more on the micro-level adaptation to externalization responses (Deridder et al., 2020). What these critical works have in common is that they largely focus on the type of migration that is relevant for European stakeholders: irregular migration to Europe. While the amount of time, effort, and money that has gone into this objective no doubt has a political effect for countries in West Africa, there are also other forms of migration that play a role in the region. This includes involving diaspora abroad, which plays a significant role for the development of the countries in question, not least through their financial remittances (addressed by some; see, Adam et al., 2020; Mouthaan, 2019). Notwithstanding such diaspora interest, the current body of work does not engage with other forms of migration, such as the political dynamics of regional mobility (Okyerefo and Setrana, 2018) or the significant populations of displaced people. As of April 2024, there are 13.7

million forcibly displaced and stateless persons in West and Central Africa, including 8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) (UNHCR, 2024). This paper seeks to consider the place of migration to Europe for West African governments in relation to other forms of politically relevant mobilities. Taking 2019 as a snapshot year for migration governance in the region (when the EU interest was at a peak and a first wave of EUTF projects were being implemented), the paper highlights how other forms of migration policymaking were also important for gaining political capital for countries in the region. In particular, this includes diaspora relations (top priority in Nigeria and Senegal) as well as humanitarian protection of displaced persons, which was second and third political priority in Niger and Nigeria, respectively. By showing the political capital related to migration policies varied, even in this year of massive EU interest in irregular migration, showcases the agency of Global South states in prioritizing their own interests when it comes to migration policymaking and that mobility speaks to a whole range of interests that go far beyond those making their way to Europe.

In the first part, the paper introduces the influence of the European agenda on migration, to explain the high prioritization of irregular migration for many countries. The second part demonstrates that despite this influence, there are still West African interests when it comes to migration governance, including those related to development interests as well as protecting displaced people. The interests are not straightforward and go in different directions but highlight the importance of other forms of migration. The third section summarizes the different migration policy priorities for 2019 in Niger, Nigeria, the Gambia, and Senegal, highlighting that states consider various interests when looking at migration, which go far beyond irregular migration. A concluding section sums up the overall priorities, as well as notes the overall non-political nature of migration governance in the region.

METHODOLOGY

The paper draws on a research project on the political economy of migration governance in Nigeria, Niger, the Gambia, and Senegal, carried out in 2019. These four countries are all important source and transit countries of migration toward Europe, as well as playing a prominent role in regional migration. Moreover, the fact that the study includes both Anglo- and Francophone contexts as well as countries with varying sizes in population, is an indication of different types of political interests and stakes. They thus provide an interesting snapshot for balancing political priorities.

The project was conducted in 2019 and this is also the time frame for the migration policy priorities under review. At the time, the European interest in trying to influence West African migration policies was at a peak, with many EUTF projects unfolding and intense political activities taking place to develop migration policies in Senegal, the Gambia, and to a lesser degree, in Niger. For the research project, the research team conducted fieldwork in different localities in all four countries:

Niamey, Abuja, Lagos, Benin City, Banjul, Dakar, and Tambacounda (and a small number of interviews in different European cities) and included interviews with 133 policymakers, politicians, civil society activists, and academic experts. The interviews generally asked about migration policies in the country, to understand how European-influenced agenda-setting compares to own interests in migration governance. The research design was participatory and resulted in open-access country case-study reports that were peer reviewed, mostly by experts from the countries themselves. The project team also presented the findings at dissemination events for further feedback and revisions in Abuja, Banjul, Niamey, and Dakar. Furthermore, we discussed our findings with academics and civil society activists from the four participating countries at a workshop in Accra during 2019. The paper draws on insights from these interviews, the reports from the project (Altrogge and Zanker, 2019; Arhin-Sam, 2019; Jegen, 2020a, 2020b), as well as an analysis of policies, reports, and newspaper analysis from the period under review.²

Regarding migration policies, this paper acknowledges that a clear delineation between various definitions of movement at best obscures overlapping motivations and consequences and at worst speaks to certain political interests (see, e.g., Erdal and Oeppen, 2017; Mourad and Norman, 2020). However, states label a certain type of movement (and act on it) for a variety of reasons. Even if this does not speak to a clear-cut motivation, legal status, or journey of people on the move, it speaks to a policy agenda. Thus, the paper considers five types of migration policies. First, “irregular migration,” depicting policymaking around migration from West Africa to Europe affected by European policy interests. Second, “diaspora relations,” which include interests around remittances, “brain drain” and “brain gain” as well as migration-for-development discussions. Third, what I term “ECOWAS immigration,” includes interests related to regional labor migration, as well as tensions between migrant communities and political scapegoating in times of economic downturn within the region. Fourth, “displacement” concerns policymaking around internally displaced persons (IDPs). Fifth, “refugee hosting” considers policies related to refugees in the country.

European influence on migration governance in West Africa: “Who pays, commands”

No doubt, the increased interest by the EU and its member states has had a growing influence on migration governance in West Africa (Adam et al., 2020; Arhin-Sam et al., 2022; Jegen, 2023; Kandilige et al., 2023). The paper shows the prioritization of irregular migration policies for African states due to the influence and pressure from the EU.

² I have included fieldwork data from Judith Altrogge (Gambia 2017, 2019), Kwaku Arhin-Sam (Nigeria, 2019) and Leonie Jegen (Niger, Senegal in 2019) in this paper, carried out in the framework of two projects under my supervision. These are a pilot study on the political stakes of migration governance in The Gambia (in 2017) and the project “The Political Economy of West African Migration Governance” (WAMIG), which was conducted as part of the Mercator Dialogue on Asylum and Migration (MEDAM) in 2019, funded by the Ministry for Science, Research and the Arts of Baden-Württemberg and the Mercator Foundation, respectively. My thanks to my project team for their hard work and collegiality. Thanks also to the reviewers for comments on earlier versions. All errors remain my own.

The increased European interest and influence on African migration governance have affected the agenda setting in the region, dictating the priorities of migration policies. Increasing development aid for migration-related purposes makes it lucrative for governments to cooperate with the EU and its European interests. Taking the case of Senegal, our interviews showed wide agreement among respondents on competing for leadership in the field of migration governance on the political, institutional and civil society levels. More generally, there is a fragmented institutional landscape in which actors operate with partially overlapping and unclear mandates. This itself may make the determination of the best project partner for external partnerships difficult and has in part contributed to particular initiatives failing in their full implementation (Vives, 2017). It also leads to inter-institutional competition, which includes, for example, the development of the National Migration Policy (NMP) in Senegal. This competition is likely to be partly linked to the funding such development projects bring. One implementing actor commented in an interview: “Everyone wants to lead the projects, but why? Because of resources, it’s very simple, it’s nothing but a question of resources” (Interview, Dakar, July 2019).³ In the case of the NMP, a civil servant further noted: “The problem is that when the donor arrives, a competition is created” (Interview, Dakar, July 2019).⁴ The funds also affect the agenda of certain policy developments. While diaspora migration is a key interest of Senegalese policymakers, European donors have made irregular migration an increasingly important issue in the Senegalese context. As a result, dealing with irregular migration becomes the priority, to which one interlocutor, a civil society activist, noted, “Who pays, commands,” highlighting the continuing asymmetric dependencies between European and African states (Interview, Dakar, July 2019; Jegen and Zanker, 2019; MOUTHAN, 2019; Vives, 2017).⁵

The influence of external actors on agenda-setting can further be exemplified by the NMP in Senegal. According to our interviewees, the initiative to elaborate the policy did not come from a high political level but from civil servants. This was done without the initial permission from a higher level, which was only granted once the funding was secured. The formulation of the document took place in the framework of an interministerial committee that was coordinated by the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Cooperation and financed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). This raises questions about the exact (political) ownership of policies elaborated, given that the initiative to draft the policy may not have derived from a political priority but rather a funding possibility (see also, Camara, 2022). This may also explain why political adoption of the policy dragged on, even making EU budgetary support conditional upon the adoption of the policy, has so far proved unsuccessful (a National Strategy to Combat Irregular Migration was passed in 2023). A civil society actor stated that donors also have an impact on the policy

³ Original : « Chacun veut piloter; mais pourquoi? A cause des ressources [financières], c’est très simple! Ce n’est rien d’autre qu’une question de ressources. » Translation by author.

⁴ Original : « Mais le problème est que quand les bailleurs arrivent, une compétition se créée. » Translation by author.

⁵ Original : « Qui paie command. » Translation by author.

content, for example, making border control a key issue. It is also notable that once the NMP was technically validated, a “lobbying” process followed to push for the adoption of the policy at the political level. While the political approval of the NMP only passed in late 2023, with no official declarations, the EU commenced funding the implementation of some of the policy’s proposals and exerted pressure for its implementation much earlier.

Another illustration of undue influence on the migration agenda comes from Niger, a major country of interest due to its “transit” position to countries like Algeria and Libya, the final places for refugees and other migrants on their way toward Europe. The interest and focus on Niger have resulted in much funding for the country – by 2021, the end-period of the EUTF, there were 15 projects under the EUTF for Africa, amounting to over €272 million in development funds. The focus of many of these projects, as well as related ones on “anti-smuggling,” including the 2015 anti-smuggling law, has been widely discussed by a number of scholars (e.g. Frowd, 2020; Jegen, 2020a). Less known is the influence at a broader, more general level of migration policymaking. The EU quickly focused on funding the development of the National Strategy to Counter Irregular Migration, tied to the anti-smuggling law. In a record time of under a year, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) drafted the strategy. This stands in strong contrast to the NMP. Niger launched its Interministerial Commission on Migration (Comité Interministériel Chargé de l’élaboration du Document de Politique Nationale de Migration – CIM) to develop an NMP already in 2007. For numerous reasons, mainly financial, but also due to a lack of strong leadership, this process was put on hold in 2014. The NMP process was only re-launched in 2017 with financial and technical support from the German development agency GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit). Besides the emphasis placed on specific interests (e.g., anti-smuggling in Niger, to stop persons moving beyond the Nigerien borders), the frameworks also limit the involvement of a wider section of the Nigerien community. Two civil society actors were closely involved in the CIM process, in addition to the national human rights council. The GIZ notes that this civil society involvement resulted in the founding of a Migration, Development, Human Rights network (Réseau Migration–Développement–Droits Humains – REMIDDH) in Niger (GIZ, 2017). A new national policy on migration 2020–2035 was adopted in September 2020. Yet, some interlocutors decried the political nature of inclusion in the consultation framework. Accordingly, only those civil society actors that reinforced a security-focused approach to migration governance were given a space to discuss and contribute to the new migration policy (see also, Jegen, 2023).

In sum, the European agenda influences African policy development, excluding more critical voices that follow different interests. Yet, this Europeanized agenda pushing the interests with regard to irregular migrants to the forefront tells only part of the story.

WEST AFRICAN POLITICAL INTERESTS IN MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

Despite the European influence on West African migration governance, there are also national or regional political interests that come into play when considering migration governance (see also, Adam et al., 2020; Mouthaan, 2019; Zanker, 2023). Unsurprisingly, these are not straightforward interests and often stand in contradiction to each other but highlight that these countries also follow their own interests when it comes to migration policymaking. These interests include, broadly speaking, development interests – that play a role in diaspora and immigration governance – and humanitarian concerns, which primarily affect the protection measures toward refugees and internally displaced people. These are discussed in turn.

Development interests: Diaspora and immigrants

An important interest for African states in relation to migration is linked to remittances. These come from both within the region, where most migration occurs, as well as beyond. Remittances, especially those from abroad, make up a substantial part of local economies. For example, personal remittances made up 15.5% of the Gambia's gross domestic product (GDP), 21.5% of Lesotho's, and 34.4% of South Sudan's in 2019 (World Bank, 2020). Due to this, the African Union (AU) has recognized the diaspora as the sixth "area" of Africa. The significance of remittances is reflected in the efforts at prioritizing diaspora relations in migration governance. For example, remittances to Nigeria continue to exceed official development assistance and foreign direct investment. Nigeria is the largest remittance recipient country in sub-Saharan Africa. By 2018, the country received more than US\$ 24.3 billion in official remittances (an increase of \$2 billion from 2017), representing 6.1% of Nigeria's GDP (World Bank, 2019).

Considering the huge impact of remittances, it is unsurprising that the Nigerian government's priority clearly lies with diaspora migration policies (Arhin-Sam, 2019). Overall, Nigeria has been active in its migration policy development at least since 2014, including an NMP from 2015, strategies on labor migration and diaspora matters, and a coordinating framework to further reform migration governance. The most pro active policies by far are the diaspora policies, which are far-reaching and include an office assisting the president on diaspora affairs, a senate committee on diaspora matters, a diaspora commission, and strong support for the Nigerians in Diaspora Organization. There are ongoing plans to set up a government-owned money transfer system for Nigerians abroad. As a diaspora representative noted, "Diasporas have a political stake in the affairs of Nigeria" (Interview, Hamburg, February 2019).

This focus on diaspora is clearly prioritized over European interests in migration cooperation with the country. A substantial portion of funding for governing irregular migration in Nigeria comes from development partners and particularly the EU. Migration-related projects funded by the EU and member states in Nigeria have focused for the most part on irregular migration, trafficking, return,

and reintegration. The low interest of the Nigerian government to work on this issue is mirrored by the funds provided. For example, the government reduced the annual funding of the primary agency for combating human trafficking and smuggling (NAPTIP) between 2015 and 2016 (see also, Arhin-Sam, 2019).

In a similar manner, immigration is relevant as a political priority. Regional migration makes up around 80% of emigration from West Africa (Okyerefo and Setrana, 2018). This openness is also linked to a general culture of hospitality in the region. One localized version, summed up under the Wolof term, is *Teranga* (spoken in Senegal and the Gambia), which means a welcoming nature and hospitality (Gasparetti, 2011). As a Senegalese government official noted, “We are a country of *teranga*, it’s natural, it’s really this policy of openness that we’ve had since our ancestors” (Interview, Dakar, August 2019).⁶ To a degree, the regional mobility is something that just happens and is not politically prioritized, “Immigrant communities in Lagos are very active ... but they have no political stakes” (Interview with government official, Lagos, April 2019). However, it is also something that can be celebrated, like a “Senegambia Free Movement Day” that was implemented in the Gambia as “a kind of a celebration on ECOWAS Protocol,” according to a government official in The Gambia (Interview, Banjul, May 2019). A Senegalese counterpart noted, “We have no negative fixation on one aspect or another of the migration issue. This project [the planned NPM] is a policy that promotes both emigration and immigration, because the vision is positive by nature” (Interview, Dakar, July 2019).⁷

Despite this – and notwithstanding that regional mobility also adds to the remittances and therefore development potential in the region – immigration is also a topic that provides political capital through exclusion. Economic downturns have historically been met by exclusionary rhetoric toward immigrants as a threat to the local labor market. Migrants are scapegoated for economic and social challenges rather than the government addressing corruption, mismanagement, or other causes for such issues (Akinola, 2018). One of the first supplementary protocols to the Free Movement Protocols from 1979 contained additional stipulations for “illegal immigrants,” that is, “any immigrant citizen of the Community who does not fulfill the conditions stipulated in the different protocols.” This protocol came at a time when several countries throughout the region were expelling citizens from other Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries in response to economic downturns. For example, in the infamous “Ghana must go” campaign in Nigeria in 1983, over two million Ghanaians in Nigeria were affected by mass expulsions (Ikuteyijo and Olayiwola, 2018). This was no unique incident, but expulsions also took place from Ghana (1954 and 1969) and Côte d’Ivoire in 1958 (Tonah et al., 2017). Even today, this exception for “inadmissible immigrants” is applied as a matter

⁶ Original « Nous sommes un pays dit de la TERANGA... C’est naturel, c’est vraiment cette politique d’ouverture que nous avons depuis nos ancêtres. » Translation by author.

⁷ Original « C’est pour vous dire qu’on n’a pas un point de fixation négative sur un aspect ou autre sur la question migratoire. Ce projet est une politique qui donne de l’intérêt aussi bien à l’émigration qu’à l’immigration parce que la vision étant par nature positive. » Translation by author.

of routine across the region (Hamadou, 2020). One of our interviewees working for an international organization in the Gambia told us, “I think there is a previous misunderstanding of ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol. Just because they have them in place, does not mean that you don’t need to check the entry and exit records of people who are moving across borders” (Interview, Serrekunda, April 2019). This highlights that at least for some, the free circulation of movement in the region is also subject to securitization and checks. The security situation, in particular in the Sahel, has also led to an increasing salience of controlling immigration to be able to control terrorist organizations that are active across borders. Similarly, Aly Ngouille Ndiaye, the Senegalese Minister of the Interior, noted in 2019 that security questions necessitate having better information of who is in the country: “By putting this system in place, we will know, as all countries do, who is in our country. Because we don’t know right now” (Mine, 2019).⁸

Political capital can be drawn from excluding immigrants and controlling immigration for economic and security reasons. In this regard, immigration in the region, while important for regional development (Okyerefo and Setrana, 2018), is increasingly receiving (negative) political attention. This can be linked to economic protectionism and to securitization; thus, reduced mobility in the region cannot merely be explained by European influence in trying to reduce irregular migration. Beyond remittances and development (as well as a degree of political curtailment of immigration), the protection of migrants and displaced persons is also of political interest in the region.

Protection interests: Humanitarian narratives and hosting displaced persons

There is a widespread humanitarian concern for migrants on the move, and this is often repeated in political statements and speeches. Hosting displaced persons – both IDPs and refugees – does, however, also have political implications.

In 2014, Yahya Jammeh, former president and dictator who brutally ruled the Gambia for over two decades, gave a speech at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in which he argued that Westerners were racist and inhumane and that they were “deliberately causing boats carrying Black Africans to sink, only to select a few lucky ones to be rescued and sent to concentration camps, called Asylum Seekers’ Camps [sic]” (Hultin and Zanker, 2019). Though his own human rights records and protection of Gambian citizens were disastrous, the resonance of his provocative statement continues to this day. The danger of traversing various routes toward Europe has, if anything, worsened (UNHCR, 2021a). In response to an incident off the coast of Mauritania in 2019, current President Barrow said: “To lose sixty young lives at sea is a national tragedy and a matter of grave concern to my government” (Shaban, 2019). Similar sentiments were also expressed by a government representative in the Gambia, who noted in relation to migrants who are returned to the Gambia,

⁸ Original : « En mettant en place ce système, nous saurons, comme tous les pays le font, qui est chez nous. » Translation by author.

“[While I accept the] need for deportation, the question is how... some of them ... are inhumane. You cannot treat humans like that. It has to follow a process. Give them the dignity to the human being” (Interview, Banjul, May 2019).

The release of news channel CNN’s footage of African migrants and refugees being auctioned off in slave markets in Libya in November 2017 marked a major turning point, as outrage unfolded across the continent (Cascais, 2017). Coinciding with the EU–Africa Summit in Abidjan, also in November 2017, the footage revealed the plight of African migrants to many governments. The revelations led Burkina Faso to recall its ambassador to Libya, and Niger to summon the Libyan ambassador for talks. In Senegal, the *chargé d’affaires* of the Libyan Embassy in Senegal was summoned by the Foreign Minister, “to notify him of the ‘profound indignation’ of President Sall over the sale of Sub-Saharan African migrants on Libyan soil” (Bodian, 2018: 168). Furthermore, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) began to airlift migrants out of Libya, and countries like Nigeria also repatriated its citizens (Arhin-Sam, 2019; see also, MOUTHAN, 2019).

Another example of humanitarian interest is the Nigerien anti-smuggling law of 2015, which tries smuggling of migrants to Libya by further criminalizing the popular transportation business. By many accounts, the law was introduced in response to European pressure and funding (Frowd, 2020; Jegen, 2020a; Molenaar, 2017). But the very same law has also been shrouded in a humanitarian discourse by the Nigerien government, as a measure to *protect migrants*, referring to a tragedy in 2013, when a group of over 90 abandoned migrants died in the desert (Jegen and Zanker, 2019; see also, Lambert, 2020). Thus, although humanitarian concerns are by no means the sole priority, it is a political narrative that was relevant to leaders across the region. A Nigerien government official stated in an interview with us that Niger is “always a country of welcome, where we give hospitality to the people” (Interview, Niamey, March 2019).⁹

Hosting IDPs and refugees is also increasingly relevant in the region. While in 2009 there were 149,000 refugees and 500,000 IDPs, a decade later, the number of refugees had nearly quadrupled to 394,796 and the IDP figures were more than six times higher at 3,155,465 (UNHCR, 2010, 2021c). Refugee rights in the region are strong – they are protected mostly with *prima facie* recognition due to the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Refugee Convention. Nonetheless, refugees and IDPs are not always fully protected. Niger faces a huge humanitarian situation with many IDPs due to the conditions in the Sahel (drought and excessive rain), terrorist conflicts, and thus, according to a Nigerien government official, “We are facing all possible risks; we have opened our borders to displaced populations and all the West African migrants” (Interview, Niamey, March 2019).¹⁰ Given the structural problems the country has to deal with, displacement and stark humanitarian situations have made the problem of displacement a priority for the country (Jegen, 2020a).

⁹ Original « Tousjours un pays d'accueil où nous donnons l'hospitalité aux gens. » Translation by author.

¹⁰ Original « Nous faisons face à tous les risques possibles ; nous avons ouvert nos frontières aux populations déplacées et à tous les migrants d'Afrique de l'Ouest. » Translation by author.

This scenario notwithstanding, states also politically contest protection measures, which are still considered a political priority, albeit in a different way. In Niger, the recent arrival of more Sudanese refugees has sparked strong contestation. The government and regional authorities view the arrival of Sudanese with suspicion, characterizing them as “criminals,” “fighters,” and “possible members of armed groups in Libya” (Lambert, 2020; Tubiana et al., 2018). As noted in one of our interviews, “In regard to the Sudanese, the people that come from other countries, maybe their practices are not well seen in the country,” which “poses problems of social cohesion” (Interview, International Organization, Niamey, March 2019). The Nigerien government certainly displayed reluctance to protect Sudanese refugees. In 2018, they deported 135 Sudanese asylum seekers back to Libya, which amounted to a breach of the non-refoulement principle (Lambert, 2020). The UNHCR had to lobby the Nigerien government to allow for the registration of Sudanese asylum seekers in the first place and to accept the opening of the humanitarian center outside the city of Agadez, which could host them (ibid). The Nigerien government has demanded the resettlement of Sudanese refugees and more aid to deal with the situation. Some respondents highlighted that a few resettlements took place. Living conditions in the humanitarian center are dire, with a lack of education, healthcare facilities, and security (Reidy, 2019). The unacceptable behavior toward Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers is evident in scapegoating them for potential job losses and causing other immigration-related tensions. They have become a target for exclusion, mainly because they do not come from the region (Jegen, 2020a; Lambert, 2020).

An inverse political interest is seeking to repatriate refugees from another context in order to highlight the strength of the country. For example, the repatriation of Nigerian refugees in Cameroon back home by the Nigerian government is a sign of improved security in Nigeria, even if this comes at the cost of refugee protection. To highlight their own stability, the government has tried several times to repatriate Nigerian refugees within the Lake Chad Basin. It was politically preferable to repatriate Nigerian refugees, bring them into IDP camps, and label them as IDPs to avoid the embarrassment of having refugees abroad. As argued by Whitaker (2017), it is often in the interest of states to label migrants as “migrants” rather than “refugees,” since the producing states can avoid political embarrassment and receiving states can avoid providing them with the refuge they seek. However, even in the migrants’ home countries, the governance of IDPs can signal certain political interests.

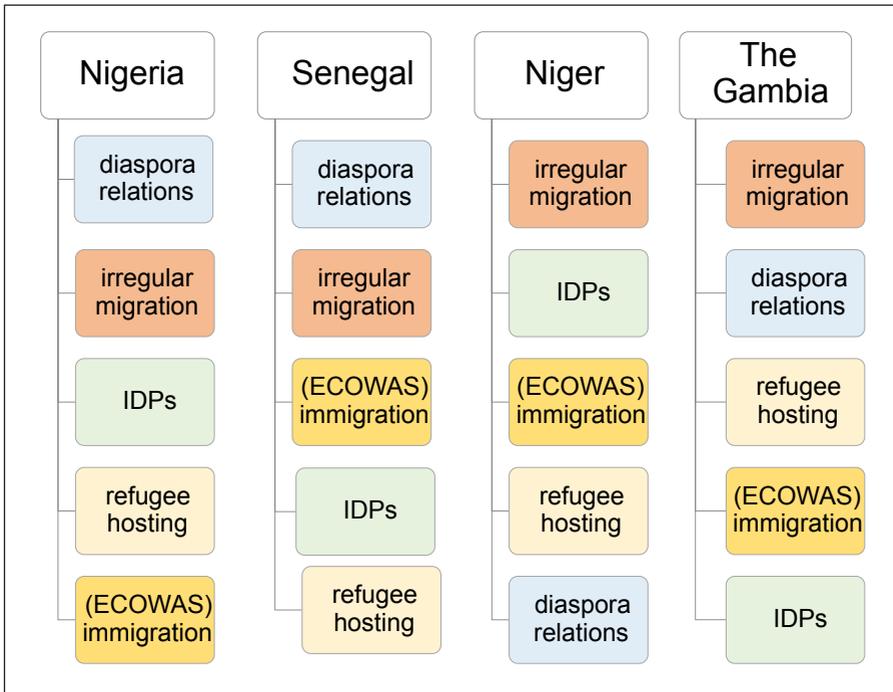
In Nigeria, for example, the IDP situation is of importance due to the personal connection the (now former) President has to the region of displacement. According to one interlocutor working for a research organization, “They [northerners] are his [then President Buhari] people. He understands that context better than the irregular migration in the south, which is in the interest of the EU to stop it” (Interview, Abuja, April 2019). For a policy consultant, this means: “They [the government] are more interested in the IDP issue than in the rising scale of irregular migration” (Interview, Abuja, April 2019). This implies that the President is “spending a lot of political capital

in the north on the plight of the IDPs” (Interview, researcher, Abuja, April 2019). Notably, former President Buhari also politically instrumentalized IDPs to show military strength, especially in the ongoing military operation against the terrorist group Boko Haram (Arhin-Sam, 2019), not least to fulfill his political promises. During the 2015 election, after Goodluck Jonathan’s administration had exhausted all means of defeating Boko Haram, the then-presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari, who is also a former military man, campaigned heavily on having what it takes to defeat Boko Haram and stabilize the region. However, after four years and the rising number of IDPs, the situation continues to put political pressure on the government (Carsten and Kingimi, 2018). Considering the rising numbers of IDPs, dealing with IDPs has become a major feat to show military strength. Thus, Buhari declared the northeast region to be in a “post-conflict stabilization phase” in June 2018 (Arhin-Sam, 2019). In the same month, the army asked 2,000 IDPs to return to their home district of Guzamala, adding to the 1,200 IDPs who were also asked to return to the city of Bama in Borno state in April 2018 (Orji, 2018; Urowayini, 2018). Many international actors, including the UN, criticized these desperate political moves, noting the volatile situation of the region in the face of intensified bombings by Boko Haram. This shows that protection interests are diverse and contested, but all the same are a significant political priority often overlooked.

MIGRATION POLICY PRIORITIES

The paper shows what effects external interests from the EU and their member states can have on agenda setting. However, using 2019 as a snapshot, it shows that interests in migration policies are numerous and states have their own interests, and even different priorities. The external push to adopt and implement measures targeting irregular migration toward Europe resulted in “irregular migration” becoming a top priority in Niger and the Gambia in comparison to other mobility-related policy issues; “irregular migration” emerged as the second priority in Nigeria and Senegal (see Figure 1).

Figure Migration Policy Priorities in Nigeria, Senegal, Niger and The Gambia



Source: Author's own elaboration

As shown, however, other interests like development and humanitarian concerns also play a role. Diaspora relations are top political priorities in Nigeria and Senegal – at least during the research phase in 2019 – and the second priority in the Gambia.¹¹ Regional mobility, in what I termed “ECOWAS immigration,” was the third priority in Niger and Senegal in 2019, fourth in the Gambia, and last in Nigeria. This highlights that at least in 2019 not much capital was made out of it and shows the non-political nature of mobility. For Niger, displacement was a second priority in the country, unsurprisingly, given the high number of displaced people at the time, and third in Nigeria, for similar reasons and as explained above. On the whole, “refugee hosting” was a relatively low priority for the countries in question.

The order of priorities – based on our research and interviews – shows a rough estimation of how different countries in the region politically prioritize migration governance. It is perhaps no surprise that the smaller countries are seemingly more influenced by external agendas (the Gambia and Niger) and

¹¹ Since there are very few Nigeriens abroad and the diaspora community is rather small, this was a very low priority for the Nigerian government.

the larger countries prioritize diaspora relations (Senegal and Nigeria). Perhaps it is also telling that regional migration is politically more prominent in the two francophone countries. Regional migration is safeguarded not only through the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocols but the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), comprising the eight states that share the Franc CFA currency to have their own rules on free movement. This may have strengthened the political importance of regional free movement.

CONCLUSION: MIGRATION AS A WAY OF LIFE

The influence on migration priorities has been problematic in many different ways, widely documented in a growing literature (see, e.g., Barry, 2023; Camara, 2022; Deridder et al., 2020; Jegen, 2023; Opi, 2021). One of the most significant examples of this was the Nigerien 2015 anti-smuggling law. One of our interviewees noted: “In the moment when there is no migration, the whole region has a problem” (Interview, civil society activist, Niamey, March 2019).¹² Fast forward to 2024, and there has been a series of coups across the region, and Niger, among other countries, has withdrawn from ECOWAS and abrogated the controversial 2015 law. How migration priorities will develop in the future, is yet to be seen.

It is relevant to note that for governments in the region, migration and mobility are traditionally not a significant political topic. In other words, it is so central to governments and their citizens that it is not politically questioned. In other words, despite more recent framing, migration and mobility are generally not considered a threat or problem in the West African context, but rather are considered a common part of everyday life. Cross-border mobility is very established, with regional variations on the freedom of movement, and includes non-formalized border crossings (see Okyerefo and Setrana, 2018). Indeed, it is in part remarkably normalized due to high informal border crossing that transforms determined territorial borders into artificial borders, dividing communities who maintain close social, economic, and cultural cross-border ties (Arhin-Sam et al., 2022).

The lack of prior political attention to migration governance becomes most evident when we consider that in Nigeria, Niger, the Gambia, and Senegal an NMP was only developed and introduced following external funding for these schemes from the EU and their member states. The juxtaposition of lack of policy implementation and an everyday lived reality of mobility comes across clearly, considering the ECOWAS framework. As one Nigerien interlocutor told us, “Migration is a tradition; it is a way of life”¹³ (Interview, Niamey, March 2019). This way of life is a fundamental aspect to understanding where political priorities in migration governance may lie.

¹² Original : « Au moment où il n'y a pas de migration, toute la région a un problème. » Translation by author.

¹³ Original : « La migration, c'est une tradition; c'est une mode de vie. » Translation by author.

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