

Why Migration is not the Solution for Africa's Youth Crisis

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Young people in Africa are faced with bleak economic prospects and limited employment opportunities regardless of their professional qualifications. Notwithstanding statistics showing that young people below the age of twenty-five constitute the majority of the population in Africa at more than 60% (Ibrahim 2019), African governments have not done enough to create opportunities and give young Africans hope for a better future on the continent. Against this background, migration has captured the imagination of many young Africans despite countless deaths on the Mediterranean Sea as boats unsuitable for the voyage to Europe capsize. African migrants who attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea are survivors of the perils of the journey to North Africa including the trans-Saharan passage and slavery. There has also been another migration trajectory to the Middle East,

predominantly undertaken by young African women. But what prospects await young Africans who arrive in Europe? And how have African migrant women fared in the Middle East?

Many African governments seem oblivious to the fact that they have a responsibility to create enabling environments for citizens to pursue their dreams and aspirations. Universities on the continent continue to churn out graduates despite there being no vibrant labor market able to absorb them. Out of despair and a conviction that their governments do not respect their civil, economic, and political rights, many young Africans are voting with their feet, spurred on in their journeys by despair and the belief that things cannot be worse elsewhere than in their countries; that no place can be worse than home. However, the waves of migration represented by the dangerous voyages via North Africa en-route to Europe appear to a growing number of Europeans as the transfer of Africa's problems. For many, the images of young African men conjure up the idea of an invasion, which carries connotations of danger framed around the Black Peril, crime, and other social ills stereotypically associated with Africa.

Online commentaries on the impact of African migrants on the aesthetic appeal of Western cities such as Paris present images of African men pestering indifferent tourists in the city's public spaces to buy their cheap merchandise, along with those of homeless Africans, as an anathema in Western cityscapes. Africans who live under these circumstances in major European cities look very much like "matter out of place" (Malkki 1995). A predictable interpretation of Africans sleeping in the streets is the Africanization of crime and filth, where putrid stench symbolize "the smell of Africa". Racialization of social ills draws from the readily available and easily accessible association of Africa with savagery, danger, and pollution. The presence of blackness, continental blackness in this case, induces tension and moral panic notwithstanding that squalor and crime are not racial traits but manifestations of poverty.

The idea of young Africans undertaking the risky journey to Europe to sell cheap merchandise to reluctant residents and tourists in European cities does not inspire any hope that migration under these circumstances is the most positive course of action for young Africans. It is difficult to believe that street vending in Europe is more profitable than it is in Africa. Combined with this, there are

also many young African migrants living on charity. This certainly cannot be any young person's dream and for how long can they live like this? Is it worthwhile for young people to spend the most productive years of their lives living on handouts in countries that are increasingly seeking ways to deport rather than absorb them? Some African migrants have found their way to farms in southern Europe where they live in shacks, inhale pesticides, and harvest strawberries in slave-like, back-breaking, and hand-chapping conditions. Earning as little as they do, how much money can they remit to their families when they can barely meet the basic minimum of life's necessities? Listening to narratives of how thousands of euros are paid to people smugglers in order to secure a cramped spot on a dangerous boat, one wonders what such migrants' lives would have been like if this money had been invested in income-generating projects in the countries of origin. There are also African migrants who overstay their visas and work odd jobs in the shadows and those who devalue their qualifications working in menial jobs. Is this really better than living in Africa?

In research that I carried out with migrants who returned to Zimbabwe (Jaji 2018), one who had

returned from the United Kingdom had the following to say:

You take three, four, five, six jobs that you do a day. When do I get time to sleep? It's very difficult. My friends; so many friends, they died in their sleep, not when they were working. Because you cannot work six jobs; I get into this toilet [to clean it], I work in a restaurant, and then I go back and change into the next uniform that I am getting another job that will pay me for the next 44 hours because there people work in shifts. It's so tiring. [S]ome people right now, they can survive, but if they can survive there in the UK, they cannot fend for the people back home here.

Many Europeans do not see the contribution that Africans make to their countries. Africans who migrate without requisite documentation are either objects of pity or contempt. For many Europeans, the inevitable changes that migration engenders are worrisome. The numbers of African migrants moving to Europe is disproportionately higher than that of Europeans relocating to Africa. Western migrants who move to Africa have the resources to look after themselves without relying on welfare systems – where they exist – in the receiving countries in Africa. In contrast, many African migrants who cross the Mediterranean arrive as victims and dependents, with only the clothes on their backs.

While reactions to African migrants are hostile in many instances, it is important to acknowledge those who have extended hospitality to and solidarity with them. However, Africa should not interpret this solidarity as an entitlement. Rather, the continent needs to find solutions and stop exporting its young people and normalizing this failure on its part. There comes a time when host countries reach saturation point and fatigue sets in because there is no end in sight. Countries hosting undocumented African migrants cannot be forced to keep burdening themselves with Africa's problems. This is particularly salient when Western countries' citizens living in Africa are not as burdensome as the hungry and destitute Africans arriving in the West.

What kind of solutions does the West offer to undocumented young African migrants without any professional qualifications who can barely speak English or any other European languages? It is quite distressing to watch these young Africans bubbling with confidence and hope as they share their dreams with the media. In one video-recorded interview, the white interviewer gently nudged the young African woman she was interviewing towards common sense: what did she intend to do when she arrived in Europe? The young woman was determined to get to Europe

where she believed she would braid hair and transform her life and that of her family back Nigeria! Mobility by young Africans especially those who move as undocumented migrants does not provide them with many life-changing opportunities. Sleeping outside on the streets and living on charity are certainly not the image of upward social mobility. If anything, the images of young African men milling around on the streets of western Europe's cities or harassing tourists on the streets of Paris has severely dented the dignity of Africans. For some, if not many Westerners, these African migrants represent a transplantation of the ills of a "deviant" continent to "normal" spaces (Boedeltje 2012).

Migrant African women in the Middle East have not fared any better. Horrendous stories abound of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse while working in slave-like, exploitative, degrading, and dehumanizing conditions. Most of these women's narratives rarely end without tears being shed. They are stories of curtailed freedom of movement, violence, cruelty, trauma, and regret for those who have survived the inhuman treatment. There are also women who have not lived to tell about the horrors of their experiences working for people who do not acknowledge their humanity. These women have died at the

hands of their employers or committed suicide as the only way out of a terrible situation whose psychological impact on migrant women is exacerbated by the fact that many African women leave the continent with bright dreams packaged in deceptive promises. These degrading experiences are reflective of many African governments' own treatment of their citizens, which reinforces racist attitudes towards Africans. Some migrant women tell stories of being spurned by their countries' indifferent embassies in the Middle East when they turned to them for help to return home.

Migration can be an exciting and fulfilling experience under the right circumstances, exemplified by highly skilled South-North mobility. Indeed, there are many Africans who have transformed their lives through migration and shown to the world what Africa is capable of producing under the right circumstances. While there are significant numbers of Africans who have turned their lives around through migration, this has been achieved at great personal cost in many cases and to the detriment of the continent in terms of human capital. For much of its postcolonial history, Africa has been losing its best human capital, mostly to Western countries. Many young Africans who study in the

West are reluctant to return to the continent, while at the same time those who were trained on the continent keep leaving it in search of better economic prospects.

Arguments have been made in the literature on migration to the effect that brain drain is counteracted by brain gain, but without return migration or harnessing of diaspora expertise for the development of the sending country, this gain is enjoyed only by the receiving countries (Ite 2002). Brain circulation which would benefit both receiving and sending countries remains limited in scope (Teferra 2004). Africa thus shoulders the expense of educating its young people without reaping the benefits of their skills. On the one hand, tertiary education and vocational training should be accessible to all Africans. Many young Africans who undertake the hazardous journey to Europe clearly lack basic skills and are ill-suited to the advanced economies in which they believe their dreams will be realized. Indeed, many young African migrants live with the disappointment of watching their dreams dissolve into thin air having risked their lives and crossed the Mediterranean against all odds. On the other hand, educating people without creating opportunities only contributes to the frustration that is forcing many young Africans to

succumb to pressure to leave the continent against their better judgment.

One issue that does not usually appear in the literature on highly skilled African migrants is the question of who fills the job vacancies that their departure creates. In many instances, services are provided by incompetent, poorly trained, and demoralized employees who are outcasts of the global labor market. It is not surprising that corruption continues to thrive in many African countries. The narrative that migration is enriching to receiving countries overlooks how it impoverishes sending countries. African countries are poor, yet they train professionals for countries that have more resources to invest in their own human capital. The extent to which remittances make up for this loss is limited, especially if one considers that very little if any of them remain for investment after meeting consumption needs. Why is a continent endowed with natural resources incapable of providing opportunities, employment and globally competitive salaries to its citizens?

Africa can ill afford to train people for other parts of the world when it is in desperate need itself of highly skilled professionals.

Europe or any other continent cannot be expected to keep absorbing Africans. If migration is a solution, the desperate migration trajectories to Europe and the Middle East are unsustainable in the long-term and a dead-end route out of poverty. The solution does not lie in young Africans voting with their feet and sleeping or slaving away the best years of their lives in migrant shelters or on farms in southern Europe. It lies in African governments comprehending that the continent's young people are Africa's responsibility and future and in their making the commitment to create opportunities for them on the continent. The solution lies in African countries training young people and coming up with concrete steps on how to reduce the high levels of unemployment and underemployment that are the reasons why many have embarked on the perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea or to the Middle East.

Admittedly, Africa has a tortured history with the West but it is time for the continent to shrug off the cloak of victimhood and find solutions to the problems that continue to bedevil it and force its young people to embark on perilous journeys to destinations where they are not wanted. The problem with victimhood is that people who self-

identify as victims cannot go further than those who victimize them allow them. The captive cannot go beyond the boundary drawn by the captor. The scramble for victimhood will not change Africans' lives for the better. If there is profit in victimhood, it is short-lived. It is time for Africans to face the reality that the solution does not lie in begging for charity but in turning things around on the continent.

Undeniably, this is a mammoth task considering the continent's crisis of leadership, which is the very reason why many young Africans find themselves between a rock and a hard place. African governments should take responsibility for young people in their countries and create conditions that are conducive for and enabling to the pursuit of happiness and lives lived with the dignity to which every human being is entitled. The nightmarish journey to Europe and the horrific tales of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse shared by young African women who migrated to the Middle East and survived the horror and dehumanization demand immediate action so that future generations do not track the same routes. Africans need to understand that no one is going to develop the continent for them. Those waiting for the situation to get better before

they can return are likely to wait for a lifetime. If African leaders talk about African solutions to African problems, the plight of young Africans is one of the African problems in need of an urgent African solution. If African governments do not respect and care about Africans, who will?

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