

When Politics Pushes Borders: How Weak Governance Fuels Irregular Migration in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Irregular migration remains a pressing issue across Africa, driven largely by governance failures that create economic marginalization and compel people to move. This paper argues that the overlap of economic hardship and weak governance rooted in fragile political institutions, pervasive corruption, ineffective policy implementation, and inadequate border management propels undocumented migration both within the continent and toward the Global North, especially Europe.

Drawing on a comparative qualitative and quantitative analysis of policy responses in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, and using secondary data and grey literature, the study shows how poorly designed governance structures generate economic deprivation and state dysfunction that encourage unregulated movement of people. Political instability born of flawed policy choices, collusion between state elites and transnational smuggling networks, weak enforcement of regional frameworks, and limited cooperation among regional bodies such as ECOWAS and IGAD all weaken states' capacity to address poverty and unemployment, and in doing so directly or indirectly facilitate internal and international migration.

The paper concludes that weak governance is a root cause of both economic deprivation and irregular migration, enabling Africans to move informally within the continent and across international routes like the Mediterranean. Strengthening governance through better policy design and implementation, improved transparency, and greater institutional accountability is therefore essential to address the economic and institutional drivers of migration. By linking migration dynamics to governance failures, this work contributes to the literature on African political governance and migration management.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Migration across Africa is driven above all by governance failures that create economic hardship, institutional weakness and regulatory gaps conditions that facilitate irregular movement within and beyond the continent. By mid-2025 roughly 45.7 million Africans were forcibly displaced, about 3% of the continent's population and nearly half (48%) of the world's internally displaced persons (World Bank, 2025). Some 15 million Africans live in other African countries, regularly or irregularly, accounting for over 90% of intra-African migration flows (South African Institute of International Affairs, 2025).

In 2024 about 146,000 Africans reached Europe and Gulf states via irregular routes, down from 282,000 in 2023 largely because of tighter border enforcement. Still, the root causes remain tied more to governance breakdowns than to economics alone (Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa, 2025). Weak institutions, ineffective border management and the spread of transnational smuggling networks all play central roles alongside economic drivers.

West Africa's ECOWAS region, home to more than 400 million people, illustrates how policies intended to facilitate movement can be exploited: free-movement protocols helped around 7.5 million intra-regional migrants move by 2020, but smugglers have taken advantage of weak enforcement and corrupt officials to profit from that openness (Nshimbi et al., 2025). The NigerLibya corridor is a stark example in 2016 an estimated 170,000 migrants transited it, showing how smuggling can become embedded in local economies and in some places be more lucrative than lawful livelihoods (Fereday, 2023).

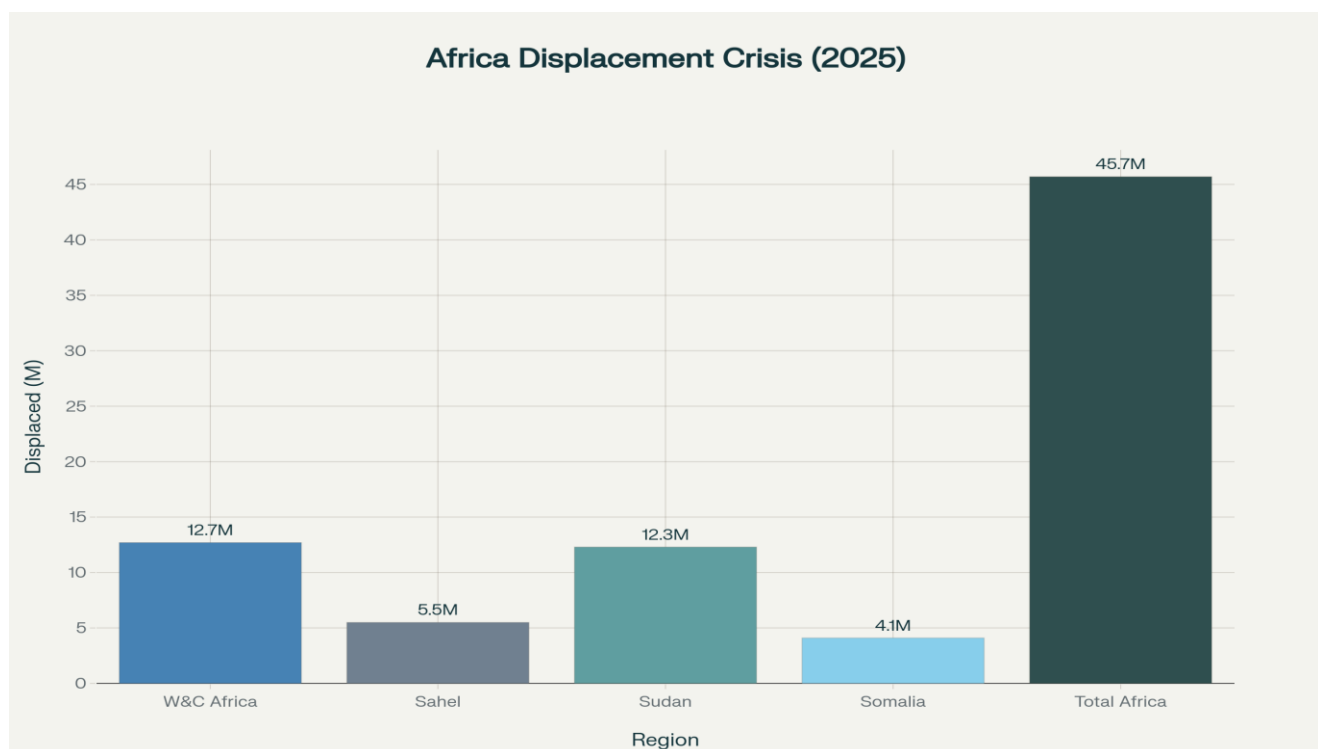
The continent's record levels of displacement stem largely from governance failures that fuel instability and conflict. As of April 2025 about 12.7 million people in West and Central Africa were forcibly displaced or stateless a 48% rise since 2020 (UNHCR, 2025). The Sahel alone now hosts over 5.5 million displaced people. Longstanding exclusionary policies, military rule and systematic violence have produced deep displacement crises in Sudan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Danish Refugee Council, 2025).

The conflict in Sudan, which began in April 2023, had displaced more than 12.3 million people by July 2025: roughly 3 million have fled to neighboring countries and 8.4 million are newly displaced inside Sudan, making it the fastest-growing displacement crisis in the world as of December 2024. In Somalia, conflict is projected to displace over 4 million people by September 2025. Corruption also drives migration: 19% of migrants surveyed on key African routes cited poor governance and corruption as main reasons for leaving (Mixed Migration Centre, 2019; Transparency International, n.d.).

Policy responses have struggled to keep up. The African Union's Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA) and its 20182030 action plan are ambitious but have been hampered by weak institutional capacity, chronic underfunding and limited political willingness among member states to cooperate (American Political Science Association, 2023; South African Institute of International Affairs, 2025). Migration governance on the continent remains fragmented, with patchy data collection, weak cooperation mechanisms and heavy reliance on donor funding that often emphasizes border control over tackling root causes (South African Institute of International Affairs, 2025).

Recent migration flows reflect this failure to manage migration effectively. Irregular entries to the EU fell by 20% to 75,900 in the first half of 2025, with major drops on the Western AfricaEU route (-41%) and eastern routes; yet the Central Mediterranean route from Libya and Tunisia stayed active, with about 47,000 arrivals in 2024 (Frontex, 2025). Increased enforcement in 2025 saw Morocco and Mauritania block crossings of over 45,000 migrants and expel more than 30,000 people in the first four months of the year.

At the same time, dangerous journeys continue. In 2024 some 46,843 migrants reached Spain's Canary Islands via the Atlantic route, and the Mixed Migration Centre (2025) recorded roughly 10,000 migrants as dead or missing that year trying to reach Spain by sea. Those losses underline the tragic human cost when border-control measures address symptoms but not the governance failures that push people to take such risks.



[Figure 1: Displacement Crisis in Africa by Region (2025)]

Source: World Bank. (2025). Forced displacement statistics for Africa.

2. BACKGROUND

Africa's migration governance has deep roots in the colonial era, when arbitrary borders carved up precolonial societies and disrupted long-standing patterns of movement, leaving behind enduring territorial divisions and intergroup tensions (Monteh, 2024). Under colonial rule, both coerced labor for mines and voluntary relocation for cash-crop farming expanded internal mobility, setting the stage for contemporary migration flows (de Haas & Frankema, 2024).

When countries became independent, they inherited those same borders and weak institutions, prompting early continental responses like the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention and the 2006 Migration Policy Framework for Africa to try to regulate movement (African Union, 2015). Yet despite these comprehensive frameworks, limited funding, weak political commitment, fragmented regional arrangements, and reliance on external donors prioritizing border security have all undermined effective implementation (Vanyoro, 2023). Today, persistent governance gaps poor border control, uneven law enforcement, and weak service delivery continue to push people into irregular migration, turning what was once a normal pattern of mobility into a marker of political fragility and a driver of regional instability. Understanding this history is crucial to making sense of current migration governance challenges across the continent.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study assesses how weaknesses in governance drive irregular migration in Africa using a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative analysis of secondary data with qualitative document review. Focusing on the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, it examines evidence from 2015 onward to capture recent migration trends and governance dynamics.

Quantitative data came from trusted sources such as UNDESA, UNHCR, IOM, Frontex, the World Bank, the Mo Ibrahim Governance Index, Transparency International, and regional displacement monitoring systems. Migration flows, displacement figures, and governance indicators were analyzed with descriptive statistics, temporal correlation measures and time-series techniques to identify patterns and links between governance quality and migration outcomes.

On the qualitative side, I conducted a systematic review of migration policies, implementation reports and academic literature produced by the African Union, ECOWAS, IGAD and national governments. These documents were examined through open and selective coding to surface institutional weaknesses, corruption trends, gaps in border-control policy and shortcomings in migration management, while content and discourse analysis helped assess enforcement effectiveness and governance inconsistencies.

A cross-case synthesis then brought together findings from the Sahel and the Horn to highlight shared patterns as well as region-specific differences, integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence to corroborate conclusions. Recognizing limitationsuneven data quality, the predominance of official narratives in available documents and difficulties in comparing data across countries the study used source triangulation, transparent methods and ongoing critical reflexivity to mitigate these issues.

4. FINDINGS: The Sahel Region as Epicenter of Governance-Enabled Irregular Migration

4.1. Overview

The Sahel corridor has become a major transit zone linking origin countries in West Africa to departure points in North Africa and onward to Europe. Migration along this route is largely driven by failures in cross-border policies among several states, which have produced an "archipelagic economy" of widespread mobility and illicit cross-border trade worth hundreds of millions of dollars (Chatham House, 2024). That economy persistsand may even be strengthenedby the criminalization imposed by transit countries.

4.2. West African Migration Patterns: Drivers, Governance Contexts, and Regional Trends

Country	Estimated Migrants (2024)	Main Drivers	Governance Context	Notes and Sources
Guinea	25,000-30,000	Post-coup instability, rapid governance decline	Military rule since Sept. 2021	Largest source via Sahel route (MMC, 2025)
Mali	20,000-25,000	Coup-induced crisis, insecurity	Military coups in 2020/21	High migration despite crisis (Chatham House, 2024)
Nigeria	15,000-20,000	Insurgency (Boko Haram), banditry, corruption	Systematic governance failures	Most populous country, diverse causes (MMC, 2025)
Senegal	15,000-20,000	Youth unemployment, limited economic prospects	Stable democracy, slow reforms	Mainly via Atlantic r
Gambia	10,000-12,000	Enduring poverty, authoritarian legacy	Post-Jammeh institutional fragility	Disproportionate flows given small population

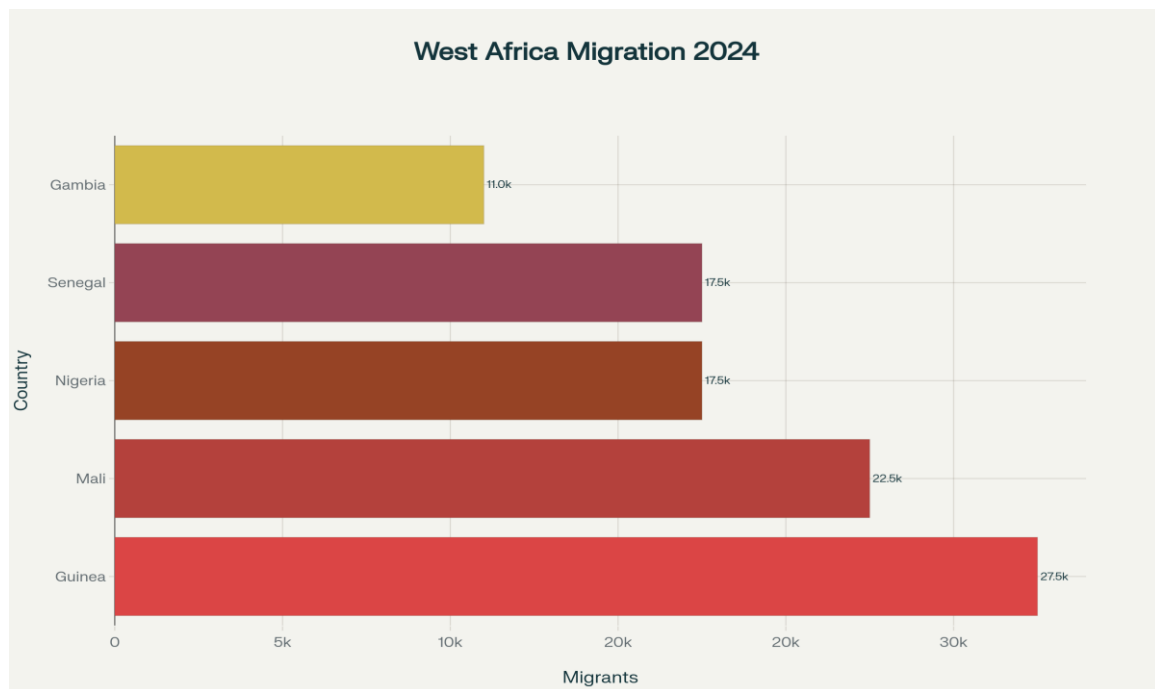


Figure 2: Irregular Migration from West African Countries (2024)

Source. Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa. (2025, June 10). African migration trends, Q2 2025: Regional dynamics and global implications.

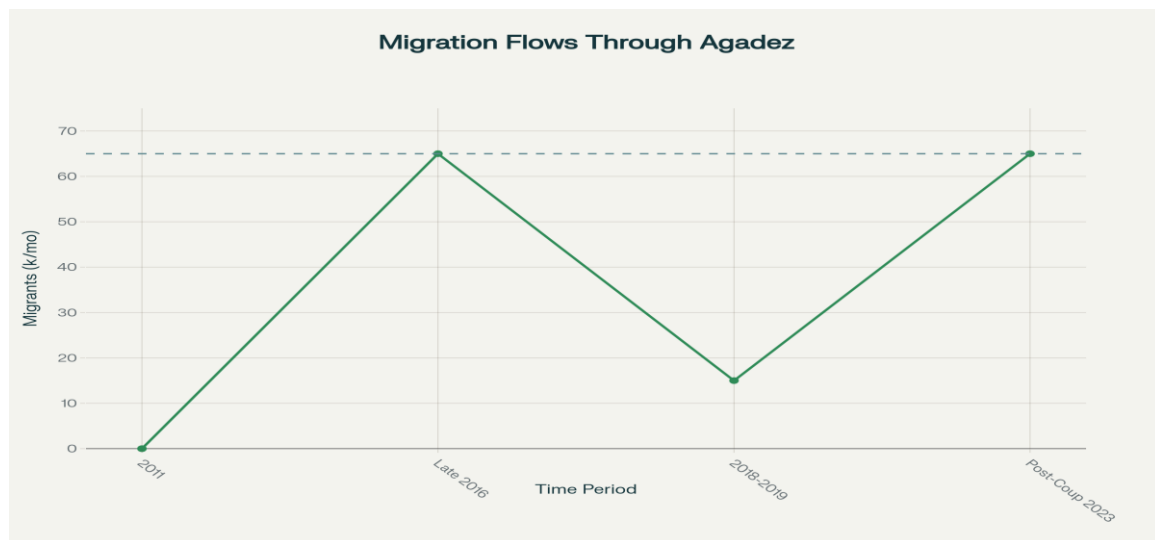
Guinea has become the leading source country for irregular migration along the Sahel route, with roughly 25,00030,000 nationals estimated to have attempted the journey to Europe in 2024 (Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa, 2025). The spike traces back to the overthrow of President Alpha Condé in September 2021; under military rule, governance indicators fell sharply, pushing many Guineans to look for opportunities abroad.

Mali adds about 20,00025,000 people to the annual flow, a trend that continued after the two military coups in 2020 and 2021, which disrupted democratic institutions and worsened the economic outlook (Chatham House, 2024). Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, accounts for some 15,00020,000 migrants each year along the Sahel route, driven by the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, widespread banditry in the northwest, and persistent governance failures including corruption that drains oil revenues and undermines public services (Mixed Migration Centre, 2025).

Senegal, despite having a more consolidated democracy than many neighbors, still sees about 15,00020,000 people leave annually on the hazardous Atlantic route to the Canary Islands. High youth unemployment over 40% and a sense that recent governance reforms have not produced real economic gains are the main push factors (Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa, 2025). And The Gambia, with only around 2.5 million inhabitants, sends a disproportionately large number roughly 10,00012,000 people each year reflecting the lingering effects of decades of authoritarian rule under Yahya Jammeh (19942017), which hollowed out institutions and left deep poverty (Mixed Migration Centre, 2025).

4.3. The Agadez Hub: Governance Vacuum as Business Model

The city of Agadez in Niger has become a key hub in the Sahel migration network, where failures of migration governance have been turned into lucrative business opportunities (Chatham House, 2024). After Libya's 2011 revolution, flows through Agadez jumped from almost nothing to about 60,00070,000 people per month by late 2016, as Libya's collapse and Niger's inability to manage transit routes combined to create a surge (Chatham House, 2024). Under pressure from Europe after the 2015 migration crisis, Niger passed Law 2015-36 the so-called "migrant smuggling law" in May 2015 (GIGA Hamburg, 2024). The law brought severe penalties, mass arrests of smugglers and tightened border patrols, and migration numbers fell to roughly 10,00020,000 monthly by 20182019 (Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, 2019). But the crackdown also wrecked Agadez's economy, which had grown dependent on migration-related income: taxi drivers, hoteliers, mechanics and guides who had made more from those services than from formal work suddenly found themselves without livelihoods, fuelling anger toward European backers and the Nigerien government (Chatham House, 2024). The July 2023 coup that ousted President Mohamed Bazoum quickly changed that approach: the junta repealed Law 2015-36 in November 2023 and openly denounced Europe's migration demands as neocolonial (Deutsche Welle, 2025). Migrant flows spiked almost immediately Agadez's mayor said the system was running "full throttle" illustrating how Sahelian borders are used politically, tightened or relaxed by those in power according to economic interests and ideology.



[Figure 3: Migration Flows Through Agadez, Niger Over Time

Source. Chatham House. (2024, July 30). Tackling the Niger-Libya migration route: Transnational links from Agadez to conflict in Libya.

4.4. Border Corruption and Systematic Governance Failure

Research in Niger indicates that, although border control systems exist, they largely function as revenue-raising mechanisms rather than tools of security. Routine corruption at crossing points has turned formal border checks into informal taxation: officers regularly demand payments that have no legal basis. Smugglers commonly move goods from Mali through Niger into Nigeria by paying small fees at checkpoints, allowing contraband including weapons to pass undetected (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015).

As one unnamed border official put it, "We are here to make money. Everybody who passes must pay something" (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015). Research by the International Republican Institute (2021) confirms that these practices are systematic, with informal earnings from border control often far outstripping official salaries, creating strong institutional incentives to keep borders porous and enforcement weak.

4.5. Economic Dimensions: The Migration Industry

Migration across the Sahel has evolved into a layered, multi-million-dollar cross-border industry. A complete trip from Bamako, Mali to Italy typically costs a migrant between \$2,500 and \$4,000. With an estimated 100,000 - 120,000 people using these Sahel routes each year, the sector's value can be conservatively put at about \$300 - \$400 million (Chatham House, 2024).

That money is spread across a range of actors: transport operators who charge roughly \$200-\$600 per segment (around \$160 - \$240M annually); border officials who extract informal "fees" of \$20-\$100 per crossing (\$30 - \$60M); transit-point accommodation providers (\$24 - \$48M); Mediterranean boat operators charging \$1,000 - \$2,500 per crossing (\$100 - \$200M); and armed groups offering "protection" along desert routes (\$40 - \$80M). The sizeable revenues generated by these channels create strong economic incentives to tolerate lax or negligent border governance.

5. FINDINGS: The Horn of Africa - Forced Versus Voluntary Irregular Migration

Whereas the Sahel shows how governance failures can push people into voluntary irregular migration, the Horn of Africa illustrates how similar failures more often produce forced displacement driven by violence and political collapse. This side-by-side comparison highlights that comparable structural weaknesses in governance can lead to very different migration patterns depending on how extensively and in what form the state breaks down.

By 2022 the Horn of Africa Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda hosted 4.3 million refugees (about one in six worldwide) and roughly 13 million internally displaced people, the largest concentration of displaced persons globally (IGAD, 2025). Unlike in the Sahel, where smuggling networks facilitate much voluntary movement, governance failures in the Horn have been severe enough to produce displacement through state collapse, armed conflict and widespread human rights abuses.

The military conflict in Sudan that began in April 2023, itself rooted in decades of authoritarian rule and elite power struggles, had forced over 12.3 million people to flee by July 2025, creating the world's largest humanitarian emergency (ICVANETWORK, 2025). Somalia is expected to have about 4.1 million displaced people by September 2025, with roughly 70% of that displacement driven by conflict linked to prolonged state fragility and governance breakdowns (Somalia Migrants Response Plan, 2025).

6. DISCUSSION: State Capacity, Corruption, and the Migration-Security-Development Nexus

These findings call for a rethink of how state capacity is linked to migration governance in theory. Traditional accounts assume that “weak” states cannot manage migration while “strong” states have effective migration systems (Norman, 2024). The Sahel, however, shows that infrastructural or institutional weakness does not automatically mean a state lacks strategic capacity to make migration policy choices (Norman, 2024).

Niger provides a clear example of targeted border-control capacity: monthly migrant flows fell from 60,000 to 20,000 after the enforcement of Law 2015-36, then rose again once the law was rolled back for geostrategic reasons following a regime change (Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, 2019; Chatham House, 2024). This supports a theory of selective state capacity, where migration control is shaped by geopolitical calculations rather than by an inherent, passive inability to act (Norman, 2024).

Corruption acts both as a push factor and as an enabler of irregular movement in the case studies. In the Sahel, 19% of migrants traveling the main routes cited governance breakdown and corruption as primary reasons for leaving (Mixed Migration Centre, 2019). At the same time, corruption at border posts where officials demand informal payments turns regulated crossings into revenue-generating checkpoints (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015). In short, corruption operates at the macro level by driving emigration and at the micro level by facilitating irregular crossings.

Finally, the EU’s investment of more than €8 billion (2015–2023) in externalized border control has had perverse effects: it has pushed more people onto dangerous sea routes and is linked to a grim toll of some 10,000 deaths on the Atlantic route in 2024 (Mixed Migration Centre, 2025; European Commission, 2024), while doing little to tackle root causes in countries of origin. This is an example of what scholars call “strategic miscalculations,” where short-term, securitized political responses undermine longer-term security and humanitarian goals for both Europe and Africa (Powell, 2024). Prioritizing governance failures at their source, rather than treating symptoms, must become central.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing governance failures is more productive than merely treating migration’s symptoms. In light of this, consider the following policy steps:

1. Make governance reform the cornerstone of migration control: tackle corruption, increase transparency and accountability, and prevent the capture of border agencies.
2. Shift funding away from short-term, project-based aid toward strengthening regional coordination, building robust data and information systems, and creating durable monitoring and evaluation platforms to effectively implement regional frameworks.
3. Link governance and development assistance to concrete, measurable improvements in governance—especially anti-corruption measures, civil service reform, and greater transparency—while maintaining a spirit of constructive collaboration.
4. Ensure vertical policy coherence by aligning national and local migration governance with economic, education, health, and employment policies so root causes are addressed holistically.
5. Expand lawful migration channels by developing labor mobility arrangements, setting up skills recognition mechanisms, and engaging diasporas to channel remittances and investment into development, thereby reducing incentives for irregular migration.

8. CONCLUSION

Across Africa, irregular migration is often driven less by simple state incapacity than by weak governance that turns borders into political tools. The Sahel shows how irregular, voluntary migration can be encouraged by deliberate policy choices: Niger’s repeal of anti-smuggling laws after the coup is one example, and by entrenched border corruption that supports an estimated \$300–400 million migration economy, involving roughly 100,000–120,000 migrants each year. In the Horn of Africa, by contrast, the collapse of governance has produced massive forced displacement: about 12.3 million people in Sudan and 4.1 million in Somalia are displaced, while Ethiopia exhibits both forced and voluntary migration flows at the same time.

The research also highlights important patterns: state capacity is selective, corruption acts both as a cause of migration and as an enabler, and security-focused measures alone simply shift migration routes rather than tackling root causes. This helps explain why the EU’s externalization of borders—some €8 billion spent between 2015 and 2023—has largely missed the mark: it has not confronted the underlying governance dynamics.

Policy responses should start with governance. That means prioritizing anti-corruption efforts, building transparent institutions, improving regional coordination, and creating more legal pathways for migration. Borders in Africa are adjustable political instruments used to serve economic and strategic interests; managing migration effectively therefore depends on strengthening governance, not only on enforcement.

Ultimately, political will is required to challenge elite capture, entrenched corruption, and the strategic indifference that benefits from porous borders. Until those governance failures are systematically addressed, migration pressures will continue regardless of how much is spent on security and control.

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