

# Migration dynamics in the Atlantic basin

CASE STUDIES FROM MOROCCO AND NIGERIA

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Amal El Ouassif and Constance Berry Newman



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**Amal El Ouassif and Constance Berry Newman**

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# Preface

Immigration has never been without tensions. In the United States, immigration remains a contentious issue that now, more than ever, dominates election campaigns. A 727-kilometer wall has been constructed on the US-Mexico border to halt the influx of migrants from the south. In Europe, the rise of far-right parties over the past twenty years has culminated in them becoming a major political force in the European Parliament ahead of the June 2024 elections.

The tension around immigration has grown in light of the projected doubling of Africa’s population by 2050 and the prediction that African youth will make up 42 percent of the global youth population by 2030. This demographic trend is raising fears in a part of Europe that is already dealing with the tragedies of African migration in the Mediterranean. In the United States, the decline in the population identifying as white from a level of 80 percent forty years ago to 57.8 percent of the overall population, according to the 2020 census, is also the subject of heated political debate. Although the sub-Saharan African population represents only 5 percent of immigrants in the United States, it is the fastest growing segment—and that is especially true of Nigerians, who stand out for their economic and political successes. Countless people of Nigerian origin play roles in the US administration, business world, and Hollywood. This is the starting point of Constance Berry Newman’s singular case study, which highlights the diversity of experiences—more or less successful—of Nigerian immigrants from Chicago to Johannesburg to London.

However, the attractiveness of the United States for Africans has not reduced departures to Europe because of its geographical proximity. Thus, if less than 10 percent of Moroccan immigrants go to the United States despite long-standing and dynamic relations between the United States and Morocco, it is because they prioritize Europe, especially France, as explained in the case study presented by Amal El Ouassif, who notes the differences between the “American dream” and the “French dream,” an expression that is rarely used in favor of the “republican integration model.” Even if some young Moroccans, like Nigerians in

the United States or the United Kingdom, bring with them a share of African excellence to France, as evidenced by the levels of access to École Polytechnique, one of the top French universities, the report notes the long-standing and persistent difficulties of Moroccan immigrants in France.

What does African migration mean today? How has it evolved in terms of flows, nature, origins, and destinations? How are African immigrants perceived in the host countries? This report analyzes the complexity of African migration in the Atlantic basin at a time when diplomatic initiatives are multiplying around this strategic area. This analysis is all the more interesting because the two countries studied, Nigeria and Morocco, are among the most dynamic economies and the most stable countries in Africa. It also reveals that countries of origin and destination have not yet been able to fully exploit the strategic potential of these diasporas in globalization, even though remittances from immigrants have reached a higher level than official development assistance and are increasingly motivated by a desire to invest in African economies that are among the most dynamic in the world.

The report’s focus on African migration to the north should not create a false perception of these migrations as a whole. Far from prejudices about a migratory flood of Africans, Africa remains an underpopulated land compared to Europe, which has a much higher population density. Moreover, Western countries are not always the first destination for African immigrants: when they migrate, many prioritize a neighboring African country. The immigration of Africans is, first and foremost, intra-African. The African Continental Free Trade Area and domestic visa-easing policies will likely accelerate this trend. Finally, Africa is not only a continent that people leave; it is where they arrive, such as the Chinese workers who accompany China’s investment strategy in Nigeria, Zambia, or Kenya, or the Portuguese living in Angola—who are much more numerous than the Angolans living in Portugal—attracted by close diplomatic relations, a common language, and economic opportunities.

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# Introduction

**M**igration is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has significant implications for both sending and receiving countries. In the Atlantic basin, the movement of people across borders has been shaped by various factors such as economic opportunities, political instability, social networks, and historical ties. This paper aims to explore the trends in African migration within the Atlantic basin, focusing on case studies of Nigerian migration to the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa as well as Moroccan migration to the European Union.

Researching migration by regions, including both incoming and outgoing migration of Africans, can lead to the development of a relevant set of recommendations to address the challenges of the countries of origin (losing) and recipient countries (gaining). Research leading to a report can assist in the understanding of the drivers of migration, such as conflict, economic deprivation, climate change, and repressive governments. Analysis of past and present trends can contribute to the development of recommendations for addressing the challenges posed by migration in the present and future.

Drawing inspiration from existing research on African migration patterns, this paper by Amal El Ouassif, a senior international relations specialist at the Policy Center for the New South, and Constance Berry Newman, nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Africa Center, seeks to broaden the scope by incorporating insights from Moroccan migration to the European Union. By juxtaposing these two distinct migrations flows within the Atlantic basin, the aim is to provide a comparative analysis that sheds light on commonalities and differences in migration experiences, challenges, and opportunities for Nigerian and Moroccan migrants.

This paper will delve into the motivations driving Nigerian and Moroccan migrants toward key countries in the Atlantic basin, examining factors such as economic disparities, political instability, educational opportunities, and family ties. By analyzing the “push and pull factors” influencing Moroccan migration to France and Spain alongside Nigerian migration to the United States, the UK, and South Africa, we aim to offer a nuanced understanding of migration dynamics within the Atlantic basin and what is at stake for the home countries experiencing brain drain.



Queues of people wait in line at U.K. citizens arrivals at Heathrow Airport in London, Britain, September 1, 2021. REUTERS/Guy Faulconbridge

Through a comparative lens that encompasses both West African (Nigerian) and North African (Moroccan) migration experiences, this paper seeks to provide valuable insights into the ongoing discourse on African migration trends in the global context. By exploring case studies from diverse regions within the Atlantic basin, we endeavor to highlight the interconnectedness of migration flows and their impact on individuals, communities, and societies on both sides of the Atlantic.

This introduction sets the stage for a comprehensive analysis of African migration trends within the Atlantic basin by incorporating case studies from both Moroccan and Nigerian migration experiences. By weaving together insights from diverse regions and populations, this paper aims to offer a holistic perspective on the complexities of contemporary migration dynamics in an increasingly interconnected world. And given that interconnection, we recommend that the relevant leadership of both the losing and receiving countries explore ways to develop joint efforts to improve the outcomes in the countries involved in migration activities, as discussed in this report.

# The Morocco migration case study

BY AMAL EL OUASSIF

## Sociodemographic profiles of migrants abroad and the drivers for their destinations

Among the countries of the Maghreb, Moroccan migration abroad is the most intense, both in terms of numbers and the diversity of destination countries. Moroccans residing abroad numbered 5.4 million individuals in 2020, out of a total population living in Morocco of around 36.7 million. Among Maghreb countries, Moroccans living abroad are also the ones who send the highest number of remittances.<sup>1</sup>

To provide a good understanding of the social and economic characteristics of Moroccan migrants abroad, Morocco's High Commission for Planning (HCP) has conducted a large study on international migration covering more than 15,000 households of current and returning migrants between August 2018 and January 2019. The data published by the report revealed interesting findings pertaining to the profiles of Moroccans abroad, as well as the latest trends observed and main drivers behind the migration of Moroccans.

## Trend lines in Moroccan migration patterns

**Fact 1:** International migration among Moroccans remains predominantly a male phenomenon. Accounting for 68.3 percent of the surveyed population, men continue to be the predominant actors of international migration among Moroccans, although women are increasingly migrating for several reasons ranging from economic motivations to education and family reunification. The proportion of women is highest among the thirty to thirty-nine age group (34.4 percent), and lowest among those aged sixty and above (2.9 percent). Among Moroccan migrants, one in four is a young person aged fifteen to twenty-nine (27.0 percent), with a higher proportion of women (32.8 percent) than men (24.4 percent) in this age group. A third (32.5 percent) are aged thirty to thirty-nine, with almost equal shares between men and women (31.6 percent and 34.4 percent, respectively). The proportion of individuals aged 60 and over is 3.9 percent, with 4.4 percent among men and 2.9 percent among women. It is worth noting that at the time of their first migration, the average age of these migrants was 25.3 years,



The border fence separating Spain's northern enclave Ceuta and Morocco is seen from Ceuta, Spain, June 21, 2018. Spain is a popular destination for Moroccan migrants. REUTERS/Juan Medina

<sup>1</sup> High Commission for Planning of Morocco, *Determinants of Transfers*.

almost the same for both men and women (25.4 years and 25 years of age, respectively).

**Fact II:** Economic drivers continue to be the main motivation of Moroccans seeking residency abroad. More than half (53.7 percent) of the surveyed migrants stated that they emigrated primarily for reasons related to a job search or improving their living conditions, with 69.2 percent among men and 20.5 percent among women. Education or pursuing studies came in second at 24.8 percent (30.4 percent among women and 22.3 percent among men), and family reunification or marriage was mentioned by 20.9 percent of them, though especially by women, with 48.7 percent of them compared to 8 percent of men.

**Fact III:** Moroccans remain attached to the traditional countries of destination. In terms of favorable migration destinations, Moroccans abroad seem to remain faithful to the traditional host countries, mainly in Europe: France, Spain, and Italy are host to the majority of surveyed Moroccan migrants (see figure 1).

Parallel to the identification of the drivers of current migration, the same study looked at the motivations of potential migrants who expressed interest in traveling permanently or temporarily abroad. Unsurprisingly, once again economic drivers topped the list of motivations for migration: 53.7 percent overall stated they intend to emigrate primarily for reasons related to a job search or improving their living conditions, with 69.2 percent of men and 20.5 percent of women. Education or pursuing studies came in second at 24.8 percent (30.4 percent of women and 22.3 percent of

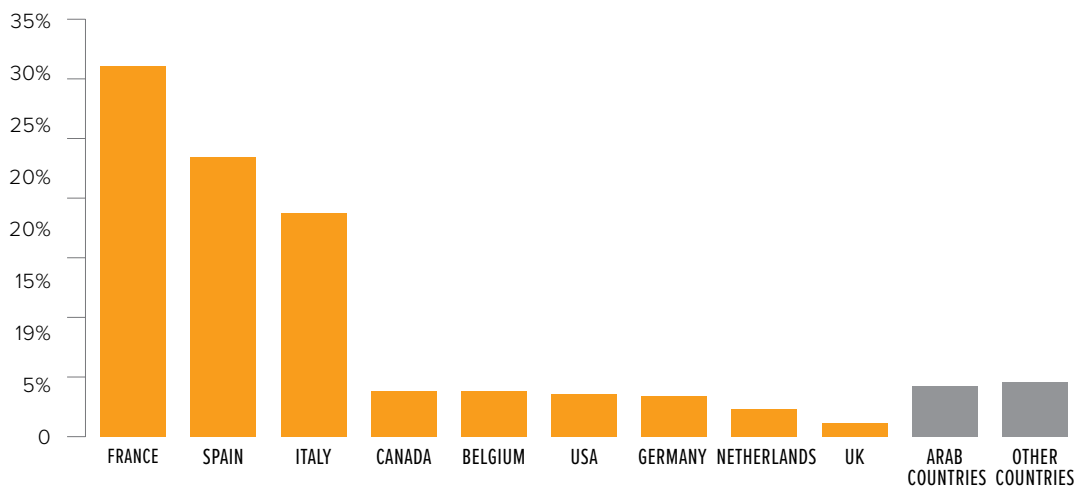
men). Family reunification or marriage were mentioned by 20.9 percent of respondents, but especially among women, at 48.7 percent compared to 8 percent of men. As far as preferred destinations are concerned, Europe continued to be the most praised destination even among nonmigrants with intentions to undergo a migratory journey, with 80 percent choosing Europe, followed by North American countries, at 8.8 percent, and Arab countries, at 2.8 percent.

In sum, the study identifies some key characteristics of Moroccan migrants abroad. First, men persist in being more mobile than women, although the latter are increasingly migrating. Second, economic motivations remain the top, driving reason for Moroccans, for both current and potential migrants, to seek travel abroad. Lastly, traditional countries of migration such as France, Spain, and Italy continue to be the most attractive for both current and potential migrants.

### Theoretical frameworks and observed trends

The presented trends of Moroccan international migration confirm theoretical frameworks that have long looked at the behavior of migrants, including their motivations and likely trajectories. One of these frameworks is the well-known “laws of migration.” Stemming from the neoclassical school, the laws of migration were developed by E. G. Ravenstein,<sup>2</sup> who argued that economic factors were the main cause of migration, as the movement of people reflects the flow of people from places where they are not wanted to areas where their labor is in demand. Ravenstein used UK census

**Figure 1: Current Moroccan migrants abroad per host countries**



Source: Author compilation based on HCP National Survey on International Migration, 2018-2019.

2 Ravenstein, «Laws of Migration,» 167-227.





Protesters hold placards which read "Freedom, equality, regularize" and "air, let's open the borders" during a demonstration to protest against immigration bill as part of the international migrant day at the Place de la Republique in Paris, France, December 18, 2023. REUTERS/Sarah Meyssonier.

data from 1871 to 1881, publishing a series of papers in 1876, 1885, and 1889 to develop the list of rules that is now widely used at the international level, among scholars in migration studies, to analyze migratory trends. Despite confusion over the exact number of these laws, most researchers including the geographer D. B. Grigg, who summarized Ravenstein's work in 1977, have identified eleven laws:

1. Most people who migrate only travel a short distance.
2. Migration takes place in stages.
3. Long-distance migrants prefer industrial areas and large economic centers.
4. Each migration stream produces a countercurrent. In other words, the first migrants to move from rural to urban areas will be replaced by other migrants who will settle in the regions from which they came.
5. Individuals from rural areas present a higher propensity for migration compared to their urban counterparts.
6. Male migrants tend to undertake longer migration distances in comparison to female migrants.
7. The demographic profile of migrants predominantly comprises young adult males, with family units demonstrating limited propensity for international migration.
8. Metropolitan centers experience more significant population growth attributed to migration rather than natural population increase.
9. Migration is positively correlated with the advancement of industry, commerce, and transportation infrastructure.
10. Economic factors primarily drive migration patterns, influencing individuals' decisions to relocate.
11. Female migrants exhibit a higher likelihood of intraregional migration as opposed to long-distance moves.

From the findings of the study presented earlier, at least six laws seem to reflect the trends observed in Moroccan international migration. First, Moroccan migrants prefer destinations with more industrialized potential and large economic centers, such as European countries. Second, migrants tend to travel short distances: Moroccans are more prone to travel to Spain and France, because of their geographic proximity, and the shortest distance between Africa and Europe is between Morocco and Spain, with 8.9 miles (14.3 kilometers) of ocean separating them. Therefore, Spain remains highly attractive to Moroccans as a destination, despite the language barrier. Certainly, there are more factors that can account for these preferences, such as history and migratory policies like the circular mobility schemes that Spain and France (among others) developed to attract low-skilled workers in sectors like construction and agriculture; however, the geographic proximity is undeniably a determining factor. Third, most Moroccan migrants reflect the maxim that male, active adults are more likely to migrate than women.

The theory of push and pull factors developed by Everett S. Lee in 1966 is another interesting framework through which we can understand the characteristics of Moroccan international migration. This analytical framework explains migratory movements by the combination of unwelcoming factors, i.e., push factors, in the countries of origin including the lack of employment opportunities, poverty, and low levels of development, which prompt people to immigrate. In contrast, pull factors attract potential migrants to a new destination (i.e., higher wages, social services, family members located there, etc.). These factors can be seen in the case of Moroccan migrants traveling to Europe. In Morocco, the minimum wage is 3,111.37 Moroccan dirham,<sup>3</sup> about €290, while the minimum wage in Bulgaria and Luxembourg, for instance, is €477 and €2,571 per month, respectively. In Spain and France, the minimum wage is €1,050 and €1,334, respectively.

Yet other criteria are factors, according to Lee. Obstacles such as travel costs and legal barriers can hinder migration.<sup>4</sup> Community networks, such as the existence of family or social ties, also facilitate movement. The fact that most current migrants are established in traditional European countries of migration is not random. In the aftermath of World War II, many Moroccans migrated to work in labor-intensive sectors in countries like France and Belgium, which had an increased need for labor force to contribute to reconstruction. The receiving countries established programs for family reunification and facilitated the settling of newly arrived

migrants. Hence, these countries gained wide recognition among Moroccans for the ease of access. Having members of their families, friends, or acquaintances established in these countries made it easier for potential migrants to undertake the journey because they had places to stay and work opportunities through those community networks.

### Challenges faced by Moroccan migrants in Europe: The case of France

When speaking about the history of Moroccan migration abroad, it is important to mention two key concepts: integration and assimilation. The first refers to policies developed by governments to ensure the inclusion of immigrants and their families in the different sectors of the host country, benefiting from duties and rights including public services and participating in the labor market. Advanced degrees of integration may evolve to include acquiring the citizenship of the host country. Assimilation is a different concept that, refers to the complete adherence of the immigrants to the culture of the hosting country, even if such an attitude might come at the expense of the native culture. In Europe, approaches to the question of migrants' integration has varied by country. By looking at France, which has the highest number of Moroccan migrants, we can gain a better understanding of the challenges and issues faced by the Moroccan community living abroad, and suggest courses of actions to enhance their integration in the host country and upon their return home.

In France, the first waves of Moroccan migrants arrived after 1945 as part of labor mobility partnerships that the Moroccan government concluded with several European countries, namely France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. The initial intentions for these migrants were to work temporarily and go back to Morocco once their work contracts had expired. However, many of these migrants decided to remain in France, where they were able to bring their families and benefit from favorable social-protection and family-reunification policies. However, in 1975, the French government limited labor migration for economic reasons,<sup>5</sup> consequently, a growing number of immigrants started to arrive in France for family reunification reasons and studies. In fact, Moroccans are the largest community of international students present in France.

Assimilation to the majority culture is often mentioned as the French model of integration. In this model, immigrants are expected to abandon their own culture in favor of the language, values, and customs of the host society. The

3 Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale, «Minimum Wage.»

4 Lee, "A Theory of Migration," 47-57.

5 The government aimed to reduce the influx of migrants to alleviate pressure on the job market and social welfare systems.

**Table 1: Top ten nationalities of international students in France**

Origin countries	INACTIVITY RATE			Employment rate	Unemployment rate
	Inactive in initial education or formal training	Other inactive, including retirees	Total		
Africa	5.2	26.1	31.3	59.3	13.7
Maghreb	3.6	30.8	34.4	56.6	13.7
Algeria	4.2	33.3	37.5	52.9	15.4
Morocco, Tunisia	3.3	28.9	32.2	59.4	12.5
Other African countries	7.8	18.4	26.2	63.7	13.7
Europe	6.9	19.4	26.3	67.7	8.1
Asia	5.2	26.1	31.3	60.8	11.5
Turkey, Middle East	3.7	28.1	31.8	58.3	14.5
America, Oceania	7.2	24.6	31.8	59.4	12.8
All immigrants	5.8	24.2	30.0	61.8	11.7
Entire population	10.5	16.0	26.5	68.1	7.3

Source: Compiled by author based on Campus France statistics on student mobility in the world and France.

abolition of social origins to promote equality for all is one of the founding elements of the French society since the Revolution. The Constitution clearly states that the French nation cannot be divided. As a result, it is not possible to legally identify social groups based on their cultural, ethnic, or religious affiliation. In a context of equality for all, defending the specificity of regional and ethnic cultures can be perceived as a form of communitarianism and preferential treatment.<sup>6</sup> Hence, in such model of integration, debates often spark around the degrees to which migrants are adhering to the values and customs of the host country. The most recent debate emerged around the New Comprehensive Immigration Law adopted in January, which introduced measures that were considered by many to be restrictive for immigrants, including limits on the repeated renewal of certain temporary residence permits and the introduction of a French-language proficiency requirement for multiyear residence permit holders.

In terms of the results of the French model of integration, the outcomes are debatable. In terms of inclusion in the labor market, migrants from the Maghreb seem to have the lowest levels of activity among all migrants, although the differences with other groups are not significant (see table 2). Moroccan migrants have an employment rate of 59.4 percent, which is near the average for African migrants and slightly higher than the rate of employment of Algerians.<sup>7</sup>

The relatively low levels of economic activity among the Moroccan community can be attributed to a variety of factors, some of them pertaining to the sociocultural characteristics of Moroccan migrants in France, while other aspects relate to the limits of the integration policies. The first observation is that the overall activity rate is lower because of the low participation rate of Moroccan women migrants in the labor market. This weakness is characteristic of Maghrebi and Turkish populations, unlike sub-Saharan African

6 Sam and Berry, *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology*.

7 2022 data of France's National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE).

**Table 2: Immigrant inactivity, unemployment, and employment by geographic origin in 2022**

	Country	Number of students, 2021	Change since 2016
1	Morocco	46,371	+22%
2	Algeria	31,032	+19%
3	China	27,479	-4%
4	Italy	19,185	+57%
5	Senegal	15,264	+62%
6	Tunisia	13,661	+10%
7	Spain	11,256	+51%
8	Côte d'Ivoire	10,725	+50%
9	Lebanon	10,469	+94%
10	Cameroon	9,037	+30%

Source: Compiled by author based on Campus France statistics on student mobility in the world and France.

countries, Portugal, or Southeast Asian nations, which have female participation rates exceeding 70 percent. Moroccan women have the lowest participation rate (48 percent) in the labor market after Turkish women (31 percent).<sup>8</sup> The low participation of women in the labor market and the corresponding prevalence of households subsisting on a single salary are a major obstacle to integration.<sup>9</sup>

However, there is more than the cultural aspect to this employment gap: migrants in general and the Moroccan community in France specifically often face multiple layers of discrimination when trying to access the labor market, as highlighted by the intersectionality theory.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Moroccan migrants, they may encounter challenges due to their immigrant status, cultural background, language proficiency, and perceived religious or ethnic identity. These intersecting factors create barriers to employment opportunities, leading to higher rates of unemployment or underemployment and integration in the labor market. Discrimination based on stereotypes, biases, and systemic inequalities further compound these challenges, making

it difficult for Moroccan migrants to fully integrate into the labor market and achieve equal opportunities for employment. An exercise conducted by the Institute of Public Policies at the Paris School of Economics and the Institute of Movement Sciences Center for Observation and Research on Urbanism and its Mutations (with the support of the French Ministry of Labor), revealed that a job applicant with a North African first name and surname has to be submitted an average of 1.5 times more applications to receive a positive response from a recruiter, compared to other candidates. The study was done using more than 2,400 real job postings and the researchers neutralized the effect of other factors (gender, age, family situation, etc.). The finding is unequivocal: there is significant discrimination in the French labor market against candidates with a Maghrebi-sounding identity—whether for men or women, workers or managers.<sup>11</sup>

On the social aspects of integration, things as basic as access to decent housing prove to be challenging for individuals with migratory backgrounds in France. In fact,

8 Figures are quite dated, based on t. Lacroix's "Les Marocains en France."

9 Lacroix, T. "Les Marocains en France: Maturation d'une communauté transnationale." In Mohamed Berriane. *Marocains de l'extérieur 2017*. Fondation Hassan II, 2018, 383-414. halshs-02157453. Based on Peach, Ceri. 2006. « South Asian migration and settlement in Great Britain, 1951–2001 ». *Contemporary South Asia* 15 (2): 133-46.

10 It is a framework of analysis that recognizes that individuals can experience discrimination based on the intersection of various factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status.

11 T. LaCroix, "Les Marocains en France."

according to French law, a landlord cannot refuse a tenant based on their ethnic origin, age, gender, sexual orientation, or any other criterion, as this would equal an infringement on the dignity of individuals and a clear discrimination that is punishable under Article 225-2 of the French penal code. However, studies have revealed housing discrimination against immigrants with North African backgrounds. These tests are often conducted by the correspondence test method, which consists of comparing the chances of success of two fictitious applicants who are similar in all respects except for the discrimination criterion being tested. In a study published in 2021, the factor being tested was how the applicants' first and last names looked and sounded: traditionally French or North African. Researchers sent four requests for a property visit for each of 504 properties in Paris, which had either been advertised by individuals or estate agents, for a total of 2016 responses. The study by Mathieu Bunel et al.<sup>12</sup> concluded that there is a high level of discrimination against people of North African origin as they seek housing in Paris, and this discrimination has little relation to potential financial vulnerability. The reference applicant of French origin had a response rate of 18.7 percent to the visit requests, while the applicant of North African origin had a 12.9 percent rate. When the Maghreb candidate specified holding a civil service or high position, the response rate rose to 15.5 percent—yet that was still below the response rate for an applicant of French origin who did not mention an employment situation. When a French origin candidate communicated such a signal of stability, the response rate rose to 42.9 percent, which suggests strong discrimination linked to preferences for applicants of French origin.

### Case study conclusions and recommendations

Although Moroccan migrants in France form a large group with well-established networks and ties, instances of discrimination continue to be felt in many aspects. Hence, it is important to engage in a holistic approach that considers the different aspects of a successful integration model (inclusion at the economic, social, and political levels of all immigrants and their families), but without the aim to completely erase the cultural particularities of the origin country. In this regard, it is interesting to look at successful practices in other countries around the Atlantic basin, namely the North American experience, with the cases of

Canada and the United States, which proved to have an effective migrant-integration model that is attributed to several factors. First, the focus on the development of a shared inclusive culture that made the acculturation associated with positive outcomes, in the sense that the two countries praise themselves on being countries of immigration. Hence, although inequalities exist in these societies, the fact of being a migrant does not necessarily stand as a discriminatory condition. Instead, pursuing the “American Dream” seems to be a common value that unifies most Americans and arriving migrants, in Canada the active migratory policy simplifying schemes for desiring migrants to legally be established in the country has proven to be transformative for the country and for the new arriving migrants.<sup>13</sup> Such a proactive migratory approach is balanced by an effective and strict control over irregular migration, which, although sometimes criticized on its human rights' records, allows a curbing of the activities of human trafficking and irregular migration that expose vulnerable individuals to danger. Second, what made the US and Canadian models of integration powerful to, for example, an international student such as I once was, is the fact that they recognize that integration is a mutual effort involving both the host society and the immigrant, rather than placing the responsibility solely on the immigrant. This reciprocity creates obligations for both parties, fostering a shared responsibility for successful integration. Finally, the fact that the host countries allow migrants to keep their own culture while internalizing the behavioral standards of the receiving society—which differs from assimilationist models—results in encouraging immigrants to reach their utmost potential and be beneficial for the host country. Of course, not all host countries have the same visions and ambitions when it comes to immigration and integration, and the positive aspects listed about the North American models of integration do not exclude the existence of other less positive aspects when it comes to the migration policies in these countries. But since this report is focused on the situation of Maghreb migrants in Europe, through the case study of Moroccans in France, and aims to provide a cross-cutting overview of host countries of African migration around the Atlantic basin, launching a dialogue on best practices to make the most of migration and development in this space is an interesting course of action, particularly given the many social and economic issues that arise today in different European countries, that deserves attention and urgent action.

12 Bunel, Mathieu, et al. « La discrimination liée à l'origine, sur le marché du logement à Paris », *Revue française d'économie*, 2021.

13 Griffith, A: Building a Mosaic: The Evolution of Canada's Approach to Immigrant Integration.

# The Nigeria migration case study

BY CONSTANCE BERRY NEWMAN

## Introduction

Many studying global immigration are assessing current developments, such as the implications of immigration from specific sub-Saharan African countries today, its significance two decades or more ago, and the potential impact of African immigration around the world in the future. In addition, research into the migration patterns of Africans, both to and from their countries of origin, can inform a robust set of recommendations to address challenges faced by sending and receiving nations. Understanding the drivers of emigration, including conflict, economic adversity, and climate change, is crucial to formulating effective strategies to improve immigration activities.

This commentary is designed to provide an understanding of the immigration activities associated with Nigeria, covering three key places where a significant percentage of Nigerians immigrate: Chicago, in the US state of Illinois; London, United Kingdom; and South Africa, primarily Johannesburg. These three destination summaries in this case study will discuss the similarities and distinctions among Nigerian immigrants in terms of their reasons for selecting a specific location, their backgrounds and experiences, their educational and professional backgrounds, their interactions with the Nigerian diaspora community, their management of remittances, and other topics that shed light on the lives of individuals who migrate from their home country in sub-Saharan Africa to another region of the world.

According to the Nigeria Immigration Service, in a two-year period ending in September 2023, over 3.6 million people migrated from Nigeria.<sup>14</sup>

Some notable migration patterns for Nigerians in 2023 were to the UK (141,000 between June 2022 and June 2023). Unfortunately, data regarding the number of Nigerians migrating to South Africa is not verified. However, there is sufficient information from all three case locations to answer questions such as: Who emigrated? Why? What were their immigration experiences? What can be learned from these experiences that leads to a set of meaningful recommendations for entities that have power over migration activities

and/or resources to respond to the challenges to effective migration processes?

The order of the Nigeria migration-destination studies is:

- Chicago
- London
- South Africa (with details on Johannesburg included).

Case study conclusions and recommendations follow the destination summaries, addressing the challenges of migrating Nigerians to locations worldwide.

## Nigerians who emigrated to the United States: Chicago, Illinois

Before the 1967 Biafran War, Nigerians emigrated to Chicago, and many were granted political refugee status. In recent years, the population of Nigerians living in Chicago has exceeded 30,000.<sup>15</sup> The key characteristics of Africans, including Nigerian immigrants to the United States, according to the American Community Survey, are summarized below specifically in Chicago, based on the data obtained from the American Community Survey (2015-2019) and related sources.<sup>16</sup>

Nigerian immigrants in the United States have continuously exhibited impressive educational accomplishments. Based on data provided by the United States Census Bureau, Nigerians are among the most well-educated immigrant groups in the country, placing an emphasis on achieving higher levels of education. In addition, Africans and their families are of a lower average age than other citizens of Illinois. Approximately 31 percent of the population consists of younger individuals (i.e., in the infant stage through seventeen years of age), in contrast to 23 percent of other residents in Illinois.

According to a United African Organization's 2022 community report,<sup>17</sup> Africans are also more likely than other Illinoisans to be self-employed, to be employed, and to be in the labor force (i.e., working or searching for work). About

14 "Country-Rankings/Us-Immigration-by-Country," *World Population Review*, n.d.

15 Encyclopedia of Chicago, "Nigerians."

16 US Census Bureau, "American Community Survey 2015-2019 5-Year Data Release."

17 United African Organization (UAO), *The African Community in Illinois*.



Nigerian Charles Otokiti, 37, who was rescued at sea after passing through Libya in 2016, in Rome, Italy. Picture taken July 4, 2018. REUTERS/Alessandro Bianchi

8 percent of Africans are self-employed compared with 6 percent of other persons in Illinois.

The experiences Nigerians have had in Chicago are mixed. Among the positive experiences, there is a strong and continuing effort of Nigerians in Chicago to advance the educational levels of all members of their families. As mentioned above, Nigerians are generally the most educated Africans who emigrate to the United States.<sup>18</sup>

Generally, Nigerians maintain the strong contacts they have with their family and friends in the diaspora. This means that in Chicago, many Nigerians belong to organizations of Nigerians where they maintain relationships associated with their mother country. An example of such an organization is the United African Organization.

Nigerians are reported to be very religious, predominantly of the Christian and Muslim faiths, and as such, religious institutions have a significant influence over their lives. Churches and other places of worship in the United States are also locations where Nigerians congregate and interact with each other.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of the professional bent of Nigerians, generally, they are known worldwide to be extremely effective entrepreneurs who join together to improve their business skills. An example of an organization encouraging Nigerian entrepreneurs' participation is Nigerians in Diaspora Organization America (NIDO) Chicago. That nonprofit organization's mission is to provide an effective and unified platform for Chicago-based members of the Nigerian diaspora to harness their talents, expertise, and resources to aid in Chicago's economic and social development.

The Nigeria Diaspora Initiative, a coalition of Nigerian professionals and community associations in Illinois and Indiana, has recently called on Nigerian President Bola Tinubu to authorize the creation of a consulate office in Chicago, with the aim of enhancing Nigeria's annual foreign direct investment (FDI) and elevating its economic standing. (The FDI for the third quarter of 2023 totaled US\$59.77 million.) Initiative organizers say the consulate office would encourage investments that have the potential to stimulate economic growth in Nigeria, particularly at a time when other countries are experiencing difficulties.

<sup>18</sup> NGEX, *Nigerians in the USA Report 2020*, via *Insight News*, 2020; and "UAO Releases African Community Report."

<sup>19</sup> NGEX, *Nigerians in the USA*.

They emphasized the impact of reduced travel distances for Nigerians and other investors in the United States to access services offered by the Nigerian embassy.

Remittances are crucial as they supplement Nigerian household incomes and contribute to the nation's economic development. In recent times, the Central Bank of Nigeria reported that diaspora remittances have been on the rise, with a 20.3 percent increase to \$5.16 billion in the first quarter of 2022 alone.

Immigrants from Nigeria also experience many challenges as they settle in their new country, whether it is the United States, the UK, or South Africa. Looking at the US context, Adam Clulow wrote that many second-generation Nigerians perceive anti-Black discrimination and report "racial profiling, feelings of isolation at work/school due to their country of origin, and having their intellectual abilities questioned."<sup>20</sup>

Some Nigerians who still live in Nigeria believe that those who immigrate to the United States lose their national identity and cultural traditions. Other family members who remain in Nigeria often make those who emigrate feel guilty because serious financial problems are left with the family remaining in Nigeria, causing strained relationships. Yet many Nigerians who are still in Nigeria are proud of their family members who emigrated to the United States.

## Nigerian migration to the United Kingdom (London)

In 2021, Nigerian nationals numbered 142,000 in London and were the second most common nationality living in London that year.<sup>21</sup> This phenomenon of Nigerians migrating abroad, such as to the United Kingdom, is referred to as *japa*, which is Yoruba for to run, flee, or escape. In Nigeria, the unemployment rate for those between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four was 42.5 percent in December 2020, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. So while migrating abroad is a major undertaking, financial difficulties often provide the impetus. As the quest for an improved standard of living abroad has increased in recent years, the word has become deeply ingrained—and the desire among many young Nigerians is to *permanently* leave their nation.<sup>22</sup>

Nigerians living in London are often recognized for their substantial and dynamic influence since they make valuable contributions to the city's broad cultural landscape.

Here are some reflections regarding the historical and current experiences of Nigerians in London:

- Before Nigeria gained independence in 1960, a significant number of Nigerians went to the UK for educational purposes and typically returned to Nigeria upon completing their studies. Nevertheless, the civil and political turmoil in Nigeria throughout the 1960s resulted in a significant number of refugees and highly skilled individuals relocating to Britain. Nigerian immigrants in the UK have a notably elevated level of educational attainment, with 66 percent having obtained some form of certification, according to the Migration Policy Institute in Washington, exceeding the educational achievement of other major immigrant groups in Britain, such as Indians and South Africans.
- Nigerian students often choose to study in the UK due to the availability of scholarships and funding opportunities. UK universities provide a range of financial assistance programs that help alleviate the financial burden of studying abroad. Additionally, many Nigerian students see studying in the UK as an opportunity to escape Nigeria's economic challenges and the struggling education system. Regarding the latter, a deterioration in the level, quality, and standard of education in Nigeria in the past two decades can be seen in the fact that Nigeria has become the leading country of origin of students from Africa migrating to other parts of the world in search of a quality education. This fall in standard has been attributed to a number of factors:
  - Poor funding.
  - Unavailability of qualified teachers.
  - Failure to accommodate rising population demands.
  - Low university admission capacity.
  - Academic fraud, corruption, and indiscipline.
  - Poor standard of living and bad governance.
  - Politicization of education.<sup>23</sup>

What are the positive experiences that Nigerians who have emigrated to London, for example, have had? Some answers are covered below.

Many Nigerians belong to organizations that provide positive experiences because they are linked to the diaspora

20 Adam Clulow, "Complicated Inclusion." Clulow cites Onoso Imoagene's book, *Beyond Expectations: Second-Generation Nigerians in the United States and Britain*, 2017.

21 "Non-British Population UK 2021," Statista.

22 Elizabeth Banyitabi et al., "'There Is No Hope Here,' " *Guardian*; and Gabriel Ntoka, "Why Nigerians 'Japa', What You Must Know."

23 Nifemi Brown Foundation, "Prospects of Primary Education in Nigeria."





Women pray in the "Mercyland" shrine on the eve of the elections at the Celestial Church of Christ National Headquarters in Makoko, Lagos, Nigeria February 24, 2023. Religion has a significant influence on daily life in Nigeria. REUTERS/James Oatway.

such as the National Association of Nigerian Communities, which was established in the 1970s as a student union and later evolved into a welfare association, and the Nigerians in Diaspora Organisation Europe, established in 2000. London remains a vibrant hub for British Nigerians, fostering cultural exchange, community bonds, and a shared love for Nigerian heritage.

Not all of the experiences in London are positive for Nigerians. "Most Nigerian immigrants have problems with authorities in England," said Chief Bimbo Roberts Folayan, the former chairman of the Central Association of Nigerians in the United Kingdom. When asked what he considered to be the burden of African immigrants in the UK, he said: "I think the main burden is culture shock, particularly Nigerian immigrants who come to Western countries with an African mindset, and that makes it difficult for them to survive."

### Nigerians in sub-Saharan Africa (South Africa)

Following the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa experienced a period of enormous political and societal change. These alterations were significant. Furthermore, the nation adopted a more open attitude toward immigrants, easing its immigration regulations. Following that, many Nigerians took advantage of the opportunity to immigrate to South Africa, drawn by the possibility of greater living standards and employment opportunities.

Roughly 2 percent of the foreign-born people living in South Africa, estimated at more than 30,000, are from Nigeria. South Africa's 2011 census put the figure at 26,341, while the United Nations' estimate for 2015 was even lower, at 17,753.<sup>24</sup> Not included in those estimates, however, are approximately 500,000 Nigerians who were classified as undocumented citizens in South Africa in 2023, according to Nigeria's high commissioner to South Africa, Muhammad Haruna Manta; in addition, there are 8,900 professionals

24 Statistics South Africa, 2016; *World Population Review*, "Country-Rankings/Us-Immigration-by-Country." Vinayak Bhardwaj, "No Data Shows That 800,000 Nigerians Live in South Africa," *Africa Check*, February 21, 2017, <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/reports/no-data-shows-800000-nigerians-live-south-africa#:~:text=It%20estimated%20that%2030%2C314%20people%20-%20or%20roughly,estimate%20for%202015%20was%20even%20lower%2C%20at%2017%2C753>.



A Nigerian woman living in South Africa wears her country's flag as she speaks to police officers after protesting President Muhammadu Buhari, after he held a town hall meeting with diaspora living in South Africa, in Pretoria, South Africa, October 4, 2019. Nigerians have been victim to xenophobic attacks across the country. REUTERS/Siphiwe Sibeko

and students among the Nigerian population in the country.<sup>25</sup>

The experiences of Nigerian immigrants in South Africa are mixed. On the positive side, Nigerians are often selected for the best-paid jobs. In the corporate world, Nigerians turn up with qualifications from the top Western universities, such as Harvard, Yale, Oxford, and Cambridge, and therefore are selected by international business firms for top-level positions. On the downside, those job holders, whether at the top of corporations or elsewhere, can be met with the resentment of many South Africans.

The Nigerian experience with affinity groups is generally positive in South Africa. It is important to note that in South Africa, there are many active Nigerian affinity groups. In Johannesburg, for example, there are strong Nigerian organizations such as the Nigerian Union of South Africa that,

among other functions, carry out charitable activities benefiting fellow Nigerians in South Africa.<sup>26</sup>

Immigrants from Nigeria experience many challenges as they settle in South Africa. A report from the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) states that racism "has been and is a key feature of South Africa's immigration legislation and practice, both historically and currently," despite the country's liberal constitution and democratic transition. In some instance, the report notes, "South African citizens have also fallen victim to xenophobia because they are perceived in racist terms as 'too dark' to be South African."<sup>27</sup>

In early September 2019, both Johannesburg and Pretoria (and nearby areas) witnessed a rise in xenophobic attacks.<sup>28</sup> Looting, fires, and other severe damage occurred at businesses owned by African immigrants, and individuals

25 Editorial Board, *Guardian*. "The Plight of Nigerians Living in South Africa."

26 *World Population Review*, "Country-Rankings."

27 Bronwyn Harris, "A Foreign Experience."

28 Human Rights Watch, "They Have Robbed Me of My Life"; and Jason Burke, "We Are a Target," *Guardian*.

were assaulted. Xenowatch, an open source data system developed by the African Centre for Migration & Society at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, reported sixty-eight acts of “xenophobic violence” in South Africa against African immigrants between January and September of 2019, including eighteen deaths and 127 or more cases of looting.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these difficulties, the Nigerian community continues to strive for a better life and contribute positively to the society in Johannesburg. It is important to note that while these challenges exist, they do not define the entire experience of Nigerians in South Africa, and many have found success and a sense of community in the country.

### Case study conclusions

The conclusions are based on secondary research involving compiling existing data sourced from a variety of channels on Nigerians who immigrated to Chicago, London, and South Africa (primarily Johannesburg). This research covered internal sources (e.g., in-house research) or, more commonly, external sources (such as government statistics, organizational bodies, and the internet). Before making recommendations, key conclusions drawn from the three Nigerian destination studies are highlighted:

- Nigerians are among the most well-educated immigrant groups who have immigrated to Chicago, London, and South Africa.
- After migration to the various regions, Nigerians are generally in the labor force and also maintain their interests and work as entrepreneurs.
- Nigerians maintain strong ties to the diaspora, i.e., family, religious organizations, and diaspora organizations.
- Over the years, remittances have played a significant role in Nigeria’s economy: contributing to household incomes, consumption, and investment in Nigeria; and serving as a lifeline for families and communities, supporting education, healthcare, and other essential needs.
- Immigrating to another region, another continent, and the lands of other races has not been easy. Each destination study identified occasions of discrimination. In fact, the experiences of Nigerians in

South Africa appear to have been among the worst experiences as measured against those in Chicago and London.

- Nigeria is facing a potential brain drain of the next generation of potential leaders for Nigeria. Potential leaders are not just wishing to move to other regions of the world but actually doing it. It is a serious endeavor, often triggered by economic hardship. In recent years, the pursuit of a better quality of life overseas has taken on an anxious quality: *japa* is Yoruba for to run, flee, or escape—the word takes firm root in the aspiration that young Nigerians have to leave the country for good.

### Case study recommendations

The review of the linked issues facing Nigerians at home and those who migrate to places such as United States (Chicago), United Kingdom (London), and South Africa (Johannesburg) prompts us to suggest that a major demonstration project would be useful in answering lingering questions about the impact of these issues. Such a project could be funded by an organization like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and/or partner foundations or other international organizations, with the aim of answering questions about the impact of immigration issues on both *receiving* and *sending* countries including:

- What steps can be taken by Nigeria to reduce the numbers of Nigerians immigrating to the United States, UK, and/or South Africa who are highly educated, young (between twenty and forty years old), entrepreneurial, and able to contribute to the future economic status of Nigeria?
- How can Nigeria work with the countries receiving large numbers of Nigerians who are or will be financially successful and can contribute to the economy of Nigeria in the next twenty-five years directly through investments and remittances of Nigerian family members?
- What steps should the elected leaders of Nigeria and the recipient countries take to improve the migration processes?

Notably, there is an underlying rationale for the recommendation for the demonstration program: the presidents of Nigeria and South Africa have engaged in a series of

29 Xenowatch, “Incidents of Xenophobic Violence in South Africa: January–September 2019.”

discussions underscoring how Nigeria is facing serious economic problems,<sup>30</sup> which are a high priority for the new president of Nigeria, Bola Tinubu, who was inaugurated in May 2023. But those problems will not be solved before large numbers of Nigerians—particularly youth—decide and act upon that desire to leave Nigeria and emigrate to the United States, the UK, South Africa, or other places in the world.

As the Editorial Board of the Guardian noted on October 24, 2023,<sup>31</sup> the presidents of Nigeria and South Africa need to address the following:

- The problem of Nigerians in South Africa who are stranded, socially uprooted, roped into crime, imprisoned, or who are dying.
- The need for the Nigerian government, the private sector, churches, mosques, and nongovernmental organizations to establish frameworks designed to address the problems of Nigerians who have migrated elsewhere.
- The need for the government of South Africa to address the issues around labeling and serving undocumented Nigerians in South Africa.

Meanwhile, we offer the following recommendations for stakeholders.

### **African embassies**

- Greater coordination from Nigerian embassies and consulates abroad should facilitate funneling remittances and money earned abroad into development projects, funding cooperatives and other programs that would bring the benefits of migration to communities in Nigeria.
- To support recent migrants, Nigerian embassies and consulates should partner with organizations like the Nigerians in Diaspora Organization America, and Nigerian churches and mosques to provide

social support, mentorship, and to foster community and ensure an easier process in settling into a new location.

### **Multilateral institutions**

Migrants are often scapegoated for economic and political challenges. Programs that enhance social cohesion and migrant integration, like previous ones from the International Organization for Migration in Southern Africa, should be expanded and better funded.

### **Governments of sending and receiving countries**

- The average age in Nigeria is eighteen years old. The population of both the United States and the United Kingdom is rapidly aging, with a median age of 38.9 and forty, respectively. As evidenced by the younger median age of Nigerians in Illinois, African migrants are often younger (within working age) and can supplement the workforce of a city, region, or country to counteract the growing proportion of retired or retiring workers in the United States and the UK. There must be a higher level of coordination between the governments of sending and receiving countries to ensure that labor gaps in receiving countries are effectively filled while ensuring a simple and legal immigration process for those from sending countries.
- There are a multitude of reasons that lead young Nigerians to *japa* (or emigrate) from Nigeria. The youth bulge in Nigeria holds great economic potential; the Nigerian government must invest in healthcare and education to effectively harness this potential. Going further, policies aimed to reduce unemployment and underemployment of recent graduates would avert push factors leading many Nigerians to leave the country.

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30 ATQ News, “Africa: Meeting between Tinubu and Ramaphosa to Address Plight of 500,000 Undocumented Nigerians in South Africa.”

31 Editorial Board, “The Plight of Nigerians Living in South Africa.”

## Conclusion

**T**hrough the juxtaposition of the two case studies from Moroccan and Nigerian migration in the Atlantic basin, we conclude that there are commonalities but also disparities between the two contexts. While in both cases economic drivers were the main reason behind the migratory journey, the experiences lived abroad are different. The first of three common trends between the two migrant communities abroad is the strong weight of history and colonial past in the migratory decision. While Moroccans remain attached to classical European destinations such as France and Spain, Nigerians tend to privilege the UK and the United States. On one hand, Morocco's geographic proximity and history with countries like France and Spain has made it easy for different generations of migrants to settle in these countries because of the language and shared history (Morocco was a protectorate of France and under Spanish colonization). On the other hand, Nigeria is a former British colony that is part of the Commonwealth and continues to share strong ties with the UK and the United States because of the common language.

The second common trend is that most migrants from both Morocco and Nigeria are young, typically in the age

category suited for the labor market. This suggests that despite rising concerns about African migration in the Atlantic basin, most of these migrants are active contributors to the economy of the receiving country.

The third common pattern is an increasing brain drain in the home countries, particularly among students at the university level. This issue seems to be of equal concern to both origin countries. Hence, it is important to engage in fruitful discussions to overcome the losses of highly skilled migrants who can contribute to and add value in their origin countries.

The differences observed in the Moroccan and Nigerian cases concern the matter of integration in the receiving country. European countries have different modes of integration, from assimilation to acculturation. It has been difficult for generations of Moroccan migrants to find equal opportunities in labor markets and in other sectors like housing and culture. As far as Nigerians abroad are concerned, there seems to be a satisfactory level of integration in the United States, while the Nigerian community in London has faced some cultural issues.



Security officers are seen at the passport control point at the Nnamdi Azikiwe international airport in Abuja, Nigeria September 7, 2020. REUTERS/Afolabi Sotunde

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