

Rural-Urban Migration in West Africa: Contexts, Trends, and Recommendations

Eva Dick and Benjamin Schraven

Rural-urban migration constitutes the principal pattern of internal and cross-border migration in West Africa. In alignment with environmental and health agendas, its drivers and effects need to be explicitly accounted for in migration and urbanization policies. For example, that households use rural-urban migration as a risk-diversification and livelihood strategy is a key consideration. Highly vulnerable migrant populations such as children, women, the elderly, or the forcibly displaced should receive particular attention.

Background and Context

West Africaⁱ is one of the global sub regions with the highest levels of intraregional migration (Dick and Schraven 2018). In the colonial era, the extraction of natural resources, the development of commercial agriculture, and the growth of major coastal cities such as Lagos, Abidjan, and Accra laid the groundwork for migration systems,ⁱⁱ parts of which remain in place today. During the late colonial and early postcolonial era, both internal rural-rural and rural-urban migration patterns intensified in coastal countries such as Ghana due to economic opportunities in commercial agriculture and cities. Migrants from today's Sahel countries (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso) were particularly attracted to the commercial plantations in their neighboring coastal countries. In the 1970s, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria developed into the West African hotspots of both regional and international migration (Adepoju 2003).

The distinction between internal and cross-border migration in West Africa is illusive to a certain degree (Awumbila 2017). State borders were arbitrarily drawn by colonial powers, often cutting through ethnolinguistic settlement areas and previously established trade and migration routes. Due to limited border management capacities, national boundaries are porous. Moreover, aspirations for regional economic integration have led to free movement regulations involving visa-free entry, and the right to residence and establishment in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Dick and Schraven 2018).

In the 1980s and 1990s, economic crises and related economic recovery programs brought significant changes to both rural and urban areas of West Africa. Rural populations faced rising food prices and worsening agricultural production conditions. This resulted in a need to diversify incomes, which was satisfied predominantly in the urban informal sector. This contributed to (further) rural-urban migration, and multilocational households that split livelihoods between urban and rural areas.

In recent decades, regional migration in West Africa has become increasingly diversified. Though urban-urban migration has become more common (Yaro 2008), rural-urban mobility still appears as the principal pattern. Circular or seasonal labor mobility is prevalent, yet households' permanent migration to cities—in a move that includes all family members—also occurs. Amid evolving employment opportunities and societal changes, independent female migration to large cities, notably by unmarried young women, has become more significant in some countries (Lucas, forthcoming, 26). Also, the migration of children and youth has

become an issue of relevance and concern. While some youth move for academic reasons, others do not; there are increasing concerns related to their protection and education in the context of precarious urban living and employment conditions (Tamanja 2013).

In recent years, violent conflicts in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria have prompted the movement of about 5 million forcibly displaced persons (UNHCR 2020, 72–74), a trend that has intensified internal migration to urban areas. Furthermore, effects of climate and environmental change (e.g., harvest failures, infrastructural damage, and drought) have become important drivers of human mobility in West Africa as they increase both existing patterns of labor mobility and forced (mainly internal) displacement. It is very likely that the effects of climate change will not only increase migration and forced displacement but also the share of “trapped populations” in the next decades to come. These are the most vulnerable population groups, who often lack the necessary resources to migrate at all (Schraven et al. 2020, 14–20). The COVID-19-related mobility restrictions and social distancing measures enacted in most countries in West Africa have severely destabilized the economic basis of vulnerable migrant groups.

Trends in Urbanization and the Relevance of Rural-Urban Migration

Although West Africa as a whole has undergone intensive urbanization since the second half of the 20th century, urbanization rates have been quite uneven across its different countries. Generally speaking, the region is dichotomous when it comes to urbanization: a group of coastal, rather population-rich and economically better-off countries (Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, and Senegal; see table 1) have a comparatively large share (at least 50 percent) of their population living in urban areas.

Table 1. Urbanization and Development Trends in West Africa

	Urban Population (as % of overall population)	Urbanization Rate (estimated % 2015–20)	Income Level Classification
Ghana	57	1.3	Lower imiddle
Côte d’Ivoire d'Ivoire	52	3.4	Lower middle
Liberia	52	3.4	Low income
Nigeria	52	4.2	Lower middle
Senegal	48	3.7	Lower middle
Benin	44	3.9	Low income
Mali	44	4.9	Low income
Togo	43	3.8	Low income
Sierra Leone	42	3.1	Low income
Guinea	37	3.5	Low income
Burkina Faso	31	5.0	Low income
Niger	17	4.3	Low income

Sources: CIA 2020; World Bank 2020.

In contrast, a group of Sahel countries (in particular Niger and Burkina Fasoⁱⁱⁱ) have lower urban population shares—ranging from 17 percent in Niger to 31 percent in Burkina Faso and 44 percent in Benin and Mali. At the same time, these countries have the highest urban growth rates in West Africa (see table 1). Meanwhile, in absolute numbers, rural populations continue to grow—a trend that is expected to persist, albeit at a slower pace, for the decades to come (UNDESA 2019). In the Sahel countries as well as in smaller coastal states with moderate urbanization levels (e.g., Guinea, Togo, and Sierra Leone), both urban and economic growth is strongly focused in the capital cities, such as Conakry in Guinea or Niamey in Niger.

In general, West African urbanization has taken place in both large and small urban centers. The number

of urban settlements with a population of more than 10,000 grew from 493 in 1970 to 1,947 in the 2010s (Moriconi-Ebrard, Harre, and Heinrigs 2016, 37). In 2015, 51 percent of West Africa's urban population lived in cities of fewer than 300,000 inhabitants. While this share is projected to decline in the coming decades (44 percent in 2035), giving way to larger population growth in the big cities,^{iv} small cities are expected to grow significantly too (UNDESA 2018).

Nonetheless, internal rural-urban migration and urbanization rates in West African countries have remained comparatively low. Rural-urban migration flows have not been the main driver of urban population growth as compared to natural population growth and the transformation of rural into urban areas, the incorporation of formerly rural communities into large agglomerations, or the formation of new cities (Awumbila 2017).

Unfortunately, the data on rural-urban migration is often insufficient and obsolete. The latest data collection efforts in West Africa were at best undertaken in the early 2010s (e.g., Ghana) and most data are from the late 1980s (e.g., Côte d'Ivoire; see Lucas [forthcoming], 25–32). Nonetheless, net rural-urban lifetime migration rates—which represent the balance between rural-urban migrant stocks and urban-rural migrant stocks—in most countries are estimated as rather low. In some cases (e.g., Burkina Faso), they even appear negative. Interestingly, net migration flows measured over shorter periods of time seem to contradict these overall trends. In Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, a negative net rural-urban lifetime migration trend in the period 1983–88 turned clearly positive by the end of that decade (Lucas, forthcoming). This shows how the dynamics of rural-urban migration flows in West Africa are very sensitive to changing circumstances and shocks on household incomes.

There is widespread evidence that temporary, including seasonal, movements make for a large proportion of mobility in West Africa and constitute an important though underreported source of remittances. A survey conducted in five migrant regions of origin in northern Ghana in 2013, and followed up on in 2015, indicated that 65 percent of households had at least one member residing in urban areas of the country. For these migrants, sending remittances home was a top priority (Awumbila 2017, 4). The reasons for temporary as opposed to permanent moves—and, connected to this, multilocational households—are manifold: the need to cope with risks associated with environmental degradation and climate change, limited income and housing security in the urban informal sector, material and immaterial ties to areas of origin, or even consumption choices in certain phases of the life cycle. It can be assumed that the lockdowns imposed due to COVID-19 starting in March 2020 caused severe economic disruptions to many multilocational households all over West Africa.

In the context of nonpermanent moves and multilocality, gender differences are significant. It can be assumed that female workers receive lower salaries and are more often subject to abusive treatment, including sexual harassment, compared to male migrants (Awumbila, Teye, and Yaro 2017). Age is another factor defining migration experiences and impacts. In Ghana, an increasing number of young females migrate to work in the urban informal sector (many as *kayayeis*, or porters; they can be seen in busy markets, balancing often large volumes of goods in containers on their heads). These women often move to work for a limited period of time and before marriage. Their movement has also been affected by the lockdowns related to the COVID-19 pandemic (see, for example, Arku 2020; GhanaWeb 2020a, 2020b). Among both females and males, children and youth of school age form another increasingly relevant group of rural-urban migrants, mostly moving to cities on a seasonal basis.

Policies Related to Urbanization and Migration

In most countries in West Africa, the speed of urban growth, especially that caused by migration of the rural poor, is perceived as a central challenge for development policies and planning (Lucas, forthcoming, 7). Poor rural populations mostly move into the urban informal service economy and informal settlements with little prospects of social mobility. Furthermore, over the past decades,

urbanization and related policies in the subregion were relatively neglected. Only a few efforts to proactively shape both rural-urban migration and urbanization for development were made. Migration policies in West Africa place little emphasis on internal mobility.^v The Ghana national migration policy adopted in 2016 is a case in point. While acknowledging internal migration as one of three main migration patterns, it contains little elaboration on its diverse characteristics, and related policy recommendations cover very little space (GoG 2016, 32–33; Segadlo, forthcoming). This said, elaborations on cross-cutting issues such as “migration and gender” or “migration and vulnerable groups” partly relate to subgroups of internal migrants.

National urban policies, which in many West African countries are either in place or preparation,^{vi} rarely reflect on migration as such and the diverse functions of cities and urban neighborhoods—particularly informal settlements—in the context of human mobility. Likewise, climate policies in West Africa—and beyond—hardly address rural-urban migration or potential risks of displacement due to the rise in sea levels. However, in order to counter urban primacy and the growth of megacities, spatial development policies in West Africa tend to promote balanced urban growth and the development of intermediate cities. This is also seen as a suitable way to enhance the linkages between rural and urban areas, in terms of their complementary functions and interdependencies (e.g., places of food production vs. places for processing and marketing). The first 2 of the 12 policy objectives of Ghana’s national urban policy, for instance, call for a balanced redistribution of the urban population and the promotion of a spatially integrated hierarchy of urban centers (UN-Habitat 2014, 64).

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Rural-urban migration is not the principal determinant of ongoing urbanization in West Africa. However, it represents the main pattern of internal and cross-border mobility in most countries of the region. In all West African countries, spatial-temporal patterns and effects of rural-urban migration (i.e., as a risk management tool to cope with environmental and climate stresses) are complex and are yet to be better understood. Based on the reflections of this policy brief, several policy recommendations can be derived:

Address rural-urban mobility in national and territorial policies. Different policies and policy domains (urban policies, rural development, climate change adaptation, etc.) are required for different types of mobility and cities. For example, supporting the development of small urban centers by enhancing their marketing or processing functions serves the purpose of countering the primacy of the largest cities, responding to needs for short-distance mobility, and strengthening economic links at a territorial scale. At the same time, the attractiveness of large urban centers for different types of (mostly rural) migrants has remained strong, too, and needs to be explicitly accounted for in both physical and economic city planning.

Mind the cross-border component of rural-urban migration. In West Africa, similar to other subregions on the African continent, cross-border rural-urban migration is important and sometimes hard to distinguish from internal migration. Mobility liberalization in the context of the Free Movement Protocol of the ECOWAS is therefore an important response to regional mobility patterns and livelihoods straddling the rural-urban divide. National implementation of the protocol should be further supported.

Focus on vulnerable rural-urban migrants. Both gender and age are important determinants of migration experiences and impacts. In West Africa, young unmarried women as well as children and youth increasingly participate in temporary and permanent migration and are at risk of several forms of exploitation—withstanding differences within groups and countries. Policy responses must therefore place a particular focus on these groups, both in urban and rural mobility hotspots.

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Eva Dick and Benjamin Schraven are senior researchers at the German Development Institute (Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik).

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ⁱ In this paper, West African countries refer to the Member States of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS): Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

ⁱⁱ According to Bakewell (2014, 310), a migration system refers to a “set of interacting elements—including flows of people, ideas and goods, institutions in the sense of discourses and associated practices (e.g. ‘culture of migration’ [...]) and strategies as in plans for action by particular actors (e.g. individual and household strategies; policies of governments [...])—which relate to the migration between localities.”

ⁱⁱⁱ The West African Sahel countries are Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

^{iv} The share of the urban population in settlements of more than 1 million inhabitants is projected to increase from 33 percent in 2015 to 42 percent in 2035 (UNDESA 2018).

^v Only 5 out of the 15 ECOWAS Member States have so far formulated a comprehensive national migration policy (partly in draft version) (Devillard, Bacchi, and Noack 2016, 46–47).

^{vi} According to the UN-Habitat’s and OECD’s “Global State of National Urban Policy,” 12 West African countries (all except Guinea-Bissau, Benin, and Niger) have explicit or partial national urban policies in some state of preparation or implementation (UN-Habitat and OECD 2018, 80–83).