

Borders, boundaries and migration route networks in West Africa: a commentary

Nicoletta Varani

DISFOR – Department of Education Sciences – University of Genoa, Italy

email: varani@unige.it

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Abstract

This article analyzes the dynamics of intraregional migration in West Africa through an integrated approach that combines migration systems theory with perspectives from human geography and the political geography of borders and frontiers. The aim is to go beyond simplistic, generic, and Eurocentric interpretations of migration phenomena, highlighting the structural, networked, and multilevel nature of mobility within the African regional space. Starting from a critical review of the most recent international literature – a useful tool for the re-examination undertaken in this article – this paper analyses and examines West Africa as an established migration system, characterised by predominantly intra-African flows, high circularity and strong economic and trade interdependence between areas and countries of origin, transit and destination. In this context, state borders are not considered simple separation devices, but dynamic elements that shape migration routes while simultaneously functioning as barriers and spaces for interaction. The analysis highlights the role of migration networks, regional policies, and environmental factors in shaping migration flows, demonstrating how migration now forms an integral part of territorial integration and development processes. In this context, state borders are not considered simple separation devices, but dynamic elements that contribute to the configuration of migration routes, functioning simultaneously as barriers and spaces for interaction. The paper therefore proposes a geographical interpretation of West African migration as a systemic phenomenon, rooted in complex and ever-evolving spatial configurations.

Keywords: Migration drivers, Mobility, West Africa, political geography of borders and frontiers, migration's systems

1. Introductory notes

In the European public debate, African migration is often described as flows directed towards Europe. In reality, the majority of movement takes place within the African continent: approximately 70–90% of African migration is intra-continental (Williams, 2025).

The detailed study of African migration trends by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, published in 2025 and authored by researcher Wendy Williams, confirms the trend presented by the United Nations (2025), which estimates that over the last decade Africa has seen a 25% increase in the number of African migrants (excluding refugees and asylum seekers) residing in another African country (from 12 million in 2015 to 15 million in 2024). Although this is likely an underestimate, given its informal nature, almost all internal migration in Africa is work-related, in one form or another. This includes both the movements of seasonal workers and permanent

resettlements in search of livelihoods, typically in urban economic centres (Williams, 2025).

Therefore, it is widely accepted that the majority of migrants move between neighbouring countries or within the same sub-regional area. This phenomenon is particularly evident in sub-Saharan Africa, where mobility has historically been an integral part of established economic, social and family strategies (Varani & Bernardini, 2018).

Between 2010 and 2020, the majority of sub-Saharan migrants – over 22 million people – did indeed cross borders, but often only to move to a neighboring state, and/or in any case remaining in Africa (World Migration Report, 2022; 2024) – a figure that is almost certainly underestimated, given that many African states keep no records of migration. For various reasons – not least the material and non-material resources required to undertake longer journeys – these migrants are less inclined to leave Africa than the more mobile North African migrants (Carbone, 2018).

The vast majority of sub-Saharan migrants – over 22 million people in total – have indeed crossed borders, but often only to move to a neighboring country, or at any rate to remain within Africa. For various reasons – not least the material and non-material resources available to them to undertake longer journeys – these migrants have a much lower propensity and/or capacity to leave Africa than North African migrants (Carbone, 2018). In sub-Saharan Africa, in fact, there are marked differences between individual countries in terms of economic opportunities and – issues somewhat less directly familiar to us Europeans, at least in their most extreme forms – political and climate-environmental risks, as well as in terms of demographic trends. Consider, for example, the presence of a very large Nigerian diaspora in Sudan, a country that does not share a border but has cultural affinities with certain northern Nigerian communities (Carbone, 2019).

In particular, the study analyses the West African region, as it should be regarded as a emblematic case of the regional migration system (see parr. 3 and 4).

Before proceeding with the discussion and analysis of the status of international research into the phenomenon that is the subject of this paper, it is important to revisit the concept of the migration system (de Haas, 2021).

A migration system is: a group of countries or regions interconnected by relatively stable migration flows, underpinned by economic, social, political and cultural ties. In other words, it does not consist of isolated individual movements, but rather a dynamic and enduring network of mobility. The Table 1 below summarises and/or outlines the key elements of the migration system.

Table 1. Main elements of the migration system. Source: Elaboration by the author

1. System hubs	2. Flows and directions	3. Migration networks
Areas of origin (e.g. the Sahel) Areas of destination (e.g. the coast of the Gulf of Guinea) Transit areas (e.g. Saharan corridors)	regular and repeated movements often circular or seasonal not necessarily permanent families	families diaspora communities ethnic and commercial networks

The concept of the migration system, developed primarily by Castles et al. (2005) and de Haas (2021), enables us to view migration as a structural and relational phenomenon – not an emergency but an integral part of the territories: an integral part of regional development processes. This concept represents one of the most established interpretative frameworks in contemporary migration geography, as it enables us to move beyond linear and deterministic approaches based on the simple origin/destination dichotomy. From this perspective, migration is interpreted as the outcome of structured and enduring relationships between interconnected territories, within which population flows form part of complex, multi-level and historically rooted networks. As highlighted by de Haas et al. (2020) in their book, migration systems develop through the interaction of economic, political, social and cultural factors, which help to stabilise specific mobility patterns over time. Such systems are characterised by a strong interdependence between the areas involved: changes in a country's economic conditions or migration policies can have a knock-on effect on the entire regional system.

From this perspective, any analysis of migration systems must necessarily include a consideration of the role of borders and frontiers, understood not merely as political and administrative mechanisms, but as dynamic socio-spatial constructs. Contemporary political geography has, in fact, progressively moved beyond a static conception of the border, interpreting it as a process (bordering) and as a territorial practice in constant redefinition. In this sense, Anssi Paasi's contributions highlight how borders are territorial institutions that are formed and transformed through discursive, symbolic and material practices, contributing to the construction of spatial and political identity. Similarly, David Newman (2006) emphasises the relational and multi-level nature of borders, highlighting how they function simultaneously as barriers and as zones of contact, where economic, social and cultural interactions develop. From a related perspective, Claude Raffestin (1981) interprets the border as an expression of the power relations that structure the territory, emphasising the role of actors and practices in the production of space.

2. Methodological notes

This research adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, drawing on tools from human geography, migration studies and political geography. The aim is to analyse the dynamics of intra-regional migration in West Africa, considering both migration routes and the role of borders and frontiers as constituent elements of migration systems. The study is based on an extensive critical review of the international literature, with particular attention to: theoretical studies on migration systems (de Haas et al., 2020; de Haas, 2021); research on the geography of borders and frontiers (Raffestin, 1981; Paasi, 1996; Newman, 2006; Paasi, 2011) and, finally, empirical analyses relating to West Africa (World Migration Report, 2022; 2024; Tafani et al., 2025).

This phase has made it possible to outline an integrated conceptual framework and to identify the main routes of migration flows and the key territorial hubs.

To visualise migration routes and their interaction with borders, a conceptual cartographic map has been developed based on statistical and qualitative data from the most recent IOM and UN reports, as well as historical and contemporary data on intra-African migration flows, alongside academic studies and secondary geographical sources.

The routes are represented as directional flows, whilst borders and frontiers are indicated both as political-administrative lines and as crossing points, in line with the perspective of Newman (2006) and Paasi (2011).

However, in this context, it has not been possible to complete the work on this map, which will be presented further on in this paper.

The analysis was conducted using an integrated model that combines different approaches:

- a systemic approach (migration systems) to understand the interdependencies between areas of origin, transit and destination;
- a relational and socio-spatial approach (borders and frontiers) to interpret the interactions between actors, policies and migration practices;
- a critical and comparative approach, highlighting similarities and differences between local, regional and transnational migration flows.

The limits of the research can be summarised as follows:

- the research is based primarily on secondary sources; no primary field data has been collected;
- quantitative estimates of migration flows are subject to limitations due to the often informal and circular nature of intra-African migration;
- certain geographical areas (e.g. trans-Saharan corridors) are poorly documented.

Despite these limitations, the integrated approach allows for a solid and consistent understanding of West African migration dynamics, providing a theoretical and operational framework useful for future comparative research or policy applications.

3. State of the art in international literature (West Africa)

Current literature in the migration studies field and on migration in West Africa highlights a growing trend towards multi-scalar and relational approaches that integrate economic, environmental and socio-political dimensions. A systematic review of studies highlights how contemporary research is progressively shifting towards the analysis of intra-regional mobility, challenging the literature that has focused on the centrality of flows to Europe, a theme emphasised by the mass media and policymakers, and instead highlighting local and trans local dynamics as structuring elements of regional migration systems. From this perspective, West Africa emerges as a region characterised by high internal mobility, dense social networks and forms of circular migration that fall outside the traditional categories of permanent migration.

At the same time, quantitative studies (Tafari et al., 2025) show that the majority of West African migrants travel relatively short distances, confirming the predominantly intra-regional nature of migration. However, such research also highlights the presence of a minority but significant component of long-distance migration, often associated with conditions of economic vulnerability or crisis contexts, thereby contributing to the configuration of multi-level migration systems. This dual structure – local and transnational – reinforces the interpretation of the region as a complex networked space.

The countries that act as the main destinations for intra-African migration are generally those with the strongest and most diversified economies; in West Africa, these include Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria, which offer employment opportunities in the agricultural or mining/extractive sectors.

For example, people migrate from Burkina Faso and Mali to the Ivory Coast for work (Fig. 1). At the same time, migration flows from the Ivory Coast head towards Burkina Faso, creating a migratory system. From Benin and Ghana, migration is almost entirely one-way towards Nigeria, just as migration from Sierra Leone is towards Guinea.

This dual structure – local and transnational – reinforces the interpretation of the region as a complex networked space (Lefebvre, 1995; Amin & Thrift, 2002; Vallega, 2006).

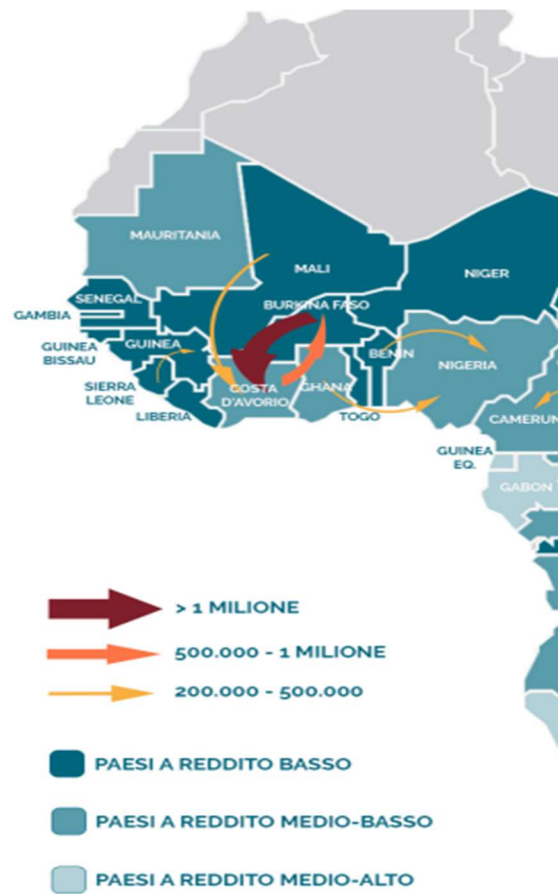


Figure 1. Migration corridors in West Africa. Source: Elaboration of Author of Fig. of page 6 from Carbone (2019)

A further line of research (Beine & Parsons, 2017; Bertoli et al., 2021; Martínez Flores et al., 2024) focuses on the interaction between environmental factors and mobility. Recent studies (Burzyński et al. 2022) demonstrate how climatic anomalies, particularly those linked to the availability of agricultural resources, significantly influence migration decisions, albeit in a non-linear manner and in ways that vary according to socio-economic contexts. This evidence confirms the multifactorial nature of migration and the need to move beyond monocausal interpretations (Yang et al., 2025).

Finally, the most recent literature – de Haas (2024) and Hoffmann & Zens (2024) – highlights the crucial role of structural factors – such as economic conditions, political instability and pre-existing migration networks – in shaping migration intentions. Analyses based on comparative African surveys show how variables such as security, economic conditions and social capital interrelatedly influence mobility choices, contributing to the stabilisation of migration systems over time.

More specifically, the study by Hoffmann & Zens (2024) provides a comprehensive analysis of the interrelated factors influencing migration intentions in Africa and the interactions between these factors. The study presents data from a large-scale Afrobarometer survey (2024)³ conducted in 34 African countries

In the context of the study by Hoffmann & Zens (2024), migration in West Africa increasingly appears as a structural and systemic phenomenon, rooted in complex and interdependent territorial configurations.

Although the multi-causal nature of migration has been recognised by the most attentive researchers, there remain significant gaps in our understanding of how different factors interact and collectively influence human mobility. This is particularly significant in the African context, where local communities face multiple, often interlinked challenges that affect their livelihoods, security, health and well-being.

4. West Africa: a prime example of a regional migration system

In this part of sub-Saharan Africa, there is a high degree of integration thanks to free movement; human mobility is strongly influenced by the regional integration processes promoted by the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons (1979)⁴ and by ECOWAS⁵, which guarantees citizens of member states: the right of entry without a visa, the right of residence, and the right of establishment. This regulatory

³ The Afrobarometer survey (2024), which involved over 45,000 interviews, provided data on 23 distinct migration factors linked to political, economic, social, environmental and infrastructural issues at the household and community levels. The study by Hoffmann & Zens (2024) cross-referenced the data with information on the respondents' migration aspirations, which made it possible to analyse the influence of the interaction between the various factors on the propensity to migrate in different contexts.

⁴ <https://ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/PROTOCOL-RELATING-TO-FREE-MOVEMENT-OF-PERSONS.pdf>

⁵ ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) is an intergovernmental organisation established by the Treaty of Lagos in 1975. Having remained inactive for a long time, the organisation was revitalised following a major overhaul brought about by the treaty signed by the heads of state and government of the member countries in July 1993, which came into force in July 1995. This treaty intensified economic and political cooperation among member states, setting the creation of a single market and a single currency as the organisation's economic objective. On the political front, ECOWAS has taken on a prominent role in maintaining security in the region, working alongside the OAU (Organisation of African Unity) and the United Nations to mediate in crises and participate in peacekeeping missions, a regional intergovernmental organisation established in 1975 to promote economic integration, trade and political cooperation. It aims to create a common market and is headquartered in Nigeria (Abuja), with its main members (currently 15, although this is under review following the withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in 2024) also collaborating on security issues (Source: <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ecowas/>).

framework facilitates relatively fluid movement compared to other African regions (Kabbanji, 2017).

In West Africa, there is a clear prevalence of intra-regional mobility: the majority of migrants move within the ECOWAS region (Fig. 2); movements are generally of short or medium distance, and flows are often circular and temporary, such as those involving: Burkina Faso → Ivory Coast; Mali → Senegal/Ivory Coast; Niger → Nigeria.

Therefore, the main factors explaining the high level of intra-regional mobility are the result of several interlinked factors: political and regulatory integration, the existence of socio-cultural continuity among populations that transcend state borders, so-called regional economic differentials, and the phenomenon of urbanisation (Tab. 2).

Moreover, within the context of the African continent itself, it is worth noting that there are two significant documents aimed at strengthening integration and development in the African region. One is from the African Union⁶, which in 2016 established the Single African Travel Document with the aim of creating an 'Africa without borders'; the second is Agenda 2063.

Concerning the free movement of people between African countries, the most reliable statistics come from the African Union's Visa Openness Index. We can obtain fairly solid estimates based on the most recent data, which show that, out of 55 African countries, on average an African citizen can enter around 20–25 African countries without a visa and obtain a visa on arrival in a further 20–25 countries. Therefore, around 40–50% of African countries are accessible without a visa or with a visa on arrival for the average African citizen.

In recent years, the Country that has shown the most progress towards abolishing visa requirements has been Kenya, which has moved towards a visa-waiver scheme for African travellers. In 2024, with the abolition of visa requirements for most African countries, it introduced the ETA (Electronic Travel Authorisation). Initially, only certain member states of the East African Community (EAC) were exempt from the ETA procedure. Now, however, Kenya has extended the exemption from visa and ETA requirements to a wider range of African nationals. Only nationals of Libya and Somalia still require an ETA to travel to Kenya (Africa Visa Openness Report, 2025).

⁶ The African Union, comprising 55 member states, has made strengthening regional integration and development a priority.

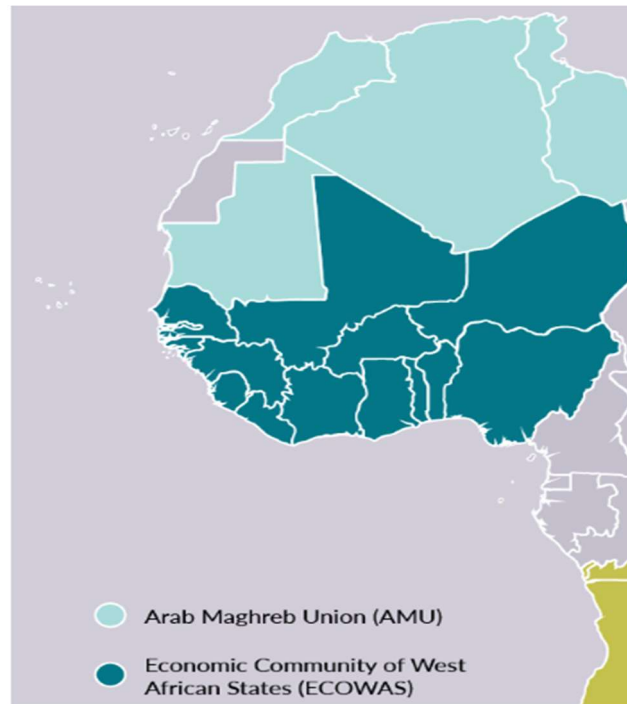


Figure 2. Regional economic communities in West Africa and North-West Africa. Source: Elaboration of Author of Fig. 2 from Okunade (2021)

1. Political and regulatory integration	2. Socio-cultural continuity	3. Regional economic differentials	4. Urbanisation
the central role of ECOWAS reduction of administrative barriers	cross-border ethnic groups common languages and trade networks	attractive hubs (Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ghana) demand for labour in agriculture, trade and services	Growth of regional cities: Lagos, Abidjan, Accra

Table 2. Main factors generating high intraregional mobility. Source: Elaboration by the author

When applied to the context of West Africa, the theoretical framework briefly mentioned above allows us to view state borders not merely as lines of separation, but as constituent elements of regional migration systems. In an area characterised by high levels of mobility and historically porous borders, borders take on an ambivalent function: on the one hand, they regulate and sometimes restrict movement; on the other, they are continually crossed, negotiated and reinterpreted by migrants and social networks. Regarding the permeability of borders between

nation states= With regard to the permeability of borders between nation states, the study by Deutschmann et al. (2023) highlights how this porosity, characterised by the flow of goods and people, can have a significant impact on many aspects, such as economic inequality, trade networks, migration patterns and the very ethnic composition of societies around the world, thereby influencing human development itself.

In 2022, Deutschmann et al. (2023) created a dataset on border permeability⁷, an interesting tool for the scientific community wishing to explore border permeability in greater depth. The dataset highlights how Europe and West and East Africa have the most permeable borders in the world, whilst the Americas have the least permeable borders. This comprehensive study takes a different approach.

Previous research, on this topic, as found in the literature, has focused on fortified borders (the construction of walls) and/or the legal aspects of various types of border control. The approach taken by Deutschmann et al. (2023) is different, in that it argues that the various transport infrastructures (including informal paths and crossings), together with checkpoints, can be used as valid indicators for measuring border permeability. To identify cross-border transport infrastructure and checkpoints, the research by Deutschmann et al. (2023) uses automated computational methods combined with thorough manual verification to analyse data from OpenStreetMap (OSM) and the World Food Programme (WFP). Based on this information, a permeability index was calculated for 312 land borders worldwide. The dataset ranges from forecasting and explaining human mobility and trade to gaining a better understanding of development, security, peace and conflict. Furthermore, the research attempts to demonstrate the existence of a connection between border permeability, state authority and nation-building.

It therefore has potential for application to various types of mobility flows (from trade to migration to tourism flows), conflicts, wars, terrorist incidents, environmental degradation or ethnic fragmentation, the latter of which in Africa has largely occurred along ill-defined and decontextualised borders (Drazanova, 2020).

In the context of permeability, West African borders are configured as lived and practised spaces, where institutional logics intertwine with informal and relational ones. The integration of the migration systems approach with border theory thus allows us to grasp the complexity of mobility dynamics, highlighting how migration routes do not develop in a neutral space, but within territorial settings marked by power relations, regional integration processes and the daily practices of crossing borders (Fig. 3).

⁷ A dataset is available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7457746>

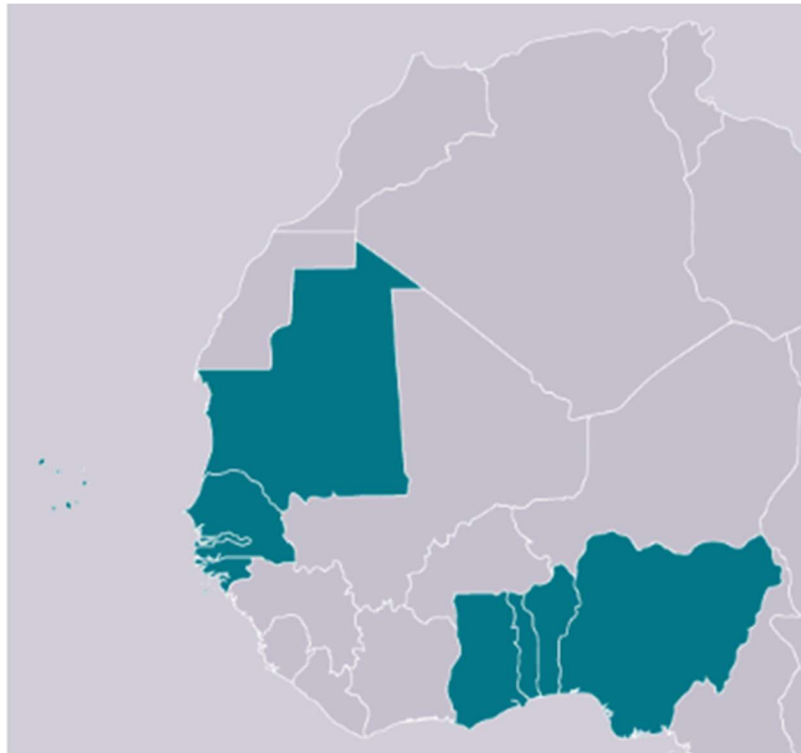


Figure 3. West Africa: African countries with minimal restrictions on movement. Source: Elaboration of Author of Fig. 2 from Ogunade (2021)

5. Closing Notes

The reflection developed here serves to reiterate that migration in West Africa cannot be understood through simplified or crisis-driven interpretative frameworks but requires an approach capable of grasping its structural and relational nature. The integration of perspectives on migration systems and the political geography of borders and frontiers has highlighted how mobility is embedded within established territorial networks, within which interactions between actors, policies and socio-economic contexts give rise to dynamic, multi-level and multi-causal patterns.

In particular, the case of West Africa shows how state borders, far from being mere lines of separation, function as complex mechanisms that regulate, filter and, at the same time, enable mobility. Borders thus emerge as spaces of negotiation and crossing, in which every day migratory practices intertwine with institutional logics and processes of regional integration. Within this framework, migration routes appear as a concrete manifestation of these interactions, emerging as defining features of the regional landscape and new frontiers of migration.

From a theoretical perspective, this paper reinforces the value of an integrated approach that links mobility and territoriality, highlighting the need to consider

flows, networks and borders simultaneously. Furthermore, it confirms the central role of intra-African migration and calls for a re-evaluation of the dominant narratives – which often focus on flows towards Europe – in favor of an interpretation that better reflects regional realities.

Finally, it is highlighted how the transformations currently underway – including demographic pressures, economic inequalities and the impacts of climate change – make the analysis of West African migration systems increasingly relevant as a prime laboratory for studying contemporary mobility dynamics. With this in perspective, further research could explore the role of regional policies and local practices in redefining borders and migration routes, contributing to a more nuanced and comparative understanding of migration phenomena (in this area, but also) on a global scale.

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