

Tomorrow's workers

Emigration from Africa will change the world

As other countries age, they will need African youth



Photograph: Getty Images

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After John Uwagboe moved to Scotland in 2008 he did not see another black man for several weeks. When at last he did, on the other side of a street in Edinburgh, he crossed over to meet him. Soon the strangers were hugging like long-lost friends. They went for lunch. “The guy wasn’t even another Nigerian,” recalls Mr Uwagboe. “He was from Ghana!”

In 2001 there were just 5,000 Africans in Scotland, or 0.1% of the overwhelmingly pasty-faced population. By the time of the most recent census, in 2022, that population had increased more than 11-fold, and will very probably have grown faster since. Mr Uwagboe, who came to study, then worked his way up the ranks of a bank and later became a restaurateur, says there are more than 3,000 members of a WhatsApp group for Nigerians in Edinburgh. There are ten branches of his Pentecostal church. “One thing for sure is that Africans will keep coming,” he says.

That may seem improbable when Donald Trump is booting out migrants, European politicians are embracing nativism and media coverage of migration from Africa focuses on the illegal sort, in leaking dinghies. But the vast majority of Africans leave the continent in prosaic, legal ways. This form of migration has continued to increase despite the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment. It will in all likelihood continue to grow in the coming decades, expanding African diasporas around the world. The trend will have profound effects in recipient countries and in Africa itself.

The growth stems from the extraordinary demographic divergence between Africa, the world’s youngest continent with the fastest-growing population, and everywhere else. Labour is becoming more abundant in Africa and scarcer in many other places. As a result, argue Kathryn Foster and Matthew Hall, demographers at Cornell University, “The future of migration will be African in origin.”

Earlier this year McKinsey, a consultancy, published a report on the “new demographic reality”. It notes that a “first wave” of countries including America, China, Japan, South Korea and all of Europe will see their working-age population (15- to 64-year-olds) shrink by about 340m by 2050. Longer lives and, especially, falling fertility rates, mean the “support ratio” of working-age people to those over 65 in these places has dropped from 7:1 in 1997 to 4:1 today. By 2050 it will be just 2:1.

Jobs but few workers

A shift is also under way in emerging economies. By 2060, according to UN forecasts, the support ratio will fall from 6.2:1 to 2.3:1 in Brazil and from 7.5:1 to 2.4:1 in Vietnam, notes Michael Clemens of George Mason

University. “Nothing like this shockingly rapid disappearance of workers has happened in world history,” he says.

The exception is sub-Saharan Africa. Though fertility rates are falling there as well, they are doing so more slowly, from a higher starting-point. The region is decades behind in its “demographic transition”. Its working-age population will rise by around 700m by 2050, roughly doubling. By 2030 roughly half of new workers entering the global labour force will be from sub-Saharan Africa (see chart 1).

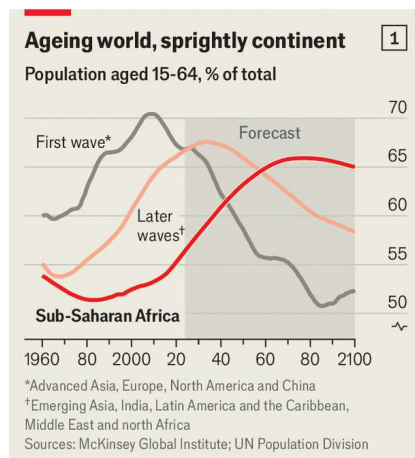


Chart: The Economist

They will struggle to find work at home. Sub-Saharan Africa sees around 15m people enter the labour market every year but just 3m formal jobs created. A survey last year by Afrobarometer, a pollster, found that 47% of Africans in 24 countries had considered migrating and 27% had given it “a lot of thought”—increases of nine and ten percentage points respectively since the previous round of surveys in 2016-18. “Better work opportunities” was by far the most cited reason.

The tendency to migrate from a given country follows a pattern that, when drawn on a chart against GDP per person (adjusted for the cost of living), forms a bell curve. Emigration rises as countries approach around \$5,000 in income per person, peaks at around \$10,000 and declines thereafter. In poor countries people lack the resources to leave. In rich ones they lack the need. In middling places they have both the will and the wherewithal.

Countries long associated with emigration, such as Mexico and the Philippines, are now rich enough to have passed their migratory peak. Meanwhile 94% of sub-Saharan Africans—1.1bn people—live in countries with a GDP per person of less than \$10,000. African migration is “an unstoppable force”, says Mr Clemens.

A need but little enthusiasm

The politics of recipient countries, however, may seem an immovable object. Mr Trump has suspended America’s “diversity visa”, which is popular among African migrants. The European Union is spending billions of euros trying to reduce illegal migration, much of it from Africa. The previous British government appeared keener to deport migrants to Rwanda than to admit migrants from Rwanda.

Nativism may lead to more curbs on African migration. But restricting it will have political costs. In Britain it would make it harder to find nurses and doctors for its National Health Service. Everywhere it would mean resorting to unpopular alternatives to fill labour shortages and fund welfare states, such as cutting benefits or raising retirement ages. Before Giorgia Meloni became Italy’s prime minister, she pledged to cut immigration. Since she has been in government the number of non-EU work visas issued by Italy has increased. Net migration also surged in post-Brexit Britain. So long as rich countries need labour from abroad, it makes sense to assume Africans will supply more of it.

Indeed, they are already doing so. In 2024 there were more than 45m African migrants living outside their country of origin, according to the UN’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), which released

its latest estimates of international migration in January. Africans comprised 15% of the world's émigrés, up from 13% in 1990.



A fruitful collaboration Photograph: Getty Images

Back then, 35% of migrants from Africa lived outside the continent, rather than in another African country. Today the share is 45%. That amounts to 20.7m people, triple the figure in 1990 and more than the number of Indians living outside India (18.5m) or of Chinese outside China (11.7m).

Between 1990 and 2024, according to the UN, Africans living in Europe increased from 4m to 10.6m—about half of all African migrants living outside the continent. Over 4m live in France and 1m in Britain. The latest arrivals have swollen diasporas that date to the post-colonial period or earlier. Prior generations of migrants, often from professional elites, have seen their descendants thrive. Children of African migrants perform above the average in exams in England. British-Nigerians, in particular, are increasingly prominent in public life, whether in sport (Maro Itoje, England's rugby captain, has Nigerian parents), business or politics (Kemi Badenoch, the leader of the Conservative Party, grew up in Lagos).

Though migrants from Africa continue to come to Britain to be doctors or members of other professions, they are increasingly joined by Africans seeking more menial jobs previously dominated by migrants from Asia or eastern Europe. Nigerians were the most common foreign nationals working in British care homes in 2023. Tens of thousands of Zimbabweans and Ghanaians have also been recruited for such positions.

In the past decade America has overtaken France as the country with the largest population of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Africans' share of immigration to America has risen from less than 1% in 1960 to 11% in 2020. Net migration from the Caribbean and Africa in the 2010s was twice as high as from Latin America. Four times more Africans arrived in America between 1990 and 2020 than during the slave trade, estimates Neeraj Kaushal of Columbia University.

In a forthcoming book she argues that “the future of the United States is in Black Africa”, since it will be the fastest-growing source of migrants. She notes that the Nigerian, Ethiopian, Ghanaian and Kenyan diasporas are roughly the size the Indian diaspora was in 1980. Since then the Indian-born population has risen 13-fold. A similar increase among those four African diasporas would equate to 10m more migrants by around 2060.

Ms Kaushal accepts that some of the Trump administration's policies, such as the suspension of the diversity visa, will limit African migration. But over the long term, she believes, “if America is to remain a nation of immigrants, then Africa will be the primary source of immigration.”

At a recent Africa Diaspora Day in Atlanta, Congolese, Ethiopians, Rwandans, Nigerians and others mingled at Georgia's state capitol. Ethiopian Airlines, the African carrier with the most extensive network, sent representatives to advertise direct flights to Addis Ababa. “Africa has long been associated with the export of natural resources,” noted Carl Kananda of the Atlanta Congo Coalition, “but one of our most valuable exports today is intellectual capital, the resources of the mind.” Yvonne Horsley McCowin, Ghana's consul-general in Atlanta, says that hers is one of four Ghanaian consulates opened in America last year. Moving to America can be a difficult adjustment for affluent Ghanaians, she says. “We had folks who took care of us, we had a cook

and all that. So imagine growing up and then moving over here to the US, and all of a sudden ... it's like, well, where's the driver?"

Ms Kaushal thinks that Africans will replace Asians as America's "new model minority". Some 42% of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa (and 64% of Nigerian-Americans) aged 25 or above have a degree, versus 33% of the rest of the population. Africans have a higher labour-force participation rate than the American average. A big majority of Nigerian-Americans say they believe in the American dream and think that America is "a land of opportunity and freedom".

African migrants are so successful that some black scholars on Ivy League campuses have questioned whether their children should have been allowed to benefit from affirmative action. The newcomers are changing what it means to be "African-American". Mr Kananda says, "I'm African. I had to learn that I was black when I came to the US." It is wrong to assume, as some scholars have, that "race would overwhelm ethnicity" in shaping migrants' identity, argues Onoso Imoagene of NYU Abu Dhabi. Ms McCowin says, "Most African-Americans will probably think the African thinks they're better, and the Africans would think the African-American, with all the opportunities afforded to them, are not taking advantage".

It is not just the West that is home to more Africans. In 2024 there were almost 4.7m migrants from Africa in the countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) according to DESA, more than tripling since 1990. Saudi Arabia is the second-largest source of remittances to Kenya, after America, but ahead of Britain and the EU.

Many Africans in the Gulf are abused. Fully 99% of Kenyans working there claim to have been mistreated by their bosses, according to one survey. Marie Mwiza, a Ugandan activist, says that women from her country who work as maids in the Middle East have no protection. "Employers treat them like commodities," she says. "Like bags of tomatoes." She has organised the return of coffins to Uganda after women died in suspicious circumstances.

Yet Ethiopians, Kenyans and Ugandans still pour into the Gulf, with some knowledge of what may await. "This is all about unemployment," says Ms Mwiza. "People here just don't have jobs."

Steven Nuwuguba was in his early 20s when he went to Qatar. He toiled seven days a week at the main airport and was hectored by racist bosses. He does not want his children to go there. But he made twice as much in a month as Uganda's GDP per person. That enabled him to start a business when he came back. "\$2,000 in our country, it's a lot of money," he says. Maids make much less but can return with enough to start a business or begin building a house.

In China there are more Nigerians than there are Indonesians and almost as many South Africans as there are Thais. Cities such as Yiwu, Zhongshan and Guangzhou are home to thousands of Africans who buy goods to send home. Peter Sosthenes, who moved from Tanzania in 2023, observes: "Chinese people work so hard. It is not like in my country." He wants to use Chinese e-commerce software in Tanzania to help farmers find markets. If Africans are not trading they are probably studying. In 2018, the last year for which there are data, there were 80,000 African students in China, more than in America or any other country save France.



Chart: The Economist

How will emigration from Africa affect Africa? One perennial concern is “brain drain”, as educated Africans leave in disproportionate numbers. But the truth is more nuanced, argues Narcisse Cha’Ngom, a Cameroonian economist. His research weighs the pros and cons of outward migration on the sending countries.

On one side of the ledger is the immediate loss of human capital, spending power in local shops and to the country’s tax base. More positive effects include remittances, which last year exceeded both foreign direct investment in Africa and overseas aid (see chart 2). The prospect of emigration can also actually increase levels of education at home, by creating an incentive for locals to get more qualifications, which they may or may not end up using abroad. A paper from 2023 co-written by Mr Cha’Ngom that looked at emigration from 174 countries concluded that, in most cases, including for most African countries, the benefits outweigh the costs, as measured by the overall impact on GDP per person in source countries.

Beneficial but under-exploited

Yet he is at pains to add: “The potential to maximise benefits and to minimise costs depends on policy.” African countries could learn from the Philippines, which linked the emigration of its nurses to funding for health-care training back home, or from India, which encourages emigrants to return with skills and capital. Several African governments, including Ethiopia’s and Nigeria’s, have issued “diaspora bonds” to raise money from émigrés for infrastructure projects.

Last year Kenya struck a tentative migration deal with Germany, under which Kenyans would fill job shortages, with Germany paying for vocational courses and language training. Kenya has a dedicated cabinet ministry for diaspora affairs which holds jobs fairs across the country. William Ruto, Kenya’s president, has argued: “Kenya’s workforce is our greatest resource.” His government wants to export 1m Kenyans a year for the next three years, which is roughly equivalent to the number of new entrants to the Kenyan workforce.

Other countries are mulling similar initiatives to promote “emigration as an export”. Earlier this year Ethiopia wrote to Norway and other European countries offering to export nurses. Tanzania is planning migration deals with eight countries, including the United Arab Emirates, according to Reuters.

Many Africans are sceptical that states that have squandered their natural resources can do better with their human ones. Some young Kenyans see Mr Ruto’s deal with Germany as a distraction from his failure to create enough jobs at home. Kenyans and Ugandans know that members of the political elite own some of the employment firms that send them to the Gulf. But that does not stop them seeking their fortunes abroad.

Africans need jobs; the rest of the world needs workers. That confluence of interests is a massive opportunity, if only both sides have the good sense to seize it. ■