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**THE SUSTAINABILITY
OF AFRICAN MIGRATION**

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THE SUSTAINABILITY OF AFRICAN MIGRATION

Lorenzo Rinelli*

Key messages

- The population of Africa was estimated at around 1,186 million in 2015 and is projected to more than double to 2.5 billion by 2050¹. This trend holds a great potential for development, but also raises critical challenges.
- Over the past two decades, economic growth and political stabilisation have improved living conditions across the continent. Yet poverty and undernourishment are still a reality for many Africans, and often an important motive for moving²
- Between 2010 and 2015, a total of almost 2 million people migrated from Africa to Europe, with a 10.3% increase over the equivalent figure for 2005-2010³. In the same 2010-2015 period, some 3 million 300,000 people moved within the African continent
- Most of African migration is intra-continental, with movements from rural to urban areas accounting for a large portion of migration within and between African countries.

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¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revisions*, 2015, <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/>.

² Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *Regional Overview of Food Insecurity: African food security prospects brighter than ever*, Accra, FAO, 2015.

³ N. Sanders and G. Abel, "Quantifying Global International Migration Flow", *Science*, vol. 343, no. 6178, pp. 1520-1522, 28 March 2014.

African governments devote between 5% and 10% of their budgets to agriculture sectors that are vital to both rural and urban economies⁴

- **Italy is an important destination for many African migrants. Between July and September 2015, for example, 68% of Nigerians arriving in Europe sought asylum in Italy. In 2015 Nigeria ranked 6th among the top remittance receiver countries with \$20.8 billion**

Migration is sustainable when it meets the needs of countries of origin, transit and destination, while accompanying migrant populations without depleting natural and human resources

Under what conditions do we consider migration sustainable? What do we mean by sustainability of migration in an age when more people are on the move on a global scale? What does this mean with regard to the specific case of the African continent? While intra-continental African migration has decreased by approximately 38% in the last 15 years, the number of people moving from one African country to another is still greater than the number of those leaving Africa for Europe by approximately 68.5%. Extra-continental emigration to Europe is on the rise. With regard to Africa, the increased movement of people is also caused by the fact that, from the late 1990s, there has been a sharp and proportional increase in “riots and protests” (ACLED, 2016) whose nature, causes and effects go beyond the scope of this paper. However, the reality is that the number of African young people is rapidly and relentlessly expanding against the backdrop of limited opportunities. To address this, there is a need to develop new policies to capture the potential social and economic benefits of Africa’s population growth and to make population movements sustainable.

While the question of sustainability in general remains contested, sustainable migration between the two continents of Africa and Europe is one that meets the needs and priorities of countries of origin, transit and destination while aiding voluntary and forced migrant populations by avoiding the depletion of natural and human resources, more so human life. Policy choices and actions can capture the enormous potential of African migrants to turn them into a healthy, educated, empowered labour force that can contribute to the real and sustained economic growth of both Africa and Europe.

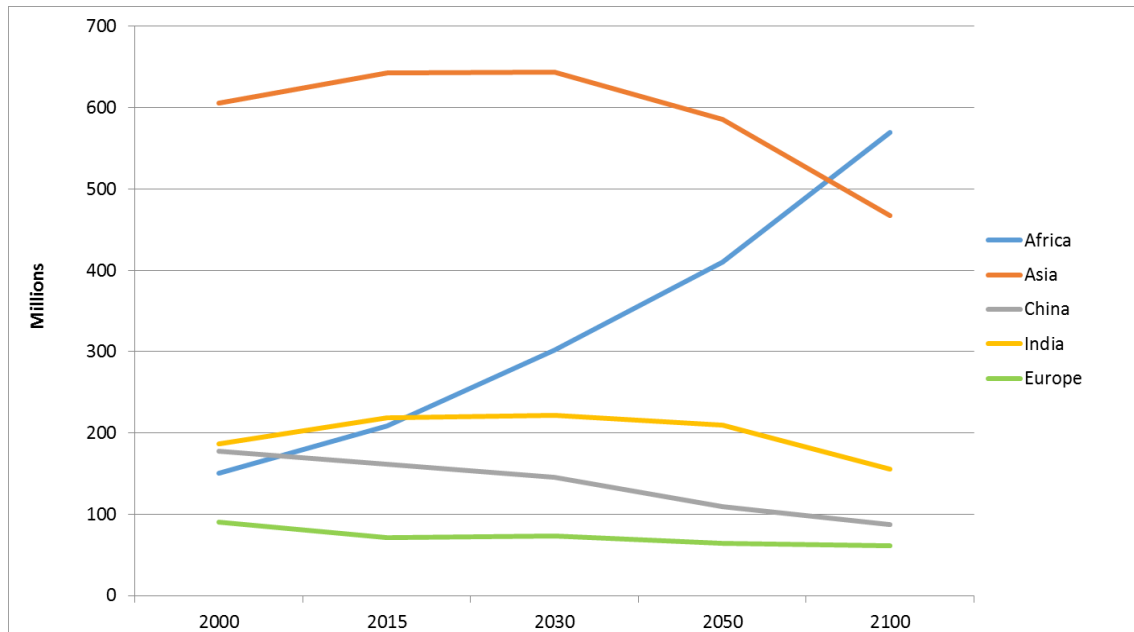
Africa’s youth population is expanding faster than anywhere else in the world

The absolute numbers of young Africans entering the workforce is expanding fast and will continue to do so over the foreseeable future, as indicated in the chart below. The growth of these large numbers of young people in Africa is greater than in China and India. While similar population increases have potential for development – the so-called “demographic dividend” – they also raise new challenges. Africa’s demographic age structure, in particular, will affect the labour supply on the continent and it may generate a race to the bottom in terms of wages and large-scale unemployment among young people and/or large inflows into the informal labour market, which in turn will make it difficult to capitalize on their productivity or to promote industrialization. The

⁴ UNDP, *Africa Human Development Report 2012: Towards a Food Secure Future*, New York, 2012.

challenge, particularly for sub-Saharan Africa, “lies in engaging the large cohort in high-productivity formal sector jobs rather than informal low-productivity, low-wage jobs”. (David Canning, 2015).

FIGURE 1 - PROJECTION OF NUMBER OF YOUTH 15-23 YEARS OLD BY REGION



SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS, DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, POPULATION DIVISION, *WORLD POPULATION PROSPECTS: THE 2015 REVISIONS*

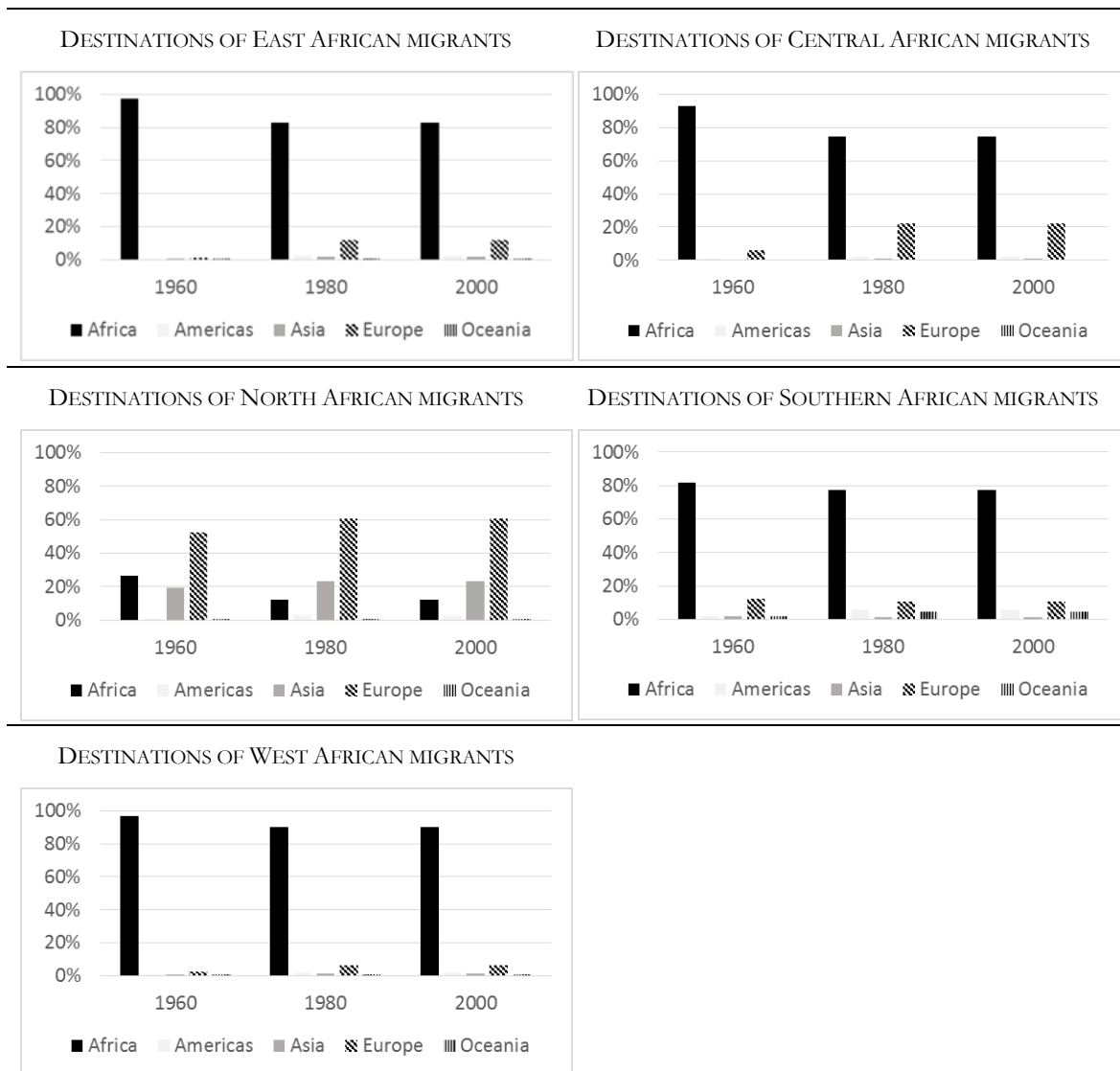
African migrants originate from diverse sub-regional and country contexts and move to different world regions

Migration in Africa responds to the general principles of migration in other parts of the world. The trope of Africa as exceptional may lead to gross generalizations and reinforce the stereotype of a continent on the move because its people are escaping from catastrophes. African migration as a field of research encounters two unique and related problems that condition its outcomes: first the problem of limited research funds for African scholars located in Africa and other parts of the world who are normally closely linked to the interests of donors, and second, a political economy of knowledge that leads to a proliferation of research on the emigration of Africans towards Europe from the security standpoint, rather than investigating African migration in general. A more complete understanding of the broad range of migration practices across the African continent can offer new insights with important policy implications. The African continent is vast, covering a huge variety of socioeconomic, political and environmental conditions, with an extremely heterogeneous population ranging from nomadic pastoralists in Mali to the highly urbanized communities of the copper belt in Zambia (Adepoju, 2011).

There seems to be a correlation between development and human mobility with regard to the volume and geographical orientation of African emigration. More marginal, poorer or landlocked countries tend to have lower absolute and relative levels of extra-continental migration, and their migration is primarily directed towards other African countries. This confirms the migration

transition theory according to which populations that are materially poor have fewer opportunities to move, and so they often tend to move towards closer destinations, either internally or towards other African countries⁵.

It is also important to consider the distinctiveness of historical relations and of macro regions (North Africa, Central Africa, West Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa): while the number of African migrants living in other continents has increased in recent years, there are strong regional variations as is evident from the charts below (Flahaux & De Haas, African migration: trends, patterns, drivers, 2016).

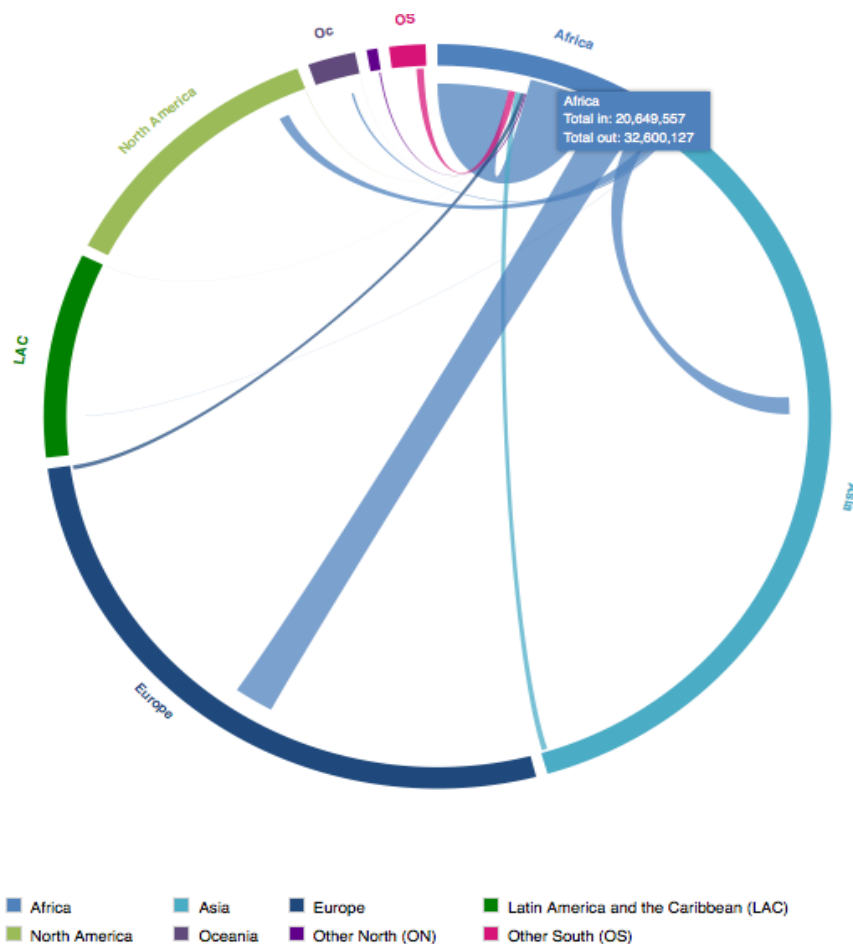


SOURCE: GLOBAL BILATERAL MIGRATION DATABASE, WORLD BANK DATABANK

⁵ M.-L. Flahaux, “The Role of Migration Policy Changes in Europe for Return Migration to Senegal”, *International Migration Review*, 17 March 2016.

Intra-continental migration is prevalent because Africa remains the first destination for the majority of African migrants – except for people of the Maghreb region – with Europe coming second as the destination of choice. The number of those living in a country different from the one they were born in has increased from 14.8 million in 2000 to 20.6 million in 2015⁶. In particular, between 1990 and 2015 the African immigrant population officially resident in Europe has doubled, from 4.4 million individuals in 1990 to 9.2 million in 2015. The graph below offers a rounded migration visualization of Africa’s ‘international migrant stock’. The term refers to the total number of persons born in a country other than that in which they reside. It is also known as a country’s ‘foreign-born population’. A thicker stream of color towards a certain region implies a larger migration stock originating from another region. In 2015, out of a total 32.6-million migrant stock originating from African countries, about half (16.4 million) were Africans who had moved to a different country without leaving the continent – they represent the vast majority of the total 20.6-million foreign-born population living in African states – whereas almost one-third (9 million, as mentioned) live in Europe.

FIGURE 2 - AFRICA’S INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS BY MAJOR AREA OF DESTINATION, 2015



SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS, DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, POPULATION DIVISION

⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *International Migration Flows to and from Selected Countries: The 2015 Revisions*, 2015.

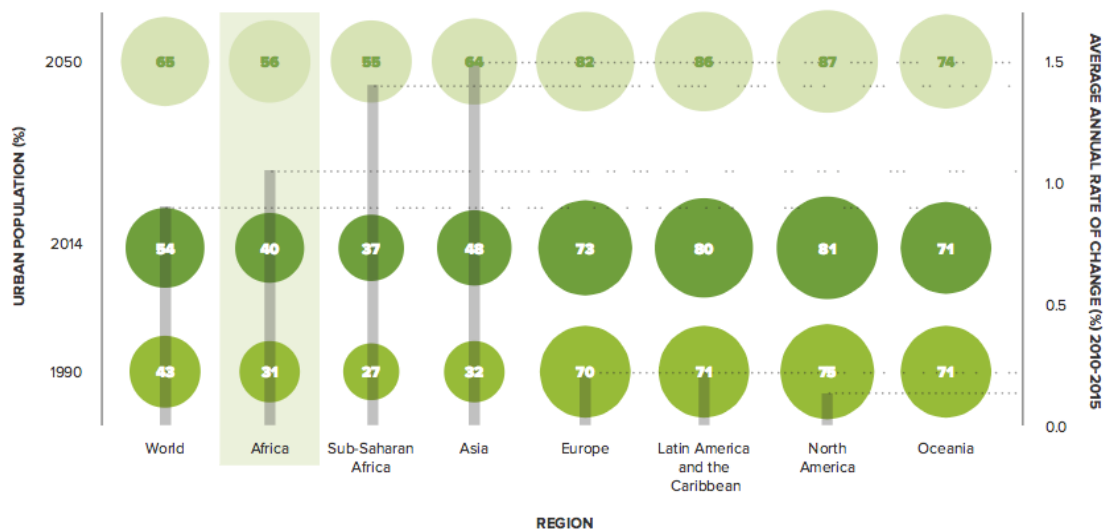
Recent forecasts produced by the ISMU Foundation show that Italy will receive about 16% of Africa's outbound migration flows – or some 50,000 annual arrivals – ranking fourth in Europe⁷. The ISMU research suggests that there will not be a large increase before 2025, but a growth in the number of arrivals will be recorded between 2026 and 2030.

Developing the agricultural sector is key to addressing the pressures for moving from rural to urban areas or to other African countries

Labour market conditions are a key factor influencing migration in Africa. Given that most of the African informal labour sector is in agriculture, innovative and effective policies must intervene and focus on that sector. Ameliorating agricultural labour conditions and improving productivity necessitates new land policies to develop tenure systems and raise investments in new farming techniques. In particular, it would be beneficial to devise policies that advance the skills needed to develop high-productivity methods of farming as well as policies that help to build the infrastructures necessary to connect farmers to markets. A large number of agricultural enterprises are informal and they represent the backbone of consumption and production in Africa. The Action Plan devised at the La Valletta Summit on Migration in November 2015 clearly states that one of the main goals should be offering “support to micro, small and medium sized enterprises (SME) in the formal and informal sectors including through access to finance and micro-loans, training and incubation with particular focus on women, youth and rural populations”⁸. These enterprises often operate outside the legal system of labour regulation in terms of wage and work conditions. In order to capitalize on this relatively under-regulated sector, it is crucial to harness the energy and resources of African young people by providing household enterprises with official recognition and security, enabling them to enter the formal sector and to abide by formal regulations. This may include allotting official space to informal enterprises operating in urban areas and providing legal access to public infrastructure and utility services such as water and electricity. This last point is particularly important because the pace of urbanization in Africa, together with that of Asia, remains the fastest in the world, even though, as evident from the chart below, Africa is still projected to be the least urbanized continent in the world in 2040. For the foreseeable future, the continent will continue to face growing migration from the countryside towards cities and other urban centres, and from the cities and other urban centres of one country to those of another country, where a young and extremely mobile African population seeks new opportunities and change.

⁷ A. Menonna, *Migrazioni dall’Africa: scenari per il futuro*, Milan, Istituto per lo Studio della Multiethnicità (ISMU).

⁸ Union for the Mediterranean, *La Valletta Action Plan*, 12 November 2015.



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2014). World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/352).

The right approach in terms of policies can lead to balanced economic growth, preservation of natural resources and poverty reduction. Otherwise, we will probably witness rising urban poverty, the proliferation of slums and more undocumented migration within and out of Africa, with devastating consequences for both African and European societies. Policies that support and encourage agricultural investments inherently represent a way to support the right to food, one of the most basic and fundamental among human rights. A revised partnership between Africa and Europe should directly confront this issue.

Migration must be recognized as a crucial component of Africa's development processes

Channelling the energy and productivity of Africa's huge amount of and increasingly mobile young people is crucial for the development of both Africa and Europe. The notion of co-development is appropriate here: "understanding that, now more than ever before, the best migration policy for developed nations is one that seeks not to block but to smoothly regulate the circulation and re-circulation of the majority of foreigners and immigrants" (Weil, 2002). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 recognize migration as a core development element. Migration is inextricably linked to the development of the African continent in terms of increased household incomes, improved access to social services such as education and health services, empowerment of traditionally marginalized groups such as elders, women and minorities. However, there are also risks linked to migration. These are not only related to the potentially negative impact of some specific economic dynamics, like the brain drain, but also, as already pointed out, to the massive urbanization in African cities. The Nigerian capital city of Abuja, for instance, grew by 139.7% between 2000 and 2010 (UN Habitat, 2014). All across the continent, urbanization has led to the growth of slums due to a rapid increase in the proportion of people moving to urban areas, with the consequent abandonment of the countryside. Finally, but certainly no less crucially, undocumented African migrants are

vulnerable to the violation of their human rights while in the process of moving from one place to another. Since 1988, 27,382 people have died in the attempt to reach the European Union, with 4,273 deaths in the year 2015 alone⁹. It is imperative that living and working conditions be improved in order to normalize migratory flows and enhance migratory channels. This is in line with point 4 of Article 13 of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement of 2000 between the members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of states, and the European Union and its member states.

Circular migration and remittances have great potential for Africa's development

Co-development requires a continuous and smooth movement of capital and people. From this perspective, circular migration can be a win-win element with regard to development processes. It can satisfy the needs of temporary employment in the host job markets without the problem of indispensable social assimilation while improving the socio-economic conditions in the communities that receive not only capital via remittances but also social capital through returning workers who have acquired new skills and experiences abroad. Total worldwide capital remittance flows exceeded \$600 billion in 2015, World Bank data indicate. Of that amount the 'Global South' officially received "about \$441 billion, nearly three times the amount of official development assistance. The true size of remittances, including unrecorded flows through formal and informal channels, is believed to be significantly larger"¹⁰.

Circular migration is important to the development of trade cooperation between Europe and Africa in the post-Cotonou partnership agenda. A more comprehensive notion of human migration sustainability and of the impact of social factors such as demography and urbanization on development is needed. This is an approach that moves beyond the security nexus, in line with the Agenda 2030 adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2015¹¹. Nigeria is a good example of how a post-Cotonou partnership can succeed in fostering human development when it capitalizes on an integrated approach that takes into consideration the country's high level of urbanization and remittances and its legitimate concerns for the humane treatment of Nigerian migrants in Italy. Article 13, point 4 of the Cotonou agreement, dealing with the issue of migration, demands that "the Parties will take account, in the framework of development strategies and national and regional programming, of structural constraints associated with migratory flows for the purpose of supporting the economic and social development of the regions from which migrants originate and of reducing poverty" (European Union, 2000). The article may appear to be too focused on documented migrants and the readmission and return of those without proper documentation. That is why, within a preliminary post-Cotonou dialogue, it is important to discuss new channels of employment for migrants and capitalize on the human resources already present in host countries that can contribute to the wealth of sending, transit and receiving countries. Article 29 of Agenda 2030 aims at successfully completing the Millennium Development Goals once "we recognize the positive contribution of migrants for inclusive growth and sustainable development. We also recognize that international migration is a multidimensional reality of major relevance for

⁹ <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.it/>.

¹⁰ World Bank, *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016*, Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD), 2016.

¹¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2015.

the development of countries of origin, transit and destination, which requires coherent and comprehensive responses. We will cooperate internationally to ensure safe, orderly and regular migration involving full respect for human rights and the humane treatment of migrants regardless of migration status, of refugees and of displaced persons". Whatever the conclusion of the negotiations to revise the Cotonou Agreement, it is crucial that these values and ideas be kept in mind as a starting basis for a renewed partnership between the EU and Africa to foster a sustainable idea of migration.

Policy options and prospects

- According to the International Monetary Fund, Africa's real GDP growth slowed down from 5.0% in 2014 to 3.75% in 2015 and will rebound to 4.3% in 2016. The resources generated by the movement of African migrants can play a crucial role in helping sub-Saharan African economies regain their growth momentum both in the short and long terms. This may help contain the migratory pressures that economic development typically generates in the short and medium term, when poor people's capabilities and aspirations to migrate increase.
- Innovative migration policies recognize the impact of rapid urbanization in Africa and the conditions necessary for the sustainability of migration in consideration of the importance of cities and other urban areas with regard to the search for an economic, demographic, and environmental equilibrium. The urban habitat must be central to policy discussions but cannot be their only focus. Policy options should address not only the issue of megacities such as Kinshasa, Lagos, or Cairo, but also pay attention to intermediate cities and towns that are more directly linked with their surrounding environment and the rural countryside in an organic vision¹².
- Following the Action Plan formulated at La Valletta in November 2015, smart policies should enhance employment opportunities and revenue-generating activities in regions of origin and the transit of migrants, through public and private investments in favour of agriculture and rural economic development and support for agri-businesses and family farming. However, there is a risk that a rush for fertile lands might displace indigenous farmers who, losing access to their only source of livelihood, would be forced to migrate to cities and contribute to expanding slums.

Key questions for discussion

- How much weight should the security element have within a sustainable migration agenda?
- At what level should African migration most effectively be discussed: urban, national, regional or through the joint EU and African institutions?
- Should and could a future framework of discussing African migration usefully include other countries and regions such as those of the Middle East?
- What have been the main weaknesses of the Cotonou agreement with regard to migratory issues? Was the partnership useful to deal with them? Should a post-Cotonou agenda do more and, if so, what particular aspects of migration should it focus on?

¹² G. Myers, *African Cities: Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice*, London, Zed Books, 2011.

- To what extent should a future partnership on migration between the EU and Africa be framed in the context of the UN Agenda 2030?
- What is and should be the involvement of civil society and non-state actors in promoting a more sustainable idea of migration between Africa and Europe?

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