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## Migration aspirations in West and North Africa: what do we know about how they translate into migration flows to Europe?

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***Abstract:** Aspiring migrants from Africa are less likely than other migrants to migrate to their preferred international migration destinations. This chapter explores migration aspirations and intentions, and actual migration of citizens of 18 North and West African countries, paying particular attention to migration to Europe. Drawing on a combination of statistics from the Gallup World Poll, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Eurostat, Frontex and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, it provides evidence for the discrepancy between the number of people intending to migrate to Europe and actual regular and irregular migration flows. It does so by exploring regional differences and drawing on theoretical frameworks on migration aspirations and (cap)abilities.*

### 7.1. Introduction

Migration from and within Africa is growing and its destinations are becoming increasingly diversified (European Commission, 2018). Eight of the 10 diaspora communities that have been growing the fastest during the last decade originated in African States (Connor, 2018). And while most African migration still takes place within the continent, South–North and South–South migration out of the continent are increasing (European Commission, 2018). Yet, aspiring migrants from Africa are less likely than other migrants to migrate to their preferred international migration destinations. This is particularly true for aspiring migrants from West Africa (Tjaden et al., 2019).

This chapter explores migration aspirations and intentions, and the actual migration of citizens of 18 North and West African countries,<sup>2</sup> paying particular attention to migration to Europe.<sup>3</sup> First, the chapter explores migration desires and intentions in the selected countries, providing an update on previous IOM reports on the topic (such as Tjaden et al., 2017), based on more recently available data. It then provides

<sup>1</sup> IOM’s Global Migration Data Analysis Centre.

<sup>2</sup> The chapter focuses on the following 18 North and West African countries: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, the Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Togo and Senegal.

<sup>3</sup> Due to a limited availability of migration inflow data for the period 2010–2016, all Europe-related data presented in this chapter refer to the following 22 European countries only: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

evidence for the discrepancy between the number of people intending to migrate to Europe and actual regular and irregular migration flows. It does so by exploring regional differences and drawing on Carling's (2002) and de Haas's (2014) frameworks on migration aspirations and (cap)abilities – meaning migrants' psychological assessment of emigration as a possible course of action and their possibilities to translate aspirations into actual migration (see Box 7.1).

This is an exploratory chapter.<sup>4</sup> Data currently available on migration desires and plans in North and West African countries, on migration outflows from these countries and on the extent to which these are directed towards non-European countries are still not comprehensive. Therefore, it is currently still not possible to fully understand why many aspiring migrants from the two regions do not eventually migrate to Europe or migrate elsewhere. However, exploring migration aspirations, intentions and actual migration is essential, in order to understand underlying relevant trends.

The chapter is based on five main sources of data. Section 7.2 is based on survey data on migration desires and plans from the Gallup World Poll. Section 7.3 is based on Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020) and Eurostat (2020) data on regular migration flows, Frontex estimates of irregular migrations flows,<sup>5</sup> and demographic statistics from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, 2020) Population Division. The final section of the chapter maps relevant data gaps and suggests how these could be addressed.



### **Box 7.1.** Migration aspirations and the (cap)ability to migrate

The concept of migration aspirations has been used to indicate an individual's psychological assessment of conceiving emigration as a possible course of action (Carling and Schewel, 2018). Migration intentions, meanwhile, refer to aspiring migrants' concrete plans to move. The concept of aspiration has been defined as “a function of people's general life aspirations and perceived spatial opportunity structures” in both places of origin and destination (de Haas, 2014:23). In this way, the concept of aspiration focuses more on factors shaping decisions and desires (not) to leave, such as social, cultural and economic capital, social norms and expectations (Carling and Collins, 2018; Schewel, 2019).

Researchers have tried to explain the factors shaping migrants' possibilities to translate their migration aspirations into actual migration through concepts such as migration ability and capability. Through his ability–aspiration model, Carling suggested that migration ability is the “capacity to convert [migration aspirations] into reality, given context-specific obstacles and opportunities” (Carling and Schewel, 2018:955). He pointed out that different socioeconomic groups experience migration barriers differently. In particular, he suggested that restrictive immigration policies render it difficult for low-skilled individuals to access legal migration channels. This may lead them to “involuntary immobility” or to search alternative migration “modes”, such as irregular migration. Carling furthermore suggested to conceptualize

<sup>4</sup> This is an exploratory chapter and some methodological limitations need to be mentioned. To begin, methodological limitations of the Gallup World Poll data on migration desires and plans are likely to affect their comprehensiveness (see Box 7.2). Estimates based on survey data used pooled data for the years 2010–2015, in order to compensate for limited sample sizes and different sampling frames. The missing data were imputed with a moving average, to increase the balance of the panel, and design and weights were adjusted for pooling countries, years or number of surveys per year. Further limitations are due to the nature of migration flow data. Different collection techniques applied by different States limit their comparability. Data on regular migration flows are based here on residence permits; however, those who received residence permits may have arrived irregularly. Data on irregular migration flows can moreover only be based on estimates. In addition, only persons 15 years old and older could be considered, due to the unavailability of data for younger persons. However, it must be noted that a high percentage of migrants are estimated to be younger than 35 years old and many are younger than 15 years old. Due to these limitations, percentages indicated here may be biased.

<sup>5</sup> Frontex estimates of irregular migration flows are based on estimated irregular border crossings. For the methodological details, please see Frontex (2020).

migration ability in two ways: (a) as “the potential ... of realizing migration aspirations, regardless of whether the individual has such aspirations”; and (b) as “revealed ability ... of someone who has actually migrated”. The latter is used in this chapter. Similar to Carling’s ability concept is de Haas’ concept of capability, which defines “human mobility as people’s capability (freedom) to choose where to live, including the option to stay” (de Haas, 2014:2).

## 7.2. What do we know about migration desires and plans in West and North Africa?

There are different ways to measure migration aspirations and intentions (see Carling and Schewel, 2018). This chapter explores migration desires – that is, individual preferences to emigrate independently of any possible limitation to do so – and migration plans – that is, whether people with migration desires have made concrete plans to fulfil them in the following 12 months. The analysis is based on the Gallup World Poll (GWP) data on migration desires and plans collected between 2010 and 2017 in 18 countries in West and North Africa. Box 7.2 provides more information on the GWP.



### Box 7.2. Gallup World Poll data on migration desires and plans

The Gallup World Poll (GWP) provides data on migration desires and plans in more than 160 countries for the years 2010–2017. These data were collected through telephone surveys and face-to-face interviews with at least 1,000 individuals per country, with a semi-annual, annual and biennial frequency, depending on the country. With some exceptions, samples are probability-based and nationally representative of the resident population 15 years old and older. The GWP collects data on migration desires and plans through the following survey questions:

- Migration desires: “Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move permanently to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country?”
- Migration plans: “Are you planning to move permanently to another country in the next 12 months, or not?” (This was asked only of those who expressed a desire to migrate.)

The GWP is currently the largest source of data on migration desires and plans globally. However, its comprehensiveness is debated, mostly due to its methodological limitations. For example, uneven access to telephone services – such as in rural regions of West Africa – is not considered. Recently, some researchers have suggested that the poll’s methodological approach risks neglecting complex (local) contexts and specific forms of mobility, such as temporary migration (for example, Carling and Schewel, 2018). Other researchers have pointed to the limited ability of the GWP to compare country trends over time and at its being proprietary, and have proposed alternative tools, such as using georeferenced online search data to measure migration intentions in origin countries in order to predict subsequent outflows (Böhme et al., 2019).

Around one in three respondents in North and West Africa expressed a general desire to move abroad. The share of people who desire to emigrate increased by 12 percentage points between 2011 and 2017, from 27 per cent to 39 per cent. Migration desires vary between and within West and North Africa. In 2017, almost half of the surveyed West African nationals (43%) said that they would like to emigrate, whereas in North Africa this was true for one third of the population 15 years old or older. Box 7.3 provides evidence on why African nationals may consider emigration.



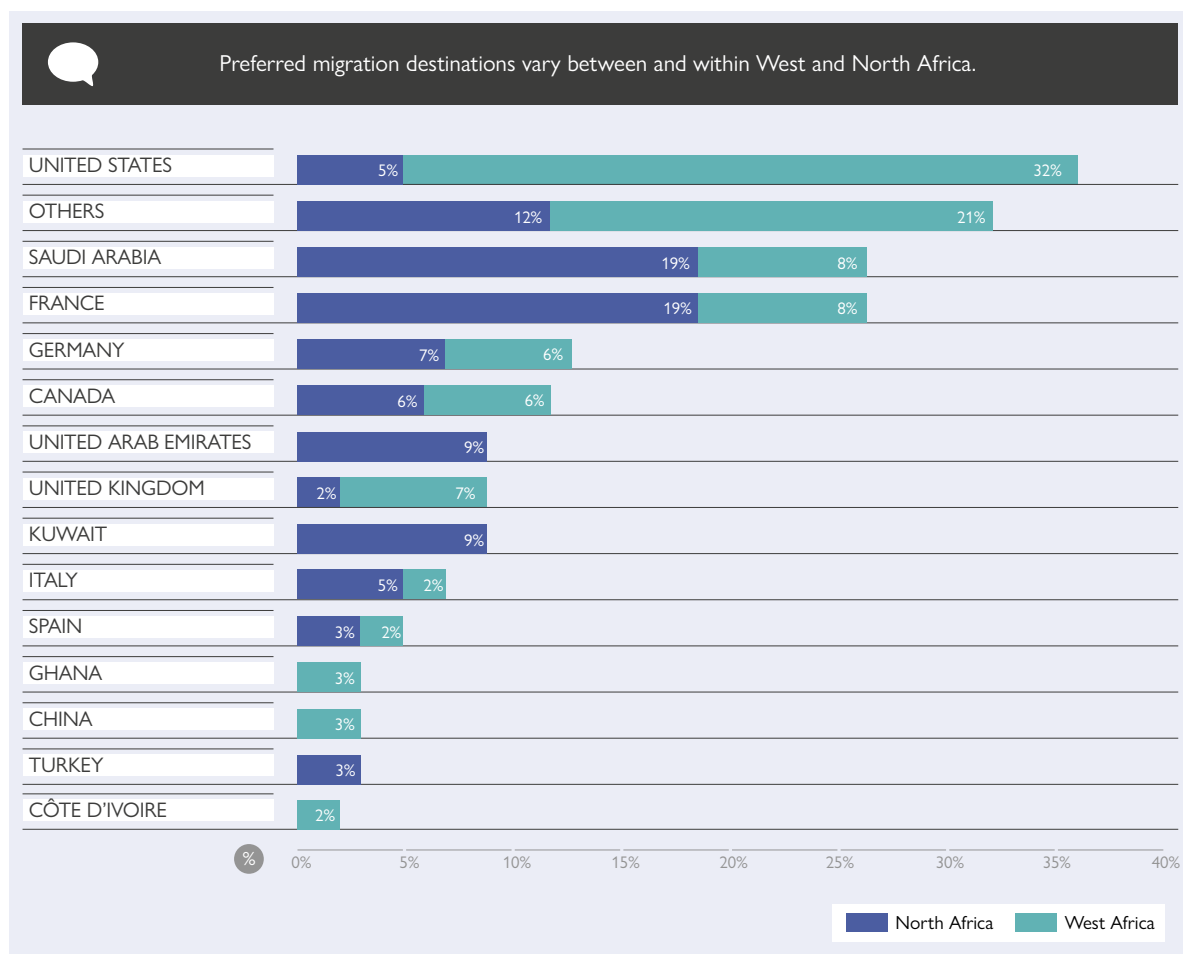
### Box 7.3. Why African nationals consider emigration – evidence from the Afrobarometer

The Afrobarometer<sup>6</sup> (2019) provides evidence on the reasons why African nationals consider moving abroad, based on nationally representative surveys. These data confirm research findings on the role of “income and job availability at destination, but also geographical, cultural and institutional distance and social linkages (networks)” as migration determinants (Docquier et al., 2014:6). Economic factors appear to be particularly important: in 2016–2018, more than half of respondents in Cabo Verde (64%) and Senegal (54%) reported “finding work” as the main reason for considering emigration. In other West African countries (Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Togo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Niger and Mali), “finding work” was the main reason for emigration for a smaller, but still consistent, share of respondents (25–35%), whereas “poverty/hardship” was the most cited factor (40–50% of respondents indicated this). Data also show the presence of “ongoing, perhaps mundane social processes that drive mobility, such as the search for an education, a spouse or a better life in the city” (Bakewell and Bonfiglio, 2013:4). Ten per cent of respondents in the Gambia, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Morocco said that they would like to emigrate in pursuit of better education opportunities. Other reasons reported by respondents included travel/tourism, business prospects and family reunification. Political reasons appear to be less relevant: “better democratic environment”, “political persecution” and “civil war” were all indicated by less than 2.1 per cent of persons having considered migration in all West African countries considered by the Afrobarometer. However, 4.2 per cent of persons having considered migration in Morocco and 3 per cent in Tunisia indicated “better democratic environment”.

Preferred migration destinations vary between and within West and North Africa. Generally, people who expressed a desire to move in 2017 mentioned North America (11%), Europe (11%), Asia (including the Middle East – 9%) and the Arabian Peninsula (6%) as preferred destination regions. Only 3 per cent stated they would like to move to another country in Africa. The United States (22%), Saudi Arabia and France (both at 12%) were the most cited preferred destinations overall, but there are regional differences. In West Africa, the preferred regions of destination are North America (16%) and Europe (10%), whereas in North Africa, Europe and the Middle East prevail (both at 12%). Destinations in Western Asia – primarily Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait – are particularly popular among potential migrants in North Africa (12%). Four per cent of potential migrants in West Africa would like to migrate to another African country, while this is true for none of the individuals surveyed in North Africa. Finally, preferred migration destinations vary at the national level, too. For example, 25 per cent of respondents with a migration desire in Algeria and 20 per cent in Senegal would like to go to Europe, while this is true for only 3 per cent of respondents in the Niger and Egypt. Figure 7.1 provides an overview of preferred countries of destination among respondents who expressed a migration desire.

<sup>6</sup> The Afrobarometer conducts regular public attitude surveys on social, political and economic questions in 37 African countries. It does so through face-to-face interviews with a randomly selected sample of 1,200 or 2,400 people in each country.

**Figure 7.1.** Preferred countries of destination among respondents in West and North Africa who expressed a general desire to emigrate in 2017<sup>7</sup>



Source: Gallup World Poll, 2017.

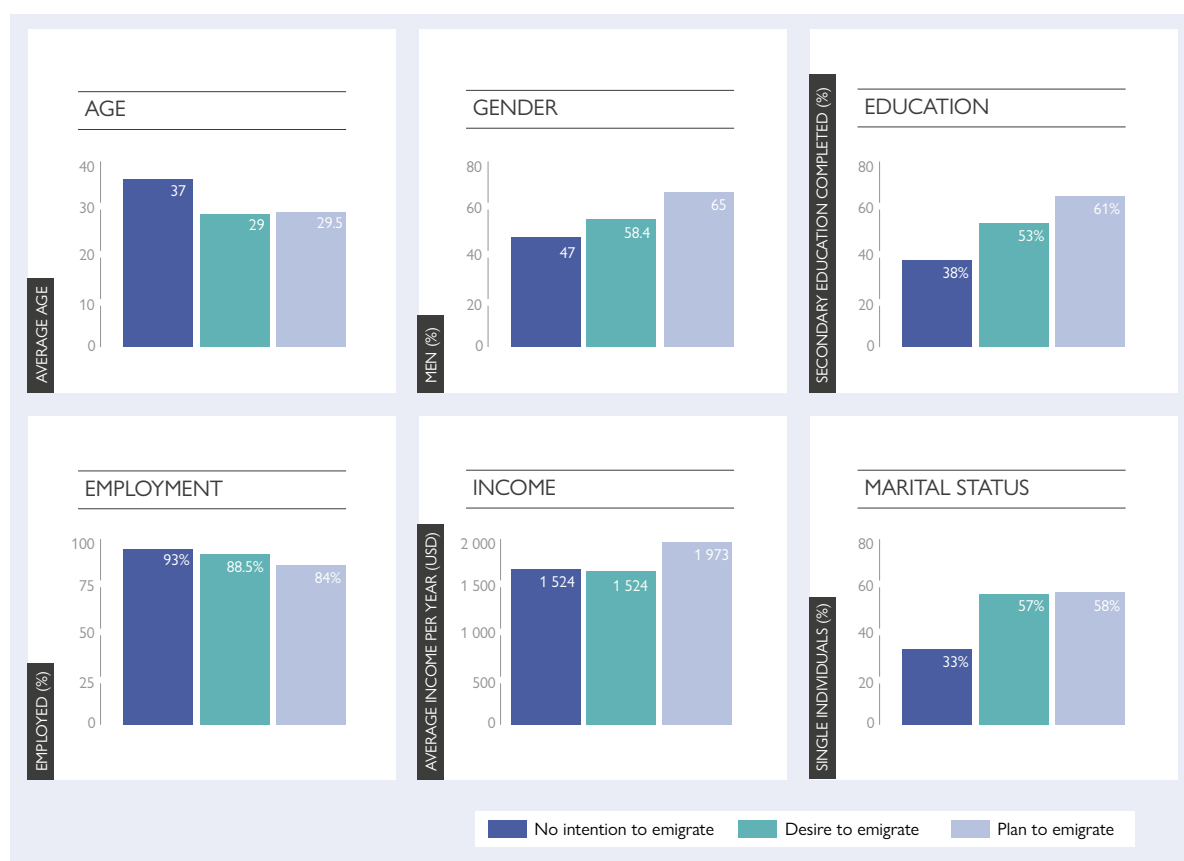
Note: Design and population weights are included.

Only 4.4 per cent of all respondents in West and North Africa said they were making concrete plans<sup>8</sup> to migrate abroad. Every year from 2010 to 2015, an average of 31 per cent of respondents across the 18 selected countries reported a general desire to migrate, whereas only 4.4 per cent indicated that they had made concrete plans to do so in the following 12 months. Among those with concrete plans to migrate, only one in three said that they were planning to move to Europe.

Aspiring migrants are on average younger, better educated and tend to have higher incomes than the rest of the population. They are also more likely to be male and single. This is true both for individuals who desire to emigrate and – even more so – for individuals who make concrete plans to migrate. People with these characteristics are more likely to have the social and economic capital to comply with immigration requirements in countries of destination and to finance migration costs. Figure 7.2 provides information on socioeconomic characteristics of aspiring migrants.

<sup>7</sup> Preferred countries of destination among respondents in West and North Africa who expressed a general desire to emigrate in 2017 were calculated in two steps. First, the share of respondents desiring to move to each country of destination was calculated for each of the 18 countries of origin considered in this chapter. Then, the average share for each preferred country of destination was calculated and adjusted for population size in countries of origin. Methodological limitations of GWP data indicated in Box 7.2 need to be considered.

<sup>8</sup> GWP data on migration plans are not yet available for 2016 and 2017. Therefore, data on migration plans presented here refer to the time period 2010–2015.

**Figure 7.2.** Socioeconomic characteristics of respondents, 2010–2015

Source: Gallup World Poll, 2010–2015.

Note: Estimates based on pooled data for 2010–2015. Design and population weights included.

### 7.3. From plans to actual migration to Europe

Plans to emigrate or stay change over time. In particular, migration plans do not always materialize. Individual characteristics such as social and economic capital, and structural or contextual factors – such as migration policies, changing risks and opportunities, and geographical distance – have an impact on aspiring migrants' will and possibilities to translate their migration plans into reality (Carling and Schewel, 2018). As a result, people may decide not to migrate, to migrate to alternative destinations, or to choose alternative means to migrate (such as through irregular channels). More information on this is provided in Box 7.4.

This section explores the extent to which plans to migrate translate into actual migration. Given the limited availability of statistics on regular and irregular migration flows at the global level,<sup>9</sup> only statistics on movements from the 18 selected countries to the 23 European countries for which data are available are considered here.

The section compares: (a) data on the number of people (yearly average) with plans to migrate from the 18 selected countries to the 23 European countries for which data are available for the period 2010–2015, and (b) data on yearly average migrant inflows from the selected 18 countries to the same 23 European countries for

<sup>9</sup> Data on migrant flows are not available at the global level. Only 45 countries report them to the United Nations and comparable migration flows data are largely limited to OECD countries and to regular migration. This renders it difficult to describe migration flows involving non-OECD countries, such as the 18 North and West African countries considered in this brief, and irregular migration flows. For more information on data availability, see Mosler Vidal (2019).

the period 2011–2016.<sup>10</sup> Data on migration plans refer to plans to migrate in the 12 months following the time of the interview. Data on yearly average migrant inflows are based on data on residence permits issued for at least 12 months<sup>11</sup> and on estimates of irregular arrivals. Migration journeys can have variable lengths, ranging from several hours to years. In addition, they are not always linear and may involve shorter or longer periods in countries of transit. While the two data sets do not refer to the same groups of individuals, comparing them can provide an indication of the gap between migration plans and actual migration to certain destinations.

From 2011 to 2016, the estimated yearly average migration inflows from the 18 selected countries to Europe have been equivalent to 7.1 per cent of the yearly average number of individuals indicating that they had made migration plans between 2010 and 2015. On average, each year between 2010 and 2015, about 4 million individuals made plans to move to the European Union in the following 12 months, whereas each year from 2011 to 2016, estimated regular and irregular arrivals were about 300,000.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 7.3.** Migration plans and estimated inflows to the European Union, 2010–2015<sup>13</sup>



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on survey data on migration desires and plans from Gallup World Poll, demographic data from UN DESA Population Division, data on regular migration flows from Eurostat (2020) and OECD (2020), and estimates of irregular migration flows from Frontex (2020). Design and population weights are included.

<sup>10</sup> Comparison is made between data for migration plans in 2010–2015 and migration inflows in 2011–2016, in order to account for the fact that plans can take time to materialize.

<sup>11</sup> Eurostat and OECD data on regular arrivals are calculated using first residence permits issued for at least 12 months as a proxy for flows. Given the lack of reliable data on irregular arrivals and partial overlaps between data on regular and irregular arrivals, estimates presented here can only be indicative.

<sup>12</sup> This number is calculated as a combination of Eurostat and OECD data on regular arrivals and Frontex estimates on irregular arrivals that are based on border crossings. Given the lack of reliable data on irregular arrivals and partial overlaps between data on regular and irregular arrivals, these estimates are indicative. Irregular arrivals in the years 2011–2016 were significantly higher than in previous years.

<sup>13</sup> These data refer to migration from the 18 African countries considered to the 23 EU countries considered. The absolute number of adults with plans to emigrate is calculated by multiplying the percentage of survey respondents that reported a plan to emigrate to EU countries considered with the population data. Estimates include people 15 years old and older. Design and population weights are applied. Estimates are based on pooled data for 2010–2015.

There are regional differences regarding whether migration plans lead to actual migration. Migrants from North Africa are more likely than migrants from West Africa to enter European countries regularly, based on available data. Whereas from 2011 to 2016 the yearly average number of individuals who migrated regularly to Europe from the North African countries considered was equivalent to 11.3 per cent of the yearly average number of those who said they had made migration plans from 2010 to 2015, the share was 3.1 per cent in the West African countries analysed. The estimated yearly average number of individuals who migrated irregularly was equivalent to 1.3 per cent of yearly average migration plans for both North and West Africa.<sup>14</sup>



#### Box 7.4. Potential migrants may decide to stay or to move to alternative destinations

Potential migrants may decide to stay in their countries of origin or to migrate elsewhere. This can happen because of changes in how they perceive their opportunities and capabilities at home and elsewhere (for comparison, see de Haas, 2014; Carling and Schewel, 2018).

- **The decision to (wait and) stay in the country of origin** may be linked to a perceived improvement of work opportunities and/or to changes in the personal situations and life aspirations of potential migrants. People may also consider that their prospects to migrate and to live in their desired migration destinations have become worse – for example, due to economic downturns or changing immigration policies. People may also be forced to stay due to an onset or increase of violence and insecurity.
- **The decision to move to alternative destinations** may be linked to changes in the perception of risks and opportunities in different countries of transit and destination, and/or to changes in the personal situations and life aspirations of potential migrants. As a result, migrants who initially desired to migrate to Europe may become internal migrants or migrate to other non-European countries. West African migrants are more likely to remain in the region, where they can benefit from the Economic Community of West African States Protocol of Free Movement, or on the continent: it is estimated that around 7 out of 10 West African migrants remain in Africa, against just around 1.5 out of 10 North African migrants (European Commission, 2018). In some cases, internal and interregional migration can serve as a step towards future migration to the European Union or elsewhere. During short- and long-term migration phases in transit countries, migrants can improve their capability to move to Europe by, for instance, working to finance migration costs or by enrolling in education programmes to fulfil immigration requirements. In other cases, however, migrants' capability to move can decrease – for instance, due to experienced situations of vulnerability.

Between 2011 and 2016, the yearly average of regular arrivals was 247,266 and the estimated average of irregular arrivals was 55,664. In other words, estimated irregular arrivals were equivalent to about 20 per cent of regular arrivals. On average, out of every 100 North and West African citizens who made migration plans, 6 entered European countries regularly, and an estimated 1 entered irregularly.

The share of individuals who realized their migration plans entering European countries irregularly<sup>15</sup> tended to be slightly higher for West African countries with a low human development index. Some countries had a slightly higher share of estimated irregular inflows over total inflows than the others, when considering yearly averages

<sup>14</sup> The statistical significance of regional differences with regard to migration plans was checked.

<sup>15</sup> For a comparative analysis of regular and irregular migration flows from Africa to Europe, see Mosler Vidal et al. (2019).



between 2011 and 2016. These are Mali (34%), Côte d'Ivoire (27%), Sierra Leone, (26%), Nigeria (26%), Guinea (26%), Liberia (25%), Burkina Faso (24%), the Niger (22%) and Ghana (19%). Every year between 2011 and 2016, all these countries except for Ghana were classified as having a low human development index, lower than most of the other countries considered in this brief (UNDP, 2019).

## 7.4. Research and data gaps and limitations, and how to address them

A comprehensive analysis of the gap between plans to migrate and actual migration can hardly be conducted based on currently available data. Still, this question is essential for the identification of effective migration policies able to maximize the possible benefits of migration for countries of origin, transit and destination. In particular, the following research and data gaps need to be filled:

- **More research on migrants' capability to translate migration desires and plans into actual emigration:** More research is needed, particularly on the role of migrants' individual characteristics and their inclusion in social networks, as well as broader contextual variables, such as migration policies and economic and political situations in countries of origin, transit and destination.
- **Data on the socioeconomic characteristics of undocumented migrants:** Related questions could be included in existing data collection tools employed in Africa and the European Union, such as the Displacement Tracking Matrix, in order to understand how these characteristics influence migrants' access to regular and irregular migration possibilities.

The following measures can help improve the availability of relevant data:

- **Support to national statistical offices in Africa, including through data capacity-building initiatives,** in order to improve the ability of national statistical offices to collect data on the above: Data collection strategies relevant in this regard include conducting specific migration surveys, integrating migration-related questions into national population censuses and improving administrative data systems.
- **Facilitation of interregional and international data-sharing mechanisms,** in order to improve cooperation between national statistical offices and make the most of existing data already collected by countries: In particular, data on migration inflows collected by countries of destination could provide information on migration outflows from countries of origin.
- **Exploration of the potential of new data sources,** such as data from online searches and social media: More efforts should be directed towards harnessing openly available data or data that are already collected by private companies to estimate migration flows and intentions, while paying attention to issues related to difficulties in separating migrants from non-migrants (based on the United Nations-recommended definitions), representativeness of the data (as aspiring migrants with lower migration capability may also have less access to Internet connections and smartphones), as well as individual privacy and civil liberties.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For examples, see <https://migrationdataportal.org/data-innovation> (accessed 23 June 2020).

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