Public opinion on immigration in North and West Africa: an exploration of the available evidence

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Abstract: This chapter explores a range of factors shaping attitudes towards immigrants in 18 countries in West and North Africa based on results from the Gallup World Poll survey. In particular, it looks at the relationship between public opinion on immigration and (a) individuals' perceptions of their countries' economy and labour market, (b) their perceptions of the quality and availability of public goods and services, and (c) their trust in institutions such as the police and government.



35.1. Introduction

Understanding public opinion about international migration and what factors influence perceptions of the phenomenon is important for countries and the international community to foster a constructive and balanced public discourse, and to effectively counter xenophobia and stigmatization of migrants, as laid out in Objective 17 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (Dennison, 2018; United Nations General Assembly, 2019). Moreover, effective and sustainable migration policymaking requires an understanding of attitudes towards immigration (Barslund et al., 2019).

This chapter explores a range of factors shaping attitudes towards immigrants in 18 countries in West and North Africa² based on results from the Gallup World Poll survey. In particular, it looks at the relationship between public opinion on immigration and (a) individuals' perceptions of their countries' economy and labour market, (b) their perceptions of the quality and availability of public goods and services, and (c) their trust in institutions such as the police and government. These have all been identified as important factors affecting public opinion on immigration in the literature.³

Existing research on public attitudes towards immigration has tended to focus around the "economic competition theory", holding that attitudes towards immigrants are driven by economic self-interest and are generally channelled through the perception

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² Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, the Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Tunisia.

The chapter does not explore the relationship between objective measures of economic performance and poverty, such as gross domestic product and Human Development Index, and public attitudes towards immigrants. Literature in similar contexts suggests that objective measures that capture poverty and vulnerability are not substantively associated with negative attitudes toward immigrants, while individual perceptions of the economy and the labour market, on the contrary, are (Ruedin, 2019; Gordon, 2018).

of labour market competition.⁴ According to this theory, individuals who are more vulnerable on the labour market are less likely to be in favour of immigration. This dimension is also key to understanding attitudes in North and West Africa, where an overwhelming share of migrants – in particular migrants moving within and between these regions – move for employment and other economic reasons: more than half of potential migrants surveyed in the 2016–2018 period in 34 African countries reported search of economic opportunities and better employment as the main motivation to emigrate,⁵ and international migrants in Africa are more economically active compared with the general population (African Union Commission, 2017).

Studies have also explored whether perceptions of the availability and quality of public goods can affect public opinion on immigration (Gordon, 2018). Migration in Africa, as elsewhere, is a significant contributor to urban growth, influencing the shape of cities, as people move away from rural communities in search of economic opportunities (Mariama Awumbila Center for Migration Studies, University of Legon, Ghana, 2017). Urban centres can have limited capacity to accommodate the incoming migrants, and disputes with local communities might arise over competition – real or perceived – for scarce local resources and opportunities, a phenomenon that has also been documented in the literature (see, for example, Beauchemin and Bocquier (2004)). In addition to the economic dimension, the chapter includes preliminary insights on how such pressures, as well as trust in institutions such as the government and police, may affect public opinion on immigrants in North and West Africa. It concludes by offering a few recommendations for further research, building on the limited body of research that currently exists on the topic of public opinion on immigration in these regions.

35.2. Public opinion polls about migration in North and West Africa

While public perceptions about migration in Europe have been relatively well studied, with national or cross-country studies conducted regularly on the topic,⁶ less is known about public opinion on immigration in countries in West and North Africa. Migration-related surveys in North and West Africa tend to focus on respondents' intentions to move across international borders (see Schöfberger, Acostamadiedo, Borgnäs and Rango, Chapter 7 of this volume). An in-depth and nuanced examination of populations' attitudes towards immigrants in their own countries that can be found in polls carried out in major immigration countries in Europe⁷ or in South Africa⁸ is often lacking in these regions. However, most of African migration occurs within Africa,⁹ with intraregional migration being especially significant in West Africa.¹⁰ Many of the countries are major destination countries facing the challenges related to handling migration pressures and understanding that the effects of the phenomenon on public opinion are as important in North and West Africa as elsewhere.

Attitudes towards immigration can be divided into several interconnected subcategories, including attitudes towards immigrants, immigration policy preferences, the perceived effects of immigration, who should and should not be admitted as an immigrant, diversity, and how important immigration is perceived as an issue in a country. Typically, public opinion polls tend to include questions along one or several of these dimensions. However, the few public

⁴ While the economic competition theory has been called a "zombie theory" for the repeated lack of empirical support, there has been more evidence that perceived economic competition, not actual competition, plays a more important role in shaping attitudes towards immigrants. For a comprehensive review of the literature, see, for example, Dennison and Dražanová (2018); Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014).

⁵ See Chapter 5 of this volume (Teppert, Cottone and Rossi). See also Appiah-Nyamekye et al. (2019).

⁶ Such as the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey, among others. For an overview of existing public opinion polls in the Euro-Mediterranean region, see Dennison and Dražanová (2018). For a further discussions of the literature summarizing attitudes towards immigrants in developed democracies, see Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014).

See Dennison and Dražanová (2018). See also Universidad de los Andes, Sistema de Bibliotecas, avaliable at www-annualreviews-org.ezproxyegre.uniandes.edu. co:8843/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102651 (accessed 15 July 2020).

⁸ For opinion polls in South Africa, see, for example, Gordon (2016, 2018); and Facchini et al. (2013).

⁹ See, for example IOM (2019). Based on data collected by DTM enumerators, over 90 per cent of those flows captured since the start of 2017 are intraregional or within the same country (IOM, 2018).

¹⁰ Some noteworthy examples are Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia and Libya, where the share of foreign nationals from the total population varied between 9 and 12 per cent (UN DESA, 2019).

opinion polls conducted in countries in North and West Africa have, with a few exceptions, ¹¹ included very few questions related towards immigration. ¹²

Meanwhile, polls that have been conducted at a global level with relatively wide coverage, such as the World Values Survey and the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, and which include a number of questions relating towards immigration, include few African countries. More insights into public opinion on immigrants in North and West Africa are provided by the Gallup World Poll¹³ and the Afrobarometer. The Gallup World Poll (GWP) currently has the broadest geographical coverage, with 165 countries covered across all continents, including 49 in Africa. The Afrobarometer covers 37 countries in Africa, including most countries in West and North Africa.¹⁴

35.3. Public attitudes are generally more positive in West Africa than in North Africa

In the 2016 GWP, respondents were asked about attitudes towards foreign nationals living in the country. Overall, the findings indicate that most adults in North and West Africa have high levels of acceptance of foreign nationals, with some variation across countries. However, attitudes are generally more positive in West Africa than in North Africa, where respondents generally hold more negative attitudes towards immigrants, although they still tend to be positive overall (see Figure 35.1). This is in line with findings in the 2012 GWP survey, which found that the majority of respondents in West African countries would like to see immigration levels stay the same or increase. Residents of countries in North Africa countries were, on average, more negative about immigration. According to data from 2012, respondents were in general more accepting of migrants coming to and living in their country or more positive about having them as neighbours rather than having them become part of the family.

Morocco, for example, has done a more extensive survey of public opinion distributed through the Afrobarometer (2019).

¹² The literature has pointed out various limitations of using polls to measure public opinion, including on migration. For more on this, see, for example, IOM (2015) and Dennison (2016).

For a discussion on the methodological limitations of these surveys, see Chapter 7 of this volume (Schöfberger, Acostamadiedo, Borgnäs and Rango).

¹⁴ Except Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau and Libya.

¹⁵ In 2012, the GWP for the first time included a question on migration, asking whether respondents would like to see immigration in their countries kept at its present level, increased or decreased. The responses are reported in detail in IOM (2015).

These findings are presented in more detail in the IOM report "How the World Views Migration" (IOM, 2015). Findings by the Afrobarometer 2016/2018 poll, which measures public opinion on migration by what respondents would think about having immigrants and foreign workers as neighbours, supports the GWP finding that West Africans are significantly more positive than their North African neighbours.

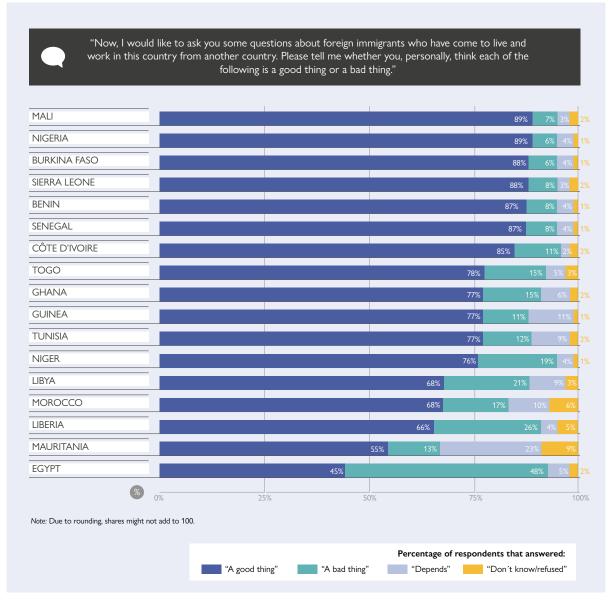


Figure 35.1. Attitudes towards immigrants by country

Source: Own elaboration based on Gallup World Poll, 2016.

35.4. Trends in public attitudes varied across North and West Africa between 2011 and 2017

An analysis of responses to a different but related GWP question that was asked over a longer time span shows that attitudes towards immigration remained stable for some of the countries studied between 2011 and 2017, while in others these changed significantly. The question asked was "Is the city or area where you live a good place or not a good place to live for immigrants from other countries?" and aimed to capture respondents' perceptions of how tolerant their society is towards immigrants (Buitrago et al., 2018). In countries such as Egypt and Libya, the share of adults perceiving their society to be accepting towards immigrants increased in the same time period, while in Mauritania and Morocco, the share of adults expressing such views saw a decreasing trend (see Figure 35.2).

"Is your community a good place to live for immigrants?" EGYPT **▲**+20% 56 65 LIBYA **+9%** GHANA **+**6% NIGERIA **+5%** BENIN **▲** +2% SIERRA LEONE **1**% TOGO **▼** -2% SENEGAL ▼ -3% LIBERIA **▼** -4% 68 72 MALI ▼ -4% CÔTE D'IVOIRE ▼ -8% BURKINA FASO **V** -9% TUNISIA **▼** -13% 60 GUINEA **▼**-14% **ALGERIA ▼** -15% 34 49 NIGER **▼** -16% MOROCCO **▼**-18% MAURITANIA **▼** -27% % 60% 80% 100% 40% Percentage of respondents that answered "A good place" **2011 2017**

Figure 35.2. Share of respondents who consider that their community is a good place to live for immigrants, 2011–2017

Source: Own elaboration based on Gallup World Poll, 2011 and 2017.

In the following section, the analysis turns to how individuals' perceptions on the economy and labour market, the quality and availability of public goods and services, and trust in institutions affect public opinion on immigration in West and North Africa. Data come from the 2016 GWP from 15 countries. 17

¹⁷ Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, the Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Tunisia are included. Morocco, Algeria and Libya were not included due to lack of data.

35.5. Positive perceptions on the economy, public goods and services, and institutions positively affect attitudes towards immigrants in North and West Africa

Figure 35.3 presents correlations between individual perceptions of a range of issues linked to the economy, the labour market, the availability and quality of public goods and services, as well as trust in institutions with attitudes towards immigrants living in the country.¹⁸ The results show that positive attitudes towards immigrants are correlated with respondents' subjective assessments of having enough income to get by on and believing that it is a good time to find a job. Respondents who perceive their country's labour market as doing well are 15 per cent more likely to hold positive attitudes towards immigrants living in their country compared with those who are more pessimistic about the labour market.¹⁹ Those who feel that they can get community support²⁰ are 21 per cent more likely to be positive towards immigrants living in the country than are those who do not feel they have such support. Moreover, those who consider it difficult to get by on their current household income²¹ are 16 per cent less likely to hold positive attitudes towards immigrants compared with those who feel that they have enough current income. Although not statistically significant, the results go in the same direction in regard to respondents' views on national economic performance or their employment status, with those employed and with a positive outlook on the national economy tending to have positive attitudes towards immigrants.

The survey data moreover suggest that perceptions of the quality and availability of public goods and services, such as the educational system and housing, are generally positively correlated with people's attitudes towards immigrants; those satisfied with the housing and the education systems in their cities or towns are 16 and 21 per cent more likely, respectively, to hold positive attitudes towards immigrants living in their countries, compared with respondents who are unsatisfied with these services. It is noteworthy that citizens who are satisfied with the quality of the air are 28 per cent more likely to be positive about immigration compared with people who are unsatisfied, suggesting that environmental stressors can negatively affect attitudes towards immigration.²² The relationship between perceived access and quality of public services should be further explored given that the analysis presented here shows no significant statistical association between attitudes towards immigrants and satisfaction with the quality and availability of other basic services, such as health care and water.

Finally, trust in the government and the police is also generally associated with positive attitudes towards immigrants. Compared with those who do not have trust in such institutions, those who trust the police and the government are 21 and 25 per cent more likely, respectively, to hold positive attitudes about immigrants living in the country.

Figure 35.3 shows the results of a logistic regression analysis that regresses positive attitudes toward foreign immigrants living in the country (dummy of positive and negative attitudes) on economic perceptions, satisfaction with public goods and services, and institutional trust. The dots represent coefficients, expressed in odds ratio, and the bars represent the 90 per cent confidence interval around that estimate. Blue dots to the right of the vertical line signify positive relationships, and yellow dots to the left of the line indicate a negative association. When the bar for an independent variable does not intersect the vertical line, that variable is statistically significant (p < .1). Country fixed effects, demographics (urban, sex, age and education) and receiving remittances are included as controls in the analysis, but excluded from the figure. Standard errors are clustered at the country level. The analysed sample in the model was reduced to 10,811 from 15,001 observations in the original data set.

¹⁹ GWP question: "Thinking about the job situation in the city or area where you live today, would you say that it is now a good time or a bad time to find a job?"

²⁰ GWP question: "If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them, or not?"

²¹ GWP question: "Which one of these phrases comes closest to your own feelings about your household income these days? Living comfortably, Getting by, Finding it difficult and Finding it very difficult".

²² For more on the relationship between environment and public attitudes towards immigration, see, for example, Landau et al., (2013).

ECONOMY NATIONAL ECONOMY GETTING BETTER **EMPLOYED - EMPLOYMENT STATUS** GOOD TIME TO FIND A JOB (LABOUR MARKET) FIND IT DIFFICULT ON PRESENT INCOME COUNT ON COMMUNITY FOR HELP GOODS AND SERVICES (SATISFIED WITH) QUALITY OF WATER QUALITY OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT **QUALITY OF ROADS** QUALITY OF AIR QUALITY OF HEALTH CARE QUALITY OF EDUCATION QUALITY OF HOUSING INSTITUTIONS TRUST IN GOVERNMENT TRUST IN POLICE 0.8 1.2 1.4 Statistical relation Negative Insignificant Positive

Figure 35.3. Individual factors of positive attitudes towards immigrants living in the country

Source: Own elaboration based on Gallup World Poll, 2016.

Further reading: Studies on factors affecting public opinion on immigration in Africa

The limited research available on this topic has pointed to how electoral political competition can affect public opinion through increasing nationalistic attitudes. In a recent analysis of survey data from 11 African countries, ²³ the authors found that opposition to immigration is significantly higher in more democratic countries²⁴ and when the survey is conducted closer to a national election (Whitaker and Giersch, 2015). As has been found in other contexts, immigrants often become scapegoats for complex problems such as crime and unemployment. Some studies show how, as political elites embrace exclusionary rhetoric, they may increase the salience of the immigration issue and legitimize opposition to immigration among the wider population. ²⁵ A study focused on Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana found that politicians may play such an "immigration exclusion card" when the costs of immigration become concentrated for key interest groups, when embracing anti-immigration rhetoric will divide the support base of an opponent, and when the backing of anti-immigration groups is necessary to build a winning electoral coalition (Whitaker, 2015).

In an extension of the electoral argument, a survey experiment in Côte d'Ivoire (Cogley et al., 2018) found that respondents were significantly more likely to support the naturalization of immigrants who planned to vote, especially those with whom they shared a religious faith, indicating a degree of electoral calculation. In addition, citizens were more likely to support policies that allowed for the naturalization of immigrants with family connections to the country or who had been in the country for longer periods, those who had entered the country legally, and those who could contribute economically.

Meanwhile, some studies have highlighted how African experiences also challenge some commonly held assumptions about migration, not just within the region but more broadly. For example, while evidence from Europe²⁶ holds that migrants face more hostility if they are culturally different from their hosts in terms of religion, language or other traits, some experiences in Africa suggest otherwise. A study found that cultural similarities between migrant and destination communities might make relations worse, not better, as leaders of both communities are motivated to highlight differences in order to maintain their authority (Adida, 2011). Other studies have pointed out that culturally diverse countries are not necessarily more welcoming to additional diversity in the form of immigrants, with some survey data showing that opposition to immigration is in fact significantly higher in more ethnically diverse African countries (Whitaker and Giersch, 2015).

35.6. Conclusion

This chapter provided a descriptive analysis of attitudes towards immigrants in North and West Africa, adding to the limited but increasing evidence on this topic on the continent. It analysed three groups of factors associated with attitudes toward immigrants: namely, perceptions of the economy and labour market, the availability and quality of public goods services, and trust in institutions. It finds that positive perceptions of various factors on all these three dimensions are correlated with more positive attitudes towards immigrants: On the economic dimension, optimism regarding the possibility of finding a job and being able to count on the community for help is positively correlated with favouring immigration, while respondents who consider that they do not have enough income tend

²³ Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, the United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

²⁴ Which could of course be because any form of opposition is more easily spelled out in democratic contexts.

²⁵ Whitaker and Giersch (2015). The authors highlight that this pattern does not hold true everywhere, though. In Ghana, for example, long-standing immigrant groups have taken advantage of citizenship laws and a competitive two-party system to constitute themselves as an important voting bloc, prompting politicians from both sides to actively compete for their support during election campaigns (Whitaker, 2015).

²⁶ See, for example, Brader, Valentino and Suhay (2008); Ford (2011); Hainmueller and Hangartner (2013); and Dennison (2018)

to have more negative attitudes. Regarding public goods and services, there is significant positive correlation between availability and quality of housing and education, and positive attitudes towards immigrants. The results also indicate a positive correlation between positive perceptions on the quality of air and positive attitudes towards immigrants. A potential relationship between perceptions on the quality of the surrounding environment and attitudes towards immigration deserves further exploration. Finally, individuals who have trust in institutions such as national systems of policing and the government are more likely to favour immigration.

These initial findings are important starting points for researchers and policymakers who wish to understand the dynamics of public opinion on immigrants in two regions that are significant origin, transit and destination countries for migrants. However, more survey data are needed for a more in-depth analysis of how attitudes change over time and what factors affect them. Overall, more nuanced data are needed to better understand what shapes attitudes in these regions; an important limitation in this analysis is the lack of precise questions in the Gallup World Poll that explore more specifically the perceived economic threat that migrants might pose on the labour market. These and other studies must be complemented with qualitative studies for a more in-depth understanding of how views are shaped and what affects them.

The relationship between attitudes towards immigrants and factors such as electoral political competition and diversity, as well as along the many factors that have been found to affect public opinion about migration in other regions – including media discourse, contact between immigrants and nationals, and psychological and early life socialization effects – also need to be further explored (Dennison and Dražanová, 2018). Furthermore, future research should explore the interactions between individual- and country-level variables, and use innovative research designs – such as involving panel data, natural experiments, and experimental manipulations – to establish causality, and not only correlations of the factors associated with attitudes towards immigration.

While this chapter confirms previous findings that North and West Africa are largely positive towards immigrants – with West Africa being particularly positive – public opinion easily fluctuates, as the analysis of the perceived acceptance levels of society towards immigrants between 2011 and 2017 shows. While attitudes remained stable in this time period for some of the countries studied, they changed significantly in others – in some for the worse. Monitoring public opinion on immigration and emigration, as well as its fluctuations, will be as important in these regions as it is elsewhere, to ensure migration policies can be adequately targeted in line with Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration Objective 17 to end racism, xenophobia and stigmatization against all migrants. Importantly, a better understanding of the various factors affecting public opinion can support stakeholders to develop awareness-raising campaigns that can help ground public perceptions of migration-related issues in evidence and facts, rather than in subjective perceptions of issues such as labour market competition. It is also important to disseminate the understanding of the determinants of public opinion on immigration widely in society – with the help of media and journalists (see Pace, Zayed and Borgnäs, Chapter 36 of this volume) – so that migrants, political, religious and community leaders, as well as educators and service providers are better equipped to detect and prevent incidences of intolerance, racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination against migrants and diasporas, as called for in action g) of Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration Objective 17.

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