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## Migration from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe: still a limited trend

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Sub-Saharan immigration to France often attracts media attention. But what is the true scale of the phenomenon? Analysing a range of statistical sources, David Lessault and Cris Beauchemin show that although the number of sub-Saharan immigrants has risen sharply in recent decades, they still represent a very small share of total immigration to France and Europe, both in terms of annual arrivals (flows) and immigrant populations (stocks).

At the time of the 1962 census, there were only 20,000 sub-Saharan immigrants in France. By 2004, their number had reached 570,000, a 27-fold increase in just over 40 years (Figure 1). Though the increase is indeed spectacular, the starting point was very low. In 1962, the vast majority of immigrants living in France were from southern Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal) and North Africa. The wave of immigration from sub-Saharan Africa is recent, and remains modest in size: in 2004, sub-Saharans represented slightly more than one-tenth of all French immigrants (12%). They are three times less numerous than North Africans or Europeans.

The immigrant stock varies between censuses according to the number of arrivals and departures (through death or emigration). French official statistics give no data on outflows, but provide quite detailed information on inflows (Box 1). Between 1994 and 2004, the share of sub-Saharan immigrants among total inflows rose from 10% to 17% (Figure 2). But they are still vastly outnumbered by immigrants from Europe and North Africa.

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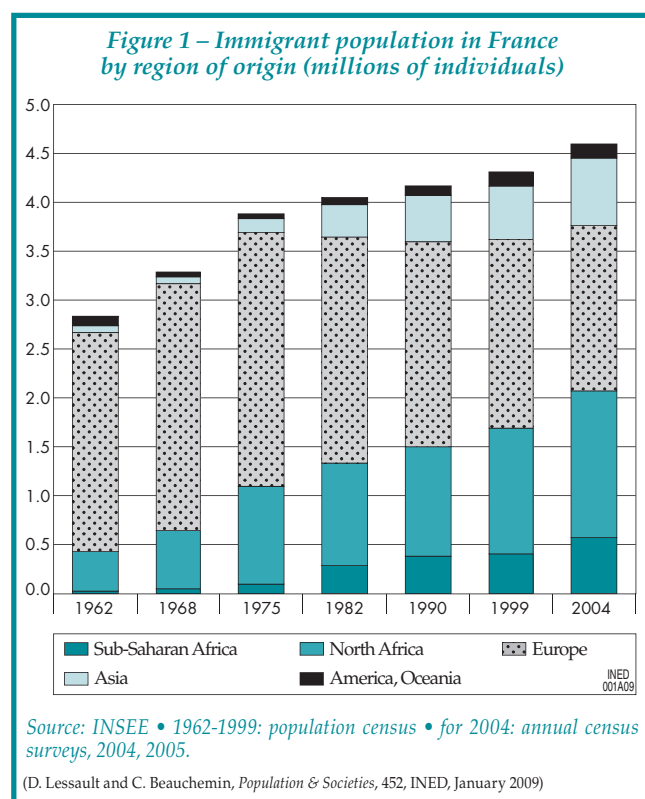
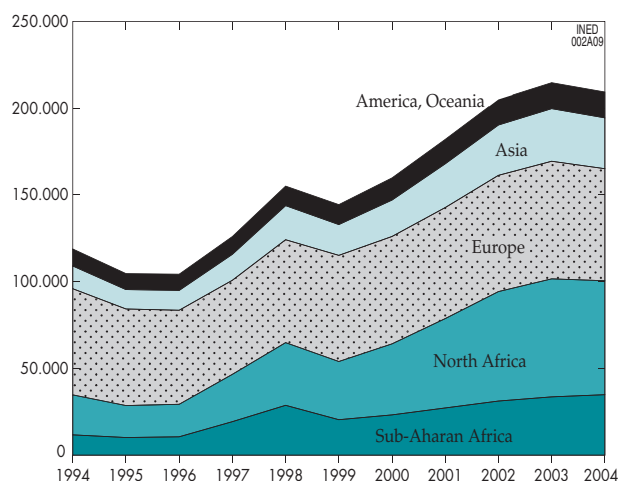


Figure 2 – Annual volume of immigration flows to France (1994-2004)



NB: This data series is based on the number of first residence permits granted to foreigners admitted for residence in France for a duration of one year or more, whatever their nationality, age, family or employment situation or the reason for admission.

Source: Xavier Thierry, INED, 2004 (table online at: [http://www.ined.fr/en/pop\\_figures/france/immigration\\_flow/](http://www.ined.fr/en/pop_figures/france/immigration_flow/))

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### ◆ A minority of the immigrant population, undocumented migrants included

Undocumented migrants are believed to slip through the statistical net, though in fact this is only partly true. Immigrants enumerated by the censuses may include currently or previously undocumented persons. Estimated inflows are based on the number of first residence permits issued, including those granted to previously undocumented individuals whose situation has been regularized in France.

As an illustration, the inflow peak in 1997-1998 corresponds to the regularization programme implemented by the Jospin government (Figure 2). This sudden increase does not reflect a surge in arrivals at that time, but rather a rise in the number of permits granted to people who had already been living in France for several years (six on average) [1]. Some 41% of the 185,000 permits granted in 1997 and 1998 served to regularize existing residents (Box 2). For the subsequent years, inflow statistics also include "case-by-case" regularizations (not linked to specific regularization programmes) under the 1998 RESEDA Act relative to the entry and settlement of aliens in France and the right of asylum. In all, they account for an estimated 13% of the 950,000 permits issued between 1999 and 2006 (Box 2).

Under the 1997-1998 regularization programme, around 30,600 permits were issued to sub-Saharan Africans, representing only 40% of the total (Box 2). In 1999, at the end of the programme, an estimated 12,000 or more were still undocumented, as their application for regularization was unsuccessful (1). Others did not apply for regularization, but their numbers cannot be determined. Let us nonetheless make the maximalist

#### Box 1

##### Definitions and information sources on migration in France

*Immigrant*: person born abroad and currently residing in France. Note that not all immigrants are foreigners, since some acquire French nationality after immigrating.

*Flow and stock*: the flow is the number of persons entering or leaving the country over a given period, while the stock is the number of immigrants (or foreigners) residing in France at a specific moment in time. The most widely used source for calculating the stock is the population census. Inflows are determined using a range of administrative data sources:

1 – the national migration agency (Agence nationale de l'accueil des étrangers et des migrations, ANAEM, former OMI) registers all persons admitted to stay in France for a period of at least three months when they undergo their medical examination;

2 – the French agency for protection of refugees (Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides, OFPRA) registers all asylum applications;

3 – the Immigration Ministry and/or the Ministry of the Interior record all residence permits granted by the prefectures via AGDREF, an application for tracking the status of foreigners residing in France. These various data sources are analysed annually by specialists [1] [2].

Fewer data are available for departures, since persons leaving France without the intention of returning are not required to register their departure. INSEE tries to estimate their number using census data and vital records, but the estimate is global and gives no details about the characteristics of departing individuals (nationality, sex, age).

assumption that for 42,000 applications submitted, a similar number of individuals did not apply for regularization. This would mean that in 1999, France had 56,000 undocumented sub-Saharan immigrants in addition to the 400,000 enumerated in the census that same year (out of a total immigrant population of 4.3 million). In sum, even including the irregular immigrants, sub-Saharan Africans represented less than 11% of the total immigrant population in 1999 (versus around 9% when only enumerated individuals are counted).

### ◆ Few sub-Saharan migrants away from Africa

Sub-Saharan Africans represent a small immigrant minority in France, and in Europe likewise. In 1993, they represented only 6% of the foreigners in EU-15, and a full half of those present were from western Africa [6]. More recently, in 2000, they accounted for only 4% of immigrants resident in OECD countries [7]. In practice, few sub-Saharan migrants away from Africa.

According to a compilation of census data, fewer than one in a hundred people born in sub-Saharan

(1) The crude regularization rate of the 1997-1998 programme was an estimated 72%, with sub-Saharan no different from the average [5]. Hence, for a total of 30,600 sub-Saharan who were regularized (Box 2), the number who remained undocumented after applying for a residence permit can be estimated at around 12,000.

## Box 2

## The share of sub-Saharans among the regularized population

Tableau 2 – Regularizations in France (1997-2006)

Region of birth of regularized persons	1997-1998 regularization programme				Case-by-case regularizations 1999-2006			
	Number of medical exams undergone for...							
	a regularization procedure		residence permit application (including for regularization)		a regularization procedure		residence permit application (including for regularization)	
Sub-Saharan	30,572	40.0%	49,410	26.7%	38,500	31.5%	215,140	22.6%
North Africa	25,105	32.8%	64,329	34.8%	38,627	31.6%	383,934	40.3%
Asia-Oceania	14,618	19.1%	40,396	21.8%	19,672	16.1%	175,255	18.4%
America	2,630	3.4%	16,572	9.0%	15,026	12.3%	87,056	9.1%
Europe	3,548	4.7%	14,328	7.7%	10,332	8.5%	91,683	9.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>76,473</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>185,035</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>122,157</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>953,068</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Note: The numbers concern residence permits of one year or more, with the exception of students.  
Source: ANAEM (1994-2004) and Régnaud (2006) [2], data compiled by D. Lessault.  
(D. Lessault and C. Beauchemin, *Population & Societies*, 452, INED, January 2009)

Contrary to the image commonly circulated by the media, the majority of undocumented immigrants are not from sub-Saharan Africa. They account for only 40% of persons who obtained a residence permit under the 1997-1998 regularization programme, and 31% of persons regularized over the period 1999-2006 (Table 2). Whatever the period, the top three nationalities benefiting from regularization never include any sub-Saharan countries. The main beneficiaries are Algeria, Morocco and China. Moreover, the fact of being undocumented in a country at a given moment does not necessarily imply that the person entered the country illegally, or that their situation has always been irregular. In the majority of cases, migrants enter legally, but lose their right to stay when their visa or their first residence permit expires. According to a sample survey conducted at the time of the 1981-1982 regularization programme, only 5% of undocumented foreigners had entered the country illegally [3]. More recently, the results of the Push-Pull survey (1997-1998) on Senegalese immigrants in Spain and Ghanians in Italy also show that migration very rarely involves illegal entry into the receiving country [4]. And those who are regularized were often legal residents in the past. For example, 41% of foreigners who applied for regularization in 1997-1998 had previously been authorized to reside in France (application acknowledgement, temporary permit). This was the case for 61% of Africans from Congo-Zaire, 41% from Mali and 29% from Senegal.

Africa and aged 25 or over lived in an OECD country in 2000 (0.9%) [7]. This is three times fewer than the proportion of emigrants in North Africa (2.9%) and thirteen times fewer than the number in Central America (11.9%). Only in Asia is the emigration rate slightly lower (0.8%).

By comparison with internal migration flows, the flows towards Europe are small. In 1990, the REMUAO network of surveys on migration and urbanization in west Africa recorded 22,000 migrant departures from west Africa to Europe, compared with 258,000 between countries of the region. Furthermore, flows towards Europe were offset by 6,000 movements in the opposite direction. In other words, one-third of departures to Europe are counterbalanced by return migration [8].

### ◆ Most refugees stay in Africa

Even the many refugees of conflict in the region tend to stay on the African continent. Some migrate within their own country, but internal migration is not taken into account in our data. For those who seek refuge abroad, they generally move to a neighbouring country. In 1999, for example, nine in ten refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo stayed in Africa, as did 96% from Liberia, 93% from Chad and 88% from Rwanda. Only a tiny proportion of sub-Saharan refugees come to Europe or to France in particular. Just 2% of the 252,400 Congolese refugees were living in France in 1999.

### ◆ The new European receiving countries: havens for “illegal” sub-Saharan Africans?

For the minority of international migrants who leave Africa, be they refugees or otherwise, Europe is the main destination. Among the OECD countries, two-thirds (63%) of sub-Saharan Africans enumerated in 2000 were living in Europe, and just under one-third (31%) in North America. By country, the United States is the main destination (24% of OECD sub-Saharans), ahead of the United Kingdom (21%) and France (15%). In the rankings of European receiving countries, France is no longer in first position. Although it ranked first in 1993, ahead of Germany and the United Kingdom, it has now fallen to second place. Sub-Saharan migrants are tending to choose a wider range of destinations, with a less marked preference for the former colonizing countries. The Senegalese no longer exclusively or primarily head for France, as they did in the past, nor the Ghanians for Great Britain [4].

With this redistribution of sub-Saharan flows, new receiving countries have emerged in Europe. Spain and Italy and, to a lesser extent, Portugal and Greece, are now favoured destinations for migrants leaving sub-Saharan Africa. And it is in southern Europe, at the entry points closest to Africa, that the European agency responsible for operational cooperation

**Tableau 1 – Breakdown of immigrant population by region of birth, Spain and Italy, 2006**

Region of birth	Spain		Italy	
	Number	%	Number	%
Sub-Saharan Africa	150,414	3.9	211,283	7.9
North Africa	535,905	13.8	483,705	18.1
Europe	1,593,675	41.0	1,261,964	47.3
North America	41,887	1.1	16,779	0.6
Latin America	1,367,989	35.2	238,882	8.9
Asia	192,323	5.0	454,793	17.0
Oceania	2,380	0.1	2,486	0.1
Stateless	nd	-	622	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,884,573</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>2,670,514</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Sources: • [www.ine.es](http://www.ine.es) (Spain: Padrón de habitantes, 2006).

• [www.istat.it](http://www.istat.it) (Italy: registered foreign residents, 2006).

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in border security (Frontex) is strengthening the European Union's external borders. It is in these countries too that the largest regularization programmes have been implemented over the last decade (Italy: 1998 and 2002; Spain: 2000, 2001 and 2005).

But in statistical terms, what is the scale of sub-Saharan migration to these new receiving countries? In 2006, in Italy, persons born in sub-Saharan Africa represented only 0.5% of the total population, and around 8% of the immigrant population. They were vastly outnumbered by Europeans, North Africans and Asians (Table 1). In Spain, in the same year, sub-Saharans accounted for less than 4% of the immigrant population, far behind Latin Americans and Europeans (Table 1). Note that these figures are only marginally affected by the uncertainties surrounding illegal immigration. In Spain, undocumented migrants are recorded in the municipal registers (Padrón de habitantes). And in Italy, an alternative source indicates that sub-Saharans as a whole (both documented and undocumented), represented around 9% of the country's foreign population in 2005 [9]. Moreover, the proportion of sub-Saharans among immigrants concerned by the major regularization programmes of Mediterranean Europe is small, and decreasing: 14% then 5% in Italy in 1998 and 2002, 14% then 7% in Spain in 2000 and 2001 [10].

In short, there is neither a major exodus from sub-Saharan Africa, nor a massive influx of sub-Saharans to Europe. The number of sub-Saharan immigrants has increased substantially in the last forty years because their numbers were very small in the 1960s. Despite this increase, they remain a minority in terms of flows and stocks, even when irregular migrants are included.

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## ABSTRACT

At the time of the 1962 census, there were only 20,000 sub-Saharan immigrants in France, compared with 570,000 in 2004, a 27-fold increase in just over 40 years. Though the increase is indeed large, the starting point was very low. In 2004, sub-Saharan Africans represented slightly more than one-tenth of all French immigrants (12%). Including undocumented immigrants does not change the picture. It simply raises the proportion of sub-Saharans from 9% to a maximum of 11% of the total immigrant population in France. Sub-Saharans represent only a minority of immigrants in France, and the same is true in the other main receiving countries. In 2000, they accounted for only 4% of the immigrants residing in OECD countries. And even in the new European receiving countries – Spain and Italy – they represent less than 10% of the immigrant population, irregular immigrants included (4% in Spain and 8% in Italy in 2006). In practice, few sub-Saharans migrate away from Africa. Nine in ten sub-Saharan refugees remain on the continent and settle in a neighbouring country. Practically on a level with Asia, sub-Saharan Africa is the region where the propensity to emigrate to OECD countries is by far the world's lowest (in 2000, fewer than one person in a hundred born in sub-Saharan Africa was living in an OECD country).