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Europe and the spectre of sub-Saharan migration

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Sub-Saharan Africa is projected to represent 22% of the world's population in 2050, versus 14% today. The number of migrants originally from this region should therefore increase. But by how much and toward which destinations? François Héran situates African migration in a global context of diasporas. He shows that the scenario for 2050, in which sub-Saharan migrants make up 25% of Europe's population, does not stand up to scrutiny. The most realistic figure is five times less.

Every two years, the United Nations Population Division updates its demographic projections for the world's countries [1]. The 2017 revision confirmed the surge in the population of sub-Saharan Africa. It is projected to rise from 970 million inhabitants today to 2.2 billion in 2050. Even if fertility were to decrease from 5.1 children per woman to 3.2, the number of couples of childbearing age would continue to increase due to the birth rates of previous decades. Demographers are closely following fertility trends in Africa [2, 3], and the UN projections now integrate data from multiple surveys. This work led to an 11% increase in the sub-Saharan population projected for 2050 in the 2012 revision and a further 2% increase in 2017. In the meantime, the question of the African population explosion has been combined with another hot topic: the "migrant crisis" [4]. There has been a great temptation to connect the two, via the claim that people from overpopulated Africa are sure to spill over into old Europe. In France, this fear has been stoked by the fact that asylum seekers are more likely to come from Sudan, the Horn of Africa, or Central Africa than from the Middle East. More recently, the sight of young sub-Saharan Africans stuck in Morocco working together to force their way through the fencing of the Spanish enclave of Ceuta seems to illustrate, along with other images, an irresistible migratory pressure that one is tempted to attribute to causes that are more demographic than political.

But are there really grounds to claim that "young Africa is going to storm the Old Continent", that "that's just how things are", and that at this rate "a quarter of Europe's inhabitants will be 'African' in 2050", and even "more than half of under-30s" [5, p. 15, 180]? These sensational claims are based on a model of communicating vessels that fails to take into account three fundamental observations: 1) compared to people in other regions, sub-Saharan Africans are less prone to migrate, precisely due to poverty; 2) when they do emigrate, 70% move to another sub-Saharan country, and only 15% migrate to Europe, with the rest divided between the Gulf countries and North America; 3) according to UN population growth projections, while sub-Saharan African migrants will indeed have a growing place in societies of the North, they will remain a small minority: at most 3% to 4% of the population in 2050 – far less than the feared 25%.

One migration flow among others

A major source sets out the facts: the Bilateral Migration Matrix constructed over the last 15 years by the World Bank, the OECD, and the IMF [6]. Originally designed to study migrants' remittances, this database integrates information from censuses, population registers, and surveys around the world to estimate the number of natives of a given country residing in another country. Of the 420 million inhabitants of Western Europe (Europe excluding the former communist bloc), 5.3 million were born in North Africa (from Morocco to Egypt) and 4.4 million in the rest of the continent, representing respec-

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tively 1.3% and 1.0% of the population. In France, the corresponding proportions are 4.3% and 1.5%. Individuals from Africa are less likely to emigrate than those from Central America, Central Asia, or the Balkans, and most sub-Saharan migrants remain in their region of origin, contrary to those from the Maghreb (Table 1).⁽¹⁾ How should this be explained? The bilateral matrix confirms a result that economists have long known: the poorer the country, the less likely its inhabitants are to

Table 1. African emigration toward 2015 in global context

Region and subregion of origin	Number of emigrants (million)	Emigration rate (%)	Proportion of emigrants who remained in the region (%)
Sub-Saharan Africa	29.3	2.8	70
Southern Africa	3.3	2.6	58
West Africa	10.0	2.7	73
Central Africa	3.9	2.9	81
East Africa	8.5	2.8	74
Horn of Africa (4 countries)	3.5	2.8	48
North Africa	9.3	4.8	1
Egypt and Libya	3.6	3.5	1
Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia)	5.7	6.4	1
Central and West Asia	37.6	8.3	46
Syria, Iraq, Yemen	10.9	12.9	77
Rest of the Middle East	10.1	5.3	45
Gulf countries	0.8	1.5	33
Central Asia	15.8	12.8	27
South and East Asia	70.7	1.8	36
South Asia (incl. India)	34.2	1.9	25
East Asia (incl. China)	12.7	0.9	48
Japan and city-states	2.6	1.9	39
Southeast Asia	21.2	3.3	44
Western Europe	24.1	5.7	52
Northern Europe	1.1	4.2	68
German-speaking Europe	5.4	5.4	53
Western Europe	9.3	5.7	43
Southern Europe	8.3	6.4	60
Eastern Europe	38.6	11.9	48
Balkans (ex-Communist)	12.6	22.2	50
Central Europe (ex-Communist)	7.3	10.5	20
Eastern Europe (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus)	18.6	9.4	58
South America	12.2	2.9	36
Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, Uruguay)	2.0	3.0	39
Brazil, Amazonia, Andean countries	10.3	2.9	35
Central America	24.6	11.2	6
Caribbean	8.3	19.4	9
Mexico and Central America	16.3	9.2	4
United States and Canada	4.3	1.2	26
Oceania	1.9	4.7	55
WORD	252.6	3.4	29

Source: Analyses based on the Global Bilateral Migration Database, World Bank, 2017. Interpretation: 29.3 million individuals from sub-Saharan Africa—2.8% of the population—live abroad, but 70% of those migrated to another sub-Saharan African country. The emigration rate is the ratio of emigrants to the population of the country of origin.

migrate to a distant place (see Figure). If they emigrate, it is mainly into neighbouring countries, which in general are equally poor. If borders were more open, those who would move to the rich countries are not the world's poor, but its emerging affluent.

Another widespread belief is that the countries with the lowest birth rates are the natural outlet for countries with the highest fertility. This is a myth. Countries with at least four children per woman sent only 5% of their migrants to countries where the rate is less than 1.7 children per woman. The most mobile countries are the furthest along in the demographic transition, whether in the North or the South (as in the case of the Balkans). The most notable exception is the 2.3 million Afghans living in Iran. The two countries' fertility rates are 5.3 children and 1.8 children per woman, respectively. But it is evidently not this discrepancy that explains the influx of Afghan refugees to Iran. The metaphor of population movements inexorably pushing from areas of demographic "high pressure" to areas with "low pressure" does not stand up to scrutiny.

Two recent updates

The question then arises of whether the demographic surge in sub-Saharan Africa predicted by the UN will overwhelm Europe in the coming decades, endangering its social model. Two recent studies dispel this spectre. First, a research team from the IMF [7] has shown that the factors behind migration from sub-Saharan Africa, aside from political troubles, are the same as in the rest of the world: income disparities, linguistic proximity, transportation costs, level of education, links established through a previous colonial relationship, the size of the diaspora already living in the destination country, etc. There as elsewhere, it is not enough to aspire to emigrate— one must also have the means. And human capital in sub-Saharan Africa remains too limited for emigration out of the region to take off. The diasporas from Niger, Chad, and Mali represent less than 2% of the population of the home country. Nigeria, whose 190 million inhabitants make up half the population of West Africa, is among the demographic giants whose population movements are mainly internal. Only 1% of the Nigerian population lives abroad.

The IMF team then applied these migration factors to the matrix of diasporas combined with the UN projections. The result was that by 2050, sub-Saharan immigrants to OECD countries could go from making up 0.4% of the population to 2.4%. This is a large increase. But a figure of 2.4% can in no way be described as an "invasion", even if the second generation is added.

(1) Cross-checks on the 215 countries or territories covered are used to complete these statistics. The most recent update (2017) describes the situation around 2015. The trials aimed at converting these data into annual flows are still subject to caution and will not be used here.

A report of the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre presents analogous results for Europe [8]. In addition to a precise count of African migration by subregion, it adds degree of urbanization and import-export activity to the list of migration factors, and shows that a young population pyramid does not in itself increase the propensity to migrate. To project into 2050, the authors used the same technique as the IMF. Demographic growth as such is predicted to double the intensity of sub-Saharan migration to Europe in 2050. An alternative scenario that aligns the economic growth of the region with that of middle-income countries multiplies this intensity by 2.3. The report thus highlights the dual effect of development. Before decreasing fertility, and thus the number of potential migrants, it begins by increasing the means available to migrate.

The report also looks at climate change (drought, rising sea levels) but does not quantify its effects because it will mainly lead to movements at the national or regional level. If it affects intercontinental migration, the authors argue, it will be indirectly, via conflicts and increasing urban growth [9]. By impoverishing rural populations, warming could even reduce their capacity to emigrate rather than increasing it.

A realistic projection of migration

In the end, if the UN projections for 2050 were applied to the migration matrix, assuming the persistence of the same migration factors, how much of the populations of the main destination countries would consist of the first-generation diasporas? There would be an increase, of course, but the proportions would not be overwhelming (Table 2). In France, sub-Saharan immigrants would make up around 3% of the population, versus 1.5% today. These proportions can be increased to integrate the possible effects of economic expansion in Africa, which would favour migration. But they would still remain far below today’s alarmist prophecies: there is a great distance between 4% and 25%. Concentrating on young people makes little difference. Given the population pyramids projected for 2050 in both origin and destination countries, sub-Saharan Africans would make up less than 5% of those under 30 living in Western Europe – and not more than half. Moreover, to raise the spectre of a “rush” out of Africa that would ruin social protections in Europe is to forget that migrants are also producers, consumers, taxpayers, and contributors. European visa policy forces

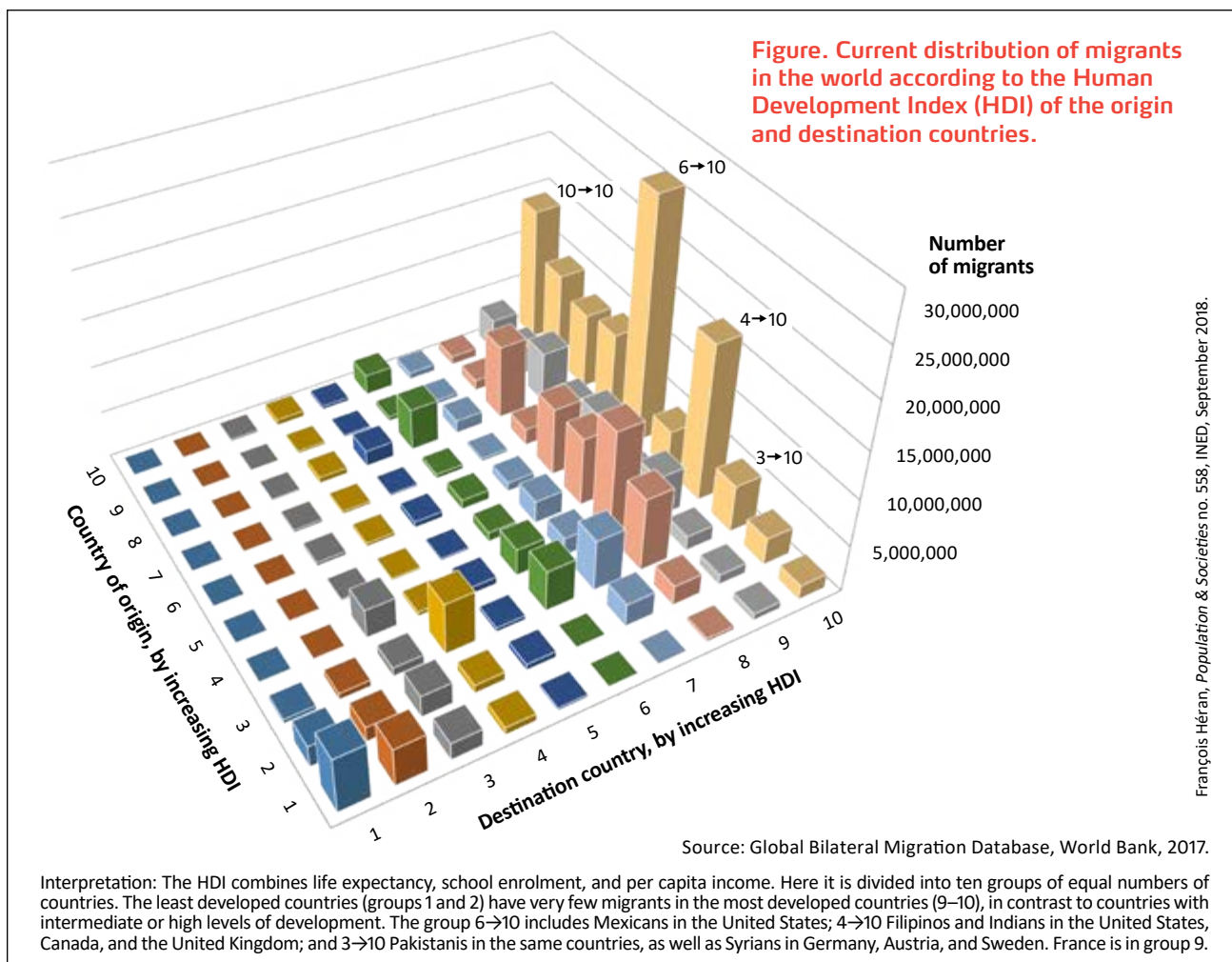


Table 2. Immigrants as a percentage of the population in selected host countries around 2015 and 2050

Origin	Destination	France	U.K.	Italy	Spain	Sweden	Switz.	Germany	Canada	USA	Russia	Turkey	Saudi Arabia	UAE
		Sub-Saharan Africa	2015	1.5	2.0	0.7	0.5	1.5	1.2		1.0	0.5		
	2050	2.9	3.3	1.5	1.2	2.8	2.0	0.6	1.7	0.9			2.5	3.1
North Africa	2015	4.3		1.2	1.9		0.5		0.5				2.6	9.3
	2050	5.3		1.7	2.5		0.6		0.6				3.0	10.4
Near & Middle East	2015	0.7	0.6			4.0	1.4	3.1	1.2			4.2	5.5	6.5
	2050	0.7	0.8			5.6	1.6	4.7	1.3	0.5		6.7	6.7	7.3
Central Asia	2015							1.5			4.7		1.3	
	2050					0.6		2.1			6.2		1.7	
South Asia	2015		2.7	0.8		0.5	0.7		2.7	1.0			17.3	57.9
	2050		3.1	1.0		0.5	0.7		2.7	1.1			16.3	53.2
East Asia	2015	0.7	1.1	0.7	0.5	1.2	1.1	0.5	5.4	2.5			7.2	9.1
	2050	0.7	1.1	0.8	0.6	1.1	1.0	0.6	5.1	2.4			6.7	8.8
Southern Europe	2015	2.6	1.8	3.3	2.2	1.8	11.3	3.9	2.7			1.1		
	2050	2.1	1.4	3.0	1.9	1.2	7.4	3.3	1.9			0.7		
Eastern Europe	2015		2.3	0.8	0.6	1.7	1.5	3.6	1.3		3.0			
	2050		1.7	0.8	0.5	1.2	1.1	3.2	0.9		2.7			
Western Europe	2015	1.2	1.7	1.2	1.9	3.6	8.1	0.9	3.3	0.6		0.5		0.5
	2050	1.2	1.6	1.4	2.1	3.3	7.1	1.0	3.0	0.5				
Latin America	2015		0.6	1.0	5.0	0.8	1.5		2.5	7.5				
	2050		0.5	1.4	6.6	0.8	1.5		2.3	7.5				
North America	2015		0.7				0.7		1.0					
	2050		0.8				0.7		1.0					

Note: Projections are based on UN demographic projections and assume constant migration rates. Rates below 0.5% are omitted; colours mark the 5% and 10% thresholds.
 Source: Application of the 2017 Revision to the World Bank's Global Bilateral Migration Database.
 Interpretation: Around 2050, due to demographic growth alone, sub-Saharan immigrants could make up 2.9% of the population of France, versus 1.5% today.

African candidates to resort to desperate and costly strategies, whose visibility in the media contrasts sharply with the discreet issuance of residence permits to migrants from other continents [10, 11]. No one can deny the immensity of the demographic problems south of the Sahara, although the solutions continue to be a matter of great debate. Nonetheless, sub-Saharan migration must be looked at in a planetary perspective, among a multiplicity of diasporas. After all, it is subject to the same constraints. Rather than a menacing anomaly, it is an ordinary form of human mobility.

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Abstract

Does Europe need to prepare for a coming "surge" of sub-Saharan migrants? This prediction is based on a model of communicating vessels that fails to take into account three fundamental observations: 1) compared to people in other regions, sub-Saharan Africans are less prone to migrate, due to poverty; 2) when they do emigrate, 70% move to another sub-Saharan country; 3) according to UN demographic growth projections, while sub-Saharan African migrants will have a growing place in societies of the North, they will remain a small minority: around 4% of the population in 2050 – far below the 25% that some have claimed.

Keywords

Migration, immigrants, demographic projections, sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, world



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