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Security Challenge in Africa: Migration Without Records, Intelligence Gaps and Informal Markets.



Introduction

Migration has long shaped the social and economic development of countries including those in the African continent. Developments have been driven by employment, trade, conflict and unequal opportunities. Many regional frameworks have been developed in order to facilitate cross border movement of people, goods, services and integration in the African region while requiring effective governance. Some frameworks include the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Free Movement Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment (ECOWAS, 1979).

Managing migration requires strong institutions capable of documenting movements, monitoring requirements for residence, and coordinating pertinent information. Governments' access to limited or incomplete migration data hampers its ability to respond to security and governance issues. Rather than migration itself, national security issues are caused by a lack of knowledge and institutional capacity to recognise real risks. Investigations into organised crime, such as identity fraud and trafficking, are made more difficult by poor information sharing between immigration and law enforcement.

The African Union's Migration Policy Framework for Africa echoes the need for efficient governance and collaboration among member states (African Union, 2018). It points out that although trustworthy records are essential, they cannot completely eliminate criminal behavior or take the role of intelligence led investigations. Ghana and South Africa provides good examples of these challenges. South Africa on the one hand shows how economic insecurity and perceptions of competition can fuel xenophobia and social tensions. Ghana on the other hand is experiencing high rates of migration from neighboring African countries intersecting with informal trade and urban livelihoods.

This article will explore these interrelated security issues, promoting evidence based migration governance that upholds lawful mobility while safeguarding national security.

Gaps in Intelligence and Transnational Organised Crime

Intelligence plays a big role in effective migration governance. This is because it enables states to identify security risks, investigate criminal networks and coordinate responses to cross border offences. In West Africa, transnational organised crime includes drug trafficking, human trafficking, migrant smuggling, firearms trafficking and other illicit activities that can undermine governance and regional stability (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2013). These crimes are not synonymous with undocumented migration, rather, they illustrate the distinct security threats that authorities must be equipped to investigate.

A primary obstacle to effective governance is the lack of reliable information exchange among immigration authorities, police, intelligence services, and neighboring countries. The African Union pointed out in December 2024 that inadequate data collection, insufficient enforcement resources, and hesitance to share information impede the fight against human trafficking and migrant smuggling. As a result, its guidelines stress the need for structured intelligence sharing and cross border collaboration to combat transnational crime while ensuring legitimate movement. This is to address gaps that can obscure the identification of criminal networks and hinder timely investigations needing coordinated efforts.

Among priorities for Ghana and other African nations are improving migration records, fostering lawful intelligence sharing, building investigative capacity, and securely managing information. Effective security relies on transforming reliable information into timely, evidence based actions, rather than assuming undocumented status indicates criminal involvement.

Ghana's immigration enforcement through its Immigration Service's Intelligence Division handles analysis, surveillance, and various crime related functions, including migrant smuggling and human trafficking. It also engages with national and international agencies, showing an understanding of immigration's ties to broader security issues. Although efforts have been put into action, concerns are whether current information systems, institutional coordination, and operational resources are adequate to handle changing threats.

Economic Security and Informal Markets

Economic security is an important dimension of migration governance. This is because mobility across borders intersects with employment, trade, livelihoods and the regulation of commercial activity (Ullah & Ferdous, 2024 ; Dafiel & Abdulziz, 2024). Across Africa, informal markets provide employment and access to goods for many households, while also offering opportunities for migrants who face barriers to formal employment.

In Ghana, the visible presence of Nigerian and Nigerien traders engaged in selling phone accessories, kitchen and household appliances, food stuff and car spare parts shows an important aspect of informal commerce that provides a starting point for examining these issues. This scenario prompts inquiries into the effectiveness of authorities in understanding informal trade networks, business registration, employment arrangements, and regulatory compliance.

Although specific claims about the scale or economic impact of migrant trading in Ghana require supporting local research, reliable data on this can help policymakers assess the

contribution of these activities to livelihoods and local markets, identify genuine regulatory violations and allocate resources appropriately.

Economic security concerns become more complicated when informal markets operate alongside unemployment, limited livelihood opportunities and public perceptions of competition. In such circumstances, migrants may be blamed for economic difficulties without sufficient evidence to establish their actual effects. For instance, Piper & Chapman's work in three South African cities found that price competitiveness did not correspond simply to whether businesses were foreign or South African owned. This challenges the assumption that migrant businesses uniformly disadvantage local entrepreneurs (Piper & Chapman, 2016). From a security standpoint, the difference between legitimate informal economic activities and genuine offences like illicit trade or tax evasion must be differentiated.

Governments require reliable economic data and fair enforcement of regulations, ensuring that migrants have pathways to clarify their status. The South African scenario illustrates how economic grievances can intertwine with xenophobia, threatening the stability of migrant owned businesses and communities (International Organisation for Migration [IOM], 2021). Thus, African governments should bolster economic oversight by enhancing documentation and regulatory transparency which can assist in economic planning and accountability. This will complement broader measures to tackle unemployment, inequality, and social exclusion.

South Africa's Example

South Africa serves as a good case study for understanding how migration, economic insecurity, and social stability meets. High unemployment and inequality have fueled community tensions between citizens and migrants who live and work under difficult conditions. Misago (2025) states that such xenophobic violence stems not only from economic hardship but also from a mix of socioeconomic and political factors, such as collective grievances and governance failures. This suggests that economic insecurity may create conditions for tension, but political and institutional factors influence whether those tensions develop into violence.

One particularly relevant dimension is the vulnerability of migrant owned informal businesses. The IOM (2021) found that migrant entrepreneurs in Johannesburg contribute to local economic activity and job creation, despite operating in communities characterised by poverty, limited employment and frustration over service delivery. Unfortunately, these businesses have also become targets of intimidation, looting and xenophobic attacks. A lesson for neighboring countries and Ghana is to enhance immigration controls. This can be done while ensuring fair enforcement, accurate public

information, and addressing economic concerns which will foster national security and migrant rights.

Recommendations

Strengthening migration governance should be treated as a national and regional security priority, not simply as an exercise in immigration enforcement. On this basis, many policy measures deserve particular attention. Some are listed below.

Countries should improve migration records and data management to enhance their accuracy, accessibility, and coordination. For Ghana, this involves strengthening the recording systems of the Ghana Immigration Service and improving collaboration among agencies managing national identification and other relevant areas. The initiative is not to gather excessive information but to ensure records are accurate, secure, and usable by authorised officials. Enhanced records will help authorities identify various migration statuses and support investigations into identity fraud and trafficking. It is important to treat lack of documentation as an administrative concern rather than an indication of criminal activity.

Secondly, effective intelligence sharing and inter agency cooperation among private and public agencies, as well as Ghana's immigration and law enforcement agencies are key. The integration of information from immigration services, police, customs, and financial investigators can uncover important links between criminal activities. Ghana should establish clear protocols for lawful information sharing. It should ensure cooperation with neighboring ECOWAS countries, and focus intelligence sharing on credible indicators of specific offenses to avoid discriminatory profiling.

Furthermore, adopting an integrated and risk based border management will be helpful for effective border security in West Africa. Strategies must link border security with regional integration using modern information systems, identity verification technologies, and trained personnel. Risk based screening should focus on serious offenses while permitting lawful movements. Engagement with border communities should be considered first to enhance trust and communication between residents and security agencies, and second to help distinguish legitimate activities from criminal exploitation. Here, investments in institutional capacity are necessary to address practical challenges identified in border management assessments.

Informal commerce is vital for many, offering livelihoods and contributing to local supply chains. As such, regulating informal markets in Ghana with a focus on economic security can be helpful, rather than treating migrant businesses as security threats. Data collection on business ownership and compliance, with cooperation among various authorities can help address regulatory gaps. Enforcement should differentiate between minor non-

compliance and serious crimes, ensuring penalties are fair and consistent for all traders. This approach can promote social stability and prevent xenophobic attitudes while supporting legitimate economic activity.

Moreso, stronger migration information systems must include safeguards against misuse. Ghana should implement measures to ensure lawful access to personal data, correct inaccuracies, and provide oversight for information sharing arrangements that influence immigration decisions. Evaluating policy effectiveness should focus on outcomes rather than enforcement volumes, using indicators like record accuracy, verification times, and adherence to privacy obligations. Periodic evaluations will help identify weaknesses and optimise resource allocation to enhance policy effectiveness.

South Africa's experience shows how economic grievances and negative stereotypes that can lead to violence. To prevent xenophobia and enhance community trust, there is the need to address migrants' documentation and also the negative attitudes towards them. In Ghana, institutions should collaborate with traditional authorities, local assemblies, and civil society to address local issues and disputes. When competition for trading spaces or services causes tension, it's essential to address the root economic problems rather than blame migrants. A transparent government that consistently enforces laws and protects businesses fosters public confidence and social stability.

Conclusion

Strengthening migration governance is an important component of national security, but its effectiveness depends on how it is designed and implemented. The recommendations stated can also improve the administration of migration and reduce the risk that legitimate mobility becomes associated with criminality. Ultimately, the objective should not be to eliminate migration, but to ensure that migration is governed effectively enough for states to identify genuine risks, enforce the law fairly, protect vulnerable people, and preserve the benefits of movement across borders.

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