

# West African young people hold key for policymakers to unlock region's potential

June 15 2021

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UK and European policymakers operating in West Africa should focus on the opportunities that young people and migration create for the region instead of simply trying to stop migrants traveling to Europe, a

new study recommends.

Led by researchers at the University of Birmingham and Loughborough University, the MIGCHOICE project set out to ask how development interventions affect people's life choices—of which [migration](#) is one option. The research relied on data collection in Senegal, Guinea and The Gambia.

The authors say that making employment, entrepreneurship and vocational training programs work on their own terms, rather than using them to manage migration, would help to address entrenched inequalities and benefit young West Africans.

An estimated 7.6 million people are mobile within the sub-region of ECOWAS. Of the total stock of migrants 64% live within the region according to the data published mid-2020. Other destinations are mainly within Africa with only a small share moving to other continents. As most of the population in West Africa is aged between 18 and 35 the question of available ways to make a living is crucial.

Funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and co-ordinated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), over a 22-month period the international research team examined locations with numerous external development interventions on addressing migration more specifically rather than facilitate development.

Project Principal Investigator Professor Richard Black, from the University of Birmingham, commented: "Intra-regional migration in West Africa is more significant than inter-continental migration, yet European policy often focuses disproportionately on the latter. By engaging with people for whom mobility is a way to tackle extreme risk and uncertainty, we might deliver more balanced policies. These need to

recognize the benefits of mobility, rather than simply seeking to deter and criminalize migration to Europe."

The researchers suggest that national and regional youth groups and activists might use the UN Global Compact for Migration (GCM) as a strategic guiding document to strengthen regional partnerships and facilitate migration through actions such as widening recognition of qualifications or making social security provision more accessible.

They discovered a number of issues relating to migration from the three countries over the course of the research, including:

- Inability to continue with education, rather than its absence, is more commonly associated with people's need to migrate.
- Vocational training does not target the sources of many challenges as perceived by many young people.
- Further entrenched inequalities relate to gender—although interventions seek to balance participation of men and women, a widespread stereotype of the 'migrant' as a young, potentially dangerous, man exclude not only many women, but also most men. It feeds European narratives that criminalize male migrants.
- Policies and programs often target individuals, yet focusing them on communities would have no enhanced benefits unless existing entrenched inequalities are taken into account—pointing to the need for a whole-of-society approach

"There is a risk that we misunderstand the challenges faced by young people, who do not perceive that they have choices, but face uncertainty," commented Professor Black. Indeed, immobility rather than mobility is seen as the norm. But a lack of choice is not the same as a lack of agency; and many [young people](#) remain ready to seize whatever opportunities they can."

**More information:** The report is available online:  
[www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents ... rt-aw-accessible.pdf](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents...rt-aw-accessible.pdf)

Provided by University of Birmingham

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