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The Root Causes Behind Migration from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe

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Abstract

Migrants have been moving from Sub-Saharan Africa towards Europe for decades due to conflicts, repressive regimes and economic hardship. One of the key factors of African emigration is the economic backwardness of the continent, which arises from the unfavourable role it plays in the global economic system and from the fact that African governments are unable to create enough jobs for younger generations. This latter is due to Africa being primarily stuck in natural resource extraction and agrarian sectors, exporting mostly unprocessed raw materials that have little technological-scientific added value. The recent dynamic growth in Africa is not based on structural transformation but on natural resource exploration and growing world prices for some natural resources. Endogenous (structural transformation has not yet taken place) and exogenous (Africa's role in global value chains is marginal) reasons together with political instability and authoritarian regimes push a substantial part of Africa's population to leave the continent.

Up to 2011, the beginning of the Arab Spring, North-African regimes were more or less able to prevent migration flows from reaching Europe due to their border control systems and jobs available for Sub-Saharan African migrants. Since the 2011 events, the 1700 kilometre-long coast of Libya has practically been uncontrolled, therefore, Libyan ports have become major starting points for illegal migrants wanting to reach European shores through the Mediterranean Sea.

Therefore, the study analyzes the security situation in Libya and its influence on migration from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. On the other hand, it also deals with the root causes of African economic backwardness and their role in African emigration.

Keywords: migration, Libya, global value chains, resource curse

Introduction

During the last few years, increased illegal migration from Sub-Saharan Africa¹ and the Maghreb countries received particular attention and reinforced the Europeans' fear from mass exodus (CASTLES et al., 2014; CUTTITTA, 2007; GOLDSCHMIDT, 2006; LUTTERBECK, 2006; LŐWINÉ, 2015; PÓCZIK, 2011; SZABÓ, 2006). Since the majority of the Sub-Saharan African refugees reaches Europe through Libya, this present study examines the impact the Libyan revolution had on migration. On the other hand, it also tries to throw light on the causes, particularly on the economic situation of the countries of origin. Revealing the causes of the economic backwardness of the African continent, we can understand to what extent economic causes explain the increasing migration from Africa to Europe.

The change in Libya's role in migration as an impact of the Arab Spring

The security policy situation in Libya, a country previously functioning as a filter, now as a gateway in the migration process from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe, is contributing significantly to increased migration. Until 2011, the beginning of the Arab Spring, the North African regimes achieved more or less success in stopping the refugee flow. This was partly due to their strong border protection system and partly to the employment opportunities they offered their citizens. Since the 2011 revolution, Libya's² more than 1700-kilometre-long coast has virtually become uncontrolled, enabling Libyan ports to turn into the main starting point for illegal immigration to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea (Frontex, 2015).

Estimates suggest that 2.5 million migrant workers were employed in Libya at the beginning of 2011, some 1.5 million of them illegally (UNHCR, 2011). Among the foreign nationals living in Libya, a country with 6 million inhabitants, the ratio of people arriving from Sub-Saharan Africa was significant, according to the International Organization for Migration³ (IOM, 2011).

¹ Sub-Saharan Africa: the area that lies south of the Sahara (earlier called Black Africa). Sub-Saharan African asylum applicants continue to come to Hungary. Until June 2015, statistics were only published regarding Afghan, Syrian, Kosovan, Pakistani and Iraqi asylum applicants and asylum applicants from other countries were classified into the category "Other" in the statistics drawn up by the Immigration and Citizenship Office (Bevándorlási és Állampolgársági Hivatal). On the basis of those statistics in the first half-year of 2014 1429 persons, i.e. 26.29% of all asylum applicants arrived in Hungary from other countries, whereas in the first half-year of 2015 7478 persons, i.e. 11.2% of all asylum applicants arrived from other countries. The "other" issuing countries also include countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. In June 2015, in Hungary, from the 31,287 asylum applications 1442 were lodged by people arriving from a sub-Saharan country (4.609% of the asylum applicants), in high numbers from the Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, and Cameroon. In August 2015, 1409 of the total number of 47,094 asylum applications were lodged by citizens of a sub-Saharan African state (2.992% of asylum applications), in higher numbers from Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, Eritrea, and Cameroon.

² The part about Libya was prepared in September 2015 within the framework of the research performed by the Working Group on Migration of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

³ In 2011, before the crisis 1 million Egyptians, 80 thousand Pakistanis, 59 thousand Sudanese, 63 thousand Bangladeshis, 26 thousand Filipinos, and 10,500 Vietnamese lived in Lybia.

Due to its demographic realities, Libya was in need of migrant workers as early as the beginning of the 1970s. Nevertheless, the number of sub-Saharan immigrants in Libya has increased from the 1990s onwards: the war between Libya and Chad ended in 1987; in 1994 an agreement was concluded about the free movement of citizens between the two countries; the Tuareg uprising in Niger and Mali came to an end (1995 and 1996) – these were among the factors that contributed to a more secure passage through the Sahara. Yet the main factor stimulating immigration was the announcement by Gaddafi of Pan-Africanism.⁴ Gaddafi, who, disappointed by the reluctant Arab leaders, on several occasions openly encouraged the inhabitants of sub-Saharan countries to seek employment in Libya where, according to his promise, they would be accepted as “brothers” (PASTORE, 2007). The open-door policy began to change in the 2000s as a result of pressure from Europe. In 2007 visa obligations were imposed on Arabs and Africans and the issuance of residence and work permits were tightened up. These measures resulted in 1.5 million migrant workers staying in Libya for a longer or shorter time becoming illegal immigrants overnight (Migration Policy Centre, 2013). In the 2000s this tightening up was followed by a wave of forced returns from Libya, the official reason for this being to “adapt” the number of the immigrants to the demand of the Libyan labour market. The majority of the people returned by force were unskilled citizens of sub-Saharan countries (HRW, 2006).

With the fall of the Gaddafi regime, racism against black Africans in Libya, especially aversion against black migrant workers strengthened. Since Gaddafi spoke up several times for black Africans, those people were considered the supporters of the system and after the 2011 revolution a “hunt” (SEYMOUR, 2011) began against the black mercenaries of Gaddafi. Gaddafi in the 32nd Brigade, the commander of which was one of the dictator’s sons, Khamis, had allegedly employed mercenaries from Chad, and Tuareg and Western Saharan Polisario warriors from the different countries of the Sahel Zone (IRIN, 2011) who had been infamous for their brutality against civilians. Following the death of Gaddafi, the brigade led by Khamis continued to commit atrocities against civilians in Western Libya, amounting to a wave of revenge in several regions of Libya against black people. In many cases, the victims were not native blacks but immigrants and migrant workers from Sudan, Eritrea, etc. (JOFFÉ, 2013).

Although Gaddafi had considerable merits in creating and strengthening the Libyan national identity instead of tribal identity, the fall of his regime led to the whole Libyan society being reorganized (along Tripolitania, Cyrenaika, Fezzan and certain old coastal towns) in the spirit of tribalism and regionalism. New fault lines emerged between the supporters and opponents of Gaddafi, who were seeking to secure the access to resources and contending for the lands donated by Gaddafi. Tribes, cities, and neighbourhoods founded their own militia in order to be able to represent their own interests even with the use of arms in the time of the general chaos. As central authority has virtually ceased to exist in a substantial part of the country since the middle of 2012, militia on their territories perpetrate arbitrary arrests, tortures, imprisonments and extrajudicial killings on their own territories.

Libyan society’s racism against black Africans surfaced with overwhelming force under the revolution, and has continued to persist ever since then. By now the situation of black people has deteriorated significantly compared to the Gaddafi-era: in many cases the

⁴ The objective of Pan-Africanism is to uplift the African people and create African unity.

outlaw and powerful militia draw on the racism of the local population in their actions. With the strengthening of the militia, and in the lack of strong central authority, nothing can stop the smuggling operations on the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea (MARSAL, 2015), as the more than 1700-kilometre-long Libyan coast is totally uncontrolled. On the other hand, conflicts between different Libyan groups result in regular clashes, which also forces foreigners living in Libya to flee (MARSAL, 2014).

The fact that during the Gaddafi regime, the strong Libyan economy and labour market, based mostly on the oil industry, absorbed many black Africans bound for Europe and eventually made them stay in Libya through local job opportunities, now represents a specific challenge. Before 2011, Libya's oil production capacity was 1.7 million barrels, which by the end of 2011 shrank to 0.5 million barrels. As long as no consensus is established concerning the governance of the country, continuous disruptions in oil production may be expected. Since 2011 certain territories, especially oil extraction units, have been controlled by rebel groups (KRAUSS, 2013). The changes in oil production and in the political and security situation are well reflected by the pattern of volatile growth of GDP (2010: 5%, 2011: -62.1%, 2012: 104.5%, 2013: -13.6%, 2014: -24%) (World Bank, 2015).

Therefore, political uncertainty and chaos has a severe impact on the development of the economy: the number of unemployed people is growing which also acts to increase xenophobia. Nowadays, the Libyan labour market is unable to offer sufficient employment opportunities for migrant workers arriving from abroad (KPMG, 2014). Consequently, in the lack of strong central authority, in a country torn by strengthened tribal, regional, and city militia, human smuggling networks operate virtually undisturbed. The deteriorating security situation also has a negative impact on the economy: the shrinking job opportunities and the increasing racism against black people forces migrants to continue their journey to Europe.

Hereinafter, we examine the root causes of migration in the sub-Saharan African countries.

Factors in Sub-Saharan African issuing countries stimulating migration

The factors involved in stimulating migration in the continent may be summarized very briefly as follows:

- *There are no possibilities for decent livelihood* in the country of origin.
- *Dynamically developing young population* (third of the population is aged between 20 and 24) (UNFPA, 2012). Since, in the area, the working age population is estimated to increase by some 700 million persons between 2005 and 2050, this population explosion alone results in forced migration. On the other hand, the number of working age population of the developed world will decrease by some 88 million persons in the same period, so we may expect permanent migratory pressure in Europe (BÚR-TARRÓSY, 2011).
- *Political instability* (civil wars, failed states, chronic emergencies) or *repressive regimes* in the issuing countries.
- Changing climate, *desertification*, natural disasters.

- The *shrinking of good job opportunities*, the strengthening racism against black people and the disruption of the refugee status system in Libya forces the refugees and immigrants who move for economic purposes to go forward.

Some of the issuing countries are struggling with several factors stimulating migration which reinforce each other's impact. In the past decade, Sudan, South Sudan,⁵ Somalia,⁶ Mali,⁷ and Nigeria faced internal conflicts.⁸ However, in the countries of the Sahel Zone (including Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia) desertification (the Sahara is expanding to the south, Lake Chad is drying up), the increasingly frequent droughts, the strengthening terrorist organizations (Ansar al-Sharia, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, etc.), the drug and human smuggling networks all present serious problems.⁹ Smuggling networks are free to continue their illegal activities in the sparsely populated, highly inaccessible territory of the Sahel Zone with less control by the state authorities or with no control at all. Repressive regimes rule, inter alia, in Eritrea,¹⁰ Chad¹¹, and Ethiopia.¹²

The key to the African outward migration is probably the lack of economic prospects. Africa produced a dynamic economic development in the 2000s, becoming the world's fastest growing region; however, in several countries this did not entail significant job creation or increase in living standards. The African dynamism is the consequence of the prolonged coexistence of several factors. Several countries implemented macroeconomic measures, the political and economic institutions of the region have strengthened, and more Sub-Saharan countries are being stabilized. In this growth newly discovered raw materials have also played a crucial role: the developed economies' demand for raw materials increased and later, when this demand decreased due to the crisis beginning in 2008, emerging markets (including India, China, etc.) have made greater and greater demand (IMF, 2013). The dynamic economic growth in recent years has relied largely on the export of raw materials.

As a result of increasing raw material exports, sudden surging government revenues and GDP growth did not, in many cases, bring about any positive material change in the lives of ordinary people, as the rate of economic growth was not necessarily followed by the corresponding decrease of the poverty rate. This can be explained by the degree of inequality. It can be observed in some of the Sub-Saharan African countries that raw material revenues are controlled by a narrow layer of society, the rent-seeking elite.

⁵ They fought each other until South Sudan became independent—now the South Sudan Dinka and Nuer tribes are fighting each other.

⁶ Failed states, with no functioning central authority, between 2009 and 2010 the most feared terrorist organization of Eastern Africa, the Al-Shabaab ruled most of the important cities in Somalia.

⁷ The Tuareg uprising was followed by an Islamist takeover which resulted in a French intervention—the situation is still unresolved.

⁸ In March 2015, Boko Haram, a radical extremist terrorist organization, ruled on a territory that is equal to that of Belgium.

⁹ Indeed, landing in the “drug country” Guinea-Bissau, Latin American drug dealers transport their cocaine shipments through Western Africa and the Sahel Zone to Europe.

¹⁰ The military service here forces citizens to life-long modern-day slavery and separate them from their families.

¹¹ Here Idriss Déby is determined to stay in power at any cost, which he seized 25 years ago and he is continuously fighting the “rebels” of the country.

¹² The party of president Hailemariam acquired 100% of parliamentary seats in May 2015.

Economic growth based on the sale of primary products also raises economic policy difficulties, for which the majority of Sub-Saharan countries do not have the appropriate institutional background and experience. At the same time, one of the most important findings in the literature on economic development is that development involves structural transformation. Poor countries that are capable of diversifying their economy can develop significantly, shifting from agricultural production and raw material production to modern economic activities, thereby increasing productivity and income. The rate of structural change determines whether a country is successful or unsuccessful (GELB et al., 2015). In this respect, Africa is lagging behind the other continents.

Globalization has changed the way in which products and services are produced: instead of cross-country trade, a single product is produced in a number of countries (be it anywhere in the world) in production chains. The so-called effective engagement in global value chains is the only possible way of convergence today, because there is no time for imitating or deciphering the acquired technology – which used to be the proven recipe – because the methods used are changing and becoming obsolete too quickly. Today, countries “only” have to engage in an existing value chain, so in principle, countries with a lower level of capital and low technology can also have access to advanced technology and *know-how*, which would not have to be able to achieve all this without going through the stations of industrialization (growth, capital accumulation, development of a supplier network, etc.) (SZALAVETZ, 2013).

For the time being, however, Africa plays but a marginal role in global value chains. Existing trade rules, preferential trade agreements, which in principle give preference to the goods of the least developed countries, did not really improve the situation in Sub-Saharan Africa, since these conventions generally neglect the products in which the least-developed countries have the best interests. In many cases, rules of origin are so complicated and unfavourable to African countries (especially for products that are not wholly created in a beneficiary country), so that the actual use of the benefits provided is very low.

For the backwardness of Africa, therefore, migration destination countries are also responsible: trade agreements are formulated on the basis of the interests of developed countries and Africa only gets a marginal role in the global value chains. Strict rules of origin and narrower preferential clauses hamper the upward movement of the continent. If in the world economy Africa remains to be involved only as a raw material importer, we can expect an increase in economic disparities (NAFEEZ, 2004).

As long as local economies do not provide opportunities for the population, migration will continue to increase and, due to relative geographical proximity, of the most developed regions Europe remains its main target.

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