



THE LINKAGE BETWEEN FREE MOVEMENT OF PERSONS AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The free movement of persons across African borders is a cornerstone of regional integration and a catalyst for national development. By facilitating labor mobility, knowledge exchange, and cross-border trade, it enhances productivity, fosters innovation, and strengthens socio-economic ties among states. This linkage contributes to poverty reduction, human capital development, and market expansion, while also promoting cultural cohesion and political stability. However, challenges such as uneven infrastructure, security concerns, and policy harmonization remain critical to fully realizing its potential. Understanding this dynamic relationship is essential for shaping inclusive growth strategies and advancing the African Union's vision of continental unity and prosperity.

Keywords: African Union, Free Movement of Persons, Integration, Mobility, Labour.

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1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, the vision of a "borderless Africa" has been a cornerstone of Pan-Africanism. In the 21st century, this vision has shifted from a political aspiration to a pragmatic developmental necessity. The linkage between the Free Movement of Persons (FMP) and national development is rooted in the idea that human mobility is a primary driver of trade, innovation, and regional stability. This article examines how the African Union (AU) Protocol on Free Movement of Persons serves as a catalyst for the Agenda 2063 goals¹ and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The free movement of persons within Africa has emerged as a cornerstone of the continent's broader integration agenda, linking mobility directly to national development outcomes. Rooted in the African Union's

vision of "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa", the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence, and Right of Establishment² seeks to dismantle restrictive border policies and foster greater economic, social, and political cohesion. By enabling citizens to travel, reside, and work across borders, the initiative promotes labour mobility, trade expansion, and knowledge transfer, all of which are critical drivers of sustainable development.

At the developmental level, free movement enhances regional connectedness, stimulates intra-African trade, and supports the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) by ensuring that human capital can flow as freely as goods and services. This mobility not only addresses labour market mismatches but also strengthens innovation ecosystems by facilitating the exchange of skills and expertise across national

¹ Union, A. (2015). Agenda 2063 report of the commission on the African Union Agenda 2063 The Africa we want in 2063.

² Union, A. (2018). Protocol to the treaty establishing the African economic community relating to free movement of persons, right of residence and right of establishment. *African Union*.

boundaries. Furthermore, the policy aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to poverty reduction, decent work, and reduced inequalities.

The African Union (AU) has identified free movement of persons as a cornerstone of Agenda 2063, recognising mobility as essential for building “an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa.” This assertion spans from the impact the protocol we have on Economic Imperative, Social development, security and reshape governance concerns. The rationale is that free movement is essential for Africa’s integration and prosperity, yet underutilized due to political hesitation. While the novelty is in reframing free movement as a direct enabler of national development, offering a new perspective that can influence both policymakers and scholars.

However, the implementation of free movement policies is not without challenges. Member states have raised the following concerns: migration governance, security, and national sovereignty.³ These issues often slow down ratification and implementation, requiring careful balancing between national interests and continental aspirations.⁴ Despite these hurdles, the developmental potential of free movement remains undeniable: it is a tool for economic growth, social integration, and political stability, positioning Africa as a dynamic force in the global arena.

Conceptual Framework:

Mobility as a Catalyst for National Development National development is no longer confined within the borders of a single state.⁵ In an interconnected world, development is fueled by the exchange of services, ideas, and labor. Hence, we must move beyond viewing migration and mobility as a "crisis" and instead treat it as a structural component of economic growth.

The following framework integrates key theories and developmental mechanisms specifically tailored to the African context.

The relationship between migration and development in Africa is best explained through a "multi-level" theoretical lens:

³ Adeola, R. (2019). The African Union Protocol on Free Movement of Persons in Africa: development, provisions and implementation challenges. *Afr. Hum. Rts. YB*, 3, 260.

⁴ Chime, I. P., Nwosu, E., Onyeabor, E., Ajibo, C. C., Richards, N. U., Nwodo, F. A., & Nwafor, N. A. (2024). The AU Free Movement Protocol: Challenges in Its Implementation. *Journal of African Law*, 68(1), 3-17.AU

⁵ Bisong, A. (2022). *Labour mobility as a key element of the AfCFTA: What role for the AU’s free movement protocol* (No. 153, pp. 1-14). ECDPM Briefing Note.

1. Theoretical Anchors

The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM):

Unlike classical theories that focus on individual gain, NELM posits that in Africa, migration is a collective family strategy. Households diversify their "risk" by sending a member to another region or country. If a local harvest fails, remittances from a mobile family member ensure national food security and local investment.

The Migration-Development Nexus:

This concept suggests a "pendulum" effect where development in a country initially increases migration (as more people gain the financial means to travel), which then further accelerates development through the return of skills and capital.

Transnationalism:

This theory recognizes that African migrants do not "leave" their home countries; they maintain dual lives. This creates "transnational corridors" where social and financial capital flows bi-directionally, fueling development in both the destination and the origin country.

2. The "Triple Win" Development Mechanism

A robust conceptual framework for Africa relies on the "Triple Win" model, which identifies benefits for three distinct stakeholders:

Table 1: The Triple Win

Stakeholder	Development Contribution
Country of Origin	Relieves unemployment pressure; receives remittances; gains from "brain gain" when migrants return with new technologies and networks.
Country of Destination	Fills labor shortages in critical sectors (agriculture, construction, healthcare); stimulates the economy through increased consumption and tax revenue.
The Migrant	Increases personal income; acquires higher education and specialized skills; achieves socio-economic empowerment.

3. Pathways to National Development

The framework identifies four primary "transmission channels" through which free movement impacts a nation's development:

A. Human Capital & "Brain Circulation"

National development is often hampered by "brain drain." However, a free movement framework encourages Brain Circulation.

Example: A tech developer from Lagos might work in Nairobi's "Silicon Savannah" for three years before returning to Nigeria to start a firm. The knowledge transfer during this cycle is a more potent developmental tool than permanent emigration.

B. Market Integration & AfCFTA Synergy

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) cannot function without mobility. Free movement allows entrepreneurs to cross borders to monitor supply chains, negotiate contracts, and provide "trade in services" (legal, accounting, and engineering), which are the backbone of a modern economy.

C. Financial Inflows (Beyond Remittances)

While remittances are crucial, the framework also highlights Diaspora Investment. Mobile Africans often invest in real estate, government bonds, and startups in their home countries, providing "patient capital" that is less volatile than foreign direct investment (FDI).

D. Social Remittances

Development is not just economic, it is social. Migrants bring back "social remittances" new ideas about governance, gender equality, health practices, and civic engagement—which can modernize national institutions and social structures.

4. Structural Barriers (The "Friction" Factors)

For this framework to work, "frictions" must be minimized. A country's developmental gain from mobility is inversely proportional to the barriers it imposes:

- **Visa Restrictions:** Act as a "tax" on human capital.
- **Non-Recognition of Qualifications:** A doctor from Zimbabwe working as a driver in South Africa is a "developmental waste."
- **Xenophobia:** Social instability derived from migration can reverse developmental gains by destroying infrastructure and deterring investment.
- **Human Capital Optimization:** Free movement allows labor to move from areas of surplus to areas of demand, reducing unemployment and filling critical skill gaps.³
- **Regional Integration:** FMP is the "third pillar" of integration, alongside the movement of goods and capital. Without the ability for businesspeople, students, and workers to cross borders, the AfCFTA remains underutilized.

5. The Policy Landscape on Free Movement: From Abuja to Kigali

1. Abuja Treaty (1991)

- Signed in Abuja, Nigeria, the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community (AEC)⁶ laid the foundation for continental integration.
- It envisioned six stages of integration, including the eventual establishment of a common market and free movement of persons.
- The treaty emphasized that mobility is central to economic growth and social cohesion, linking it directly to development goals.

2. Regional Economic Communities (RECs)

- Following Abuja, RECs such as ECOWAS, EAC, and SADC began implementing regional free movement protocols.
- ECOWAS pioneered visa-free travel among member states, while the EAC advanced policies on labour mobility and residence rights.
- These regional experiments provided practical models for continental-level policy.

3. African Union Agenda 2063

- Agenda 2063⁷, adopted in 2013, reaffirmed the vision of "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa".
- It explicitly identified free movement of persons as a flagship project, recognizing its role in boosting intra-African trade, innovation, and labour market efficiency.

4. Kigali Protocol (2018)

- Officially known as the Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment, adopted in Kigali, Rwanda.
- Grants Africans the right to visa-free entry, residence, and establishment in member states and explicitly calls for an African Passport and the end of visa requirements for Africans within Africa.
- Seen as complementary to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), ensuring that human capital can move as freely as goods and services.
- Despite its promise, ratification has been slow due to concerns over sovereignty, security, and migration governance.

6. Economic Impact on National Development Intra-African Trade and the AfCFTA

Trade in services (consulting, legal, medical, education) requires professionals to move. According to the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), countries with higher Visa Openness scores show a direct correlation with increased tourism revenue and trade volumes. Example: The Gambia, Kenya, Seychelles and Rwanda,

⁶ Union, A. (1991). Treaty establishing the African economic community. *African Union*, 1-47.

⁷ Union, A. (2015). Agenda 2063 report of the commission on the African Union Agenda 2063 The Africa we want in 2063.

which adopted liberal visa policies, saw an immediate boost in their service sectors and international conference hosting.

Remittances and Investment

Intra-African migration keeps capital within the continent. Migrants often send home remittances that fund education, healthcare, and small-scale entrepreneurship in their countries of origin, directly contributing to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)⁸.

Scholarly Contributions and Insights

Adeola⁹ emphasizes in her study “The African Union Protocol on Free Movement of Persons in Africa: development, provisions and implementation challenges” that the Protocol was designed with development in mind and is not merely symbolic. She highlights both the opportunities it presents, such as economic growth, continental integration, and human capital mobility, as well as the challenges that hinder its realization. Adeola argues that the AU’s Free Movement of Persons Protocol is intrinsically tied to Africa’s broader development agenda, yet its implementation remains fraught with political and institutional obstacles. While Adeola provides a valuable continental overview, this study advances the conversation by narrowing the focus to specific national development indicators, including GDP growth, employment creation, innovation, and social cohesion. Reframing the debate from “implementation challenges” to “development opportunities”, which is a fresh perspective.

According to the study undertaken by the AU and IOM on the benefits and challenges of free movement of persons in Africa¹⁰:

The study demonstrates how intra-African free movement of persons, if well managed, can bring about significant benefits to the continent, thereby positively impacting Africa’s development prospects. It proceeds to outline recommendations for AU Member States, AU/RECs, civil society, and media for a gradual approach to implementation of the protocol. The study also notes that while many African countries still lack sufficient enablers to create and manage free movement, this need not be an impediment to progressing the free movement agenda, and advocates that a phased approach may well be the way to go on this taking account of African

⁸ Kedir, A. M., Siwale, J., & Kamara, S. (2025). The contribution of informal cross-border trade to a successful African Continental Free Trade Area. *AIB Insights*.

⁹ Adeola, R. (2019). The African Union Protocol on Free Movement of Persons in Africa: development, provisions and implementation challenges. *Afr. Hum. Rts. YB*, 3, 260.

¹⁰ The Study on Benefits and Challenges of Free Movement of Persons in Africa. A study commissioned by the AUC and IOM. | African Union 2018.

Member States’ different stages of socio-economic development.

Comparing practices and lessons from other parts of world and how the African Union RECs are facilitating free movement of persons in Africa, the study provides an analysis of the possible policy implications of enabling free movement of persons, and offers practical recommendations on how to move the free movement agenda forward.

It concludes by offering guidelines for AU Member States on how to progress the free movement agenda, while taking account of the hurdles and the fears that the notion of free movement provokes in some quarters.

Addressing Skills Mismatches

National development is often hindered by "brain drain" to the West. FMP encourages "brain circulation" within Africa, where a Nigerian engineer might work on a project in Kenya, keeping expertise within the African ecosystem.

Social and Cultural Dimensions

Free movement fosters a shared African identity, which is essential for long-term political stability. By easing the barriers to travel, nations can:

- Promote cultural exchange and tourism.
- Facilitate educational mobility, allowing students to attend the best regional universities.
- Enhance innovation through the collaboration of diverse African minds.

Table 2: Comparative Table: Abuja vs. Kigali

Aspect	Abuja Treaty (1991)	Kigali Protocol (2018)
Vision	Establish African Economic Community	Operationalize free movement of persons
Scope	Broad integration (economic, political, social)	Specific rights: entry, residence, establishment
Implementation	Six stages over decades	Immediate legal framework for mobility
Drivers	Economic growth, unity, peace	Labour mobility, AfCFTA, innovation
Challenges	Institutional capacity, regional disparities	Sovereignty concerns, security, ratification delays

Comparative Analysis: Successes in Regional Economic Communities (RECs)

Table 3: The continent's progress is best viewed through its sub-regions

Region	Success Level	Key Achievement
ECOWAS	High	Abolition of visa requirements for member citizens; ECOWAS Passport.
EAC	High	Use of national IDs as travel documents; progress on a single tourist visa.
SADC	Moderate	Bilateral agreements between specific countries (e.g., South Africa and Zimbabwe).
COMESA	Low	Gradual implementation of visa-on-arrival policies

Challenges to Implementation

Despite the clear benefits, only a handful of countries have ratified the 2018 Protocol. The barriers include:

- **Security Concerns:** Fears that open borders will facilitate the movement of terrorists (e.g., Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram) and transnational criminals.
- **Economic Protectionism:** Fear that "foreign" workers will take jobs from locals, leading to xenophobia.
- **Infrastructure Gaps:** Many borders lack the biometric technology needed to track movement effectively.
- **Health Risks:** As seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, uncontrolled movement can accelerate the spread of infectious diseases.
- National sovereignty and political resistance

Strategic Recommendations for National Governments

- To harness the benefits of FMP for national development, states should:
 1. **Ratify the AU Protocol:** Move beyond signatures to legal ratification and domestication.
 2. **Invest in Integrated Border Management (IBM):** Use technology (biometrics, e-visas) to balance security with ease of movement.
 3. **Harmonize Labor Laws:** Ensure that professional qualifications are recognized across borders.
 4. **Public Sensitization:** Launch campaigns to educate citizens on the benefits of integration to mitigate xenophobic tensions.
 5. **Political Champion:** AU and RECs should consider appointing a goodwill Ambassador and Champions to spearhead advocacies.

6. **Resource Mobilization:** AU and RECs should mobilize resources for the implementation phase both at national and continental levels.
7. **Partnership:** AU and RECs should collaborate closely with private sector.

CONCLUSION

The linkage between the free movement of persons and national development is undeniable. For Africa to achieve the "Africa We Want," it must dismantle the colonial-era borders that stifle economic energy. While security concerns are valid, they should be managed through technology and cooperation rather than exclusion. Free movement is not just a mobility policy; it is an economic imperative for the 21st century.

The pursuit of free movement of persons within Africa is more than a political aspiration; it is a developmental imperative. From the Abuja Treaty's vision of continental integration to the Kigali Protocol's concrete framework for mobility, Africa has consistently recognized that the ability of its citizens to travel, reside, and work across borders is central to achieving sustainable growth. Free movement enhances labour market efficiency, trade expansion, and knowledge transfer, while also fostering social cohesion and regional solidarity.

Although challenges remain particularly around migration governance, security concerns, and sovereignty debates the developmental dividends of mobility are undeniable. By enabling the circulation of skills, ideas, and opportunities, free movement strengthens the foundations of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and aligns with the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Ultimately, the linkage between mobility and national development underscores a simple truth: Africa's progress depends on the freedom of its people to connect, collaborate, and contribute across borders. The successful implementation of free movement policies will not only accelerate economic transformation but also nurture a more integrated, prosperous, and peaceful continent.

¹⁰ The Study on Benefits and Challenges of Free Movement of Persons in Africa. A study commissioned by the AUC and IOM. | African Union 2018.