

# **Irregular Migration from West Africa to the Maghreb and the European Union:**

## **An Overview of Recent Trends**

Prepared for IOM by

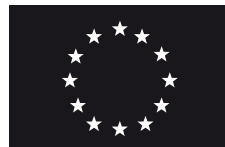
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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

- CIMADE – Inter-movement Committee for Evacuees
- EC – European Commission
- EU – European Union
- ILO – International Labour Office
- OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
- UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- UNODC – United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
- UNPD – United Nations Population Division



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Media and dominant policy discourses convey an apocalyptic image of an increasingly massive exodus of desperate Africans fleeing poverty and war at home trying to enter the elusive European “El Dorado” crammed in long-worn ships barely staying afloat (Pastore et al., 2006). The migrants themselves are commonly depicted as victims recruited by “merciless” and “unscrupulous” traffickers and smugglers. Hence, the perceived policy solutions—which invariably boil down to curbing migration—focus on “fighting” or “combating” illegal migration through intensifying border controls and cracking down trafficking and smuggling-related crime. Although there has been an incontestable increase in regular and irregular West African migration to Europe over the past decade, available empirical evidence dispels most of these assumptions.

First, irregular migration from Africa to Europe is not as new as is commonly suggested. Illegal sea crossings of the Mediterranean by North Africans have in fact been a persistent phenomenon since Italy and Spain introduced visa requirements in the early 1990s. The major change has been that, in particular, since 2000, sub-Saharan Africans have started to join and have now overtaken North Africans as the largest category of irregular boat migrants.

Second, it is a misconception that all or most migrants crossing the Sahara are “in transit” to Europe. There are possibly more sub-Saharan Africans living in the Maghreb than in Europe. An estimated 65,000 and 120,000 sub-Saharan Africans enter the Maghreb yearly overland, of which only 20 to 38 per cent are estimated to enter Europe. While Libya is an important destination country in its own right, many migrants failing or not venturing to enter Europe prefer to stay in North Africa as a second-best option.

Third, the majority of West Africans enter Europe legally. In recent years, the total annual increase of the registered West African population in the EU has been around 100,000. The total number of successful irregular crossings by sub-Saharan Africans should be counted in the order of several tens of thousands, according to our estimates 25,000 to 35,000 per year, which is only a fraction of total EU immigration of 2.6 million in 2004. The majority of migrants enter Europe legally and subsequently overstay their visas.

Fourth, despite a recent increase, West African migration to the EU is still relatively modest in comparison with migration from North Africa and Eastern Europe. There are an estimated 800,000 registered West African migrants in the main European

receiving countries compared to 2,600,000 North Africans. Moroccan immigrants alone outnumber all West African immigrants in Europe.

Rather than a desperate response to destitution, migration is generally a conscious choice by relatively well-off individuals and households to enhance their livelihoods. Likewise, the common portrayal of irregular African migrants as victims of traffickers and smugglers is inconsistent with evidence that the vast majority of migrants move on their own initiative. Trafficking is relatively rare, and smugglers are usually not part of international organized crime but locally based passeurs operating alone or in small networks.

Since the 1990s, European states intensified border controls and have attempted to “externalize” these policies by pressuring certain North African countries to clamp down on irregular migration and to sign readmission agreements in exchange for aid, financial support, and work permits. While failing to curb immigration, these policies have had a series of unintended side effects in the form of increasing violations of migrants’ rights and a diversification of trans-Saharan migration routes and attempted sea crossing points.

In practice, it seems almost impossible to seal off the long Saharan borders and the African and European coastlines, if European and African governments are willing to do so. Notwithstanding public discourses stressing the need to “combat illegal immigration”, European and African states seem to have little genuine interest in stopping migration because their economies have become dependent on migrant labour and remittances, respectively. In fact, there is a growing discrepancy between restrictive migration policies and the demand for cheap migrant labour in Europe and Libya.

Unless exceptional circumstance arise, it is therefore likely that migration from West Africa to the Maghreb and Europe will continue. This explains why increasing border controls have rather led to the swift diversion of migration routes and an increase in the risks, costs, and suffering of the migrants involved rather than a decline in migration. As long as no more legal channels for immigration are created to match the real demand for labour, and as long as large informal economies will exist, it is likely that a substantial proportion of this migration will remain irregular.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Southern Europe is familiar with irregular migration from core Maghreb countries of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Since the early 1990s, thousands of North Africans have attempted to cross the Mediterranean to reach Spain and Italy each year. But, as the recent migration crises made clear, sub-Saharan Africans are increasingly migrating to Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, often using the region as a point of transit to Europe and others remaining in the Maghreb region.

Swelling masses of desperate Africans fleeing poverty and war at home are trying to enter Europe illegally. At least, this is the image conveyed by the media and popular discourses. The dramatic images of African migrants massively scaling the tall border fences separating the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on Morocco's Mediterranean coast in the autumn of 2005, their more daily attempts to cross the Mediterranean by small fishing boats, and the arrival of large numbers of African boat migrants on the shores of the Canary Islands in the summer of 2006 reinforce the *perception* of mounting African migration pressure on Europe's southwestern borders.

In recent years, the issue has also been put high on the policy agenda of the EU and its member states. Since the 1990s, European states have mainly responded to persistent irregular immigration by intensifying border controls. This has involved the deployment of semi-military and military forces and hardware in the prevention of migration by sea (Lutterbeck, 2006). When groups of immigrants started to push their way into Ceuta and Melilla, fences were erected by 2000 (Goldschmidt, 2006). Over the past decade, Spain has attempted to seal off its borders. Besides erecting fences at Ceuta and Melilla, the government installed an early warning radar system (SIVE or Integrated System of External Vigilance) at the Strait of Gibraltar, a system that has recently been extended to the Canary Islands (Lahlou, 2005).

EU countries have also attempted to "externalize" border controls towards the Maghreb countries by transforming them into a "buffer zone" to reduce migratory pressures at Europe's southern border (Goldschmidt, 2006; Lutterbeck, 2006; Perrin, 2005; Schuster, 2005). They have done so by pressuring certain North African countries to clamp down on irregular migration, toughening immigration law (Belguendouz, 2005; Boubakri, 2006), and to re-admit irregular sub-Saharan migrants from Europe and expelling them from their own national territories (Goldschmidt, 2006; Lahlou, 2005; Lutterbeck, 2006).

North African countries have signed readmission agreements with several European countries, often in exchange for development aid and financial and material support for (joint) border controls, and, particularly in Italy, for a limited number of temporary work permits for immigrants (Chaloff, 2005; Cuttitta, 2005). Facing the recent increase in trans-Mediterranean migration by migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, Italy and Spain, in particular, have recently concluded similar agreements with sub-Saharan countries. Since 2003, Spain and Morocco, as well as Italy and Libya, have started to collaborate in joint naval patrols and readmission of migrants in exchange for aid. In 2006, Spain received limited support from Frontex, the new EU external border control agency, to patrol the routes between Senegal, Mauritania, Cape Verde, and the Canary Islands by airplane, helicopter, and patrol boat. Frontex also intends to coordinate patrols involving Italy, Greece, and Malta to monitor the area between Malta, the Italian island of Lampedusa, and the Tunisian and Libyan coast.

Media, politicians, and also scholars often portray this migration as “new”, “increasing”, and “massive”. Media reportage and popular discourses give rise to an apocalyptic image of a “wave” or “exodus” of “desperate” Africans fleeing poverty and war at home in search of the European “El Dorado”, crammed in long-worn ships barely staying afloat (cf. Pastore et al., 2006). Millions of sub-Saharan Africans are commonly believed to be waiting in North Africa to cross to Europe, which fuels the fear of a threatening invasion. These migrants are commonly seen as economic migrants although perhaps masquerading as refugees (Yassine, 2006).

However, the empirical basis of such perceptions is rather shaky. The problem is twofold. On the one hand, there is still a lack of empirical research on this issue. On the other hand, the emergent and rich body of empirical literature that *has* become available in recent years, and which was pioneered mainly by Francophone researchers such as Pliez (2002), Lahlou and Escoffier (2002), and Bensaad (2003), is often ignored. The main aim of this study is to achieve a more empirically founded and quantitative understanding of the nature, scale, and recent evolution of irregular West African migration to North Africa and Europe.<sup>1</sup> This is pursued through an analysis of data available from official statistics as well as the emergent policy and research literature on this issue. On the basis of this analysis, this study will also evaluate how policies to curb trans-Saharan and trans-Mediterranean migration have affected migration patterns.

## 2. KEY DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

Much confusion in the current debate on irregular migration from West Africa to North Africa and Europe is related to the poor definition of central concepts. First of all, this applies to irregular migration. However, the boundaries between regular and irregular migration are not always clear. First, it is useful to make a distinction between irregular *entry* and irregular *stay*. For instance, most irregular migrants enter destination countries legally, but subsequently overstay their visas, or engage in prohibited work, through which their status becomes irregular. The other way around, migrants entering or residing in a country illegally can acquire legal residency through obtaining work, marriage or regularization. In the case of overland migration from West Africa, migrants cross many countries, some of which do allow their entry, some of which not, so that a migrant moves in and out of formal regularity and irregularity.

We will define irregular migration in a broad sense as “international movement or residency in conflict with migration laws”. For the purpose of this study, we will employ a more narrow definition focusing on the actual process of migration: “crossing borders without proper authority, or violating conditions for entering another country” (Jordan and Düvell, 2002: 15). This definition includes all journeys made by West Africans to North Africa and Europe where such illegal border crossing is involved. It is important to realize, though, that a substantial proportion of Europe’s legally residing migrant population were irregular migrants at some stage of their residency. While focusing on *irregular* migration, the study will not artificially dissociate irregular from regular migration, because both phenomena are known to be reciprocally interrelated (Allasino et al., 2004; Schoorl et al., 2000).

Trafficking and smuggling are other central terms, which are often confused in policy and academic discourses. The term “trafficking in persons” is restricted to situations in which people are deceived, threatened, or coerced in situations of exploitation, including prostitution. “Human smuggling” implies that a migrant voluntarily purchases services to circumvent immigration restrictions, without necessarily being the victim of deception or exploitation (Carling, 2006). However, in practice, it is often difficult to make a sharp distinction between what is voluntary and what is forced, except in the case of slavery where migrant behaviour is simultaneously shaped by human agency and structural constraints to varying degrees.

In this study, the term “migrant” includes both labour migrants and refugees, unless otherwise specified. In presenting migration data, migrants are defined according to country of birth. Second generations are not considered as they are less relevant for this study.

Transit migration is another concept that is commonly used in the context of irregular migration from West Africa to North Africa, to such an extent that it is almost used interchangeably with irregular migration, erroneously so (see Düvell, 2006, for several examples). Moreover, intentions to move on (which is the basis of most definitions of transit migration) are not necessarily converted into actual movement. This is similar to the problems of distinguishing temporary from permanent migration—in which case (return) migration intentions do also often not match actual moves. The term transit migrant seems therefore mainly useful as a post-hoc categorization.

What complicates things further is that transit migration has, to a considerable degree, become a politicized and therefore value-laden term, which is used to brand migrants as “those who are ought to move on”. Even labour migrants to Libya or *de facto* settlers who have been staying in North Africa for years or decades (cf. Roman, 2006)<sup>2</sup> have recently been re-branded as “transit migrants”. This casts serious doubts on the added value, usefulness, and desirability of using “transit” as an analytical category. This report will therefore not employ the term transit to categorize *individual migrants*. The more general term “transit migration” seems to be more useful to refer to a migratory phenomenon operating at the macro-level of societies and countries. *Transit migration* can then be defined as the movement of people entering a national territory, who might stay for several weeks or months to work to pay or to organize the next stage of their trip, but who leave the country to an onward destination within a limited period, for instance one year (cf. Düvell, 2006).

## **3. EVOLUTION OF REGIONAL MIGRATION PATTERNS**

### **3.1. From Trans-Saharan to Trans-Mediterranean Migration**

Like in other parts of Africa, there is evidence of a considerable degree of pre-colonial mobility in West Africa (cf. Arthur, 1991; Bakewell and de Haas, 2007). Throughout known history, there has also been intensive population mobility between both sides of the Sahara through the trans-Saharan (caravan) trade, conquest, pilgrimage, and religious education. The trans-Saharan trade connected North and West Africa economically, politically, religiously, and socially (Lydon, 2000; Marfaing and Wippel 2004; OECD 2006b). It was only with the advent of colonialism, which drew borders where there had been none and created modern states, that trans-Saharan mobility and trade collapsed.

However, soon after independence, the foundations were laid for the contemporary trans-Saharan migration system. After the 1973 oil crisis, Libya and, to a limited extent, Algeria, witnessed increasing immigration of labourers from their southern neighbours to their sweltering Saharan hinterlands, where oil wells are located but where nationals often refuse to work (cf. Pliez, 2004; Spiga, 2005).

This picture would drastically change in the 1990s. A progressive change in Libya's foreign policy contributed to a major surge in trans-Saharan migration to Libya. In particular, the 1992-2000 UN embargo prompted Libya to intensify its relations with sub-Saharan countries. As part of these renewed "pan-African" policies, Libya started to welcome sub-Saharan Africans to work in Libya. Traditionally a destination for migrants from Arab North African countries including Sudan, Libya became a major destination for migrants from West Africa and the Horn of Africa (Boubakri, 2004; Hamood, 2006; Pliez, 2002; 2004). In the early 1990s, most migrants came from Libya's neighbours Sudan, Chad, and Niger, which subsequently developed into transit countries for migrants from a much wider array of sub-Saharan countries (Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005).

In addition to Libya's new immigration policies, growing instability, (civil) wars, and the associated economic decline in several parts of West and Central Africa also contributed to increasing trans-Saharan migration from the mid-1990s onward. Moreover, the outbreak of civil war in 1999 and associated economic decline and increasing xenophobia in Côte d'Ivoire, until then West Africa's major migration destination, prompted hundreds of thousands of migrants to leave the country (Black et al., 2004; Drumtra, 2006; Kress, 2006). Although many of these migrants stayed or returned to

Côte d'Ivoire, the country lost most of its former appeal to West African migrants. Confronted with the lack of alternative migration destinations within the region, this prompted increasing numbers of West Africans to migrate outside the region, to countries such as South Africa (Adepoju, 2004; Morris, 1998), Gabon, Botswana (Adepoju, 2000), and Libya.

Initially, most West Africans made the trans-Saharan crossing in order to work in Libya. The presence of sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco and Tunisia remained largely limited to relatively smaller numbers of students, traders, professional workers, and some refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Trans-Saharan, overland migration to these countries was relatively rare (Barros et al., 2002; Boubakri, 2006; Goldschmidt, 2003; Lindstrom, 2002).

However, it was particularly since the late 1990s that Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia started witnessing an increase in migration from an increasingly diverse array of sub-Saharan countries. These changes in migration patterns have probably been reinforced under the influence of mounting xenophobia in Libya after the violent clashes between Libyans and African workers in 2000. This led to more restrictive immigration regulations and regular forced expulsions (Hamood, 2006; Pliez, 2004; Schuster, 2005). This has presumably contributed to a diversification and partial westward shift of trans-Saharan migration routes towards Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Nevertheless, migration to Libya continued because of the persistent need for immigrant labour, although this migration has become increasingly irregular as a consequence of its restrictive immigration regime.

Around 2000, the next fundamental shift in migration patterns occurred when sub-Saharan migrants started to join Maghrebians in their attempts to enter the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla illegally or to cross the Strait of Gibraltar to Spain or from Tunisia to Italy (Lampedusa, Pantalleria, or Sicily) by *pateras* (fisher boats) (Barros et al., 2002; Boubakri, 2004). Maghrebians had started doing so since Italy and Spain introduced visa requirements for North African workers in the early 1990s. This increase was so strong that since sub-Saharan Africans have now taken over North Africans as the largest group intercepted by European border guards (De Haas, 2006b). In addition, sub-Saharan migrants in Libya have increasingly tried to cross to Europe directly from the Libyan coast, transforming Libya from a destination country into a destination *and* transit country.

In this way, sub-Saharan migrants forged a vital connection between the resurgent trans-Saharan and the already established Euro-Mediterranean migration systems. The increasing presence of West Africans in the Maghreb, the persistent demand for migrant labour in (southern) Europe, where salaries and living conditions are much



better than in Libya, and the already well-established networks of smugglers helping Maghrebians to cross the Mediterranean all contributed to this fundamental shift in the African-European migration landscape.

### **3.2. Migration Routes and Migration Methods**

Migrants use numerous land, sea, and air routes to reach their desired destinations in North Africa and Europe. Europe's increasingly restrictive immigration policies and intensified migration controls have led to a growing reliance on overland routes, although migrants who can afford it make at least part of the journey to North Africa by airplane. The trans-Saharan journey is generally made in several stages, and might take anywhere between one month and several years. On their way, migrants often settle temporarily in towns located on migration hubs to work and save enough money for their onward journeys, usually in large trucks or pick-ups (Barros et al., 2002; Brachet, 2005; Collyer, 2005; Escoffier, 2006).

Although a multitude of trans-Saharan routes exists, at least until recently, the majority of overland migrants entered the Maghreb from Agadez in Niger (Bensaad, 2003; Brachet, 2005). Agadez is located on a historical crossroads of trade routes that now extend deep into West and Central Africa. From Agadez, migration routes bifurcate to the Sebha oasis in Libya and to Tamanrasset in southern Algeria. From southern Libya, migrants move to Tripoli and other coastal cities or to Tunisia; from the coast, migrants travel by boat to either Malta or the Italian islands of Lampedusa, Pantalleria, and Sicily.

From Tamanrasset in Algeria, migrants move to the northern cities or enter Morocco via the border near Oujda (Barros et al., 2002). From Oujda in Morocco, migrants either try to enter the EU by crossing the sea from the north coast or entering the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta or Melilla or move to Rabat and Casablanca, where they settle down at least temporarily. Since 1999, tougher policing at the Strait of Gibraltar has led to a general diversification in attempted crossing points. Migrants started crossing the Mediterranean Sea from more eastern places on the Moroccan coast or Algeria to mainland Spain, from the Tunisian coast to the Italian islands, and from Libya to Italy and Malta. Since 2001 migrants in Morocco have increasingly moved southward to the Western Sahara in order to get to the Canary Islands, a Spanish territory in the Atlantic Ocean (Carling, 2007; De Haas, 2006b).

On the western edge of the continent, and in a likely response to increased border controls and internal policing in the Mediterranean and North Africa, there has been

a recent increase in migrants avoiding the trans-Saharan crossing to the Maghreb altogether by sailing directly from the Mauritanian, Cape Verdean, Senegalese, and other West African coasts to the Canary Islands on traditional wooden fishing canoes (*pirogues*) (Oumar Ba and Choplin, 2005).

In recent years, migrants from China, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have also started to migrate to the Maghreb overland via Saharan routes. They mostly fly from Asia to West-African capitals, sometimes via the Gulf States. From there, they follow the common Saharan trail via Niger and Algeria to Morocco. Others enter north-Africa through Egypt to Libya and Tunisia, from where they cross to Italy and Malta (Simon, 2006: 39). In 2007, increasing numbers of Asians have joined Africans crossing from the West African coast to the Canary Islands.

Although migrants are commonly depicted as (passive) victims of “unscrupulous traffickers” and “merciless” criminal-run smuggling networks, the available empirical evidence based on research among the migrants concerned strongly suggests that trafficking is rare and that the vast majority migrate on their own initiative (Alioua, 2005; Barros et al., 2002; Brachet, 2005; Collyer, 2006; Escoffier, 2006). Rather than a desperate response to destitution, most migration is generally a deliberate choice and an investment by reasonably prosperous households and families to enhance their future livelihoods (Alioua, 2005; Collyer, 2006; Escoffier, 2006; Goldschmidt, 2006; Mazzucato, 2005). Migrants typically pay for one difficult leg of the journey, usually involving a border crossing, at a time (Brachet, 2005; Collyer, 2006). Oftentimes, smugglers tend to be former nomads, fishermen, and immigrants who operate relatively small and loose networks (Pastore et al., 2006). These smugglers often cooperate with local police, border officials, and intermediaries (cf. Brachet, 2005).

In the process of crossing the Sahara to North Africa, migrants spend hundreds of dollars on bribes, smugglers, transportation, and daily necessities. In 2003, it was estimated that a boat crossing from Morocco to Spain cost from US\$ 200 for adults to US\$ 500 to US\$ 800 for Moroccans, and up to US\$ 800 to US\$ 1,200 for Francophone and Anglophone sub-Saharan Africans, respectively (Lahlou, 2003). Prices for the Libya-Italy crossing seem to be roughly similar. UNODC (2006) cited press reports mentioning prices of US\$ 880 for the Morocco-Canary Islands crossing, US\$ 385 to US\$ 1,260 for Nouadhibou-Canary Islands crossing, and US\$ 480 to US\$ 1,930 for Senegal-Canary Island crossing. More secure crossings, for instance aboard cargo ships, tend to be much more expensive (Oumar Ba and Choplin, 2005).

While the media focuses on “boat people”, many (North and sub-Saharan) African migrants use other methods—tourist visas, false documents, hiding in vessels with or

without the consent of the crew, scaling the fences surrounding the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla or attempting to swim around them (Collyer, 2006; De Haas, 2003; Oumar Ba and Choplin, 2005; Van Liempt, 2007). In response to increased restrictions in North Africa, border and police officials tend to charge higher bribes, and migrants increasingly use secondary, often more dangerous routes through the desert (Brachet 2005).

Each year, significant numbers die or get seriously injured while trying to enter the EU. It has been claimed by a Spanish human rights organization that at least 368 people died while crossing to Spain in 2005, although the actual number might be two or three times higher because many bodies are never found (Asociacion Prederechos Humanos de Andalucia, 2006). Human rights organizations estimate that 3,285 dead bodies were found on the shores of the Straits of Gibraltar alone between 1997 and 2001 (Schuster, 2005). The actual number of drownings is significantly higher because an unknown percentage of corpses are never found. Carling (2007) estimated that the actual risk of dying while crossing the sea to Spain has remained fairly constant at around one per cent or has even slightly fallen over the past years. The risks of crossing the Sahara are believed to be at least as high as the more widely mediatized hazards of an undocumented crossing of the Mediterranean or the Atlantic (Collyer, 2006), although there is no empirical evidence to sustain such claims.

If possible, North and West Africans avoid entering Europe by perilous crossings on fisher boats. In 2002, only 10 per cent of the irregular migrants' population in Italy entered the country illegally by sea (Cuttitta, 2007). Empirical evidence suggests that most irregular West African migrants enter Europe legally and subsequently overstay their visas (Coslovi, 2007; Schoorl et al., 2000; UNODC, 2006). According to one survey, about one-third of irregular Senegalese and Ghanaian immigrants in Spain and Italy, respectively, have entered the country illegally, compared to two-thirds of overstayers (Schoorl et al., 2000).

### **3.3. Transit or Settlement?**

Once in Europe, many irregular migrants manage to stay and settle. Only a minority of those apprehended by Spanish, Italian, and Maltese border guards are sent back. In 2002 and 2003, only about a quarter of detained irregular migrants in Spain were effectively expelled, more than 66,000 were released (Carling, 2007). Besides the limited expulsion capacity, this is related to difficulties to identify migrants. Sub-Saharan African countries are often reluctant to collaborate with the forced readmission of large numbers of irregular migrants. Many migrants destroy their papers to avoid

expulsion, while asylum seekers, minors, and pregnant women often have the right to (at least temporary) residence on humanitarian grounds (cf. Kastner, 2007).

Although EU countries have signed re-admission agreements with a growing number of African countries, expulsions are often *difficult to implement in practice* (Barros et al., 2002; CIMADE, 2004; Collyer, 2006; Escoffier, 2006). As a result, many apprehended migrants are eventually released after the maximum detention period with a formal expulsion order. This order is generally ignored, after which they either move to other EU countries or go underground in Spain and Italy, where they can find jobs in the informal agricultural, construction, and service sectors. A substantial number have obtained residency papers through marriage or regularization campaigns in Italy and Spain.

The commonly used term “transit migrant” is often misleading because many migrants end up staying in North Africa voluntarily or involuntarily. First, some “transit migrants” end up working and staying in Saharan migration hubs along the way without ever reaching the Maghrebi cities along the Mediterranean and Atlantic coast (Oumar Ba and Choplin, 2005; Bensaad, 2003; Boubakri, 2004; Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005; Spiga, 2005). Second, Libya, in particular, has been a migration destination in its own right. Third, a considerable proportion of migrants failing or not venturing to enter Europe prefer to stay in North Africa as a second-best option. Few would rather return to their more unstable, unsafe, and substantially poorer home countries (cf. Barros et al., 2002; CIMADE, 2004; Escoffier, 2006; Goldschmidt, 2006).

Most major cities in the Maghreb, such as Nouakchott, Rabat, Oran, Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, and Benghazi, now harbour sizeable and increasing communities of sub-Saharan migrants as a result of their voluntary and less voluntary settlement (Boubakri, 2004: 4; Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005: 11-12). Despite their irregular and often extremely marginal status, and an increase in internal policing, sub-Saharan migrants and refugees, including an increasing number of those living outside Libya, find jobs in specific niches of the informal service sector (such as cleaning and domestic work), petty trade, construction, agriculture, and fishery (Alioua, 2005; Boubakri, 2004). It often concerns arduous jobs that some Maghrebis shun (cf. Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005: 12). Others try to pursue studies, sometimes also as a means to gain residency status that simultaneously gives them a foothold in local labour markets (Alioua, 2005; Boubakri, 2004). This resembles the beginning of a settlement process.

## 4. QUANTIFYING MIGRATION PATTERNS

### 4.1. Main Origin Countries

It is impossible to give precise figures about the number of West Africans leaving their country each year in search of other destinations within and outside the region. However, by triangulating as many data sources as possible, this section aims to assess the general migration trends in West African migration to North Africa and Europe that occurred over the last decade. Table 1 presents bilateral country-to-country estimates of migrant stocks based on the matrix recently developed by the University of Sussex and the World Bank (cf. Parsons et al., 2005; Ratha and Shaw, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

TABLE 1  
ESTIMATES OF EMIGRANT AND IMMIGRANT POPULATIONS  
IN WEST AFRICA AND NORTH AFRICA

	Population (2000)	Emigrant stock	% population	Immigrant stock	% population	Emigrant- immigrant stock	% net migrant stock
Benin	7,197,000	508,640	7.07	174,726	2.43	-333,914	-4.64
Burkina Faso	11,292,000	1,121,758	9.93	772,817	6.84	-348,941	-3.09
Cameroon	14,856,000	231,169	1.56	136,909	0.92	-94,260	-0.63
Cape Verde	451,000	181,193	40.18	11,183	2.48	-170,010	-37.70
Chad	8,216,000	181,442	2.21	437,049	5.32	255,607	3.11
Cote d'Ivoire	16,735,000	151,755	0.91	2,371,277	14.17	2,219,522	13.26
Gabon	1,272,000	27,330	2.15	244,550	19.23	217,221	17.08
Gambia, the	1,316,000	56,762	4.31	231,739	17.61	174,977	13.30
Ghana	19,867,000	906,698	4.56	1,669,267	8.40	762,569	3.84
Guinea	8,434,000	520,835	6.18	405,772	4.81	-115,063	-1.36
Guinea- Bissau	1,366,000	116,124	8.50	19,171	1.40	-96,953	-7.10
Liberia	3,065,000	89,075	2.91	50,172	1.64	-38,903	-1.27
Mali	11,647,000	1,213,042	10.42	46,318	0.40	-1,166,724	-10.02
Mauritania	2,645,000	105,315	3.98	65,889	2.49	-39,426	-1.49
Niger	11,782,000	437,844	3.72	123,687	1.05	-314,157	-2.67
Nigeria	117,608,000	836,832	0.71	971,450	0.83	134,618	0.11
Senegal	10,343,000	463,403	4.48	325,940	3.15	-137,463	-1.33
Sierra Leone	4,509,000	78,516	1.74	119,162	2.64	40,646	0.90
Togo	5,364,000	222,008	4.14	183,304	3.42	-38,704	-0.72
<b>Total</b>	<b>257,965,000</b>	<b>7,449,740</b>	<b>2.89</b>	<b>8,360,382</b>	<b>3.24</b>	<b>910,642</b>	<b>0.35</b>

<i>North Africa</i>							
Algeria	30,463,000	1,783,476	5.85	242,446	0.80	-1,541,030	-5.06
Egypt	67,285,000	2,399,251	3.57	166,047	0.25	-2,233,204	-3.32
Libya	5,306,000	90,138	1.70	617,536	11.64	527,398	9.94
Morocco	29,231,000	2,718,665	9.30	131,654	0.45	-2,587,012	-8.85
Tunisia	9,563,000	623,221	6.52	37,858	0.40	-585,363	-6.12
<b>Total</b>	<b>141,848,000</b>	<b>7,614,751</b>	<b>5.37</b>	<b>1,195,541</b>	<b>0.84</b>	<b>-6,419,211</b>	<b>-4.53</b>

Source: Calculations based on 2000 population data (UNPD) and bilateral migration estimates compiled by the University of Sussex and the World Bank and adapted by the World Bank. Bilateral migration matrix (updated 7 December 2006) downloaded on 15 January 2007 from [www.worldbank.org/prospects/migrationandremittances](http://www.worldbank.org/prospects/migrationandremittances)

These data should be used with the greatest caution because they rely on data of varying quality and, for some countries, figures have been obtained through estimation. Nevertheless, the data seem to exemplify the varied migration patterns in West Africa, with several countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal) having a higher estimated emigrant than immigrant stock and some countries (Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana, the Gambia) a higher estimated immigrant than emigrant populations. The immigrant and emigrant populations of other countries (Cameroon, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Togo) appear to be roughly in balance.

Some unexpected results seem to be the result of the significant movement of refugees and asylum seekers within the region and the underestimation of emigration to Libya and other North African countries. For instance, Chad might seem an unlikely immigration country, but is, in fact, a major country of asylum hosting at least 224,000 refugees and asylum seekers, mainly from Sudan (see Tables 6 and 7 in the Appendix). On the other hand, this database seriously underestimates not only the number of Chadians, but also Nigeriens and other West Africans living in North Africa (Libya) (see also Table 2). Liberian emigration is also likely to be much higher than the estimated 89,000, which does not apparently include the at least 237,000 Liberian refugees and asylum seekers living abroad, primarily in other West African countries. Their inclusion would drastically increase the actual emigrant population (see Tables 6 and 7 in the Appendix).

Looking at emigrant population as percentage of the total population, emigrant populations seem comparatively low, with the notable exception of Cape Verde (38% of the total population) and, to a lesser extent, Mali (10%), Benin (5%), and Burkina Faso (3%). All West African countries taken together, immigrant and emigrant populations seem roughly in balance. This stands in contrast with North Africa, where these

data suggest strongly negative migration rates for all countries, with the unsurprising exception of Libya. Whereas emigrant populations of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia seem fairly accurate, the actual immigrant population in Libya is likely to be several times higher than the 620,000 mentioned in this database (see Section 4.2).

TABLE 2  
ESTIMATES OF DESTINATIONS OF EMIGRANT POPULATIONS  
FROM WEST AND NORTH AFRICA (%)

	West Africa	Middle Africa	North Africa	Gulf	North West and South Europe	North America	Other
<b>West Africa</b>							
Benin	79.1	8.6	0.0	0.0	3.5	0.3	8.5
Burkina Faso	90.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	0.1	8.5
Cameroon	9.7	42.7	0.0	0.0	31.8	7.0	8.7
Cape Verde	10.2	1.1	0.0	0.0	53.0	16.7	18.9
Chad	13.5	41.7	26.5	5.7	3.4	0.6	8.6
Cote d'Ivoire	35.9	0.1	0.0	0.0	48.4	6.9	8.7
Gabon	24.1	14.6	0.0	0.0	48.9	3.7	8.7
Gambia, the	27.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	51.5	12.2	8.7
Ghana	66.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.3	10.2	9.1
Guinea	84.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.2	1.4	8.6
Guinea-Bissau	56.3	0.1	0.0	0.0	34.6	0.5	8.6
Liberia	24.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.2	51.7	9.1
Mali	82.7	3.8	0.1	0.0	4.5	0.3	8.6
Mauritania	65.6	2.4	0.1	0.2	20.6	2.5	8.6
Niger	79.0	10.2	0.1	0.0	1.8	0.3	8.5
Nigeria	14.1	26.9	3.5	1.7	24.6	19.9	9.3
Senegal	39.3	6.7	0.0	0.0	42.1	3.0	8.8
Sierra Leone	13.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	45.7	31.5	9.2
Togo	65.9	7.4	0.0	0.0	16.3	1.9	8.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>61.2</b>	<b>8.1</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>14.7</b>	<b>6.0</b>	<b>8.8</b>
<b>North Africa</b>							
Algeria	0.1	0.0	0.8	0.1	85.5	2.0	11.5
Egypt	0.4	0.0	15.4	53.0	8.2	7.1	16.0
Libya	0.3	13.9	2.3	0.4	25.6	13.7	43.7
Morocco	0.2	0.0	0.3	0.8	79.2	2.7	16.8
Tunisia	0.0	0.0	12.3	2.0	71.7	2.2	11.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>0.2</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>17.2</b>	<b>57.1</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>15.4</b>

Source: see Table 1.

Table 2 exemplifies the overwhelmingly regional orientation of West African international migration. In Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Togo, over two-thirds of emigrants are believed to live within West and Central Africa. According to the same estimates, over half of emigrants from Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Gabon, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and the Gambia are living in North America or Europe. For the region as a whole, 61.7 per cent of emigrants would live in the region, 8.2 per cent in Central Africa, 0.3 per cent in the Gulf, 14.8 per cent in North, West, and Southern Europe, and 6.0 per cent in North America. Given the fact that data problems are more severe in African countries than in most Western countries due to undercounting of irregular migrants and missing data on migrants in censuses (Parsons et al., 2005), it is likely that the actual level of intra-regional migration is considerably higher, according to some estimates up to seven times more than the volume of migration from West Africa to the rest of the world (OECD, 2006b). Thus, despite the recent diversification of West African migration, it is important to emphasize that intra-regional migration remains far more important than migration from West Africa to the rest of the world.

Recent data on legal immigrant stocks in OECD countries presented in Figure 1 give new insights on the relative share of West African countries in intercontinental migration to Europe and North America. These data are likely to underestimate the true size of migration population as they do not include irregular migrants, and because not all receiving countries register relatively unimportant countries of origin separately. They are furthermore based on country of birth information and therefore do not include the second generation.

In absolute numbers, Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal predominate in migration to Europe and North America. They would represent 25.5, 16.4, and 12.2 per cent of all West African migrants living in OECD countries, respectively. Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, and Cameroon also have more than 50,000 registered migrants living in OECD countries. If we calculate the emigrant population as percentage of the total population, which indicates the relative importance of emigration, the picture changes quite radically. For instance, registered Nigerian migrants in OECD countries only represent 0.2 per cent of its total estimated total population of 118 million in 2000. Generally, migration to OECD countries is at relatively low levels, and only Guinea-Bissau (2.4%), the Gambia (1.8%), Liberia (1.6%), Senegal (1.4%), Sierra Leone, Gabon, and Ghana (all at 1% each) have emigrant stocks of at least one per cent. The

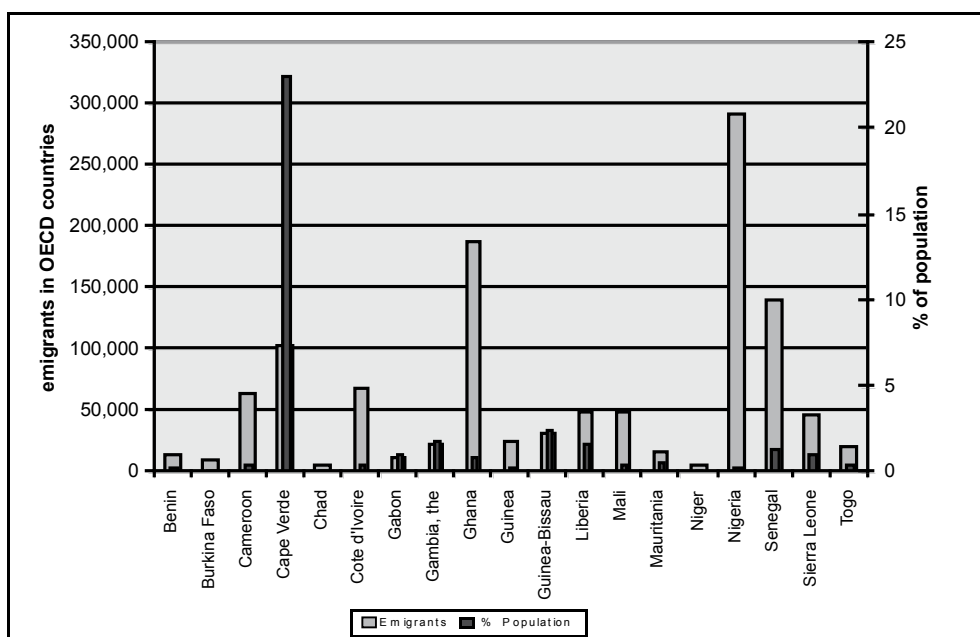


notable exception to this rule is Cape Verde, with an estimated 23.1 per cent of its population living in OECD countries.

These data confirm that West African migration to Europe is relatively modest, certainly in comparison with North Africa. This is exemplified by Figure 2, which compares the absolute and relative importance of migration from a selected number of North and West African countries. Registered Moroccan migrants (1.6 million out of a population of 29 million) alone already outnumber all registered West Africans (1.2 million out of a population of 258 million) living in OECD countries.

FIGURE 1

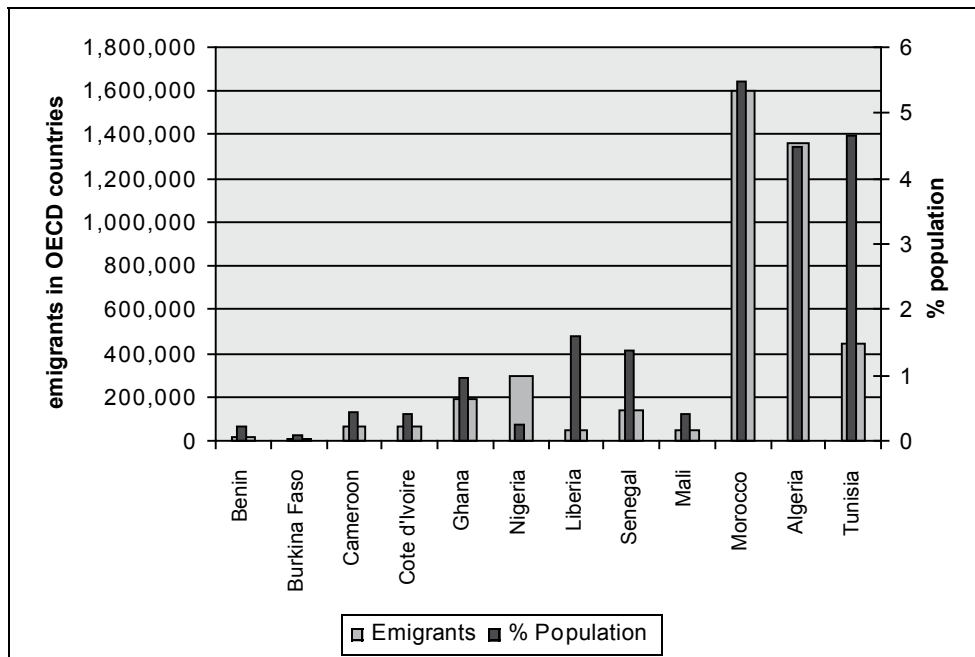
WEST AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS IN OECD COUNTRIES, ABSOLUTE NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION OF ORIGIN COUNTRIES (AROUND 2000)



Source: Own calculations based on OECD database on immigrants and expatriates (updated in November 2005); downloaded on 15 January 2007 from [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org). Data sources are population censuses or population registers, mostly dating back to 2000-2001.

FIGURE 2

IMMIGRANTS IN OECD COUNTRIES FROM SELECTED SUB-SAHARAN AND NORTH AFRICAN COUNTRIES IN ABSOLUTE NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION (AROUND 2000)



Source: see Table 1.

## 4.2. North African Destination and Transit Countries

Available estimates suggest that more sub-Saharan Africans live in North Africa than in Europe. Because of the irregular or unregistered character of most migration, official North African data sources show unrealistically low estimates of West African immigrant populations in the region. Libyan local authorities estimate the number of legal foreign workers at 600,000, while irregular immigrants are estimated to number between 750,000 and 1.2 million (Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005: 6; EC, 2004a). Another source claims that Libya hosts 2 to 2.5 million immigrants (including 200,000 Moroccans, 60,000 Tunisians, 20,000 to 30,000 Algerians, and 1 to 1.5 million sub-Saharan Africans), representing 25 to 30 per cent of its total population (Boubakri, 2004: 2). Pliez (2004) estimated the number of sub-Saharan Africans in Libya at 1.5 million. This population would be dominated by 500,000 Chadians and an even higher number of Sudanese (Drozd and Pliez, 2005: 64).

According to official estimates, 100,000, predominantly Senegalese and, to a lesser extent, Malians would live in Mauritania (Oumar Ba and Choplin, 2005: 28), also commonly but misleadingly referred to as a transit country. Real figures are likely to be higher. Based on data on the migration-propelled growth of cities in Saharan Algeria (Spiga, 2005), the number of resident sub-Saharan migrants in Algeria is at least 60,000, although the real number is likely to be significantly higher. While there is much uncertainty, Morocco and Tunisia probably house a growing sub-Saharan immigrant communities of about one to several tens of thousands (Alioua, 2005; Boubakri, 2004; Collyer, 2006; Goldschmidt, 2006).

TABLE 3  
MAIN OECD DESTINATION COUNTRIES OF WEST AFRICA-BORN MIGRANTS  
(AROUND 2000)<sup>a</sup>

Destination	Number of migrants	Percentage
US	351,025	29.8
France	298,302	25.3
UK	176,223	15.0
Italy	82,018	7.0
Portugal	68,000	5.8
Spain	51,174	4.3
Canada	41,450	3.5
Netherlands	35,978	3.1
Belgium	14,691	1.2
Switzerland	12,147	1.0
Ireland	10,559	0.9
Other	35,834	3.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,177,401</b>	<b>100.0</b>

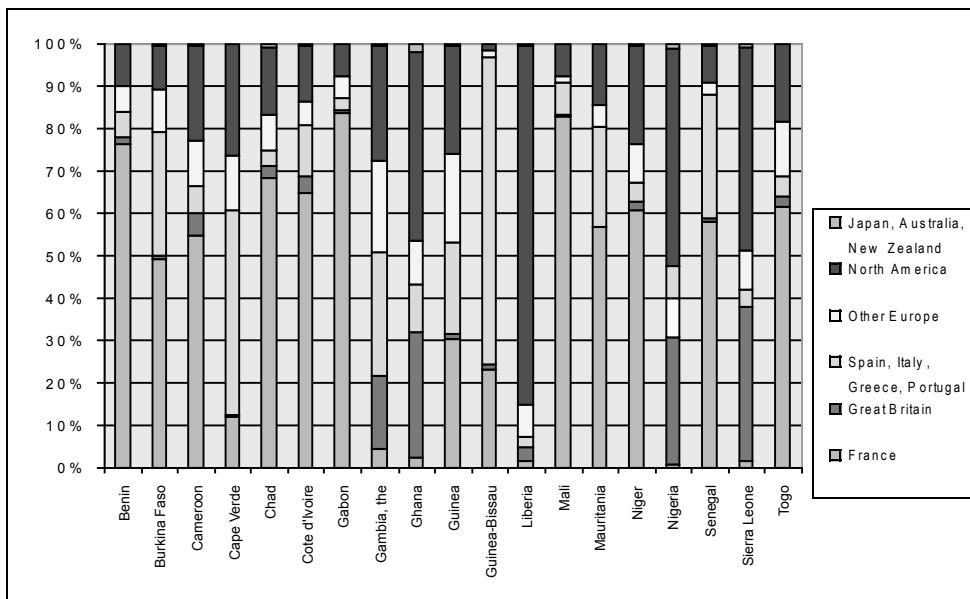
Source: Own calculations based on OECD database on immigrants and expatriates (updated in November 2005); downloaded on 15 January 2007 from [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

### 4.3. European Destination Countries

Data from OECD countries presented in Table 3 show that France, UK, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands are the most important European destination countries for West African migrants. However, these figures obscure recent dynamics, in which Italy and Spain have emerged as the most important destinations for new migrants to Europe. Figure 3 gives some additional insights on the dominant migration destinations within the OECD for each West African country. It shows that emigration from several countries still largely follows colonial patterns. For instance, two-thirds to three-quarters of migrants from Benin, Chad, Gabon, and Mali live in France.

Likewise, migration from Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and, to a lesser extent, the Gambia, is predominantly oriented towards the UK and the US. Due to their specific histories of colonialism and foreign dominance, migrants from Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau are predominantly living in Portugal and Liberians in the US. Figure 3 suggests that recent migration to Spain and Italy has been relatively important for Senegal, the Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, and Burkina Faso.

FIGURE 3  
DESTINATIONS OF WEST AFRICA-BORN IMMIGRANTS IN OECD COUNTRIES,  
BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



Source: Own calculations based on OECD database on immigrants and expatriates (updated in November 2005); downloaded on 15 January 2007 from [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org) (see Table 8 in the Appendix for absolute figures).

In absolute numbers, the most important origin countries of migrants in southern Europe are Cape Verde (51,000; mainly in Portugal), Senegal (41,000), Nigeria (26,000), Guinea-Bissau (24,000; mainly in Portugal), and Ghana (21,000). Benin, Chad, Gabon, Niger, and Togo have particularly small registered expatriate populations living in southern Europe (less than 1,000) (for further details, see Table 8 in the Appendix).

TABLE 4  
REGISTERED FOREIGN-BORN MIGRANT POPULATIONS IN MAIN EUROPEAN  
RECEIVING COUNTRIES

Origin country	Spain (padrón data 1/1/2006)	Italy (official foreign residents) 31/12/2005	France (foreign born population, 1999 census)	UK (foreign born) 2001 census	Portugal (foreign born) 2001 census	Netherlands (foreign born) 2007 estimates	Total
Benin	n.a.	1,762	8,375	239	26	219	10,621
Burkina Faso	n.a.	7,949	2,796	99	2	288	11,134
Cameroon	3,326	5,529	26,890	3,233	58	1,559	40,595
Cape Verde	2,508	3,955	11,938	328	44,964	11,453	75,146
Chad	n.a.	115	1,864	183	18	76	2,256
Cote d'Ivoire	1,446	14,378	29,879	2,794	92	797	49,386
Gabon	n.a.	156	5,794	135	72	453	6,610
Gambia, The	12,663	650	970	3,924	25	75	18,307
Ghana	12,068	34,499	4,069	56,112	54	12,196	118,998
Guinea	7,525	1,813	5,704	265	297	2,191	17,795
Guinea-Bissau	4,797	258	5,882	381	21,435	217	32,970
Liberia	758	1,165	586	1,583	31	1,996	6,119
Mali	13,834	702	35,978	121	44	137	50,816
Mauritania	8,410	568	8,237	28	31	349	17,623
Niger	n.a.	714	1,247	96	n.a.	263	2,320
Nigeria	26,501	34,310	1,978	88,378	146	4,754	156,067
Senegal	31,507	57,101	53,859	723	631	816	144,637
Sierra Leone	1,165	964	520	17,048	44	4,810	24,551
Togo	n.a.	2,109	10,598	553	30	1,136	14,426
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>126,508</b>	<b>168,697</b>	<b>217,164</b>	<b>176,223</b>	<b>68,000</b>	<b>43,785</b>	<b>800,377</b>

North Africa							
Algeria	43,719	20,202	575,740	10,670	189	3,801	654,321
Egypt	2,588	58,879	16,386	24,700	102	11,147	113,802
Libya	n.a.	1,523	988	9141	11	533	12,196
Morocco	487,942	319,537	521,059	12,348	1354	168,099	1,510,339
Tunisia	1,656	83,564	201,700	3,070	53	4,119	294,162
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>535,905</b>	<b>483,705</b>	<b>1,315,873</b>	<b>59,929</b>	<b>1,709</b>	<b>187,699</b>	<b>2,584,820</b>

Other Africa	23,906	42,586	159,073	n.a.	n.a.	56,824	282,389
Europe	1,593,675	1,261,964	1,934,758	n.a.	n.a.	620,400	5,410,797
North America	41,887	16,779	46,038	n.a.	n.a.	25,906	130,610
Latin America	1,367,989	238,882	81,306	n.a.	n.a.	308,665	1,996,842
Asia	192,323	454,793	550,166	n.a.	n.a.	354,016	1,551,298
Oceania	2,380	2,486	4,149	n.a.	n.a.	7,004	16,019
Apatride	n.a.	622	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	622
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,884,573</b>	<b>2,670,514</b>	<b>4,308,527</b>	<b>4,865,563</b>	<b>651,472</b>	<b>1,604,299</b>	<b>17,984,948</b>

Sources: www.ine.es (Spain), www.istat.it (Italy), www.ined.fr (France), OECD (United Kingdom and Portugal), www.cbs.nl (Netherlands).

Table 4 displays the most recently available data on registered West African-born migrant populations in the six main European receiving countries.<sup>5</sup> The data reveal that, although France still hosts the largest estimated number of legal West African immigrants, the recent Spanish and Italian figures are much higher than the OECD figures suggest. Genuine figures are believed to be substantially higher because of the irregular status of many migrants (cf. Mazzucato, 2005). Although West Africa is the most important origin region of sub-Saharan migrants in Europe, the data confirm that West African migration is comparatively modest compared with North African migration and, recently, migration from Eastern Europe (for West Europe as a whole) and Latin America (mainly to Portugal and Spain).

These data also exemplify that some West African countries participate disproportionately in migration to Europe. Ghana and, in particular, Senegal stand out as countries that have broken away from colonial migration patterns and from where a substantial increase and diversification in migration to (southern) Europe (and the US) has taken place. Senegalese-born immigrants are increasingly present in Spain and, particularly, Italy. The Senegalese form an immigrant group almost as big as the Nigerian-born population abroad,<sup>6</sup> although Nigeria's population is 11 times higher than Senegal's population. The Ghanaian community has particularly grown in Italy, and, to a lesser extent, in Spain and the Netherlands.<sup>7</sup>

Other West African countries that have experienced an increase and diversification in migration to Europe are the Burkina Faso (to Italy), Côte d'Ivoire (to France and Italy), Gambia (to Spain), Mali (to Spain and France), and Nigeria (to Spain and Italy). European-bound migration from other West African countries and, in particular, Benin, Chad, Guinea, Niger, and Togo has remained extremely limited. In particular, migrants from Chad and Niger almost exclusively migrate within West Africa or to Libya, and hardly migrate to Europe at least until very recently.

## 4.4. Trans-Saharan and Trans-Mediterranean Migration

### General estimates

It is important to make a distinction between trans-Saharan and trans-Mediterranean migration flows. Largely because of their irregular character, we can only make tentative estimations on gross trans-Saharan flows of West African migrants to North Africa. Empirical field studies seem to generate more reliable data than official statistics could. One empirical case study estimated that the yearly number of Africans migrating over the main trans-Saharan migration route between Agadez in Niger to Sebha in Libya amounted to “some tens of thousands”, of which one to two-thirds had the *intention* to migrate to Europe (Brachet, 2005). Simon (2006) estimated that about 60,000 to 80,000 migrants would take this route every year, although the source of this estimate is not clear. According to Libyan authorities, each year, between 75,000 and 100,000 foreign nationals would enter the country (EC, 2004b). It has also been claimed that between 65,000 and 120,000 sub-Saharanans would enter the entire Maghreb yearly, of which 70 to 80 per cent would go to Libya and 20 to 30 per cent to Algeria (Simon, 2006).

With regards to Mediterranean sea crossings, UNHCR (2005) estimated that in 2004, 120,000 irregular migrants have attempted to cross the *entire* Mediterranean each year, including 35,000 persons of sub-Saharan origin, although this number would be higher if we include Atlantic crossings to the Canary Islands. International Centre for Migration Policy Development estimated that about 100,000 migrants would cross the Mediterranean (irregularly) each year, an estimated 30,000 of which would be of sub-Saharan origin, and 45,000 of which would be from northern Africa or eastern Mediterranean (Simon, 2006).

Nevertheless, the empirical basis of such estimates is not always entirely clear. In the remainder of this section, we will use data on apprehensions, regularizations, and migration statistics to assess the magnitude and recent evolution of irregular migration from West Africa to North Africa to Europe.

### Apprehension data

Data on apprehensions of migrants along the border by either North African or European law enforcement agencies are the most commonly used data source to estimate irregular migration flows. However, apprehension figures are sensitive to control levels, the effectiveness with which smugglers operate, and problems of

counting the same migrants several times. Moreover, apprehension figures only say something about irregular entries, and nothing about the larger group entering Europe legally. Finally, apprehension figures say little about irregular entry by other means than *pateras* and *pirogues*, which are the typical subject of apprehensions. Therefore, such data should be used with great caution.

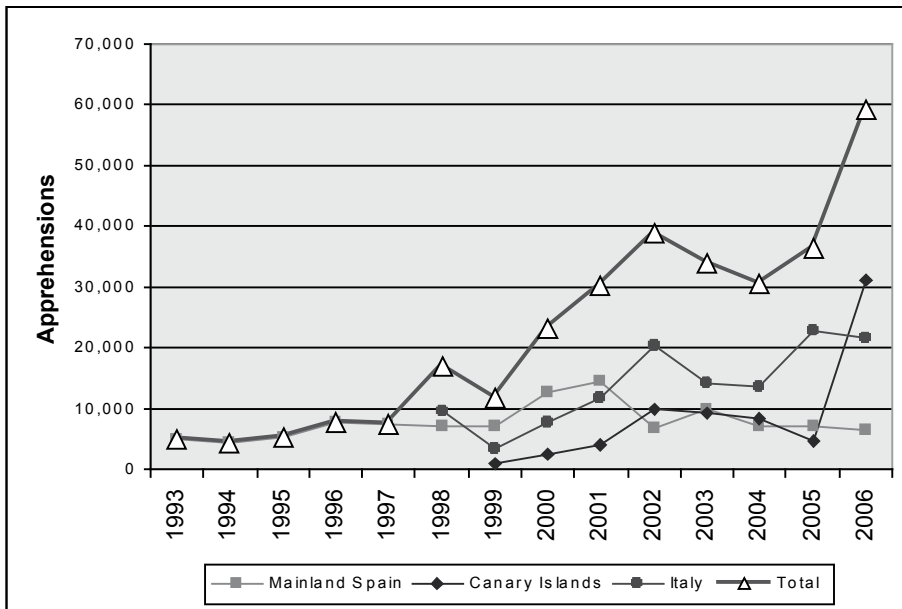
Libyan authorities claim that in 2005, they apprehended some 40,000 people seeking to enter Italy, in comparison to 43,000 in 2003 and 54,000 in 2004. According to International Centre for Migration Policy Development (cited in EC, 2004b), 50 per cent of migrants transiting through Agadez in Niger would be from Nigeria, 15 per cent from Niger, 30 per cent from Ghana, and 5 per cent from other countries. In the same year, Algerian authorities would have arrested over 3,000 migrants, possibly mainly from Niger and Mali, while Tunisian authorities claim to have apprehended an average number of 8,000 irregular migrants annually between 1998 and 2003 (UN-ODC, 2006). The Moroccan authorities claim to have apprehended 30,000 irregular migrants in 2005 (source: Ministère de l'Intérieur). This would mean that Maghrebian authorities together apprehend approximately 80,000 migrants each year.

Over half of the 27,000 migrants apprehended by Moroccan police in 2004 would be of West African origin, with most migrants coming from the Gambia, Ghana, Mali, and Senegal, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Other important groups are Algerians, Asians, and Congolese. About two-thirds of the 20,000 irregular migrants apprehended by Libyan authorities between 2000 and 2003 would also be of West African origin, with a dominance of migrants from Chad, Niger, Mali, and Ghana, respectively. Other migrants are mainly from Sudan. Over 90 per cent of migrants apprehended by Algerian authorities between 2002 and 2003 is of West African origin, with most migrants originating from Niger, Mali, and Guinea (Simon, 2006). All Maghreb countries taken together, the most important nationality of apprehended migrants seems to be Mali, followed, in order of importance, by Niger, Guinea, Chad, Ghana, Senegal, and Liberia.

Since the introduction of visa requirement for Maghrebi by Italy and Spain in 1990 and 1991, respectively, and the subsequent end of free seasonal and circular labour migration to these countries, migrants started to migrate illegally to the European continent.<sup>9</sup> Figure 4 reveals an increasing trend in the number of apprehensions since 1999. The increase in apprehensions might partly or mainly reflect intensified border patrolling. It is therefore less clear to what extent this indicate a real increase in irregular boat migration, although Carling (2007) hypothesized that the increase in apprehensions rather reflects the post-2000 increase in migration than more effective controls.



FIGURE 4  
 APPREHENSION FIGURES OF IRREGULAR MIGRANTS  
 IN SOUTHERN EUROPE 1993-2006



Sources: See Table 9 in Annex.

However, apprehension data do reveal two other more certain trends: the diversification of crossing points and the increasing sub-Saharan character of this migration. Intensified border controls at the Strait of Gibraltar have led to increasing migration to Italy, the Canary Islands, and, to a lesser extent, Malta. The decrease in apprehensions after 2002, in particular at the Canary Islands, was presented as a success of increasing border controls. However, a steep increase in Italy in 2005 and a particularly sharp increase in apprehensions at the Canary Islands seem to have reversed this trend.

All apprehension figures show an increase in the proportion of mainly sub-Saharan migrants since 2000, who have now overtaken Maghrebis as the largest group crossing to Europe.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in 1996 the 142 sub-Saharan Africans crossing to mainland Spain represented a mere 1.8 per cent of all migrants, this share jumped from 2.0 to 20.3 per cent between 1999 and 2000 (Lahlou, 2005). This share further increased to 41.7 per cent in 2002, 38 per cent in 2003, and 50.6 per cent in 2004 (*El Pais*, 6 October 2002; Simon, 2006). Nine per cent of the migrants apprehended in the Canary Islands in 2004 declared to be from Morocco and 86.8 per cent from other predominantly West African countries. This percentage went up from 11.8 per cent in 1999 to 63.2 per cent in 2000 (Coslovi, 2007). Similar trends can be observed in Italy, where sub-Saharan migrants represented 30 per cent of all migrants apprehended in 2002, although the

shares of East African (in particular from Eritrea and Somalia), Middle Eastern, and Asian migrants are higher than in Spain (Coslovi, 2007; Simon, 2006).

This does not necessarily mean that sub-Saharanans are now the largest group of trans-Mediterranean irregular migrants. Moroccan and other Maghrebi migrants can often migrate through other means (hiding in vans and trucks, using forged documents and tourist visas) through their family networks. This explains that sub-Saharan Africans are more likely to be apprehended.

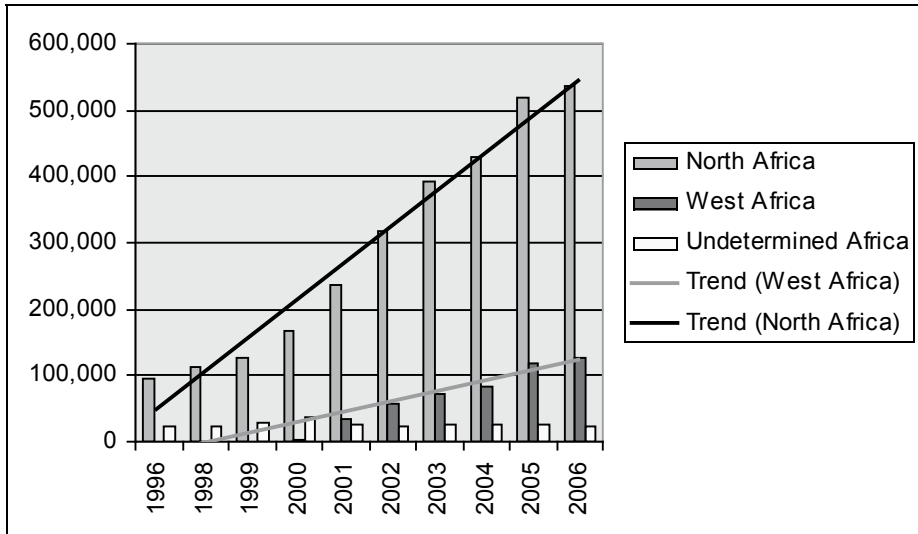
What can we conclude from apprehension figures on total irregular migration movements from West Africa to North Africa and Europe? In a recent report, UNODC (2006) added up the apprehension figures from North African and European authorities (over 100,000 per year), multiplied this by two (assuming that one-third of illegal entries are detected), and concluded on that basis that “at least 200,000 to 300,000 Africans enter Europe yearly illegally, while another 100,000 try and are intercepted and countless others lose their way or their lives” (UNODC, 2006: 5).

Although these estimates immediately started circulating in the press as “facts”, this is in fact a highly inaccurate estimate. The cited UNODC study entirely ignores reliability issues, the fact that migrants may be apprehended several times, and the fact that North Africa is a migration destination in its own right, which should preclude adding up North African and European apprehension figures.

## **Evolution of regular and irregular migration stocks in Spain**

A second, indirect but probably more accurate method to estimate regular and irregular migration flows is to study the evolution of the numbers of regular West African migrants in the main European destination countries over the past decade. This is a useful exercise because irregular and regular migrations are likely to be correlated (Allasino et al., 2004), and because increases in regular migrant stocks largely reflect regularization of formerly irregular migrants. The fact that most irregular migrants can and do register with Spanish municipal registers (*padrón*) provides a unique opportunity to assess the magnitude of irregular migration through comparison of such municipal data with data on migrants possessing a residence permit (Sandell, 2006). Triangulating these two data sources with data from the recent regularizations allows assessing the number of irregular migrants per origin country and the net yearly irregular immigration.

FIGURE 5  
 NUMBER OF NORTH AND WEST AFRICANS REGISTERED  
 IN SPANISH MUNICIPALITIES (*PADRÓN*)



Source: Own calculations from INE (data accessed on 20 February 2006 at [www.ine.es](http://www.ine.es))

Figure 5 shows the increase in West and North African populations registered in Spanish municipal registers (*padrón*) between 1996 and 2006. Although North Africans are in the majority, the number of West Africans has increased over the past decade but at a less steep rate as the trend lines shows. Nevertheless, the absolute increase in recent years has been rather spectacular, from 3,200 in 2000 to 127,000 in 2006, or 20,500 per year. These data confirm the hypothesis formulated above that 2000 has indeed been a turning point in irregular West African migration to Europe.

Through careful comparison of the municipal registers with residence permit data, it is possible to estimate how many migrants are without legal status, although the difference between the two registers should not be interpreted as an exact measure of the share of irregular migrants due to different kinds of possible measurement errors (for an elaborate discussion, see Sandell, 2006). Table 5 displays the relevant data for West African and, for comparative purposes, North African migrants in Spain. These data suggest that 41 per cent of West Africans against 20 per cent of North Africans had irregular status at the eve of the regularization in 2005. The analysis strongly suggests that a more recent migration history to Spain is related to a higher proportion of irregular migrants.

TABLE 5  
FOREIGNERS REGISTERED IN SPAIN

Origin country	Registered residence permit 31/12/2004	Municipal registers 01/01/2005	Difference as % of total registered at municipalities	Registered residence permits 31/12/2006	Difference residence permit 2006-2004 as % of 2005 municipal data
Benin	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Burkina Faso	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	522	
Cameroon	1,532	3,254	52.9	2,612	33.2
Cape Verde	2,143	2,765	22.5	2,350	7.5
Chad	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Cote d'Ivoire	552	1,340	58.8	1,042	36.6
Gabon	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Gambia, The	12,834	11,601	-10.6	16,177	28.8
Ghana	4,633	10,165	54.4	8,989	42.9
Guinea	3,151	7,049	55.3	5,238	29.6
Guinea-Bissau	2,424	4,513	46.3	3,228	17.8
Liberia	315	1,099	71.3	301	-1.3
Mali	4,465	11,794	62.1	11,187	57.0
Mauritania	5,723	8,909	35.8	7,843	23.8
Niger	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Nigeria	11,248	25,611	56.1	19,074	30.6
Senegal	19,343	27,880	30.6	28,560	33.1
Sierra Leone	575	1,707	66.3	600	1.5
Togo	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
<b>Total</b>	<b>68,938</b>	<b>117,687</b>	<b>41.4</b>	<b>107,201</b>	<b>32.5</b>
<b>North Africa</b>					
Algeria	27,532	46,232	40.4	39,433	25.7
Egypt	1,683	2,610	35.5	2,249	21.7
Libya	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Morocco	386,958	468,797	17.5	543,721	33.4
Tunisia	1,013	1,693	40.2	1,327	18.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>417,186</b>	<b>519,332</b>	<b>19.7</b>	<b>586,730</b>	<b>32.6</b>

Source: Own calculations based on INE and Secretaría de Estado de Inmigración y Emigración (data accessed on 20 February 2006 at [www.ine.es](http://www.ine.es) and [extranjeros.mtas.es/](http://extranjeros.mtas.es/)).

The last two columns of Table 5 assess the effects of the last regularization, which started in 2005. Between 2004 and 2006, the number of legal immigrants from registered West African countries increased from 69,000 to 107,000, which is an increase of 32 per cent compared to the 118,000 estimated legal and irregular residents on

1 January 2005. Of the 3,022,000 foreigners possessing a Spanish residence permit on 31 December 2006, 709,000 were of African origin. An approximate number of 107,000 migrants were West African, or 4.6 per cent of all non-EU immigrants living in Spain, whereas North Africans account for 24.9 of the total non-EU population. West Africans have also not figured very prominently in earlier Spanish regularizations. In 1985-1986, 1991, 1996, and 2000, Moroccans were the dominant group, with Ecuadorians taking over this position in the 2001 and 2005 regularizations (OECD, 2006a).

Using the same data, Sandell (2006) assessed that Africans account for 12 per cent (91,000) of Spain's irregular migrant stock of about 765,000, of which half were Moroccans. He estimated that yearly immigration to Spain has been remarkably stable over the 2001-2006 period at a level of 650,000 per year, that there has been no major "pull effect" of the recent regularization, and that total irregular migration has been around 447,000 in 2005.

Taking into consideration that African migrants account for 12 per cent of the total number of estimated irregular migrants, and assuming that this reflects their share in current migration flows, it can be estimated that the total number of Africans successfully entering Spain in an illegal way hover around 54,640 ( $447,000 * 0.12$ ) per year. During the 2005 legalization campaign, West Africans only accounted for 28 per cent of the total African population. If we apply this to the above estimates, this would correspond to an annual net irregular immigration from West Africa of 15,000 each year, suggesting that three-quarters of the 20,500 yearly increases of West Africans are through irregular migration. Because this figure also includes overstayers, the actual number of irregular entries into Spain should be lower.

At first sight, these estimates seem at odds with the more than 35,000 apprehensions of predominantly sub-Saharan migrants in Spain over 2006, up from 11,781 in 2005. This seems to corroborate the hypothesis that there has indeed been a recent increase in irregular entries, in particular through the increasing popularity of the direct West Africa-Canary Islands route. Furthermore, if we take into account that many migrants migrate onwards from Spain to other destinations in Europe, the gross irregular immigration movement into Spain is likely to be substantially higher than net irregular immigration. It is therefore important to look also at the evolution of West African populations in other important destination countries.

## **Italy**

Unfortunately, there are no data similar to Spain from Italy, the other main port of entry to Europe. Also in Italy, sub-Saharan citizens form a relatively small but rapidly expanding population. On the basis of regularization data, it has been estimated that the total irregular migrant population is 700,000 (OECD, 2006a). Moroccans dominated the 1987-1988, 1990, and 1999 regularizations, but this position was taken over by Albanians and Romanians in 1998 and 2002, respectively. The only West African country appearing relatively predominantly in the Italian regularizations is Senegal, which is the biggest immigrant group from the region. This also tends to be the dominant West African origin country in regularizations in Spain and Portugal (OECD, 2006a). In Italy, there has been an increase in the number of regular West African citizens from 141,000 in 2003 to 211,000 in 2006, an increase of 23,000 per year (source: [www.istat.it](http://www.istat.it)). Although this only includes the legally residing population, the total West African immigrant population in Italy is significantly higher than in Spain.

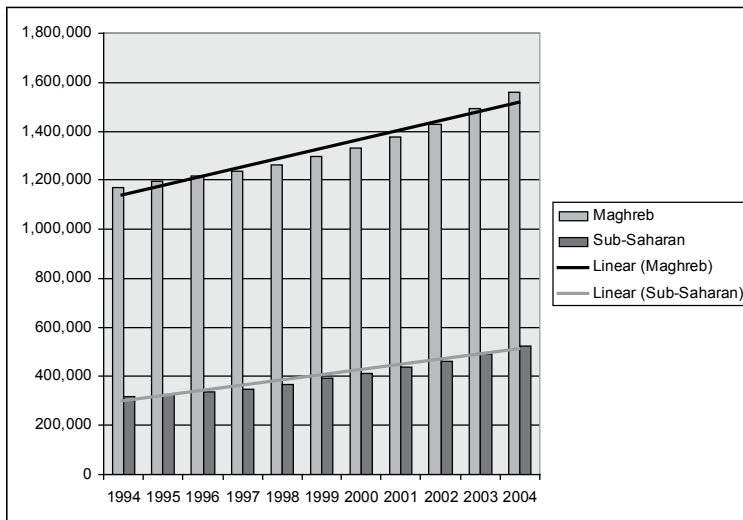
## **Portugal**

On the basis of regularization data, the total irregular migrant population living in Portugal has been estimated at 185,000 (OECD, 2006a). In 2006, the population holding African nationalities is predominantly from the former Portuguese colonies Cape Verde (56,000), Angola (28,000), and Guinea-Bissau (21,000). The combined population of nationals from these countries has increased from 83,450 in 2000 to 105,388 in 2006, or an average increase of 3,660 per year (data for 2006 from Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras). In the Portuguese regularizations of 1992-1993 and 1996, Angolans and Cape Verdians were among the main beneficiaries, but this position was taken over by Ukrainians and Brazilians in the 2001 regularization, mirroring increasing migration from Latin America and Eastern Europe in Spain (OECD, 2006a).

## **France**

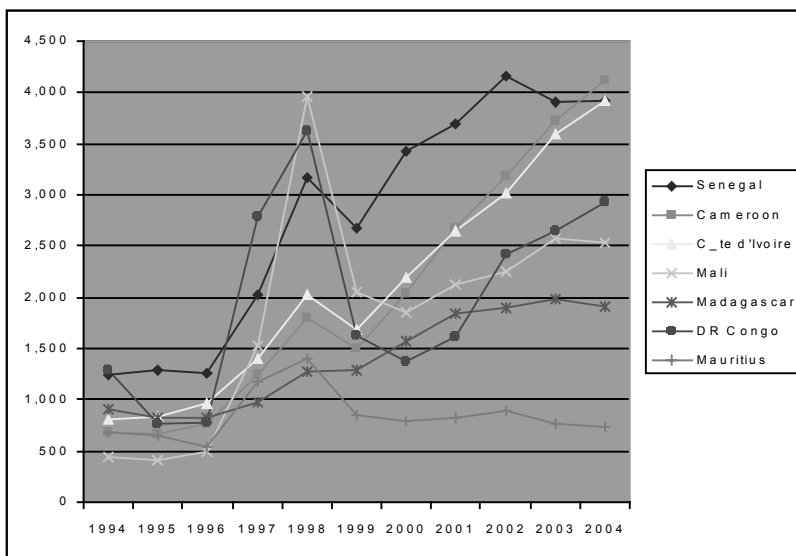
In France, the number of sub-Saharan migrants has increased from 376,000 in 1999 to 570,000 in mid-2004, or an increase of 35,000 per year, of which seven out of ten come from former French colonies (Borrel, 2006). Figure 6 shows that, as in Spain, the growth in absolute number of the sub-Saharan population between 1994 and 2004 has been slower (21,000 per year on average) than the growth of the Maghربي population (37,000 per year). Figure 7 shows that sub-Saharan immigration has remarkably increased since 1996, with the sharpest increases from Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, and Senegal.

FIGURE 6  
ESTIMATES OF THE GROWTH OF THE FOREIGN-BORN AFRICAN  
POPULATION IN FRANCE



Source: Own estimates based of data from [www.ined.fr](http://www.ined.fr) and [www.insee.fr](http://www.insee.fr)

FIGURE 7  
IMMIGRATION RATES OF SELECTED SUB-SAHARAN COUNTRIES TO FRANCE,  
1994-2004

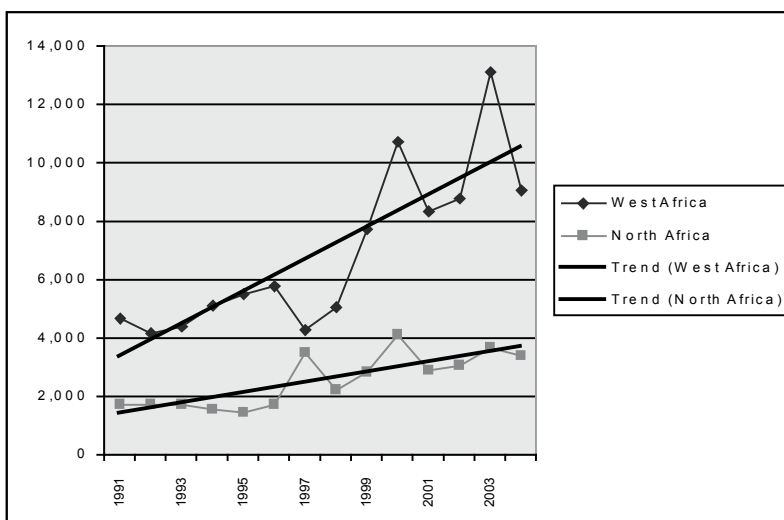


Source: [www.ined.fr](http://www.ined.fr)

## United Kingdom

In line with evidence from other countries, recent data from the UK equally show an increase trend in West African immigration over the past 15 years. These figures only include migration from the main origin countries of Ghana (30,495 immigrants between 1991 and 2004), Nigeria (55,835), and Sierra Leone (10,365). In recent years, total immigration from these counties has been around 10,000 annually (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8  
IMMIGRATION RATES FROM WEST AND NORTH AFRICA TO THE UK,  
1991-2004, BY NATIONALITY



Source: Migration Information Source, Global Data Center [www.migrationinformation.org](http://www.migrationinformation.org); "West Africa" comprises Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone.

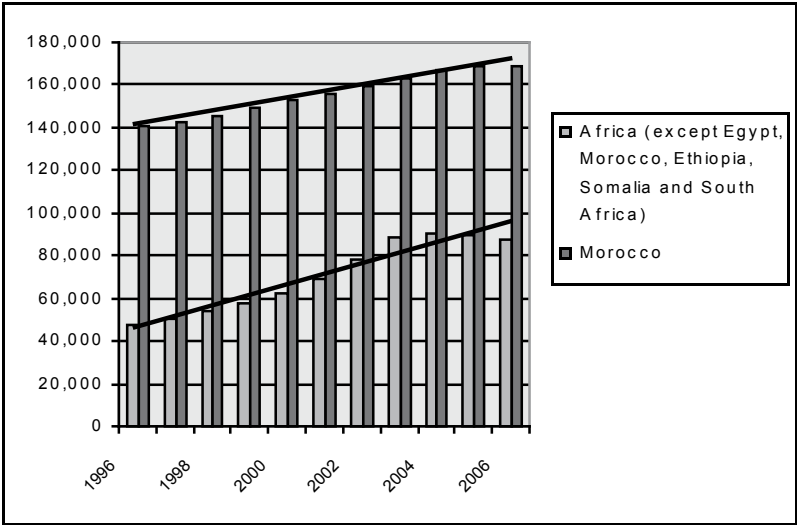
## Netherlands

Data from the Netherlands presented in Figures 9 and 10 suggest a substantial yearly increase in the number of West African-born immigrants since 1996. In fact, averaging 5,000 per year, this increase is faster than, for instance, the increase of the Moroccan-born. It is quite remarkable that immigration of West Africans has been roughly equal to that of Moroccans, a striking change compared to previous migration, where the latter group clearly dominated. Corroborating earlier evidence, there was an increase in West African immigration after 1999. However, after 2002, there has been a remarkable decrease in legal immigration. After 2004, the sub-Saharan



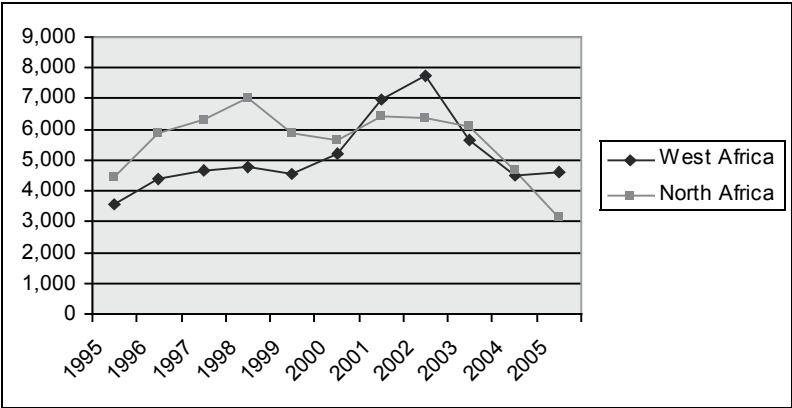
population has even decreased in absolute size. This seems to reflect nation-wide trends of decreasing immigration and increasing emigration in the Netherlands, where hardened policies towards immigration and immigrants have incited immigrant groups such as Ghanaians (and Somalis) to migrate to other European countries (Mazzucato, 2005; Van Liempt, 2007).

FIGURE 9  
GROWTH OF AFRICAN- AND MOROCCAN-BORN POPULATIONS  
IN THE NETHERLANDS



Source: www.cbs.nl

FIGURE 10  
GROSS AFRICAN IMMIGRATION TO THE NETHERLANDS



Source: www.cbs.nl

## 4.5. Estimates of Irregular Migration Flows

Since 2000, the combined registered immigrant population born in West Africa living in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain has increased by approximately 73,000 per year. Taking into account that about one-quarter of registered West Africans is living in the UK, and considering smaller communities in other countries, the total increase is likely to be around 100,000 per year. Because this represents the net increase, the actual annual number of entries is higher. On the other hand, part of this increase does not reflect new entries, but the conversion from irregularity into regularity.

We have estimated net irregular migration from West Africa to Spain at 15,000 each year. Spain's estimated yearly increase of West African migrant populations (20,500) accounts for about 20 per cent of the estimated total yearly increase in Europe. This leads to a maximum estimate of 75,000 ( $15,000 / 0.2$ ) irregular immigrants per year. If we apply the above mentioned survey data by Eurostat/Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (Schoorl et al., 2000), estimating that about one-third of irregular Senegalese and Ghanaian immigrants in Spain and Italy, respectively, have entered the country illegally (compared to two-thirds of overstayers), we reach a provisional estimate of 25,000 successful irregular entries of West Africans each year.

Assuming that the irregular entry for West Africans has increased in importance since the Eurostat/Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute research was completed in the 1990s, the actual number of illegal entries is possibly higher. On the other hand, this estimate is based on Spanish data, while irregular entry is probably less important in the UK and France where West African immigrant populations are already more established. This would lead to lower overall estimates. Although these estimates should be interpreted with extreme prudence because of such uncertainties, our estimate of 25,000 successful illegal entries comes rather close to earlier estimates that 30,000 to 35,000 sub-Saharan Africans (predominantly from West Africa) would successfully cross the Mediterranean irregularly each year (Simon, 2006; UNHCR, 2005). Assuming that 65,000 and 120,000 sub-Saharans enter the entire Maghreb yearly (Simon, 2006), this leads us to estimate that between 20 ( $25,000/120,000$ ) and 38 ( $25,000/65,000$ ) per cent of trans-Saharan migrants eventually cross to Europe. This clearly counters common views that reduce North Africa to a transit zone.

What does this say about apprehension rates? Between 2002 and 2005, European apprehension figures fluctuated between 30,000 and 40,000. Assuming that half of these migrants are from sub-Saharan Africa, this leads to an annual interception rate of 15,000 to 20,000. From this, it appears that between one-half and two-thirds of

irregular entries goes undetected. However, the estimated 25,000 successful irregular entries also include the many West Africans migrants who are apprehended but eventually released. Being detected is not equal to being unsuccessful. So, the actual rate of undetected entries seems to lie lower.

It is important to stress that the underlying assumptions (in particular about the proportion of migrants attempting illegal entry versus other methods) of these estimates are fundamentally uncertain. However, it does seem rather certain that the total number of successful irregular entries of West Africans into the EU should be counted in the order of several tens of thousands rather than hundreds of thousands. According to current estimates, these irregular entries would represent approximately one-third of total West African (regular and irregular) immigration of around 100,000. Although irregular immigration has apparently accelerated in 2006 with increasing boat migration from West Africa to the Canary Islands, this clearly dispels any idea of an African exodus.



## 5. RESEARCH GAPS AND NEEDS

There are still huge gaps in the knowledge of irregular and regular migration from West Africa to North Africa and Europe. This is partly related to the lack of awareness of existing studies, but mostly to a genuine lack of relevant empirical material. So far, research on the issue has focused on mapping migration routes, estimating the magnitude of migration flows, and studying smuggling and (supposed or real) trafficking methods. Many existing publications rely on secondary sources such as media reportage and government sources. They are often written with a focus on finding “solutions”, that is, to curb irregular migration rather than to genuinely understand the process of migration and the experiences, motives, and concrete livelihoods of the migrants themselves. Hence, it is of paramount importance to achieve a more socially embedded understanding of the phenomenon (see also Van Liempt, 2007: 46).

There is an urgent need for detailed empirical studies combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies that can throw a more informed light upon the life and migration histories, motivations, perceptions, and actual livelihoods of West African migrants living and working in North Africa and Europe. Such empirical work should enhance insight into their complex and changing individual motivations to migrate that go beyond reductionist macro-level push-pull models. It should also focus on the extent to which and how migrants are able to build up decent livelihoods in their places of temporary or more long-term settlement as well as the use they make of transnational network to achieve such aims.

The micro-empirical case-studies that have been conducted among sub-Saharan migrants in North Africa, mainly in Morocco (cf. Alioua, 2005; Escoffier, 2006), have yielded some very useful insights, but evidence is still scarce, scattered, and often anecdotal. Moreover, most empirical work has focused on refugees, asylum seekers, trafficked persons, and other migrants “in crisis”. Virtually nothing is known about the lives of the bulk of “normal” migrants, such as the numerous Chadian, Ghanaian, Malian, Nigerien, Nigerian, and Senegalese migrants who pass largely unnoticed.

We know particularly little about their position on North African labour markets. It is too easily and erroneously assumed that all migrants in North Africa are “in transit”, while it is known that they tend to stay for increasingly longer periods and do find work in North African countries—for instance, in construction and agriculture for men, and in domestic services for women.

The fact that this work is often precarious and that many migrants aim at migrating to Europe does not necessarily mean that these migrants will not settle for longer periods. It is still unclear to what extent and how West and Central African migrants in North Africa are involved in the process of settling and social and economic integration, and how this relates to their future aspirations to migrate to Europe or elsewhere. The gender dimension is equally ignored: to what extent are women migrating individually as family migrants, and what is their role in the migration process and transnational livelihoods?

There are similar gaps in understanding the position of recent (irregular) West African immigrants in the labour market of Europe. Although we do know that they massively work in the formal and informal agricultural, construction, and service sectors, much less is known about their personal experiences. How do restrictive immigration policies, racism, and their economic, social, and legal marginalization affect their process of integration? How does this affect their future (return) migration plans and social and economic involvement with their countries of origin? To what extent are there transnational interactions between family and community members living in West Africa, North Africa, and Europe? Finding answers to such crucial questions is important in order to achieve a better understanding of the nature, causes, and consequences of this migratory phenomenon.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Over the last 15 years, there has been incontestable increase in regular and irregular migration of West Africans to the Maghreb and Europe. Nevertheless, this study showed that trans-Mediterranean migration from Africa to Europe is not as new and massive as is commonly perceived. There is also no evidence that irregular migration from Africa to Europe is growing at an “alarming” rate. The available empirical evidence also dispels the general image of a massive exodus of desperate Africans fleeing war and poverty, who, in search of the European “El Dorado”, fall victim to merciless and unscrupulous smugglers and traffickers who deceive them about the perils of the journey through desert and sea.

While there are still major gaps in research on this issue, the preceding analysis of existing data and empirical studies on trans-Saharan and trans-Mediterranean migration revealed the following patterns and trends.

- Although there has been an increase in trans-Saharan and trans-Mediterranean migration to the Maghreb and Europe, intra-regional migration remains far more important than migration from West Africa to the rest of the world.
- West African migration to the EU is relatively modest in comparison with migration from North Africa and Eastern Europe. There are an estimated 800,000 registered West African migrants in the main European receiving countries compared to 2,600,000 North Africans. Moroccan immigrants alone outnumber all West African immigrants in Europe.
- The total annual increase of the registered West African population in Europe is estimated at about 100,000. West African migrants represent about 6.4 per cent of the total registered non-European immigrant populations in the main European destination countries.
- In absolute numbers, Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal predominate in migration to Europe and North America, where also Cape Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, and Cameroon have considerable emigrant populations living in Europe.
- With the exception of Cape Verde, migration rates from West African to OECD countries are relatively low. Only Guinea-Bissau, the Gambia, Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Gabon, and Ghana have at least one per cent of their population officially living in OECD countries.

- While emigration from many West African countries still largely follows colonial patterns, there is an increasing diversification in destinations since the 1990s. In particular, Italy and Spain have emerged as new destinations for West African migrants. Ghana and Senegal stand out as countries that have broken away from colonial migration patterns and from where a substantial increase and diversification in migration to Europe has taken place.
- Since the introduction of visa requirements for North African countries by Italy and Spain in the early 1990s, illegal crossings of the Mediterranean Sea have been a persistent phenomenon. Rather than an increase per se, the major change has been that, since 2000, sub-Saharan Africans have started to join and have now overtaken North Africans as the largest category of irregular boat migrants.
- Apprehension data suggest that intensified border controls at the Strait of Gibraltar have led to a general diversification of crossing points and professionalization of smuggling methods rather than a decline in irregular immigration.
- If possible, North and West Africans avoid entering Europe by perilous crossings on fisher boats and use safer migration methods. The majority of irregular West African migrants have entered Europe legally and subsequently overstay their visas. Many migrants who are intercepted cannot be expelled and are eventually released with a pro forma expulsion order. Despite their difficult situation, most migrants find work and many have recently obtained residency papers through recurrent regularizations.
- It does seem rather certain that the total number of successful irregular entries of West Africans into the EU should be counted in the order of several tens of thousands rather than hundreds of thousands. This study estimated that 25,000 to 35,000 West Africans would successfully cross the Mediterranean and the Atlantic (to the Canary Islands) irregularly each year. This represents a fraction of total immigration to the EU—a total of about 2.6 million people in 2004 among the EU-15 (except Greece) (De Haas, 2006b). From this, it appears that one-half to two-thirds of irregular entries goes undetected.
- The common portrayal of irregular African migrants as “desperate” and impoverished victims of “unscrupulous” traffickers and “merciless” criminal-run smuggling networks is inconsistent with empirical evidence that the vast majority of migrants move on their own initiative and that most are relatively well-off. While trafficking is relatively rare, smugglers tend to be locally based and operate alone or in relatively small, flexible networks.



- It is a common misconception that all or most West African migrants crossing the Sahara to North Africa would be “in transit” to Europe. There are probably still more sub-Saharan Africans living in North Africa than in Europe. Available evidence suggests that between 65,000 and 120,000 sub-Saharan Africans enter the entire Maghreb yearly. This study estimated that between 20 and 38 per cent of these trans-Saharan migrants eventually make the sea crossing to Europe. This clearly counters views that reduce North Africa to a transit zone.
- Libya is an important destination country in its own right, and other North African countries house smaller but growing West and Central African communities. In addition, migrants failing or not venturing to enter Europe often prefer to settle in North Africa as a “second-best option” than to return to their substantially poorer or unsafe origin countries.

This study indicated that alarmist media images and policy discourses tend to overstate the magnitude of irregular migration from Africa to Europe. It also showed how state-led efforts to increase border controls and “externalize” these policies to North and West African countries have had a series of unintended side effects, the most notable of which have been increasing violations of migrants’ rights in North Africa and Europe, a professionalization of migration smuggling methods, and a huge diversification of overland and maritime migration routes. This led to an unintended increase in the area that EU countries need to monitor to “combat” irregular migration. While increasing migrants’ suffering, it is questionable whether increased migration controls and internal policing have actually reduced the total numbers of crossings. The huge length of land and maritime borders alone make it virtually impossible to prevent people from crossing the Sahara, the Atlantic, and the Mediterranean.

While it seems practically impossible to seal off the long Saharan borders and Mediterranean coastlines, it is also questionable whether governments are genuinely willing to do so. Irregular migration is often less unwanted than it seems. European and, increasingly, Maghrebi economies are in need of cheap, irregular labour. At the same time, Maghreb and sub-Saharan states have little genuine interest in curbing migration because they consider migration and remittances as a source of stability and a vital development resource.

Ironically, migration policies aiming at “combating” irregular migration are a fundamental cause of the increasingly irregular character of migration. Similarly, while smuggling is commonly represented as one of the main “causes” of irregular migration, it is rather the result of increasingly restrictive migration policies. Policy making on this issue seem to be caught in a vicious circle: Rather than “solving” ir-

regular migration, increasingly restrictive immigration policies and border controls have produced more “illegality”, which ironically adds pressure to adopt even more restrictive policies (see also Van Liempt, 2007).

Unless exceptional circumstance arise, it is likely that migration from West Africa to the Maghreb and Europe will continue. There is a growing discrepancy between restrictive migration policies and the demand for cheap migrant labour in Libya and Europe. This explains why increasing border controls have rather led to the swift diversion of migration routes and an increase in the risks, costs, and suffering of the migrants involved rather than a decline in migration. As long as no more legal channels for immigration are created to match the real demand for labour, and as long as large informal economies will exist, it is also likely that a substantial proportion of this migration will remain irregular. Policies to “combat illegal migration” not only criminalize migration but are also bound to fail because they are among the very causes of the phenomenon they pretend to combat.

## ENDNOTES

1. This study will focus on migration between West Africa, the ‘greater’ Maghreb (Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya), and West European countries, and only addresses migration occurring to and from Central Africa, Egypt, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa as far it is relevant to understand migration processes in West and North Africa. The paper applies a broad definition of West Africa. Besides all Economic Community of West African States members, Chad, Gabon and Cameroon are also included because of their relevance for West African migrations. Because of its geopolitical position and ethnic composition, Mauritania is difficult to classify as either Maghrebi or West African, and will be considered as both.
2. For instance, Roman (2006) uses the term “transit migration” for Sudanese and other migrants and refugees, who have often been living and working in Cairo for many years or decades.
3. These bilateral migration data are derived by the World Bank from an augmented and updated bilateral migration matrix originally created by the University of Sussex (see Parsons C.R., Skeldon R., Walmsley T.L., Winters L.A., 2005. *Quantifying the International Bilateral Movements of Migrants*, Development Research Centre on Migration, University of Sussex). This database uses national censuses, population registers, national statistical bureaus, and a number of secondary sources (OECD, ILO, Migration Policy Institute, Department for International Development, United Nations Development Programme) to compile bilateral migrant stocks for 162 countries. In an expanded version used for modeling, this database also estimated bilateral information for 64 additional countries for which the censuses had no information on sources of migrants. The World Bank updated the information on bilateral migrant stocks for 56 countries using the most recent census data (Ratha D., Shaw W., 2007. *South-South Migration and Remittances*. Washington: World Bank, Development Prospects Group).
4. Including Cameroon, Chad, Gabon, and Mauritania.
5. For Portugal and the UK, we had to rely on census-based OECD data from 2001. The French figures are based on the 1999 census data, which means that the current numbers are likely to be substantially higher due to recent immigration.
6. Indeed, there is an interesting analogy between Nigeria and Senegal regarding the geographical migratory movements over the last ten years.
7. There is also a substantial Ghanaian population living in Germany (Van Hear, 1998).

8. Source: Euro-Mediterranean Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration online database, [www.carim.org](http://www.carim.org). Accessed on 4 April 2007.
9. It is a common misconception that all or most North African and Turkish “guest workers” migrated legally. For instance, among Moroccans, spontaneous settlement and recruitment by companies have been more important than formal labour recruitment by agencies since the late 1960s. Most entered Europe as tourists, and subsequently overstayed their visas (cf. de Haas, 2003). It was only since Spain and Italy introduced visa requirements, that irregular entry into Europe started to become a major policy issue.
10. This data does not necessarily mean that Sub-Saharanans are now the largest irregular migrant group that crosses the Mediterranean. Migrants from the Maghreb and other migrants often move with other means thanks to their family networks (hidden in vans or trucks, false papers, tourist visas). This explains why it is probably easier to stop Sub-Saharan Africans. It can certainly be applied to the apprehension data of the North Africa authorities which are more inclined to arrest Africans than their own compatriots.

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## APPENDIX

TABLE 6  
REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS, BY COUNTRY OF ASYLUM AND ORIGIN,  
END-2005

Country of asylum / origin	Refugees and asylum seekers in the country	Refugees and asylum seekers from country abroad	Refugee/ asylum seekers immigrants minus emigrants	As percentage of total population
Benin	31,989	683	31,306	0.4
Burkina Faso	1,295	818	477	0.0
Cameroon	58,808	13,876	44,932	0.3
Cape Verde	n.a.	19	n.a.	n.a.
Chad	275,480	51,513	223,967	2.7
Côte d'Ivoire	44,070	24,659	19,411	0.1
Gabon	13,388	138	13,250	1.0
Gambia	7,932	2,340	5,592	0.4
Ghana	59,033	20,783	38,250	0.2
Guinea	67,333	9,097	58,236	0.7
Guinea-Bissau	7,782	1,300	6,482	0.5
Liberia	10,197	237,114	-226,917	-7.4
Mali	13,066	873	12,193	0.1
Mauritania	724	33,955	-33,231	-1.3
Niger	349	1,246	-897	0.0
Nigeria	9,439	36,137	-26,698	0.0
Senegal	23,341	10,521	12,820	0.1
Sierra Leone	60,142	46,397	13,745	0.3
Togo	9,707	58,586	-48,879	-0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>694,075</b> (32,319 asylum seekers)	<b>550,055</b> (59,989 asylum seekers)	<b>144,020</b>	0.1

Source: Own calculations of data in UNHCR, 2005 Global Refugee Trends and UNDP 2000 population data.

TABLE 7  
ESTIMATED REFUGEE POPULATIONS WITHIN WEST AFRICA  
(LARGER THAN 10,000), 2005

<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Country of asylum</b>	
Liberia	Côte d'Ivoire	39,919
Liberia	Ghana	38,684
Liberia	Guinea	54,810
Liberia	Sierra Leone	59,952
Mauritania	Senegal	19,712
Togo	Benin	26,632
Togo	Ghana	14,136
Sudan	Chad	202,266
Central African Rep.	Chad	41,246
Chad	Cameroon	39,303

Source: UNHCR 2005 Global Refugee Trends.

TABLE 8

## ESTIMATED FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION IN OECD COUNTRIES, BY COUNTRY OF BIRTH

	France	Great Britain	Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal	Other Europe	North America	Japan, Australia, New Zealand	Number of Emigrants	% Population (2000 UNPD)	% all West Africans migrants living in OECD countries	Emigration higher educated / all higher educated
Benin	11,986	239	952	908	1,555	31	15,671	0.2	1.3	9.6
Burkina Faso	4,674	99	2,777	938	1,007	25	9,520	0.1	0.8	14.3
Cameroon	36,020	3,233	4,332	7,036	14,749	132	65,502	0.4	5.6	19.9
Cape Verde	12,404	328	50,543	13,272	27,411	28	103,986	23.1	8.8	n.a.
Chad	4,421	183	212	552	1,041	41	6,450	0.1	0.5	n.a.
Cote d'Ivoire	45,231	2,794	8,104	3,894	9,464	143	69,630	0.4	5.9	9.8
Gabon	10,639	135	353	656	932	22	12,737	1.0	1.1	25.2
Gambia, the	1,026	3,924	6,706	5,026	6,284	66	23,032	1.8	2.0	42.4
Ghana	4,376	56,112	21,121	19,954	84,274	3,605	189,442	1.0	16.1	45.7
Guinea	7,836	265	5,627	5,326	6,542	150	25,746	0.3	2.2	n.a.
Guinea-Bissau	7,596	381	23,904	529	511	11	32,932	2.4	2.8	70.4
Liberia	737	1,583	1,305	3,660	41,620	181	49,086	1.6	4.2	24.4
Mali	40,222	121	3,622	784	3,680	79	48,508	0.4	4.1	19.7
Mauritania	9,591	28	3,993	884	2,400	21	16,917	0.6	1.4	n.a.
Niger	3,391	96	258	504	1,290	21	5,560	0.0	0.5	10.5
Nigeria	2,563	88,378	26,435	22,361	150,917	3,190	293,844	0.2	25.0	8.4
Senegal	82,116	723	41,476	3,781	12,739	299	141,134	1.4	12.0	28.6
Sierra Leone	686	17,048	1,985	4,341	22,381	442	46,883	1.0	4.0	33.5
Togo	12,787	553	971	2,708	3,777	25	20,821	0.4	1.8	11.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>297,276</b>	<b>172,299</b>	<b>197,970</b>	<b>92,088</b>	<b>386,290</b>	<b>8,446</b>	<b>1,154,369</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

Source: Own calculations based on OECD database on immigrants and expatriates (updated in November 2005); downloaded on 15 January 2007 from [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org). Data sources are population censuses or population registers, mostly dating back to 2000-2001.

TABLE 9  
 APPREHENSIONS OF UNAUTHORIZED MIGRANTS IN SPAIN, ITALY AND MALTA  
 (1993-2006)

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Mainland Spain	4,952	4,189	5,287	7,741	7,348	7,031	7,178	12,789	14,405	6,795	9,788	7,245	7,066	6,494*
Canary Islands	0	0	0	0	0	0	875	2,410	4,112	9,875	9,388	8,426	4,715	31,000**
Sicily / Lampedusa	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	8,828	1,973	2,782	5,504	18,225	14,017	13,594	22,824	21,400
Calabria	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	873	1,545	5,045	6,093	2,122	177	23	88	282
Malta	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	166	219	24	57	1,686	502	1,388	1,822	n.a.
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,952</b>	<b>4,189</b>	<b>5,287</b>	<b>7,741</b>	<b>7,348</b>	<b>16,898</b>	<b>11,790</b>	<b>23,046</b>	<b>30,171</b>	<b>38,703</b>	<b>33,872</b>	<b>30,676</b>	<b>36,515</b>	<b>59,176</b>

Sources: Lahlou, 2005 (mainland Spain until 1999), Coslovi, 2007 (mainland Spain and Canary Islands since 2000, Sicily/Lampedusa, Calabria, Malta since 2002); Simon, 2006 (Malta until 2001). \* Extrapolated estimate based on 4329 apprehensions until 29 August 2006; \*\* Estimate for 2006 (El País, 27 December 2006).

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