

African mobility as ‘pre-crime: Mobility ‘management’ and the neo-colonial project

By Loren B Landau

Over the past two decades, [European policy-makers have become far more interested in migration within and out of Africa](#). Under their influence, so too have African political leaders. This is understandable. As [economic opportunities become more concentrated in cities](#), many seek futures there. Indeed, [Africa’s cities are among the most rapidly expanding on the planet](#). [Environmental change is also rendering farming and other natural resource-based livelihoods less viable](#) engendering further moves. As rural areas and coastlines are unable to support their populations, people look elsewhere. Sometimes they leave for good, sometimes just long enough to weather the storm. Political persecution and violence also send [millions packing](#). Whether in the long-standing conflicts of the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](#) or more recent insecurity in [Northern Mozambique](#) and elsewhere, life remains unsafe for those who do not move. As such, there are good reasons for this heightened attention to people’s movements. However, what drives European policy and interventions is often [less demography or development than fear of demagoguery](#).

In a global, environmentally and politically precarious world, mobility is part of how people survive and make their futures. Efforts to fix people in space work against those projects. But this is exactly what many political leaders are seeking to do. Since 2015 and the ‘European migration crisis’, the [European Union has spent hundreds of millions of Euros on projects to enable and encourage Africans to stay ‘at home.’](#) What could be wrong with that? As it turns out, plenty. Indeed, the same strategies now being employed to discourage movement are only likely to exacerbate the reasons people need to relocate. What is more, they are reinforcing global forms of governance that reinscribe the racist and colonial geographies of past generations. Let me explain.

Over the past decade, the European Union, Australia, and the United States have driven shifts in global migration governance, most notably with the Global Compacts on [Migration](#) and [Refugees](#). Often framed as a humanitarian gesture or efforts to promote ‘safe and orderly’ migration, this often includes implicit calls to promote the [orderly, regular, and ‘responsible’ movements of people](#). Such language echoes within Europe’s migration pact with Africa and in a series of bi-lateral and multilateral agreements. Underlying many of these are efforts to ensure that people only move when they can do so legally and remain close to home to help build families, communities, and countries.

In practice this is a kind of [‘containment development’](#): a ‘Marshall plan’ like programme for Africa to address the root causes of migration and effectively eliminate the necessity for Africans to seek lives elsewhere. This includes education programmes, vocational training, infrastructure, and other efforts to build opportunity for people within the continent.

Even if efforts to bolster livelihoods are likely to benefit some, the efforts have not stopped there. Supporting this effort are a range of ‘pre-crime’ policing: identifying and correcting those likely to move out of Africa before they do so. This means not only coercive controls like strict borders and detention centres, but an extensive effort to correct [how Africans think about themselves and their place in the world](#). Asserting their duty to protect those who can not protect themselves, this is Europe ‘saving Africans from themselves.’ They claim to be dedicated to protection and perfection: to keeping Africans in place long enough for them to overcome the shortcomings which render them unsuitable for circulation in a global future. Such efforts resonate strongly with the language of the ‘white man’s burden’ that officials and apologists used to justify colonial interference more than a century ago. To be sure, the strategies have changed, but the effects are similar: generating a global, racialised hierarchy where Europeans can move freely in the world, but others cannot.

The EU’s externalisation logic is founded on framing Africans’ mobility projects as ‘misguided’ betrayals of family, community, country, and self. Every desire to move shows immaturity, atavism, and inappropriate adventurism that disqualify Africans from movement into the future that we share. In some ways, European has been dangling movement in front of Africans as a cruel promise. If they will only behave properly and adhere to immigration regulations authored and often imposed by Europe, they can think about becoming full citizens of the world. But meeting these legal and moral standards effectively means building a sedentary life dedicated to ‘development at home’. This is a trap. Moreover, within this scheme, [detention and border death](#) become pastoral and paternalistic, intended to save lives while enabling Africans to realise their utmost potential. All this is achieved in an environment in which decision makers are often [unknown, unreachable, and unaccountable](#) to many of their intended ‘beneficiaries’; geographically distant and shrouded by privatisation, pooled sovereignty, and legal uncertainties.

In limiting the less desirable consequences of Africans ill-behaviour, the EU works with public and private allies across sectors and continents to collect data, speculate on future movements, and pre-empt migration as means of empowering and perfecting Africans. This effort to correct the future in the present, effectively excludes Africans from a shared, global humanity: it pre-codes Africans as

deviants whose much be taken care of, not listened to. Such language allows Europeans to cling to discursively validate (to themselves anyway) their commitments to universal human progress even while excluding millions of people from mobility and full human recognition. The approaches seen today are, in many ways, the extension of centuries of colonial entanglement, formal decolonisation, neo-imperialism and the governmental modes of contemporary capitalism.

What is more, the activities that Europe is seeking to do are only likely to exacerbate the need for Africans to move. [Education and vocation training will boost people's marketability and aspirations but do little to address the economic realities on the ground.](#) Without changes to global systems of trade and resource distribution, how many more plumbers, electricians, or carpenters will Africa need? Instead of building communities at home, these people are likely to move to where the money is. Unfortunately, that often means leaving Africa. Moreover, trying to fix people in place will result in less resilience to climate change and ever stronger police forces, violence, trafficking, and border deaths. This empowers autocrats, encourages repression, and fragments regional trading networks.

To quote the late, grate philosopher Zygmunt Bauman's, "[the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our time.](#)" The value of mobility is now greater than ever. As Europe seeks to create 'responsible' Africans who stay at home, it is excluding them from a collective future. This is the next phase of racist, imperial exclusion that can only be justified by consciously forgetting the historical source of Europe's wealth and power in the colonial adventure. Mobility within Africa will undoubtedly continue with some small number of people finding their ways across deserts and oceans to Europe, the Middle-East or north America. But the future of imagination and mobility will be one in which Africa remains on the edge of global space-time.