

# Book review

Zelege, Meron and Smith, Lahra (eds.), 2024

## **African Perspectives on South–South Migration (1st ed.)**

London: Routledge, 217 pages

ISBN: 978-1-032-43646-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-43651-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-36826-7 (ebk)

eBook ISBN: 9781003368267

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003368267>

### INTRODUCTION

Studies of international migration continue to be framed within the narrative of South–North movement, with academic and policy discourses largely focused on African migrants crossing into Europe or North America. Nonetheless, *African Perspectives on South–South Migration* (2024), edited by Meron Zelege and Lahra Smith, is a timely and needed intervention that shifts thematic focus toward the much more common, yet under-researched phenomenon of South–South migration (SSM), especially in Africa. The book, published by Routledge as part of its Studies on African and Black Diaspora series, gathers a multidisciplinary team of researchers, with many from the Global South, to explain the agency, resilience, and underlying structural constraints driving intra-African migratory flows. The contributors draw from their diverse knowledge out of long years of research in the field to examine migration as a multidimensional process driven by history, geography, gender, networks of knowledge, and flow of resources. The editors and contributors do not see migration through the narrow prism of crisis or victimhood, but, more importantly, the focus is on lived experiences, decision-making agency, and the people's potential for migration. The edited volume also does not only challenge the dominant Eurocentric paradigm but also makes a highly contextual and grounded contribution to theorizing mobility in Africa.

The 217-page book, *African Perspectives on South–South Migration*, is laid out in three thematic sections, each of which develops a unified story about the intricacies and importance of intra-African migration. The book, organized into 11 chapters, balances theory and empirical analysis through case studies carried out to highlight the lived experiences and structural conditions of African migrants who are on the move, not to the Global North, but within the continent itself (the Global South).

## PART I – INTRODUCTION

The volume begins with an introduction in which the editors, Meron Zeleke and Lahra Smith, outline the core argument of the book: South–South migration (SSM), especially the intra-African movement, is numerically preponderant and qualitatively diverse but has been less theorised and sidelined in the international migration scholarship. The editors criticize the prevalent Eurocentric migration discourse and problematize the forced or voluntary migration dualities. They suggest re-framing SSM as a multi-motivational phenomenon that includes economic, social, historical, and cultural phenomena. They suggest the re-conceptualization of transit and destination spaces in the African context.

## PART II – AGENCY IN SOUTH–SOUTH MIGRATION

The second section (Part II) of the book is an exploration of how migrants in Africa are engaged in the negotiation of their movements in ways that do not depict them simply as victims of circumstance. The chapter by Joseph Mujere on informal settlements in Rustenburg, South Africa, reveals how the platinum mine workers in Southern Africa, especially from countries such as Lesotho, Swaziland, and Mozambique, tend to align politically and socially. Besides employment, these migrants also engage with the local administration systems and establish community leadership with the aim of attaining stability and rights. Fana Gebresenbet draws on the Ethiopian setting to deploy the hidden realities of the SSMs that are quite pronounced in the country. In his chapter, he stresses that poverty and conflict are not the only factors that influence Ethiopian migrants, but there are good and strategic decisions that are made under the influence of available information, the democratic experiences of destinations, and the sociocultural expectations. Another example of migration agency is the article by Leander Kandilige, Joseph Awetori Yaro, and Joseph Mensah discussing the Ghana–China migration channel. In their article, they elaborate on the creative ways in which Ghanaian students in China overcome the limiting labor laws and establish informal labor arrangements, like tutoring and leveraging social networks to overcome bureaucratic and financial challenges.

The final contribution to this section by Tirsit Sahldengil is a critique of the ongoing tendency to frame refugees as helpless. Based on ethnographic studies conducted in the Sherkole refugee camp in Ethiopia, Sahldengil foregrounds how the Congolese refugees assertively create the avenues of social integration by invoking the historical connections with the host communities, thus defeating their marginalization and establishing purposeful intercultural relationships.

## PART III – THE FLOWS OF RESOURCES IN SOUTH–SOUTH MIGRATION

Part III reinforces a shift in the analytical gaze from the focus on mobility itself to the movement of resources, both tangible and intangible, that follows and occurs as a result of intra-African migration. Focusing on Ethiopian and Somali aid workers who move

around East Africa, Lauren Carruth explores the practice of humanitarian labor as an example of South-South mobility. She constructs the concept of such individuals as humanitarian nomads who migrate because of professional opportunity, institutional gaps, and the flexible citizenship smartly applied to their activity.

Relatedly, Tebkieta Alexandra Tapsoba and Bonayi Hubert Dabiré explore the transfer of skills in agriculture between Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. Their study highlights that the migrants return home with critical experience that contributes to the sustainable development of rural areas by making rural productivity more effective, thereby complicating the problems associated with simplistic theories of migration built around the concept of brain drain or indirect flows. In the chapter by Dereje Feyissa, ideational and political remittances are examined based on the experience of returning Ethiopians from South Africa. These immigrants import liberal ideals and criticisms of state-led development. They translate those experiences into local activism and small-scale reform efforts back at home. This illustrates that migration may stimulate ideological diffusion and sociopolitical change. The chapter by Johara Berriane points to how migration is related to religion and spatial identity. She employs her analysis of Muslim and Christian migrant groups in Morocco to demonstrate how migrants use religious institutions and symbols to construct a sense of belonging and permanence, establishing so-called transit spaces as spiritual and social destinations. Amina Saïd Chiré and Géraldine Pinaudt criticize the traditional perception of Djibouti as a transit country. They find that the migrants tend to stay in Djibouti voluntarily or are driven by opportunities and engage in its labor economy, social circles, as well as informal economies, making Djibouti a long-term settlement center.

Lastly, Mohamed A.G. Bakhit discusses the shifting identities of the South Sudanese who are migrants and move between internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. His chapter demonstrates how these people navigate across stratified legal and political landscapes both in Sudan and South Sudan to create hybrid identities that resist the fixed categories of states and humanitarian organizations.

## CRITICAL EVALUATION

*African Perspectives on South-South Migration* is a substantial addition to the migration literature as it moves the analytical center of attention, reversing the analytical fixation on African emigration toward the Global North that has long been long-dominant. Among the strengths of this book certainly regards its stern criticism of the Eurocentrism of paradigms that have dominated both academic and political discourse. Instead of perpetuating the stereotypical views of African migrants as victims of either poverty or war, the book prioritizes their agency, rationality, and thoughtfulness about decision-making. Such a shift is not just theoretically bold but ethically urgent, considering the context of, as well as the temper of the rhetoric of migration around the world. The organization of the volume into sections on agency, resource flows, and destination/transit dynamics is quite effective in creating an

internally coherent but topically varied argument. The chapters themselves provide standalone empirical cases to reinforce the greater conceptual trajectory of the book. Interestingly, the editors manage to balance theoretical recognition and the ethnographic research anchoring. Most of the authors are African researchers or those rooted in African research settings, which enhances authenticity, local responsiveness, and epistemic soundness of the analyses. This is particularly relevant in a discipline where the external analysis has been traditionally relied on. Another strength of the book lies in its theoretical basis. Relying on such frameworks as the Aspirations–Capabilities Framework developed by Hein de Haas, and critical reflection on such notions as transit migration, social remittances, and South–South mobility, the volume shifts away from basic binary approaches (war and poverty) and integrates intersectional, multidimensional analysis. The chapters draw on theory not in an abstracted fashion but as a way of making sense of complex social realities, whether in labor migration, in mining towns, ideational flows among returnees, labor mobility in humanitarian labor or the place-making of the religiously-minded.

However, the volume does have its limitations. The main weakness is the uneven depth in the theoretical intensity across chapters. Although a few chapters, like those by Feyissa or Carruth, contain thick conceptual reflections, others are based more on empirical description. Such an approach does not, perhaps, diminish the value of the work as a whole, but does result in an uneven analytical perception and can leave theory-minded readers wishing for a more critical synthesis. Additionally, the political economy of SSM would have been better engaged. Although resource flows and development connections are mentioned, little attention is paid to state-level migration governance, trade regimes, or labor market segments, which are knowable facets of international political economy (IPE) studies. A more thorough examination of the method and means by which African states regulate or encourage migration would have probably added more analytical significance. The other area of criticism is that the book can be considered relatively self-sufficient in its treatment of migration corridors despite its rich empirical domain. More cross-chapter comparison would have shed more light on general patterns, especially of gender, class, or informal economies across geography. As an example, although gendered experiences are noted in several chapters, few of them take them on an in-depth discussion. This, therefore, results to some extent, in a missed opportunity to draw intersectional conclusions across the volume.

Nevertheless, these shortcomings are small relative to what the book achieves as a whole. The fact that it addresses the decolonization of migration knowledge, gives voice to the Global South, and decenters hegemonic discourses is very timely and needed. The book is useful to scholars and practitioners in many fields of study, particularly migration studies, African studies, anthropology, political science, and international development.

## THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The intellectual worth of *African Perspectives on South–South Migration* is that it makes one of the most significant contributions to the theoretical reorientation of migration studies. The volume questions the decades-long intellectual disposition of viewing migration as unidirectional (Global South to the Global North), typically via deterministic economic push and pull theoretical frameworks. Rather, the editors and contributors focus on SSM as an empirical phenomenon as well as a conceptual lens to reimagine mobility, agency, and development in Africa.

One of the main theoretical developments of this book is that it draws directly on the Aspirations–Capabilities Framework by Hein de Haas. A number of chapters are informed by this pattern, in that it can show how migration decisions are not simply a response to structural deprivation but an issue enmeshed within individual aspirations, cultural values, group strategies, and access to the enabling resources. As exemplified in the chapters authored by Gebresenbet and Sahldengil, African migrants will make rational decisions depending on social networks, information at their disposal, as well as their future mobility schemes. The framework enables a more complex analysis and integrates mobility and immobility as a form of agency, a necessary correction to standard models that tend to assume that movement is associated with freedom or success. The volume also has a powerful theoretical intervention in questioning the utility and meaning of the Global South. The editors and contributors approach the term dynamically rather than as a fixed geopolitical category, as one that is contested along lines of shared colonial experiences, uneven development, and intra-continental relations. This is reflected in the manner in which the book locates African migration corridors as not only places of economic interactions, but spaces in which ideological, religious, and epistemic resources are traded. By doing so, the volume adds to a series of scholarly texts that discuss the problems of homogenizing North/South binaries in the global context.

The other notable theoretical advancement in the book includes expanding the concept of remittances outside the scope of financial transactions to what Peggy Levitt (1998) terms social remittances that entail the transmission of skills, values, ideas, and institutional practices. Levitt frames remittances into two categories, financial and social, in which financial remittances relate to flows of cash sent by migrants to their countries of origin. This form of remittance is also called monetary remittance. On the other hand, social remittances involve transactional flows of ideas, identities, behaviors, and social capital. The chapters by Feyissa, Carruth, and Tapsoba and Dabiré portray how the transfer of knowledge, norms, and ideational capital that migrants bring back to their communities of origin realigns development and governance in ways that are minor yet influential. It is this multidimensional perspective of resource flows that enhances an in-depth appreciation of migration as a mechanism of social change. In addition, the contributors criticize what Crawley and Skleparis (2018) call a categorical fetishism, a strict divide between the forced and voluntary migrants or even refugees and economic migrants. The volume has

a more intersectional and flexible definition of migrants that reflects reality. Such a strategy increases the analytical sensitivity of migration theory by taking into account overlapping motives, changing legal statuses, and adaptive strategies to uncertain environments.

In sum, those theoretical interventions make the book a landmark contribution to decolonial migration theory. It is not only about fitting African cases into the preexisting frames, but changes the way migration is theorized internationally. The outcome is an empirical, pluralistic, highly contextual framework with the potential to inform future research not only in Africa but also in other Global South contexts.

The book is a must-read for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers who need to understand African migration in more profound, locally situated ways than traditional portrayals.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

**Ayodeji Peter Adesanya** is a researcher with an academic background in Political Science. His current research interest spans trade policy, development assistance, multilateralism, development policy, regional integration and migration issues, with a particular focus on political economy dimensions of global and regional governance.

✉ [ayopeteradesanya@gmail.com](mailto:ayopeteradesanya@gmail.com);  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5284-9631>

## REFERENCES

- Crawley, H. and Skleparis, D. 2018. Refugees, migrants, neither, both: Categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe's "migration crisis." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(1): 48–64.
- Levitt, P. 1998. Social remittances: Migration driven local-level forms of cultural diffusion. *International Migration Review* 32(4): 926–948. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2547666>.