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Navigating exodus: youth external mobility, the 'Japa' phenomenon and economic resilience in West Africa

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This paper is part of the ECOWAS Policy Analysis Series (EPAS)—a flagship initiative that highlights the perspectives of African thought leaders and researchers on ECOWAS. EPAS aims to critically examine the evolution of ECOWAS over the past five decades, from the viewpoint of scholars and citizens alike, and to contribute to a forward-looking vision for regional integration in West Africa. The series is coordinated by the Africa Policy Research Institute as part of the Support to the ECOWAS Commission on Organisational Development project. This project is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, ECOWAS established a Youth Policy and Strategic Plan of Action as its main framework for meeting the diverse needs and aspirations of youths in the West Africa region. Since ECOWAS was established, it has made tangible gains in promoting the free movement of people and goods as a means of achieving regional integration. However, the task of dealing with the exodus of citizens, particularly youths, outside the continent still requires more discussion and action. This is because youth emigration drains West Africa of skilled workers and young talent essential for development. Many West African countries have not faithfully implemented policies aimed at assisting the youth. This is obvious considering the almost exclusion of youths in governance where individuals under 35 make up less than 20% of elected or appointed officials despite constituting over 50% of the population, alongside large scale unemployment often exceeding 30%, and lack of equal access to health and education in many West African countries as reflected in low-doctor-to-patient ratios, out of school children, etc.

In the ECOWAS zone, the emigration rate among youths — defined in the ECOWAS Youth Policy as every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years — to destinations outside the African continent, has been rising steadily (migrationdataportal.org, 2025; Schürmann et al., 2022). The movement, which started in the 1980s during the economic crisis, has gained enormous traction in the 21st century. This has led to tangible consequences such as a reduction in the skilled workforce especially in healthcare, technology and education sectors, and slow industrial growth, weakened public services and increased dependency on remittances instead of the development of strong local economies. In Nigeria, the concept of *japa*, a word in the Yoruba language used to describe emigration, has become a prevalent term particularly among people who wish to seek greener pastures abroad.

This paper argues that youth emigration could create opportunities in the ECOWAS zone through investments in the digital economy, establishing a diaspora skills database, optimising remittances by encouraging it for investments rather than using it for short-term consumption and lowering remittance transfer fees.

The paper uses Nigeria as a case study and gathers data from official reports from national and international institutions, academic literature and online sources. Nigeria is a useful example given its large population of an estimated 228 million, which accounts for nearly half of the West African populace.

“In 1979, ECOWAS adopted the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons”

TRENDS AND DESTINATIONS OF WEST AFRICAN YOUTH MIGRANTS

According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), approximately 300,000 West African migrants embarked on journeys through the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean Sea. Such irregular migration has raised concerns among stakeholders, ranging from the policy and security challenges it poses for national governments and ECOWAS, such as managing borders, combating human trafficking and addressing security risks, to the emotional and economic toll it takes on relatives of migrants and the local communities they come from.

While the population in West Africa is estimated at 423 million, the youths between the age of 15 and 35 according to the African Youth Charter comprise about 53 percent of this number (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2021). With more than 1.2 million international youth migrants in 2015 - defined as young people (typically aged 15–24, or up to 35 in Africa) who move to another country for at least 3 months, West African countries are the leading source of youth migrants in Sub-Saharan Africa. The IOM Gambia (2019) estimated that approximately 12,000 young Gambians arrived in Europe in 2016. Similarly, statistics showed that the number of Ivorian migrants using the Central Mediterranean route to Europe was the third highest in West Africa. It is worth noting that young people do not only emigrate from countries in the ECOWAS zone to Europe and other parts of the Global North, but also within the West Africa region, for instance an estimated 4 million West Africans are migrants within the ECOWAS region.

Migration from West Africa to Europe increased from 12 percent in 1990 to 19 percent in 2020, while the rate of migration from West Africa to North America increased from 3 percent to 10 percent during the same period. Among other factors, this trend is down to increased collaboration between key stakeholders in West Africa and Europe to improve migration management with initiatives like the New Pact on Migration and Asylum and promoting legal labour migration between the continents (Adhikari, Clemens, Dempster, & Ekeator, 2021). For instance, the EU-third country cooperation under the Pact includes provisions for legal pathways and partnerships with origin countries, while ECOWAS has developed a regional labour migration strategy.

CHALLENGES AND KEY DRIVERS OF YOUTH EMIGRATION IN WEST AFRICA

Afrobarometer survey in 34 African countries, including West African countries (Asiamah, Sambou, & Bhoojedhur, 2021), revealed that nearly half of young Africans are emigrating as a result of unemployment. The exodus of many West African youths to destinations outside the sub-region is linked to high unemployment rates among youths, which stood at nearly 13 percent in the West Africa region in 2023. (Kelong, 2025:298; Okunade & Awosusi, 2023; and Aliyu, Salisu, & Kale, 2024). In 2022, Nigeria's Ministry of Budget and National Planning stated that the country had a young population of about 151 million approximately 70 percent of the country's estimated 217 million from that year. More than 53 percent of Nigerian youths are unemployed, according to the ministry's data. Other West African nations also face similar situations. Youth unemployment in Ghana stood at 21 percent in 2023, according to the country's statistics agency. In Senegal, people aged 15 to 34 make up approximately 58 percent of the working-age population and approximately 62 percent of the unemployed population (Diallo, Dieye, Tall, and Mazu, 2024).

Youth emigration reflects more structural problems embedded within a geopolitical context marked by violent instability, economic fragility and regional security crises. The departure of educated and skilled youths contributes to a brain drain from the region, weakening its labour market and fuelling discontent among those left behind by depriving them of job creation, mentorship, and essential services that skilled youth could have provided. Scholars have framed West Africa's brain drain as a threat to both development and security (UNDP, 2020; Falola, 2022). Emigration pressures are increased by jihadism as non-state actors such as Boko Haram and Islamic State – West Africa Province (ISWAP) significantly contribute to forced migration, with many displaced individuals in Nigeria and Mali reluctant to return due to persistent insecurity. Since 2009, Nigeria has recorded more than 350,000 deaths that have been attributed to insurgent attacks. More than 2 million people in Nigeria have been displaced from their communities, especially in the Northeastern part of Nigeria, including over 244,000 refugees, scattered across the Lake Chad Basin region, due to jihadist extremism. ECOWAS's credibility could be undermined by its inability to stabilise conflict areas or create opportunities for youths.

In the early 2020s, West African countries showed considerable promise. Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Senegal were among the top 10 fastest-growing economies in the world (Oxfam, 2019). However, wealth inequality remains entrenched in the region, as the top 1 percent of earners in West Africa hold a disproportionate amount of the region's wealth. Findings from Afrobarometer cited in IOM (2020) suggest that economic reasons and poverty is a major driver of the desire of many West Africans to seek greener pastures abroad.

Although regional initiatives such as the ECOWAS Youth Policy (2008) have not been efficiently implemented, some countries in the region are making fleeting attempts to address youth migration. Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu at a graduation ceremony in

2024 asked the youths to shun Japa Syndrome. Some initiatives like the Not Too Young to Run, the Student Loans Policy and the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises Fund, are being established to help the youth develop their potential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **West African governments must adopt a multi-pronged approach that begins with investing in the digital economy given its proven role in job creation and entrepreneurship for young people.** Building on existing initiatives such as Nigeria's Digital Transformation Centre, governments in West Africa can scale up and replicate the establishment of coding academies, technology hubs and incubator centres to train youths in programming, artificial intelligence and digital marketing. Governments must partner with ECOWAS and private sector organisations to expand broadband access and make it widely accessible. According to a research study conducted by Basol, Sevgi and Yalcin (2023), the digital economy was responsible for the creation of youth employment in 27 European countries from 2018 to 2021. For the EU during this period, every major improvement in digitalisation was linked to about a 4 percentage point drop in youth unemployment. This is a model that can be replicated in West Africa with timely investments in the digital economy.
- **ECOWAS should establish a rapid response fund for emergency aid and a diaspora skills database that connects investors located abroad with local business initiatives.** The bloc would need to create a West African Diaspora skills portal and host an annual ECOWAS Diaspora summit to ensure regular engagement with participants. Governments can help to facilitate the opportunities for young West Africans to acquire the skills they need to make a living by building stronger links with professionals in the diaspora, who can provide mentoring, consulting, and other opportunities for skills development.

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