African Migration in its National and Global Context

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2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the global and national context of African migration, starting with an historical background concerning migration in sub-Saharan Africa. Internal migration in this region has always been significant and today almost 17 million citizens of different countries in sub-Saharan Africa are living in a foreign land; only 2 per cent of them are settled in a country outside the African continent – for example, labour migration to South Africa is much older in origin than flows to Europe (United Nations Organisation Program for Development (UNPD), 2009). Numerically, south–south migration is thus much more noteworthy than south–north migration. However the flows of migrants towards Europe have strongly increased during the last decade. The different routes to Europe by land and by sea and the risks and difficulties encountered by those migrants who reside in European countries today are addressed in this chapter. It then analyses the particularities of sub-Saharan migration within the three countries under study – France, Britain and South Africa. The historical background of such migration is relatively similar between France and Britain but the case of South Africa is different because of its proximity and ties with poorer neighbouring countries.

This chapter then goes on to examine the situation of sub-Saharan migrants in the three countries, outlining the migration regimes, citizenship entitlements and integration processes. The demographics of African migration are outlined, including migration pathways, work, education, living conditions, gender, faith and settlement patterns. The specific case of asylum seekers is also touched on and the relationship between migrants and nationals is taken into consideration, especially
with regard to the South African context. The chapter concludes by underlining the commonalities and differences between the three countries and sketching of broader global trends within African diasporas.

2.2 Migration in sub-Saharan Africa

The history of African people living in sub-Saharan Africa is above all a history of migration. A process of desertification in the Sahara began around 2000 years before Christ and provoked the departure of black peasants towards the grand rivers of Western Africa: Senegal, Niger, Volta. At the same time wandering groups of cow and camel breeders began to move over this immense desert and its surrounding regions.

From the Benoué tableland, in the border region of Cameroon and Nigeria, the ancestors of the Bantu moved across the equatorial forest and arrived in the Austral savannah during a period that corresponded to the European Middle Ages. In Eastern Africa, we can also observe different flows of populations towards the high tablelands of Rwanda and Burundi and the regions of the grand lakes. Bantu agriculturists settled there around the eleventh century AD and Ethiopian shepherds followed them some decades later. These migrations little by little populated the different spaces of the continent and this continued until the twentieth century. Many ethnic groups of western Africa have myths or legends telling precisely of their arrival in their territory, underlining their relatively recent presence there. Different reasons explain the importance of migration in Africa up to the contemporary era: the existence of vast under-inhabited places, the climate hazards and the lack of intensive agriculture encouraging people to look for new soils to plough.

During the colonial period, migration increased for new and different reasons. Military troops were recruited from local populations and were moved from one country to another in order to conquer new lands or to maintain the authority of colonial powers. Economic migration was often organised by administrations from poor and over-crowded regions to plantations and mines, as in the case of the migration of the Mossi people from poor Burkina to the rich plantations of the Ivory Coast, or from the villages of the former Northern Rhodesia to the mining towns of the ‘copper belt’.

During the years following the independence of African countries from the early to mid-1960s, migration became more controlled because of policies aiming to protect national workers against the rivalry of foreigners. A few countries that chose a more outward-looking approach