AFRICAN
STUDIES
GROUP
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MELBOURNE

Reimagining Migration in*(out)* of Africa in the Post-Pandemic World.
Taking Stock and Building Resilience

Thursday 29th September – Saturday 1st October 2022

African Studies Group (ASG) &

African Research and Engagement in Australia (AREiA) initiative

The University of Melbourne, Australia.

Conference Themes

The 'Reimagining Migration in(out) of Africa' Conference seeks to bring together scholars (students, faculty, and researchers), advocates, practitioners, policymakers, and community members within and outside Australia for a conversation on the increasing politicisation of mobility in and out of the African continent and the experiences of migrant communities and their resilient cultures. It builds on our 2021 Solidarity in Diversity Conference and the 2020 Borders, and Identities and Belonging in a Cosmopolitan Society Conference.

The 2022 ASG conference is dual delivery (online and in-person at the University of Melbourne), and it is organised around three main themes:

1. Migration discourses in academia

Migration discourses permeate academia with varying perspectives. The fluid nature of migration issues warrants that we continue to engage in debates grounded in the experiences of migrants. Considering different factors propel people to migrate or limit their ability to migrate, the experiences of migrants add value to the theories that emerge from academia. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted migration and migrant livelihood. As it may appear that the world is heading toward a post-pandemic world, we need to take stock of the accumulated experiences and resilience of migrants that have been built over these past years. Contributions under this theme will examine the various facets of these debates. The following questions will guide the deliberations:

- Why/should people move freely? Are some migrants more worthy than others?
- To what extent is migration scholarship based on migrant experiences and stories?
- How do migrants cope and build resilience in host nations?
- What are the contributions of migrants to their host communities?
- How has the pandemic shaped the flow of people and resources?

2. Migration and policy framing

The politicisation of migration influences policy framing and implementation of such policies. Under this theme, government officials whose work intersects with policy framing, NGOs and policy think tanks, and political entities that provide and justify their stands on migration policy and legislation will unpack what informs their policy framing and legislation. Contributions will explore the questions:

- What informs migration policy framing and legislation?
- To what extent are migrant experiences factored into policy and legislation that concern them?

3. Migration in practice and migrant experiences

While different stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, and scholars, engage in migration issues, 'real' people are impacted by such discourses. This conference grounds or highlights the experiences of migrants in host communities who have been affected by different policies and legislations. This theme seeks to unpack the lived experiences of navigating systems in host countries from a migrant perspective. Contributions under this theme will examine the questions:

- What are the lived experiences of migrants in building resilience around challenges such as discrimination, stereotyping, employment difficulties, mental health and the COVID 19 pandemic?
- How do migrants perceive themselves and their contributions to host countries?

Conference Structure

The 'Reimagining Migration in*(out)* of Africa in the Post-Pandemic World' conference will comprise five key elements:

1. **A Masterclass**: The keynote speaker will deliver a two-hour masterclass. The class will focus on building specific skill sets, such as communicating research to a broader audience and the art of constructive scholarly debate on migration issues.

2. **Academic presentations and student symposium**: Academics and Postgraduate students at the University of Melbourne and their peers in other universities working on migration and migration issues will present their research and engage in debates alongside the conference's themes. As a student-led conference focusing on issues relevant to students of African descent and other marginalised groups and communities, the conference will provide a much-needed platform for networking. These students will build their confidence by presenting their research and debate in a scholarly but accessible fashion.

3. **Sharing of experiences by practitioners and community**: Practitioners and Community members working on issues related to the conference themes or the lived experiences of migrants will be invited to present their work.

4. **Debate:** A structured debate will be convened to engage conference participants. A motion capturing the essence of the theme of the conference will guide the debate. In doing so, it is hoped that participants will get the opportunity to sharpen and articulate their arguments and engage in constructive and collegial debate.

5. **By the fireside conversation:** we are exploring hosting an informal yet structured conversation with a distinguished migration scholars and/or activists about their work.

The five elements of the conference are distinct but interrelated.

Background

Migration is a universal human experience. It is propelled by a human desire for safety, dignity, and a better life. Yet, migration has become deeply politicised globally. Populist debates on the cost of migrants to host societies have driven some governments to adopt exclusionary policies underpinned by racism, xenophobia, and anti-immigration sentiments. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that optimism about global solidarity among states, groups and individuals worldwide is highly exaggerated. Instead of a more interdependent global system, the past two years reflected nationalistic politics and international competition for scarce resources, thus exacerbating existing inequalities. Indeed, at one of the most vulnerable times of humanity, nation-states introduced border closures and the use of health concerns as the rationale for the exclusion and further marginalisation of those who are most in need. In this scenario, migrants were often cast as carriers of the virus and a threat to public health, leading

to racial profiling and racialised attacks on some ethnic minorities, including, for example, Africans in China (HRW, 2020) and Asian/Chinese people in some Western countries (Wang, 2021).

While migration has remained a divisive issue in international/national policy framing and practice, some host nations embrace the economic benefits of globalisation. Indeed, the movement of goods, finance and capital has been almost frictionless. Still, the movement of people is entangled in complexities. Whereas mobility is relatively smooth for some – passport holders of global North countries, the highly skilled, and the global elite – it remains restrictive for others, particularly unskilled and semi-skilled people from the global South. Border crossing has become the focus of many Western governments who continue to use highly racialised anti-immigration sentiments for electoral gains.

Efforts to restrict/ease migration by African countries, transit and recipient governments, and even international organisations often ignore the rights and voices of migrants. Yet, African migrants remain resilient and continue to contribute to their origin and host communities in no small way. So, how do African migrant communities build resilient cultures? According to Akbar and Preston (2019), social resilience takes stock of individuals and groups' transformative capacities to deal with challenges in the face of institutional racism. At the same time, it recognises how institutional inequalities, power dynamics and social structures shape these capacities (Preston et al., 2021). On the other hand, social-ecological resilience emphasises coping mechanisms in the face of external pressures (Cretney 2014). The social-ecological approach to resilience which views a complex issue like migration as an external threat tends to be at the centre of many national policies.

Importantly, national and international migration policies have failed to address the persistent drivers that cause people to make the difficult decision to leave their homes to seek safety and a better life. Efforts have instead focused on short-term strategies to placate anti-immigrant and nationalist constituents. Our interest in social resilience is to understand the experiences of migrant communities and their resilient cultures. This agenda requires stocktaking and soul searching to highlight the progress and limitations around migration scholarship, policymaking, and community relations to identify how we can forge better relationships in the emerging post-pandemic world.

Africans cross borders every day, but most of such movements happen within the continent. In scholarly discourse, however, there is a disproportionate focus on African migrations to the

global North. This discourse obscures the dynamic nature of mobility within the African continent and the global South. We invite contributions and conversations that consider migrations within and out of Africa as part of this conference.

Rationale

Whereas the world seems to be emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, old problems such as extremism, climate change, poverty and inequality continue to exert pressure on fragile economies. Meanwhile, old geopolitical rivalries are playing out in areas such as the Ethiopian military campaign in Tigray and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The conditions that fuel the crossing of borders seem to be increasing at a time of waning global cooperation and public resentment against migration. Perhaps, the most vivid example is the recent display of racism towards black and brown people fleeing the Ukrainian crisis (Fernandez 2022). However, populist narratives of migration as a threat are hardly limited to Europe or the United States. In 2019, there were a series of xenophobic attacks on other African nationals in South Africa, leading to deaths and the destruction of several foreign-owned shops and businesses. As indicated earlier, the majority of migration is between global South countries, and xenophobia is often a concern in such contexts. Yet, it may not always be institutional racism in quite the same way as in situations of global South to North migration – in fact, there is insufficient research on this.

Indeed, migrants of all ethnic backgrounds face challenges globally, but those from Africa and other developing countries are often the focus of politicised debates on the impact of migration. Notably, there are two competing perspectives in origin and host communities. The positive holds that migrants contribute to the economies of their origin countries through remittances and knowledge and technological transfer. They also bolster their host communities through socio-cultural enrichment and active engagement in economic activities. They are often engaged in labour locals do not want to do (4-D labour – dirty, demeaning, dangerous, difficult). However, the opposing view is that migrants cause a 'brain drain' – depriving their origin countries of needed human resources. And that in the host countries, migrants are primarily 'free-riders' – living off state benefits without contributing much to the local economy. And even when they engage in economic activities, their willingness to take lower payments drives down wages, depriving locals of job opportunities.

Both perspectives tend to either gloss over or exaggerate the lived realities of migrants. That is why a more critical engagement with the empirical and conceptual dynamics of migration in

the emerging post-pandemic world is required. In particular, there is the need to better understand the racialisation of migration regimes, the contributions of migrants to origin and host countries and how we can imagine Afro-futures through the lens of migration and the lived realities of migrants.

Deliberations on migration in academia, policy framing, and community practice often occur in silos. While these stakeholders sometimes speak to each other, policy framing hardly reflects the experiences of migrants. The engagement of these multiple stakeholders on a single platform, especially in Australia, where these migration discourses are ongoing, will engender a more critical dialogue and contribute to a better understanding and appreciation of the net benefit of migration and migrants to both the origin and host communities.

Call for Papers/Presentation Proposals

We invite papers and presentation proposals of up to 300 words on any related topic, particularly those focused on migrations in(out) of Africa and the global South and the experiences of migrant communities and their resilient cultures.

For academics and graduate researchers: Submit your abstracts here OR copy & paste the following link to your browser: https://forms.gle/5LviCK36A8Wy4HsV9.

For practitioners and community members: Submit your presentation proposals here OR copy & paste the following link to your browser: https://forms.gle/hP7BYbGV5oMdKZwf9.

If you wish to propose roundtables or different presentation formats, please contact the organising team at africanstudiesgroup@gmail.com.

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Partners