Mythologies of Mixed Migration and the Southern Route

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> "Migration myths are constantly advocated and recycled, not because their proponents necessarily believe them, but primarily because they serve powerful interests and political agendas" (de Haas, 2024, p. 8)

INTRODUCTION

The term "mixed migration" is a relatively recent addition to the lexicon of international migration governance. Its emergence is often viewed as a positive development that transcends the outdated distinction between forced and voluntary migration by acknowledging the ground-level reality that migrants with different characteristics, motivations, and ambitions often travel the same routes to common destinations (Ghosh, 2018; Ihalmur-Öner, 2020). "Mixed migration" is increasingly used to describe international and internal migration flows as diverse as caravan migration from Central America to the United States (Rea Granados, 2019), Roma mobility in Albania (Vullnetari, 2012), migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa (Crush et al., 2015), "boat people" in the Bay of Bengal (Moretti, 2017) and migrants in Asian, African, and Latin American cities (Botti, 2020; Molina, 2020; Nguyen & Vallentine, 2020). At the global scale, "mixed migration" is now seen as the most common form of cross-border mobility in all the world's major regions (MMC, 2025). However, as Dennison (2021) suggests, it is also a policy narrative about the nature of international migration. As such, its power lies not so much in what it explicitly argues but in the assumptions behind its selection of content (Dennison, 2021, p. 3).

In Africa, various international organizations have vigorously promoted "mixed migration" as a new governance challenge requiring innovative policy responses. Further, much of the research, policy, and media attention to the phenomenon over the last two decades has focused on migration from Africa to the European Union (Bastide, 2017; Collyer, 2015; Frouws, 2013). However, there is a danger that the mixed-migration narrative might obscure more than it reveals about African migration from and within the continent (Sharpe, 2018; van Hear et al., 2009). Insofar as it privileges security concerns, "mixed migration" portrays mobility as a basic threat to national sovereignty. Securitized framings see migration as a crisis demanding stringent management, rather than a structural phenomenon driven by complex socio-economic, environmental, and political factors. As such, it threatens to fuel the proliferation of restrictive immigration policies and fortified border enforcement regimes that disproportionately target and criminalize migrants. As Oelgemöller (2020a: 20) points out, "obligations on the part of governments (of

both Global North and South) are creatively interpreted whilst non-compliance on the part of migrants and refugees, respectively, is responded to with well-established modes of punishment and abandonment." Additionally, the narrative runs counter to the efforts of the African Union and other regional organizations to implement open borders and free movement across the continent (Belete, 2024; Vhumbunu & Rudigi, 2020).

Any attempt to understand the importation of the language and imaginary of mixed migration to Africa needs to start with the mandates of key actors such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) (Dini et al. (2024). The IOM and UNHCR have both played a central role in framing and operationalizing the mixed migration narrative, often aligning their approach with the priorities of donor countries (Green & Pécoud, 2023; Moretti, 2021). Through their extensive networks of expertise, training programmes, and knowledge production, these organizations have imported the mixed-migration narrative and inserted it into African migration policy debates (Kortendiek, 2021). In this report, we first trace the origins of the mixed migration narrative, its essential storyline, and its imposition on African realities. The next section of the report assesses the silences and misrepresentations in the mixed-migration narrative. The final section provides a case study of the most recent invention of the narrative, the so-called "Southern Route" in Africa. The example of the Southern Route shows how the state-centric mixed-migration narrative shapes policy interventions, marginalizes migrant voices, and delegitimizes African mobilities.

IMAGINING MIXED MIGRATION

The institutional roots of the mixed migration narrative lie in the period immediately after the Second World War when the United Nations made a fundamental legal distinction between refugees and migrants (Kiselva & Markin, 2017). The UNHCR was mandated to protect the interests of refugees as defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention (and 1967 Protocol). Other forms of international migration continued to be the sovereign prerogative of individual states. In Africa, the 1969 OAU Convention expanded the definition of a refugee but took the distinction with migrants for granted. In the following decades, the refugee/migrant binary found expression in the notion that there were only two forms of international mobility –forced and voluntary migration – and two types of migrants – refugees and economic migrants.

The 1992 UNHCR handbook for determining refugee status defined a migrant as "a person who, for reasons other than those contained in the definition (of a refugee), voluntarily leaves his (sic) country in order to take up residence elsewhere… if he is motivated exclusively by economic considerations, he is an economic migrant and not a refugee" (UNHCR, 1992). The IOM positioned itself as the dominant actor in global migration governance, shaping the perspectives and strategies of other international organizations and many governments (Bradley, 2020; Bradley et al., 2023; Green & Pécoud, 2023). While these developments greatly expanded institutional capacities for managing migration, they entrenched governance practices that prioritized and legitimized state sovereignty (Ahouga, 2023; Dini et al., 2024). As Bradley et al. (2023: 2) note, the IOM "has a long-standing reputation for deference to states."

Although migration and refugee flows were for many years regarded as discrete phenomena, by the 1990s it was becoming increasingly difficult "to make a clear distinction between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' population movements, between people who are fleeing from threats to their life and those wanting to escape poverty and social injustice" (Crisp, 1999: 3; see also, Erdal & Oeppen, 2017). In 1995, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, responded by arguing that "as refugees become part of a larger movement of people, responses must be fashioned to include measures to address both refugees and economic migrants" (Ogata, 1995). She maintained that there was still a fundamental difference between refugee flows and migratory movements but that "the mixed character of today's movements necessitates a comprehensive strategy that meets the diverse needs of refugees and economic migrants." The UNHCR Global Consultations on International Protection in 2001 proposed the idea of an asylum-migration nexus to characterize mixed flows (Crisp, 2008). However, as Linde (2011) points out, this formulation denoted an interface rather than a mixture of migrants and refugees. By 2007, this label had been dropped in favour of the language of mixed migration (Van Hear, 2011).

In January 2007, the UNHCR released an Action Plan on Refugee Protection and Mixed Migration (UNHCR, 2007a). The 10-point plan proposed a new governance architecture with a clearly defined role for the UNHCR in refugee protection within the larger phenomenon of mixed migration. The plan also proposed that the UNHCR partner with organizations such as the IOM, other UN agencies, NGOs, regional organizations, and governments. The UNHCR's primary interest was what it saw as the abuse of the international asylum and refugee protection system by economic migrants engaging smugglers and using fraudulent documents:

> People who are moving from one country or continent to another, whether or not they meet the criteria for refugee status, often *engage in unauthorized or undocumented forms of movement, making use of similar routes, employing the same smugglers and obtaining fraudulent travel documents from the same suppliers* [our emphasis] (UNHCR, 2007b).

In 1997, the UNHCR and IOM signed a memorandum of understanding on closer cooperation in the management of mixed migration and submitted a joint position paper to the UNHCR's 2001 Global Consultations (UNHCR & IOM, 2001). The IOM initially proposed an inclusive definition of mixed migration as complex population movements including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and other migrants (IOM, 2008). However, it narrowed its operational definition with far-reaching consequences for Africa. The 96th Session of the IOM Council in late 2008 tabled a document on addressing migration flows and followed this up in the 98th Session in October 2009 with proposals for the IOM's approach to irregular migration and mixed flows (IOM, 2008, 2009a). These two documents clarified that the IOM would focus on "irregular migrants" within mixed migration flows. This was reflected in the organization's narrow (re)definition of mixed migration, which focused on "the irregular nature of and the multiplicity of factors driving such movements" (IOM, 2008: 2). In 2009, the IOM elaborated on its definition to the Council:

> In essence, mixed flows concern *irregular movements*, frequently involving transit migration, where persons move without the requisite documentation, crossing borders and arriving at their destination in an *unauthorized manner*… Irregular mixed migration flows present particular challenges to States not only because *they infringe on their sovereign prerogative to determine which non-nationals may enter their territory* and under what conditions, but also because the persons involved in these movements are more likely to be subject to hardship, human rights violations and discrimination [our emphasis] (IOM, 2009a).

By the time the UNHCR and IOM began to suggest to African regional organizations and governments that "mixed migration" was the dominant form and management challenge for movement within and from the continent, they had agreed that it comprised only two categories – "refugees" (as defined by the UN and OAU Convention) and "irregular migrants" (as defined by the immigration laws of individual states). As Langrognet (2023: 247) concludes, "the refugee/migrant binary remains alive and well because of its political performativity and usefulness for those who want to keep foreigners at bay and those who want to protect them."

The mixed-migration narrative contains two other images encapsulated by another IOM definition:

> Migrants, especially economic migrants, choose to move in order to improve their lives. Refugees are forced to flee to save their lives or preserve their freedom. Migrants and refugees increasingly make use of *the same routes and means of transport* to get to an overseas destination. If people composing these mixed flows are unable to enter a particular state legally, they often employ *the services of human smugglers* and embark on dangerous sea or land voyages, which many do not survive [our emphasis] (IOM, online).

In the first image, mixed migration has a geography in which migrants and refugees travel along the same routes to a common destination. As Crawley & Skleparis (2018) argue, there is an implicit assumption in the concept of the route that migrants and refugees move between two fixed points in linear fashion – an origin or sending country and a destination or receiving country – often transiting through third countries. In the second, mixed migration flows are facilitated by non-migrants, especially "smugglers" and "traffickers". The narrative is strikingly silent about other known enablers, including corrupt border guards, immigration officials, and the police, presumably because states would object to being cast as in any way complicit.

In Africa, the UNHCR and IOM characterized contemporary migration movements from and within the continent as fundamentally mixed in character and set up mixed-migration projects in various regions. Their initial focus was Somalia where a Mixed Migration Task Force (MMTF) was established in 2007, co-chaired by the IOM and UNHCR and with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNDP, UNICEF, the World Food Programme, the Danish Refugee Council, and the Norwegian Refugee Council as members (MMTF, 2008). From 2011 onwards, the two organizations established a network of mixed-migration initiatives across North and East Africa and the Horn, largely funded by the European Union. They included a Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) and an East and Horn of Africa Mixed Migration Secretariat (MMS) in Nairobi, Kenya. A North Africa MMS was set up to monitor migration movements to and through North Africa towards Europe. In 2016, these various nodes were consolidated and renamed as the Geneva-based Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), which has become the major information and data-gathering source for international organizations and governments on mixed migration in Africa and beyond.

In Southern Africa, a consortium of UN organizations led by the IOM and the International Labour Organization established the EU-funded Southern African Migration Management project. The IOM leads the mixed-migration component, which it defines as follows:

> Mixed migration flows are complex population movements, including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and other migrants, such as unaccompanied migrants, *smuggled persons and victims of trafficking* as well as stranded migrants. Mixed migration flows are *characterized by their irregular nature* and the multiplicity of factors driving such movements, as well as the differentiated needs and profiles of people involved [our emphasis] (Crush et al., 2020).

Therefore, the mixed-migration narrative has been essentially unchanged by its engagement with African realities. The African Union (AU) and regional organizations such as SADC and ECOWAS have all bought into its essential elements and images. For example, the initial AU Migration Policy Framework defined mixed flows as "large numbers of persons seeking asylum but who are moving for non-protection reasons creat[ing] the perception, rightly or wrongly, that asylum systems are being abused, and increase the tendency to associate migrants with criminality, which in turn nourishes problems of xenophobia and intolerance to foreigners" (AU, 2006: 14). More recently, the AU Migration Policy Framework for Africa described mixed flows as "consisting of different types of migrants and asylum seekers that use the same migration routes and means, (that) have been on the rise. As legal pathways for migration have diminished, migrants are falling prey to smugglers and human traffickers" (AU, 2018: 18). Furthermore, border management systems "are coming under increasing pressure from large flows of persons, including irregular and mixed flows."

DISASSEMBLING THE NARRATIVE

In a critique of migration mythologies in Europe, de Haas (2024, p. 1) argues that the migration narratives of Global North governments, international organizations, and the media are heavily biased towards the perspectives of destination states and are therefore "one-sided, misrepresent the true nature of migration, and largely disregard migrant agency." Concerning migration to Europe, he identifies four dominant narratives: (a) the mass migration narrative, (b) the migrant threat narrative, (c) the migrant victim narrative, and (d) the migration celebration narrative.

Elements of most of these European narratives are to be found in the African mixed-migration narrative. First, the idea that Africa is confronting a mass migration crisis of refugees and illegal migrants who are indistinguishable from one another is central. Flahaux & de Haas (2016) argue that Africa is often portrayed as a continent of mass migration and displacement caused by poverty, violent conflict, and environmental stress. Rooted in the European Union's antipathy towards migrants from Africa, the mixed-migration narrative applies the same conceit to movement within the continent (de Blasis & Pitzalis, 2023; Smith & Schapendonk, 2018). Examples and images of a temporary upsurge in migration, such as from Zimbabwe to South Africa after 2005, are seen as typical of Africa more generally.

UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020) data does show that there has been an overall increase in the number of people living in another African country from 14.3 million in 1995 to 22.2 million in 2020 (of which 8.9 million are refugees). However, the number of migrants and refugees in Africa is less than 1.5% and 0.5% respectively of the 1.53 billion people on the continent. The first AU African Migration Report has the sub-title "challenging the narrative", which refers to "Eurocentric approaches to managing migration (that) currently dominate domestic and regional policymaking on human mobility in Africa" (AU, 2019: 3). Published by the IOM, it is clear from the report that some within the organization are uncomfortable with the importation of Eurocentric ideas such as the mass migration of illegal migrants.

The suggestion that migrants are a social, economic, and health threat to citizens is more muted in the mixed-migration narrative, although it is central to the immigration policy and rhetoric of many African governments (Agwanda, 2022; Crush, 2020; Whittaker, 2015). Rather, mixed migration is portrayed by the narrative as a threat to "orderly" migration management, to the integrity of borders, and to "regular" forms of migration (as states shut up shop and become hostile to all migration). Finally, elements of the migrant-victim narrative are present in the African mixed-migration narrative as well, feeding into "the stereotypical image of migrants and refugees being tricked or rounded up [en masse] by smugglers and traffickers who force them to make perilous journeys, subject them to severe abuse and, once having reached the destination, force them to work in slavery-like situations" (de Haas, 2024: 10). The mixed-migration narrative effectively displaces responsibility for victimization from harsh government policies onto smugglers and traffickers. Indeed, the poor treatment and human rights violations of migrants by states is erased from the story (Pijnenburg & Rijken, 2020).

The narrative of mixed migration may have started in the 1990s as an effort to address the limitations of traditional migration categories, but it has served only to entrench the refugee-migration binary in Africa; an example of what Crawley & Skleparis (2018) call "categorical fetishism". While it broadens the image of "the migrant" to include women, children, the smuggled, the trafficked, and those who migrate for other than economic reasons, the narrative is fundamentally uninterested in heterogeneity. It aims to impose order and categorize and label migrants as either refugees or irregular migrants. Therefore, the mixed-migration narrative "continues to treat the categories 'refugee' and 'migrant' as if they simply exist, out there, as empty vessels into which people can be placed in some neutral ordering process like a small child putting bricks into a series of coloured buckets" (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018: 49). For the agencies, irregularity is the defining feature of mixed migration, However, this focus on irregularity amplifies the stigmatization of migrants, framing them as perpetrators of illegality rather than as individuals navigating systemic constraints and inequities (Scheel & Squire, 2014).

While the word "irregularity" may appear to be more neutral than alternatives such as "undocumented", "unauthorized" and "illegal", they at least have the virtue of making it clear who does the categorizing. In Africa, as elsewhere, it is national immigration (and refugee) law and regulations that determine whether the agencies will put a migrant in the migration bucket labelled irregular/illegal or asylum seeker/refugee. African governments much prefer to use the language of illegality (and even criminality) than irregularity since it is their laws that are being broken, however restrictive those laws may be. South Africa's Immigration Act goes one step further in the "othering" of non-citizens and labels most migrants as "illegal foreigners" (Crush, 2017). As Vanyoro (2023) indicates, there is a fundamental compatibility between South Africa's exclusionary migration governance framework and the policy prescriptions of the imported mixed-migration narrative.

Undergirding the mixed-migration narrative is the securitization of mobility, a paradigm that prizes national sovereignty, external and internal bordering, and state control. As Frowd (2018, 2019) points out, this perpetuates a securitized framing of African mobility as a problem to be contained. The recent export of the European Union's border management strategy to Africa is evident in the German-funded *African Union Strategy for A Better Integrated Border Governance*, which proposes "a guiding framework for coordination of border policies at the continental, regional and national levels with the objective to create greater coherence" (AU, 2020: 4) As the IOM's Warn & Abdi (2019: 83) note, "internal borders are not foreseen to be removed and replaced with a common external border, and the process of border

passage remains a managed one, albeit highly facilitated and commonly supported by advanced technology and more cooperative or integrated interagency approaches to border management."

The IOM is a key implementing partner in initiatives such as the biometric Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS) project operational in over 15 West, East, and Southern African countries (Frowd, 2024). Critics argue that reducing migration to a data problem risks dehumanizing migrants, rendering their experiences statistical abstractions that obscure their agency and lived realities (Bircan & Korkmaz, 2021). As Singler (2021: 454) notes, MIDAS constitutes "'the migrant' as a governable, potentially risky subject" and "'migration' as a problem amenable to depoliticized techno-solutionist interventions." Securitization in practice transforms border spaces into zones of exclusion and insecurity, where restrictive policies exacerbate governance failures rather than foster solutions (Frowd, 2018). The securitization of borders, with its emphasis on enforcement over protection, exacerbates these vulnerabilities by framing migrants either as passive victims or agents of disorder and criminality. Migrants are framed as threats to national security or public order, which overshadows discussions about integration policies (?tefan?ík et al., 2022) and ignores the potential benefits of migration for human development and innovation (Castles, 2014). Abebe & Mugabo (2019) conclude that the sanctity of the nation-state and national borders and the securitization of migration has had major negative implications for the freedom-of-movement agenda of the African Union and regional economic communities such as ECOWAS, COMESA, and SADC.

One of the most telling criticisms of the mixed-migration narrative is its erasure of the voices and agency of migrants. Within this narrative framework, migrants are depicted as passive victims of humanitarian crises or as security threats to be managed, rather than as active participants shaping their own destinies (Mainwaring, 2016). Objectifying migrants as objects of pity or sources of disorder reduces complex realities to simplistic binaries, ignoring the aspirations, capabilities, strategies, resilience, conviviality, networking, and economic contributions of migrants. African migrants as individuals and groups also demonstrate remarkable agency and ingenuity in navigating restrictive policies and securitized borders (Schapendonk et al., 2021; Vanyoro, 2024).

A second erasure in the mixed-migration narrative, linked to the first, is deliberate avoidance of Africa's complex migration history (de Haas & Frankema, 2022). Turning over the traces of the past certainly appeals more to migration research-

ers than to policy experts in international agencies. However, past migrations are also embedded in present migrations (Crush, 2000). Africa's 54 nation-states and tens of thousands of colonial borders continue to shape contemporary migration narratives, by imposing a rigid, state-centric approach on all forms of cross-border mobility (Aniche et al., 2021; Nshimbi & Moyo, 2016). This rigidity disrupts established practices integral to African livelihoods and community resilience, effectively criminalizing mobility that has historically been a vital livelihood and survival strategy (Kweka, 2022). On the ground, colonial and post-colonial borders have always been porous and ineffective barriers to movement (Tevera, 2020). While states have attempted to funnel and track migration through border posts on transportation routes, it was just as easy for people to cross back and forth close to where they lived. That remains true as most migration in Africa is characterized by deeply rooted local mobilities, shaped by economic opportunity, political instability, and environmental challenges (Fálolá & Usman, 2009). But for the mixed-migration narrative to work as a mechanism of control, it is more convenient to assume that the 1990s mark the beginning of an era in which refugee movements are infiltrated by irregular/illegal migrants setting off a crisis requiring new policy responses and governance mechanisms. Transcending the limitations imposed by mixed-migration discourse, African migration continues to resist reductive categorization.

The final erasure is the periodicity of cross-border migration within the continent. The European narrative of migration from Africa maintains that all migrants are actually immigrants wanting permanent residence, Hence the cliché, "there is nothing more permanent than a temporary migrant." The mixed-migration narrative transplants this aphorism to Africa, taking for granted that there is a one-way and permanent flow of migrants from one country to another. This Eurocentric spatial vision disregards the fluidity of African socio-economic and cultural networks, transnational linkages, and the temporariness and circularity of much inter-state migration. Indeed, it might be said to the mixed-migration narrative that in Africa, "there is nothing so temporary as a permanent migrant."

CARTOPOLITICS OF THE SOUTHERN ROUTE

The idea of an intra-African mixed-migration "Southern Route" originated in an IOM investigation into trafficking between the Horn of Africa and South Africa (IOM, 2009) and was first labelled as such in 2013 (RMMS, 2013). Finding little evidence of trafficking, the report instead laid out most of the essential story elements of what became the Southern Route narrative. The narrative was marketed

to African governments and regional organizations by the UNHCR and IOM at a regional conference on *Refugee Protection: Mixed Movements and Irregular Migration from the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes Region to Southern Africa*, held in Tanzania in September 2010 (UNHCR, 2010a, 2010b; UNHCR & IOM, 2010). The conference background paper, entitled A Long and Winding Road, described the core elements of the narrative:

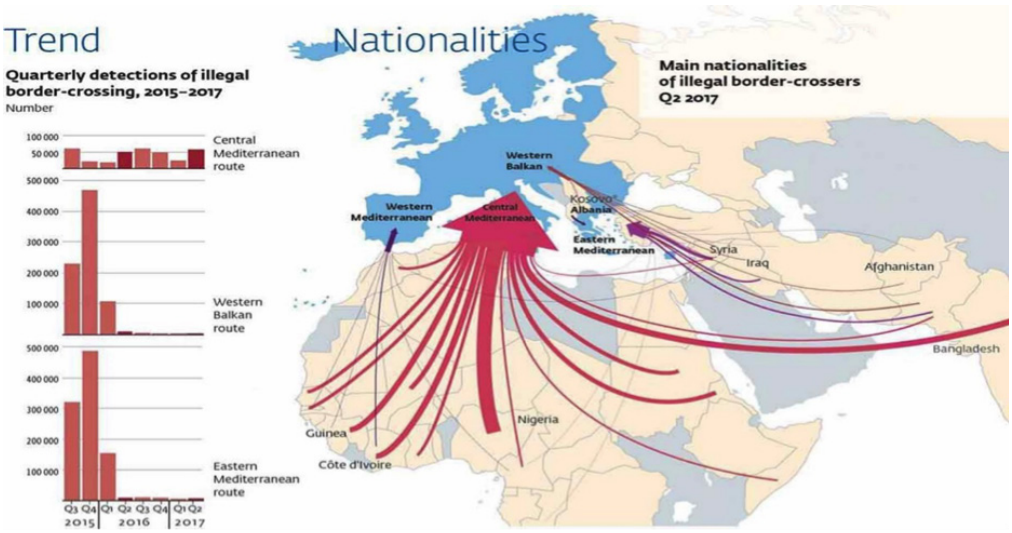
> Stretching all the way from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia to South Africa's Atlantic coast, *growing numbers of people are travelling the whole or part of this complex 4,500-kilometre route*, travelling overland, by sea and (much less commonly) by air. It is a difficult and dangerous journey that *imposes a great deal of hardship on the people concerned and which exposes them to a variety of human rights and protection risks*. At the same time, this mixed movement, much of which is *irregular in nature and organized by human smugglers*, is of growing concern to states, who regard it as a violation of their national laws as well as *a threat to their sovereignty, security and economy* [our emphasis] (UNHCR & IOM, 2010: 2).

Key aspects of the narrative identifiable in this extract include the cartography of the "route", the abuse and victimization of migrants, their irregular legal status, the organizational role of smugglers, and the threat to national security and sovereignty. These tropes were amplified and elaborated in many reports published with funding from the European Union, European government aid, refugee agencies, and the US State Department (IOM, 2013, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024; MMC, 2021 2023, 2024; RMMS, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). A recurrent feature of these reports is the mapping of the Southern Route in narrative as well as visual form. International organizations have therefore been able to mobilize the Southern Route narrative to raise project funds and try to allay the rising European moral panic about migration by promoting the notion of alternative destinations within the continent.

van Houtum & Lacv (2020: 18) refer to the cartography of migrant invasion as a "map trap" in which "the arrangement of iconographic choices creates an image of undocumented migration that bears little resemblance with this geopolitical phenomenon" (see Figure 1). Spatial imagery is central to narratives of mixed migration from Africa to Europe, where migrant mobility is generally represented as a set of mappable unilinear "routes" or "corridors" (Presti, 2020). Idemudia & Boehnke (2024) identify five such routes to Europe: the Central Mediterranean Route, the Western Mediterranean Route, the Eastern Mediterranean Route, Western African Route, and the Western Balkan Route. Within Africa, they also identify Eastern

African, Trans-Saharan, and West/Central African Routes. Cobarrubias (2019: 1) calls this form of visualization "routes thinking" and argues that it has a deeply "cartopolitical" rationale, which he defines as "a shared expert language and a common geographical imaginary reinforcing practices of contention and classification of those assumed to move toward the European Union irregularly."

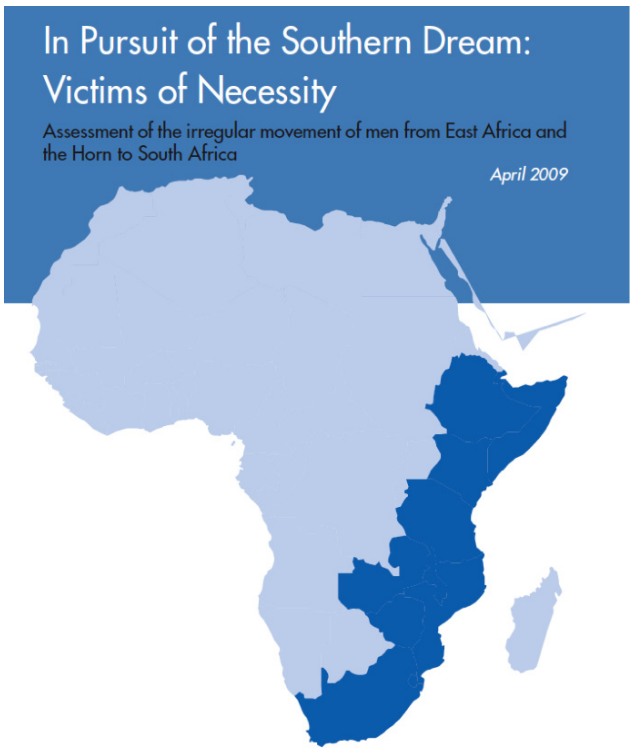
FIGURE 1: Representation of Migration from Africa to Europe



Source : Frontex (2017)

In the Southern Route narrative, Eurocentric "routes thinking" is imposed on migrant movements within Africa. Cartopolitical mapping of the Southern Route has shifted over time. Initially, the cartography sought to demonstrate the large swathes of the continent, and the significant number of countries affected (and transgressed). The front cover of IOM (2009b), for example, suggests that the Southern Route is a cohesive geographical entity over 4,000 km in length covering the national territory of 12 African countries (Figure 2). The map portrays the route as a featureless isotropic plain, a misleadingly rigid and state-centric view of migration. The main cartopolitical purpose behind this state-centric imaginary is to convey quite how many countries are impacted in their entirety by this undesirable phenomenon and, therefore, how many may need international assistance in countering it.

FIGURE 2: Early Mapping of the Southern Route

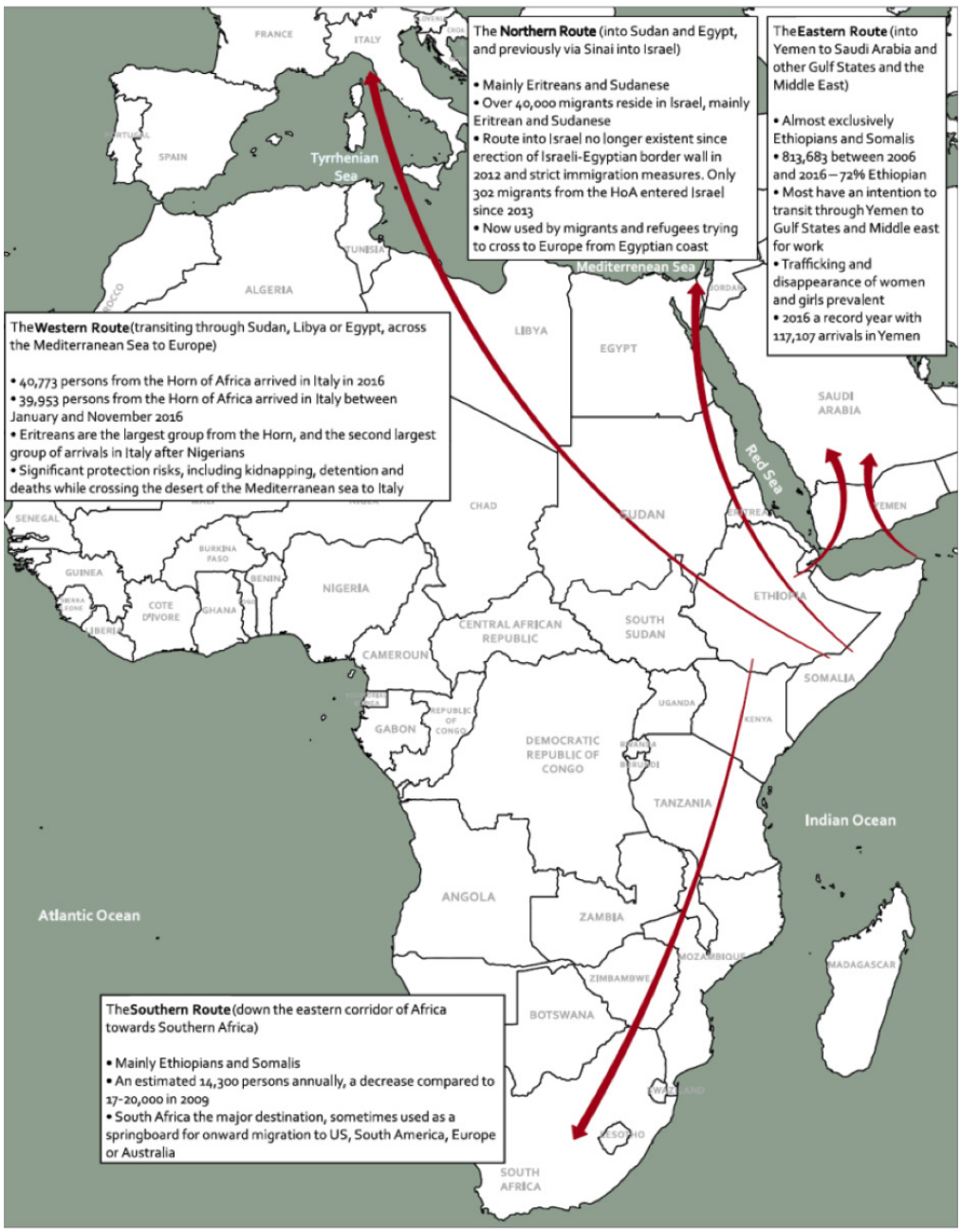


Source: IOM (2009b)

Subsequent representations focus more on depicting the directionality of migration as well as the transgression of numerous national borders. In Figure 3, for example, movement occurs inexorably in one direction in a great sweeping arc with no possibility of interrupted, reverse, or return migration. Migration also gathers momentum as the arrow thickens the closer it gets to South Africa. The delineation of national borders transgressed is much clearer than in Figure 2. The addition of a commentary box conveys the message that South Africa is a potential transit for onward migration to the United States, South America, Europe, and Australia (and therefore needs to be better understood if it is to be avoided).

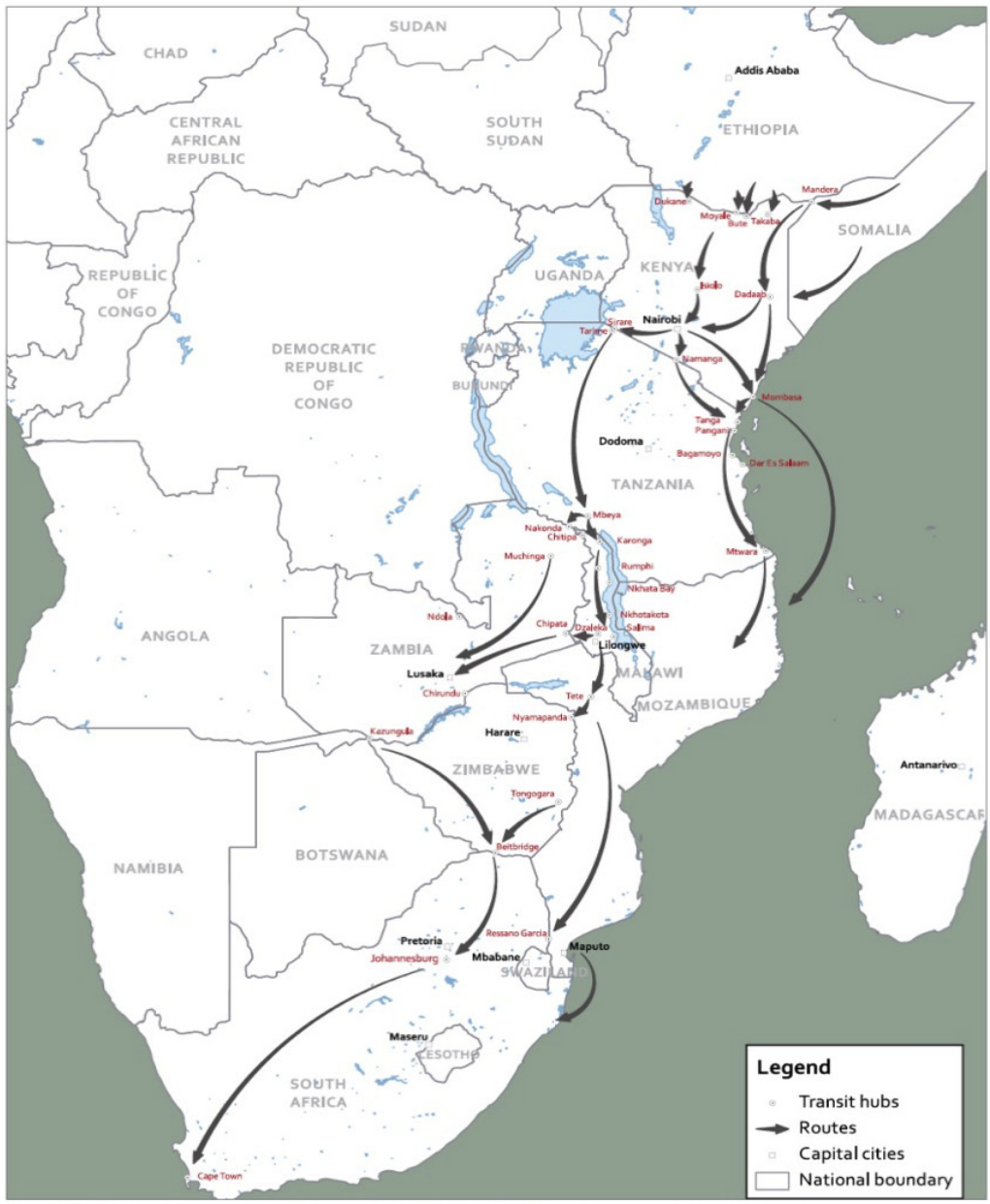
Other cartopolitical representations depict both southward directionality and supposed migration pathways via the strategic placement of arrows and "transit hubs" (see Figure 4). This is meant to suggest growing technocratic knowledge of the phenomenon as well as possible indications of the need to concentrate discovery efforts in these locations. However, none of the actual transportation routes used by migrants are included so the placement of the arrows is hardly literal. Their purpose

FIGURE 3: The Sweep of the Southern Route



Source: RMMS (2017: 4)

FIGURE 4: Pathways on the Southern Route



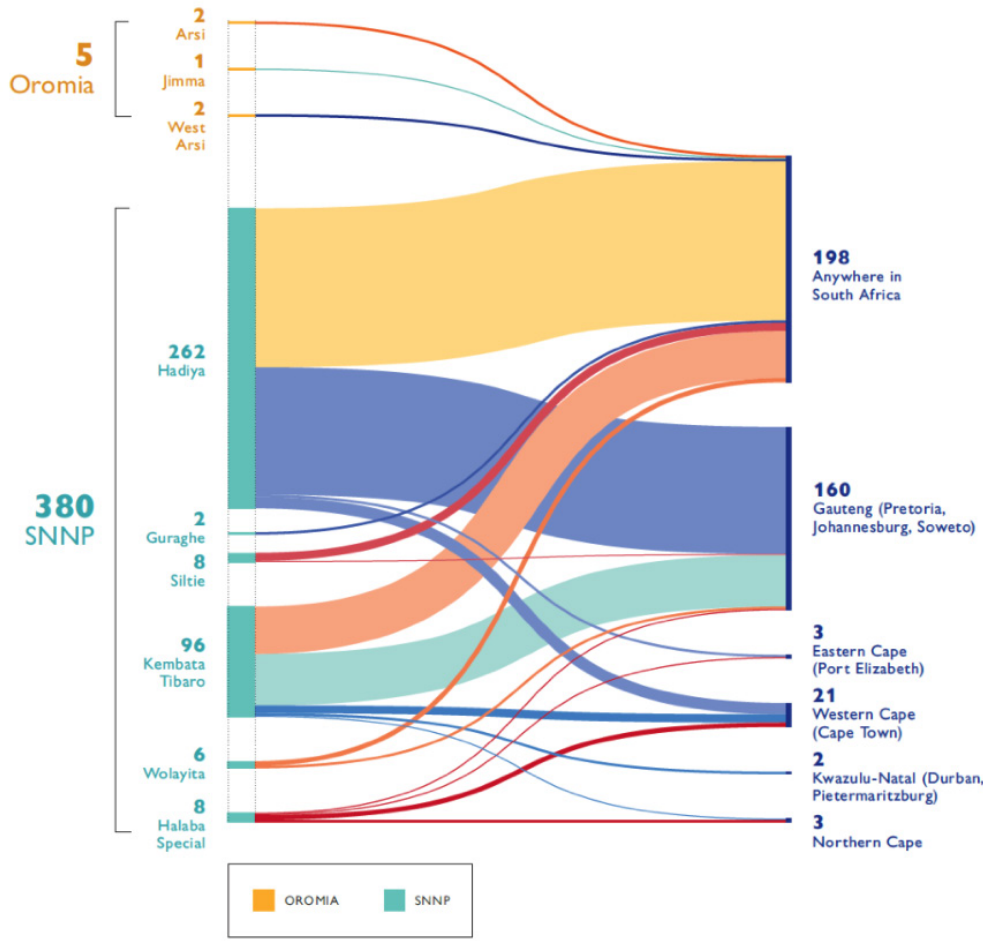
Source: RMMS (2017: 9)

is rather to suggest that there are proliferating pathways to South Africa as well as many more borders being transgressed by migrants. As Cobarrubias (2019: 1) suggests, cartopolitical maps ensure that "illegality is constructed in ways that target border crossing long before any border is crossed, making someone *illegal* at the very moment and place where s/he might decide to migrate." In contrast, the map is specific about the location of border crossing points, suggesting that the points of transgression of national boundaries are knowable and, by implication, that the policing of mixed migration should focus on these localities. At the same time, several of the direction arrows peter out (for example, in Mozambique and Zimbabwe), a cartographic device to indicate that the routings are currently invisible and may require more investigation.

In sum, by depicting migration as movement between clearly defined national territories, cartopolitics reinforces the idea of borders as absolute barriers, rather than porous and negotiable spaces. These unidirectional visual images fail to reflect the complex, multi-directional nature of migration, where detours, deportations, and prolonged waits are often defining experiences (Estifanos & Zack, 2020; Adugna et al, 2020; Fejerskov & Zeleke, 2020). Moreover, the maps erase the lived realities of migrants, who frequently experience migration as a cycle of movement, stagnation, and redirection rather than a straightforward journey. To date, there have been no attempts to counter-map the migrant experience, but such an exercise is needed to contest the current state-centred orthodoxy (Campos-Delgado, 2018; Tazzioli, 2023). By prioritizing borders over the actual pathways, infrastructures, and temporal disruptions that define migration, the maps reinforce a managerial and bureaucratic rather than migrant-centred perspective.

A recent addition to state-centric mapping of the Southern Route is the IOM's (2023) use of Origin-Destination (O-D) maps linking Ethiopia and South Africa (Figure 5). Here the aim is to connect the source areas of migrants in Ethiopia with various city destinations in South Africa. The main value of such a map is the elimination of all references to irregularity, national borders, and nation-states as well as the representation of bilateral migration flows and linkages at the sub-national scale. However, it has several weaknesses including the fact that it is based on a survey of the stated intentions of a non-random sample of young Ethiopians and therefore does not show the actual linkages between origin and destination localities. It is also a static representation of those intentions captured at one moment in time. At a more general level, O-D maps (like their more conventional predecessors) provide no insights into the complex spaces between the two poles traversed by migrants and are therefore migrant-centred in the narrowest sense.

FIGURE 5: O-D Mapping of the Southern Route



Source: IOM (2023: 14)

NARRATIVES OF THE SOUTHERN ROUTE

Mapping of the Southern Route is generally complemented by a narrative structure with many of the same discursive elements. First, all migrants traveling the Southern Route are typecast as "irregular". The seminal IOM (2009b: 11) report uses the word "irregular" nearly 400 times (including in the sub-title) and claims that "the number of Somalis and Ethiopians moving south as irregular migrants has increased in recent years and is currently as high as it has ever been." Irregular migration is defined as "movement that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending,

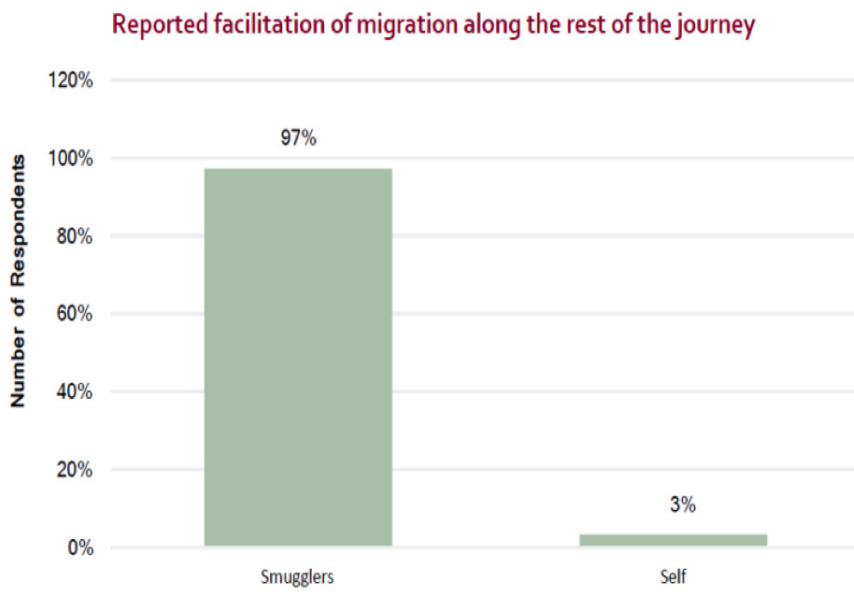
transit and receiving countries" (IOM, 2009: 15). This state-centric categorization means that there are no regular migrants on the route. There are also no refugees. They are sequestered in the refugee camps in Kenya and Malawi where irregular migrants stop and refuel before "flowing" inexorably on to South Africa where they immediately, and largely falsely, claim to be refugees. The report overlooks the fluidity of migrant status, where individuals often transition between legal and unauthorized categories due to restrictive immigration policies, bureaucratic barriers, and shifting national asylum frameworks.

A recurrent figure in the Southern Route narrative is "the smuggler". Indeed, not only are all migrants irregular, but they are also the victims of smugglers. Figure 6 from RMMS (2017) visualizes the point. Most of the characteristics of the Euro-American smuggling narrative are uncritically imposed on migrants moving from Ethiopia and Somalia to South Africa (Baird & van Liempt, 2016; Gallien & Weigand, 2022; UNODC, 2011). IOM (2009b) reproduces the 2000 UN Smuggling Convention as an annex and uses the word "smuggler" and its variants (smuggling, smuggled) over 1,400 times. Sanchez & Antonopoulus (2023: 2) note how in the Eurocentric narrative "excessive attention to the persona of the smuggler present in smuggling research and migration policy has led to the invisibility of the mobility efforts facilitated by other critical actors – most notably, migrants themselves." As Sanchez (2017a: 9) also suggests, "the dichotomist script of smugglers as predators and migrants and asylum seekers as victims that dominates narratives of clandestine migration has often obscured the perspectives of those who rely on smugglers for their mobility." A key policy recommendation from the IOM is the establishment of a regional smuggling task force to "facilitate information exchange on migrant routes and smuggling practices, referrals for migrants' authentication processes, legal guidance to preserve and promote the rights of the smuggled migrants, as well as facilitating training and technical cooperation to specialized agencies in dealing with the smuggling of migrants" (IOM, 2023: 89).

Migrants do not see themselves as passive victims of smugglers but rather as active agents working with guides to breach and circumvent the policing of the "web of facilitation and control" that blocks their path (Schapendonk, 2018; also, Maher, 2018; Mainwaring, 2016; Sanchez, 2017b). Migrants refer to their "smugglers" as "door openers", "transporters", "facilitators", and "guides", while the guides see themselves as "travel agents" or "brokers" providing a paid service to their "customers" (Adugna et al., 2019; also, Keshavarz & Khosravi, 2022). This is not to say that there is no exploitation and targeting of migrants by unscrupulous smugglers and criminal gangs. However, to imply that this is the general fate of migrants is to

strip them of all initiative, versatility, practical intelligence, and what Schapendonk (2018) calls "the power of improvisation." Even potentially high-risk journeys are made after careful calculation of the odds of success (Bakewell & Sturridge, 2021). Furthermore, migrant agency is invariably a collective and collaborative enterprise "shaped by complex social relations, access to communication technologies, information flows, and money transfer systems" (Megersa & Tafesse, 2024a, p.3; 2024b; also, Fevissa et al., 2024).

FIGURE 6: Smugglers Cove



Source: RMMS (2017: 15)

Another feature of the Southern Route narrative is an obsession with counting a "steady and rising tide" of smuggled migrants (IOM, 2024). As this report notes, "an elusive but critical area of knowledge when examining the movement of Ethiopians and Somalis to RSA is that of scale. How many people pay brokers and smugglers to take them south?" (p.7). According to the IOM, a lack of knowledge (rather than moral panic about migration in Europe and North America) is key to understanding why the Southern Route has been sidelined in policy debates:

> The Southern Route has received less attention in migration dialogues, in part because of the limited evidence available about the smuggling dynamics and the risks and vulnerabilities faced by migrants along the

> journey. More understanding of the routes taken, of migrant profiles, of how smuggling networks operate from the countries of origin to those of destination as well as of the protection needs, risks and vulnerabilities of migrants will be key to strengthen the evidence-base of these migration trends – which will further inform the development of sound policies, programmes and advocacy (IOM, 2023, p. 87).

The actual numbers are "unknown", which invites the use of aquatic metaphors of floods, waves, and rising tides to describe migration. Still, "estimates" are made (usually presented as numbers leaving or arriving per year). For example, the IOM (2024) claims (based on flimsy statistical evidence) that 17,900 to 19,600 people leave the Horn for South Africa each year. Back in 2009, with equally weak evidence, the IOM claimed that conservatively between 17,000 and 20,000 migrants engaged smugglers to take them to South Africa. This scale of migration would produce total numbers far above the recorded UNHCR numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa. The contradiction is resolved with the counterclaim that there are a large number of clandestine irregular migrants from the Horn in South Africa.

The argument to strengthen the evidence-base of migration is central to the IOM's global mission (Geiger & Pecoud, 2020). The IOM argues that better migration data has a dual role: to improve migration management by states and to offer better protection to migrants (Bradley, 2024; Bradley& Erdilmen, 2022; Frowd, 2017). However, in practice, the "datafication" of borders is of much greater interest and relevance to states than to migrants (Frowd, 2024). Ahouga (2022: 6) argues that for the IOM and states, datafication is a form of surveillance that "does more than simply observe, describe and count the displaced in order to learn more about them and disaggregate them into different types of data." He suggests that it introduces cognitive brakes on the uncertainty associated with migration, ties migrants to a priori chaotic spaces of circulation, and "assigns them a set of socio-demographic characteristics that are stable over time and reduce the heterogeneity of their experiences" (Ahouga, 2022: 6). What is certain is that the Southern Route narrative has provoked considerable interest from donors and funders over the last decade, especially in Europe and North America.

The IOM and other agencies have translated the narrative into a vehicle for attracting large-scale project funding to establish initiatives devoted wholly or in part to data collection and cross-border flow monitoring within Africa. These include: (a) the 2016 EU-IOM Joint Initiative on Migrant Protection and Reintegration in the

Horn of Africa Region including migration data collection and analysis "to support fact-based programming"; (b) cross-border movement monitoring at over 100 Flow Monitoring Points by IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) for East, Horn and Southern Africa (2016); (c) the Mixed Migration Centre in Nairobi with a Mixed Migration Monitoring Initiative (4Mi) and Mixed Migration Data Portal (2018); (d) the Africa Regional Migration Program funded by the US State Department (also 2018), (e) the Southern African Migration Management (SAMM) Project (2020), (f) the Mixed Bilateral Labour Migration Agreements Southern Corridor Assessment (2021); and (g) the Regional Migrant Response Plan (MRP) for the Horn of Africa to Yemen and Southern Africa (2024).

The better-data-for-migrant-protection argument has an uncomfortable place in the Southern Route narrative since it requires elaboration of who and what migrants must be protected from. The initial IOM report provided extensive documentation that the primary agents of migrant human rights violations were the state officials employed to uphold national laws, maintain the integrity of national borders, and offer protection from rights violations (IOM, 2009). As the report notes, "it is especially pertinent…to highlight the role of state law enforcement (police, prison officials and soldiers) as some of them allegedly act to harm, degrade, injure, rob and threaten the lives of smuggled migrants as they find them in transit through their territories" (IOM, 2009: 76). Over 80% of all Ethiopian and Somali migrants said that they had witnessed corruption by officials during their journey. Instances of criminal extortion, strip searches, violence, robbery, and corruption by police, army, immigration officials, and immigration authorities were all documented. As the report concludes, "the guardians of national border integrity in many places are deeply compromised" (IOM, 2009: 81). Corruption is ubiquitous, widespread, and systematic. As one Ethiopian migrant recalled, "everyone along the way was corrupt" (IOM, 2009: 78). Borders are porous not simply because they are long, minimally fenced, and largely unguarded, but because of the corruption industry that provides easy passage for migrants extorted for bribes. As the IOM (2009: 87-88) concludes, "the smuggled migrant is in fact prey to a constellation of people he (sic) encounters from the start of his journey to RSA," especially since "there were few situations that cash payments could not solve."

Subsequent versions of the narrative systematically downplay the role of corrupt state officials in victimizing migrants en route to South Africa, relegating the phenomenon to a passing observation or two, recasting it as the fault of smugglers and migrants, or failing to mention it. For example, the IOM (2013: 12) notes that "border guards

and police at checkpoints are routinely bribed to facilitate the passage of undocumented migrants" as if there is little of the corruption and extortion meticulously documented four years earlier by the author of IOM (2009b). Attention is deflected from state malfeasance to abuse by competing smugglers which leaves migrants with "more exploitation, kidnapping for ransom and violence (IOM, 2024: 11). Two recent reports by the Mixed Migration Centre point out that bribery and extortion are experienced by the greatest number of migrants without further comment on the implications (MMC, 2023, 2025). For MMC (2023), smugglers protect their clients from rapacious officials, while MMC (2025: 22) attempts to calculate the risk of being smuggled: "Using a smuggler at some point during the journey was one of the strongest predictors for experiencing abuse. Migrant youth who used a smuggler were 1.8 times more likely to experience abuse overall, and they showed greater vulnerability to each of the abuse types. They were 1.8 times more likely to experience robbery, 1.9 times more likely to report injury/ill health, and three times more likely to experience physical violence. Using a smuggler increased the likelihood of experiencing sexual violence and witnessing death by a factor of 3.4 and 3.8, respectively." However, since only 18% of their non-random sample were Ethiopian, it is by no means clear that this applies to the Southern Route.

In erasing the idea of the State as a victimizer, the IOM (2024: 11) argues that smuggling makes the migrant more of a victim than it does the State:

> What begins as an entirely voluntary process can become coercive when migrants are trapped in houses, beaten and starved until ransoms are paid; the intent of the action can turn from the facilitation of travel to exploitation, where the victim is no longer the State – through the violation of its territorial laws – but the migrant.

Finally, the narrative maintains that irregular and smuggled migrants who cross into different countries are not committing illegal acts and should not be treated as criminals. This is an organizational perspective with which most states would disagree since much immigration legislation labels irregular migrants as "illegal foreigners". Between 2020 and 2023, for example, over 5,000 Ethiopian migrants were arrested in Tanzania and imprisoned for periods of one to six years under the 2016 Immigration Act. On release, the IOM's protection strategy has simply been to organize their repatriation to Ethiopia, rather than facilitating their onward journey.

RERUNNING THE SOUTHERN ROUTE NARRATIVE

Intra-continental migration is easily the dominant form of African migration and powerfully illustrates the broader realities of South-South mobility (Crush et al., 2025). Scholars have historically concentrated on Africa-to-North flows, leaving major knowledge gaps about the specific dynamics and impacts of contemporary intra-regional mobility on the continent. These neglected dynamics challenge the Eurocentric assumptions dominating mixed-migration discourse, bringing into focus the complexity of African mobilities and the failures of contemporary governance frameworks. States in the region are aligned with international organizations in promulgating mixed-migration frameworks that cast complex movements as flows requiring strict oversight (Long & Crisp, 2011). Intensified border controls, biometric registrations, and donor-led migration management initiatives have consequently multiplied. The cartographic and discursive construction of a geographical entity called the Southern Route therefore provides an important South-South case study of the mythic nature of the mixed-migration narrative.

The Southern Route narrative reproduces many of the contradictions of its progenitor, the Africa-Europe mixed-migration narrative. Although influential reports – from IOM (2009b) through to MMC (2025) – document serious abuses of migrants, they risk overshadowing local genealogies of mobility, communal resource pooling, or the ordinary place of movement in African livelihoods. While official scripts portray the flow as irregular migrants (with bogus refugee claims) smuggled on perilous roads, in reality, communal risk-sharing, diaspora sponsorship, and longstanding patterns of cross-border mobility also shape patterns of migration between the Horn and South Africa. Nor are the effects of these movements solely negative for South Africa and the states in between: research shows how entrepreneurship, job creation, remittances, cultural exchange, and communal wealth-building are all significant benefits (Crush et al., 2015; Estifanos & Zack, 2019; Megersa & Tafesse, 2024).

The claims of the Southern Route narrative to be an objective representation of African migration realities are thus fundamentally flawed. What the narrative represents, rather, is the collaborative (carto)political project of European donors, African states, and inter-governmental organizations such as the IOM to assert the primacy of national borders and state-centred definitions of legitimate and illegitimate movement within the continent. For international organizations, the construction of the narrative also serves the purpose of generating donor support for their operational programmes in Africa. Claims about the Southern Route as a new "irregular migration" corridor have prompted calls for more border fortification, sophisticated data

monitoring, and regional enforcement collaborations, which the technical experts and advisers are only too willing to provide (Crush, 2020). In practice, such securitization rarely curbs movement; it instead raises transit fees, fosters corruption, and drives migrants into more precarious paths (Estifanos & Zack, 2019).

The concluding sections of the abundant Southern Route texts focus on providing "policy recommendations" for governments about how to manage the border transgressions of irregular migrants and rent-seeking smugglers. There are no serious recommendations on how to address what the IOM (2009b) initially labelled the "collusion, complicity and human rights violations" perpetrated by officialdom. To address the official misconduct, victimization, and extortion would be to suggest to governments that they are complicit in creating a problem they prefer to rail against. Similarly, the Southern Route narrative does not allow for recommendations to migrants on how best to navigate the challenges of migration southwards to South Africa. The construction of the state-centric narrative is also fundamentally at odds with the free movement agenda of the African Union and regional organizations such as ECOWAS, COMESA, and SADC. The alignment of top-down policy prescriptions with immigration frameworks that assert national sovereignty are overshadowing progress towards free movement agendas at migrants' expense (Vanyoro, 2023).

Decolonizing the Southern Route narrative and its cartopolitics means re-centring Ethiopian and Somali migrants and their networks not as passive victims of smugglers but as creative actors of their own livelihoods in trying structural circumstances of inequality and poverty as well as malfeasance by state officials. Ultimately, viewing the Southern Route as a "smuggling corridor" for "irregular" migrants from the Horn is a gross oversimplification of a complex reality. By depicting all migration as irregular, Ethiopian and Somali migrants are reduced to objects to be managed rather than agents of their own mobility. This profoundly state-centred narrative is a textual and cartographic abstraction with a clear political rationale. All along the territories, borders, and regulatory regimes that it encompasses are other local and long-distance, past and present, cross-border mobilities and migrations that intersect with the movement of migrants from the Horn (Vanyoro, 2024b; Crush & Tevera, 2010; Musoni, 2020; Banda, 2019; Isaacman et al., 2025). These are written out of the plot of the official Southern Route story.

The challenge for African researchers seeking to contest such (mis)leading mixed-migration narratives lies in reclaiming the agency of migrants within scholarly and policy discourse. This requires shifting from state-centred, securitized framings to

nuanced, migrant-centred analyses that highlight the economic, social, and historical dimensions of mobility while challenging the political interests that sustain restrictive migration governance. Crucially, migration from the Horn to South Africa must be understood within the broader context of South Africa's history as a destination, transit hub, and sending country in regional and continental migration systems. The movement of Ethiopian and Somali migrants intersects with diverse patterns of labour migration from countries including Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi. Situating the Southern Route within these wider dynamics not only counters its portrayal as a uniquely problematic migration corridor but also reveals the entanglement of South-South mobilities in shaping economic and social life across the continent.

CONCLUSION

The genealogy of "mixed migration" presented in this report reveals that the concept is often treated as a neutral taxonomy capturing the diverse realities of refugees and migrants, but is actually a discursive framework that actively reshapes African mobilities on the ground. Conceived largely outside Africa and introduced and promoted by international organizations, this narrative draws on Eurocentric binaries of "voluntary" versus "forced", and "regular" versus "irregular" migration with little regard for the historical and contemporary complexities of African cross-border movement While this framework purports to acknowledge the complexity of migration dynamics, it ultimately simplifies and reinforces a rigid distinction between two types of migrants: refugees and "irregular migrants". Thus, a paradox of "mixed migration" is that, although it claims to collapse old categories – highlighting that people on the move have different motivations but often follow the same routes – it ultimately reproduces the refugee–migrant dichotomy.

In Africa, the narrative positions migration flows as inherently diverse, primarily irregular, organized and driven by smugglers, and requiring tight control by states. The narrative is particularly prevalent in discussions on African migration to Europe, but it has also been repurposed to describe intra-African movements. As a result, African mobilities are increasingly framed through the lens of crisis, illegality, and smuggling, rather than as longstanding patterns of economic and social connectivity. This framing is particularly evident in the invention and abstraction of the so-called Southern Route in the last twenty years. Originally identified in IOM reports on migrant smuggling, the Southern Route is depicted as a vast, perilous, and growing pathway of irregular migration requiring urgent policy intervention.

In this report, we suggest that textual and cartographic representations of the Route are a form of cartopolitics, constructing migration as a disorderly and permanent flow of irregular migrants from a singular destination toward a common destination. These maps erase the cyclical and multidirectional nature of African migration and reinforce the notion of migration as a security challenge.

A striking omission in the Southern Route narrative is the role of state officials in facilitating and profiting from migration. While reports frequently emphasize the dangers posed by smugglers and traffickers, they rarely acknowledge the pervasive corruption among border guards, police, and immigration officers who extort bribes, subject migrants to abuse, and enable illicit crossings for personal gain. The early IOM reports documented widespread exploitation by state actors, yet later iterations systematically downplay this reality, shifting the blame onto smugglers while absolving governments of responsibility. This serves a political function, allowing states to position themselves as enforcers of migration control rather than as key actors in creating and sustaining the very conditions they claim to combat.

International organizations such as the IOM and UNHCR have played a key role in constructing and perpetuating the Southern Route narrative, benefitting both financially and institutionally from its persistence. By framing migration as a crisis in need of urgent management, these organizations secure funding from donor governments—particularly in Europe and North America—who are keen to externalize border control to African states. The narrative also strengthens the authority of these organizations in migration governance, allowing them to expand their operational footprint, influence policy, and justify border fortification, the deployment of biometric data collection systems and border surveillance technologies, and migrant return programmes. In this way, the Southern Route narrative serves not only as a tool for controlling mobility but also as a mechanism for reinforcing the power and relevance of international agencies in Africa's migration landscape.

The Southern Route narrative portrays all migrants as victims of smugglers and threats to state sovereignty, erasing their agency, decision-making, and resilience. By portraying migration as solely a function of smuggling and coercion, the narrative obscures the broader context within which migrants make decisions about their journeys. The Southern Route narrative largely focuses on Ethiopian and Somali migrants, casting them as irregular travellers while disregarding the broader diversity of migrants moving within East and Southern Africa. This framing excludes long-established and concurrent migration streams, such as Zimbabwean, Malawian, and Mozambican migration to South Africa, and assumes that all southward migration

is permanent. Thus, by narrowing its scope to a singular crisis-driven perspective, the Southern Route narrative erases the lived experiences of migrants who do not fit neatly into the paradigm, reinforcing a state-centric and securitized approach to African mobility. By vesting authority in state-centric security responses, the mixed-migration framework not only marginalizes the experiences of migrants but also erodes alternative understandings of mobility and integration in Africa.

The Southern Route narrative also runs counter to the African Union's vision of free movement and regional integration, as well as longstanding initiatives by regional organizations like COMESA and SADC to facilitate cross-border mobility. By portraying migration as inherently irregular and security-driven, the narrative legitimizes restrictive border controls, increased surveillance, and enforcement-heavy approaches that run counter to these efforts to promote economic and social integration. In doing so, the narrative criminalizes migrants and obstructs Africa's broader agenda of reducing barriers to intra-continental migration. The imposition of a Eurocentric migration governance model on African realities reframes mobilities as inherently problematic, justifying more restrictive border controls and surveillance technologies funded by external actors. African and international policymakers need to consider alternative frameworks that, for example, recognize the economic, social, and historical realities of migration within the continent.

This report exposes the Southern Route narrative as a constructed and politically motivated state-centred instrument that serves to justify restrictive migration policies, rather than accurately reflecting the realities of African mobility. The mythologies of mixed migration reinforce state control while ignoring the historical and structural drivers of migration. Moving beyond the Southern Route narrative requires re-centring African agency, recognizing migration as an integral part of continental development, and resisting simplistic crisis narratives that perpetuate exclusion and securitization.

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In Africa, various international organizations have promoted "mixed migration" as a new governance challenge requiring innovative policy responses. The narrative, which has been repurposed from discussions on African migration to Europe to include intra-African movements, positions migration flows as primarily irregular, organized and driven by smugglers, and requiring tight control by states. This report shows that textual and cartographic representations of the so-called Southern Route are a form of cartopolitics, constructing migration as a permanent flow of irregular migrants from a singular origin toward a common destination. By portraying migration as solely a function of smuggling and coercion, the Southern Route narrative obscures the broader context within which migrants decide on their journeys. It also ignores the role of state officials in profiting from migration. By vesting authority in state-centric security responses, the mixed-migration framework not only marginalizes the experiences of migrants but also erodes alternative understandings of mobility and integration in Africa. This report exposes the Southern Route narrative as a constructed and politically motivated state-centred instrument that serves to justify restrictive migration policies, rather than reflecting the realities of African mobility. The mythologies of mixed migration reinforce state control while ignoring the historical and structural drivers of migration. Moving beyond the Southern Route narrative requires re-centring African agency, recognizing migration as an integral part of continental development, and resisting simplistic crisis narratives that perpetuate exclusion and securitization.

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