

From Conflict to Mobility: Reframing AU–EU Cooperation on Migration, Peacebuilding, and Human Security in West and Central Africa

Udo, Kingsley Asukwo, PhD

Country Director of International Alert, Nigeria
80, Lome Crescent, Wuse Zone 7, Abuja, FCT
kingsleyprotect@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the persistent tension within AU–EU cooperation between migration control, conflict management, and the promotion of human security in West and Central Africa. Although migration and mobility constitute an established pillar of the AU–EU partnership, policy responses have frequently emphasised irregular migration, border management, trafficking, smuggling, return and readmission, potentially overlooking the developmental and peacebuilding functions of human mobility. The study aims to reframe AU–EU cooperation by examining how mobility can contribute to peacebuilding, livelihood resilience and human security, while identifying implications for migration governance in West and Central Africa. Theoretically, it combines the migration–mobility perspective with human security and peacebuilding approaches, arguing that mobility should be understood not only as a consequence or security challenge of conflict but also as a resource for resilience, regional integration and sustainable peace. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative theoretical desk-study design, drawing on policy documents, institutional reports and relevant scholarly literature. Findings indicate that conflict, climate pressures and livelihood insecurity reshape established mobility systems, while safe and regular mobility can support livelihoods, social networks, labour markets and regional resilience. The study concludes that AU–EU cooperation requires a shift from predominantly control-oriented migration management toward integrated mobility governance. Policy implications include strengthening legal mobility pathways, protecting migrant rights, supporting regional free movement, integrating mobility into peacebuilding, and improving AU–EU–ECOWAS coordination.

Keywords: *AU-EU cooperation, conflict mobility, human security, migration, peacebuilding*

Introduction

The relationship between the African Union (AU) and European Union (EU) has evolved substantially from an earlier emphasis on development cooperation toward a broader strategic partnership encompassing peace and security, sustainable development, governance, climate action, trade, migration and human mobility. Since the establishment of the Africa–EU partnership in 2000, successive summits and institutional dialogues have progressively widened the scope of cooperation, while the 2022 Joint Vision for 2030 explicitly framed Africa and Europe as partners pursuing shared prosperity, peace, security and human development (African Union [AU], 2022). The 2025 AU–EU Ministerial Meeting further emphasised implementation, monitoring and institutional follow-up of this strategic partnership (AU, 2025).

This transformation is particularly important because migration in West and Central Africa cannot be adequately understood independently of conflict, displacement, climate pressures, livelihoods and human security. The region simultaneously experiences voluntary and forced mobility,

including seasonal migration, transhumance, labour mobility, rural–urban movement, displacement caused by conflict and climate-related movements (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024). Conflict, resource competition, poverty and climate pressures have contributed to substantial displacement across the region, demonstrating that mobility is frequently connected to broader struggles over safety, livelihoods and access to basic resources (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). Consequently, treating West and Central Africa merely as origins or transit zones for migration to Europe overlooks the region’s complex and interconnected mobility systems.

The policy implications of this reality are significant. Traditional migration-control approaches have frequently prioritised irregular migration prevention, border management, anti-smuggling measures, returns and readmission. Although these remain components of AU–EU cooperation, contemporary frameworks increasingly recognise legal pathways, labour mobility, protection, reintegration, youth employment and development alongside migration management (AU, 2022). Scholarly evidence nevertheless shows that EU-supported migration governance in West Africa can reproduce externalised control and shape domestic bureaucratic priorities, underscoring the need to examine migration governance beyond a narrow security lens (Roos et al., 2024).

The Joint Vision for 2030 provides an important institutional foundation for this reconsideration. Its migration and mobility commitments include cooperation on irregular migration, trafficking, border management, return and reintegration, protection, legal migration pathways, youth skills and employment, while its broader pillars connect migration with peace, prosperity, human development and sustainability (AU, 2022). Subsequent implementation mechanisms, including the AU–EU Ministerial Follow-up Committee and monitoring arrangements, seek to translate these commitments into practical cooperation (AU, 2025).

Against this background, the central puzzle of this study is, why does AU–EU cooperation continue to treat migration primarily as a security and irregular-migration problem when mobility can also constitute a mechanism of resilience, peacebuilding, livelihood recovery and human security? The study argues that resolving this tension requires moving conceptually from conflict-to-control toward conflict-to-mobility, treating human mobility not merely as an outcome of insecurity but also as a potential resource through which individuals, households and communities navigate crisis, sustain livelihoods and rebuild social and economic security.

Therefore, this study makes three contributions. First, its conceptual contribution is to reframe migration from a predominantly security problem to a multidimensional mobility phenomenon shaped by conflict, livelihoods, climate pressures, development and human security. Second, its theoretical contribution is to integrate migration governance, human security and peacebuilding into a single analytical framework for understanding mobility in West and Central Africa. Third, its policy contribution is to reconceptualise AU–EU cooperation around safe mobility, resilience, livelihoods, regional integration and human security, thereby positioning mobility not simply as something to control, but as a domain through which peace and sustainable development can be advanced.

Establishing the problem

Migration and human mobility in West and Central Africa are increasingly shaped by the interaction of conflict, displacement, climate pressures, livelihood insecurity and changing regional

mobility patterns. Although the African Union (AU) and European Union (EU) have progressively broadened cooperation beyond development assistance toward migration, peace, security and mobility, significant conceptual and policy limitations remain. Current AU–EU frameworks recognise the links between migration, development and security and call for comprehensive cooperation, yet implementation continues to give substantial attention to irregular migration, trafficking, smuggling, border management, return and readmission.

First, existing approaches remain substantially conflict-centric. Migration is frequently constructed through the lens of irregular movement, trafficking, smuggling and border insecurity, positioning mobility primarily as a security challenge requiring containment and control. This framing can obscure the diverse drivers and functions of mobility, including livelihood adaptation, family strategies, labour movement, displacement and responses to environmental stress. The AU itself has recently emphasised that African migration should be understood as a developmental and mobility issue rather than principally as a security problem.

Second, cooperation remains significantly state-centric. Policy attention is concentrated on states, borders, border-management capacities and migration-control mechanisms, while migrants, displaced persons, host communities, pastoral populations and other mobile groups receive comparatively less analytical attention. This is problematic because mobility routinely crosses administrative boundaries and connects communities across countries and regions. Third, sectoral fragmentation persists. Migration, peacebuilding, development, climate adaptation and human security are frequently addressed through separate institutional and policy frameworks despite their evident interconnections. Although AU–EU policy increasingly acknowledges these linkages, a sufficiently integrated framework connecting mobility with peacebuilding and human security remains underdeveloped. The problem, therefore, is the persistence of fragmented approaches that inadequately capture West and Central Africa as interconnected mobility spaces. This study addresses this gap by reframing AU–EU cooperation around mobility, peacebuilding and human security. However, this study posed the following research questions:

- i. How has AU–EU cooperation historically conceptualised migration in West and Central Africa?
- ii. What are the theoretical limitations of conflict- and control-centred approaches to migration governance?
- iii. How can mobility be reconceptualised as a resource for peacebuilding and human security?

Theoretical framework

The study adopted human security theory. Human security theory emerged prominently from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report of 1994, rather than from a single individual scholar. The report shifted the referent of security from states and territorial integrity toward the survival, dignity, freedom and well-being of individuals and communities (UNDP, 1994). Subsequently, scholars such as Buzan (1991) broadened security analysis beyond military threats, while Axworthy (2001) advanced the human-security agenda through emphasis on individuals, human rights and international cooperation. The Commission on Human Security (2003) further conceptualised human security around protecting fundamental freedoms and enabling people to live with dignity. These contributions established human security as a people-centred and multidimensional framework. The theory assumes that security is not synonymous with state or military security but concerns protection from interconnected threats affecting people's everyday lives. UNDP (1994) identifies freedom from fear and freedom from

want as foundational principles and identifies economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security as interconnected dimensions. The theory therefore assumes that insecurity can arise from armed conflict, displacement, poverty, unemployment, environmental degradation, exclusion, disease and political violence. It also assumes that security and development are mutually reinforcing and that sustainable security requires prevention, protection and empowerment rather than coercive control alone.

Human security theory provides a useful framework for from conflict to mobility because migration in West and Central Africa can be understood as both a consequence of insecurity and a livelihood, adaptation and resilience strategy. It directs AU–EU cooperation beyond border control toward conflict prevention, peacebuilding, livelihood protection, climate resilience, human rights, safe mobility and migrant protection. This approach is consistent with the contemporary AU–EU partnership, which links peace and security with migration and mobility under the Joint Vision for 2030. Thus, the theory supports reframing migrants and mobile communities as holders of security needs and rights, rather than merely objects of migration control.

Research design

This study adopts a conceptual/theoretical research design to critically examine the relationship between migration, peacebuilding, security and AU–EU cooperation in West and Central Africa. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the design systematically interrogates existing theoretical arguments, scholarly literature, policy documents and institutional frameworks to develop a conceptual reframing of migration from a predominantly security and border-control concern toward a broader human-mobility and human-security agenda. This approach is appropriate because the study seeks to synthesize competing perspectives and develop an alternative analytical understanding of AU–EU cooperation. The research involves a critical review of studies on migration, peacebuilding, security and AU–EU relations. Existing migration studies frequently emphasizes irregular migration, trafficking, smuggling, border governance and migration control, thereby privileging state security over migrants' welfare and mobility rights. The African Union (2024) policy discourse, however, explicitly argues that African migration should be approached primarily as a development and human-mobility opportunity rather than exclusively as a security problem. Similarly, contemporary AU–EU frameworks increasingly connect migration and mobility with development, peace, security, humanitarian action and human rights (African Union, 2025; European External Action Service [EEAS], 2025).

The review also critically examines studies on the migration–security nexus, particularly arguments that conflict, terrorism, climate pressures and insecurity produce complex patterns of displacement and cross-border mobility. David and Mabudusha (2025) study on West Africa demonstrate the interconnectedness of terrorism, migration, regional security and development while highlighting limitations in interstate cooperation. Consequently, the study compares conflict-centric and state-centric approaches with human-security and peacebuilding perspectives. The AU–EU Joint Vision for 2030 provides an important policy framework because it explicitly combines peace and security with an enhanced partnership on migration and mobility (European Commission, 2025).

Conceptual clarification

Migration and mobility studies

Literature review demonstrate that migration in West and Central Africa is predominantly intra-regional, multidirectional and livelihood-oriented, rather than simply movement toward Europe.

Using 67,296 interviews conducted across Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea, Mali and Niger, the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024) found that 93% of observed movements remained within West and Central Africa, while 74% of migrants reported economic motivations, particularly employment, livelihoods and business activities. Similarly, regional mobility mapping identifies seasonal migration, transhumance, rural–urban movement, conflict-induced displacement, climate-related mobility and economic migration as interconnected forms of human mobility (IOM, 2024). In West Africa, Yemisi (2024) examined Nigerian migrants in Ghana and found that ECOWAS free-movement arrangements coexist with migrant vulnerability arising from securitisation, nationalism, harassment and deportation. Omutuyi et al. (2024) similarly found tensions between ECOWAS free mobility and national security practices in Nigeria. In Central Africa, mobility is strongly influenced by conflict and climate pressures, particularly around the Lake Chad Basin, where millions of displaced persons, refugees and returnees move across Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger (IOM, 2024).

Peacebuilding and conflict transformation

Empirical studies in West and Central Africa demonstrates that peacebuilding increasingly depends on locally grounded conflict-transformation mechanisms rather than formal peace agreements alone. In Cameroon, Lefort-Rieu (2024) examined grassroots peace initiatives through case studies of the Anglophone conflict, Boko Haram-related insecurity and the Central African refugee crisis. The study found that locally oriented reconciliation initiatives can strengthen community engagement, but may also overlook structural political grievances when state-level issues are excluded. Similarly, Cho (2025), drawing on more than 60 interviews with political actors, separatists, civil-society activists and mediation participants, found that Switzerland's mediation efforts in Cameroon's Anglophone crisis were strongly shaped by domestic political dynamics and the agency of conflict parties. In Nigeria and Mali, a qualitative study by Tripp et al. (2025) also demonstrates the importance of women's agency in local peacebuilding, particularly through community-based responses to insecurity and displacement. In Central Africa, De Juan et al. (2022) evaluated reconstruction interventions in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and found improvements in services and subjective well-being, but these gains did not translate into stronger trust in state institutions. Collectively, these studies indicate that effective conflict transformation requires attention to local agency, structural grievances, social inclusion, livelihoods and state–community relations.

Human security

Current empirical review demonstrates that human security in West and Central Africa extends beyond protection from armed violence to include economic, food, health, livelihood and personal security. In Ghana and Nigeria, Nwangwu (2024) examined the securitisation of transhumance and found that predominantly security-oriented responses to farmer–herder mobility can intensify land-use conflicts and generate broader human-security consequences, including displacement, restricted healthcare access, psychological distress and food insecurity. In Cameroon, Acha-anyi (2024) surveyed 529 internally displaced persons in the Northwest, Southwest and Littoral regions and found widespread fear, loss of basic freedoms, inadequate food and water, and disrupted livelihoods, demonstrating how armed conflict simultaneously undermines several dimensions of human security. Similarly, Bang (2024) found that internally displaced persons affected by Cameroon's Anglophone crisis experienced livelihood insecurity, inadequate humanitarian assistance and weak institutional coordination. At the regional level, IOM's Solutions and Mobility

Index (2024), drawing on more than 5,000 locality assessments across West and Central Africa, identified conflict, intercommunal violence, climate shocks and governance challenges as interconnected drivers of displacement and weakened community resilience. Collectively, these studies indicate that effective human-security interventions require integrated approaches addressing conflict, mobility, livelihoods and access to essential services.

Africa–EU relations and migration governance

Literature review pointed out that Africa–EU migration cooperation has increasingly shaped migration governance in West and Central Africa, although African actors retain varying degrees of agency. Roos et al. (2024), using 87 interviews in Accra, Dakar and Brussels, found that EU funding strengthened bureaucratic capacity in Ghana and Senegal while simultaneously encouraging national administrations to adapt migration policies to European priorities. Their findings suggest that EU influence operates not only through formal conditionality but also through sustained financial and institutional engagement. Similarly, Cham and Adam (2025), examining the Gambian context, found that political actors framed EU cooperation on deportation through moral, utilitarian and identity-related arguments, demonstrating that African domestic politics mediate European migration objectives. Zanker (2024) further shows that West African governments do not simply adopt European priorities; they simultaneously pursue development, diaspora engagement, security and migrant-protection interests. In Nigeria, Niger and Mauritania, Uzomah (2024) found that EU-supported border technologies influenced mobility patterns and generated concerns regarding migrants' rights. Collectively, these studies indicate that Africa–EU migration governance is a negotiated process involving external influence, African institutional agency, mobility interests and competing development and security priorities.

Policy-document analysis

Policy-document analysis provides a systematic examination of the institutional frameworks shaping AU–EU cooperation on migration, peacebuilding and human security. The AU Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA) 2018–2030 promotes coherent migration governance through labour mobility, border management, migrant rights, forced displacement, migration-development linkages and inter-state cooperation (African Union [AU], 2018). Its 2026 mid-term assessment further identifies migration and mobility as central to Africa's development and integration agenda. Agenda 2063 situates mobility within continental integration, inclusive development, peace, security and partnerships (AU, 2015). The AU–EU Joint Vision for 2030 establishes migration and mobility as one of four partnership pillars, alongside prosperity, peace and security, and multilateralism (AU & EU, 2022). Related AU–EU Migration and Mobility Dialogues address irregular migration, trafficking, border management, return, readmission, reintegration and legal mobility (European Commission, 2025). The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in 2024 and applicable from June 2026, emphasizes common asylum procedures, border management, solidarity and external cooperation (Council of the EU, 2026). ECOWAS frameworks emphasize free movement, residence and establishment, while ECCAS similarly provides regional mobility frameworks, although implementation remains uneven (ECOWAS, 2026; UNECA, 2026).

From migration control to mobility governance

Migration has increasingly been framed through a security lens in which irregular migration, border insecurity, trafficking, migrant smuggling, terrorism and organised crime are treated as

interconnected threats. Forced displacement arising from conflict, persecution and environmental pressures further reinforces this security-oriented framing. Contemporary EU policy continues to emphasise external-border management, anti-smuggling cooperation, trafficking prevention, return and readmission, although legal mobility pathways are also recognised (European Commission, 2026). The AU similarly identifies irregular migration, forced displacement and border governance as important dimensions of migration governance (African Union [AU], 2018, 2026).

The securitisation of migration

The Copenhagen School's Securitisation Theory, developed principally by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998), explains how issues become security threats through political discourse and "speech acts." Migration becomes securitised when political authorities represent mobility as an existential threat requiring exceptional measures. This perspective therefore asks when ordinary social and economic movement becomes constructed as a security problem. A predominantly securitised approach can produce border-centric policies, deterrence strategies, externalisation, return/readmission priorities and limited recognition of migrant agency. It may also inadequately capture extensive intra-African mobility, including labour, pastoral, educational and circular movements. The AU (2026) assessments emphasise that African migration involves both voluntary and forced mobility and should contribute to continental integration and development.

Toward mobility governance

Mobility governance broadens analysis from controlling movement to managing mobility through rights, connectivity, regulation, development and human security. Thus, migration control prioritises borders, irregularity, enforcement, return, migrant-as-risk, state security and containment, whereas mobility governance emphasises connectivity, a mobility spectrum, regulation, circularity/reintegration, migrant agency, human security and managed mobility. This approach is consistent with the AU's governance framework, which promotes safe, orderly and regular migration while recognising development, rights and regional integration (AU, 2018, 2025).

Mobility as a peacebuilding resource

Conflict and insecurity can transform mobility from a livelihood strategy into a survival mechanism. Armed violence may displace populations, interrupt pastoral transhumance, destroy farms and markets, and separate households from productive assets. In West and Central Africa, conflict, climate pressures and insecurity increasingly interact to produce displacement and complex mobility patterns (African Union Commission [AUC] & IOM, 2024; IOM, 2024). Such disruptions can also increase irregular migration when safe and legal mobility channels become inaccessible. Conversely, mobility can constitute an important resilience resource. Movement enables households to diversify livelihoods, access employment and connect with wider labour markets. Migrants can transfer financial resources, knowledge and social connections to households and communities of origin. Remittances, for example, remain an important source of external finance for many developing economies and can support households experiencing economic shocks (World Bank, 2024). Mobility can additionally facilitate access to education, markets and social networks, thereby reducing dependence on conflict-affected local economies.

Mobility also matters after violence. Safe return and voluntary movement can reconnect displaced populations with communities, livelihoods and institutions. Labour mobility can support reconstruction by restoring access to skills, employment and markets, while return movements can contribute to social and economic reintegration. IOM's regional evidence demonstrates the importance of mobility-sensitive approaches to return, solutions and peacebuilding across West and Central Africa (IOM, 2024). The conceptual innovation is therefore to understand mobility as potentially transforming negative peace into positive peace. Rather than merely controlling movement to suppress insecurity, peacebuilding can govern mobility to expand livelihoods, reconnect communities and facilitate reconciliation. This approach aligns with the AU's emphasis on migration as a developmental opportunity rather than solely a security problem (AUC, 2024). Thus, mobility becomes both an outcome of peace and an instrument through which sustainable peace can be constructed.

West and Central Africa as a mobility–peace–security system

West and Central Africa constitutes an interconnected mobility–peace–security system in which migration, livelihoods, conflict and regional governance intersect. Regional mobility systems are supported by the ECOWAS free-movement architecture, established through the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, which facilitates movement, residence and establishment across member states (ECOWAS, 2026). In Central Africa, ECCAS mobility dynamics similarly involve cross-border trade, labour migration, pastoral movements and refugee mobility. Across both subregions, mobility includes seasonal migration, transhumance, rural–urban movement, economic migration and forced displacement (IOM, 2024).

Conflict and displacement corridors demonstrate how violence can redirect established mobility routes. Insurgency, communal violence and insecurity may close markets, disrupt pastoral corridors and generate displacement, while neighbouring states become destinations for refugees and returnees. The Lake Chad Basin illustrates this interaction, where conflict, poverty and environmental pressures have produced extensive population displacement across Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria (IOM, 2024).

Climate, livelihoods and mobility should therefore be understood through a multidimensional relationship indicating climate stress → livelihood pressure → mobility → conflict or cooperation. Climate variability can undermine farming, grazing and water access, encouraging households and pastoralists to move in search of livelihoods. However, mobility does not automatically generate conflict; institutions, resource governance, social relations and negotiated access can determine whether movement produces cooperation or tension (World Bank, 2021).

Transnational communities further sustain regional connectivity through diaspora networks, remittances, cross-border families, migrant associations and social capital. Such networks can facilitate employment, investment, information exchange and household resilience (IOM, 2024). Finally, regional governance matters because mobility routinely crosses national boundaries. Consequently, nationally focused migration-control approaches cannot adequately capture interconnected movement systems. Effective governance requires cooperation among ECOWAS, ECCAS, AU, states and communities to manage mobility while strengthening livelihoods, protection, peacebuilding and human security (IOM, 2024).

Reframing AU–EU cooperation: From control to mobility–peacebuilding

The AU–EU partnership provides an institutional foundation for connecting migration, peacebuilding, development and human security, but these dimensions are often implemented through relatively separate policy streams. The 2022 Joint Vision for 2030 identifies four interconnected pillars: prosperity and sustainable development, peace and security, migration and mobility, and multilateralism. The 2025 implementation assessment confirms that these remain the principal organising pillars of the partnership (European Commission, 2025). The conceptual challenge is therefore not the absence of relevant policy areas, but the limited theorisation of their interaction.

This study proposes a Mobility–Peace–Human Security Framework that reframes mobility as a potential peacebuilding resource. At the first level, structural conditions including conflict, climate stress, poverty, unemployment, governance deficits and environmental pressures shape mobility decisions. These conditions generate diverse mobility dynamics, including labour mobility, pastoral movement, cross-border trade, circular migration, refugee movement, student mobility and diaspora engagement. African Union policy already recognises migration’s connections with employment, trade, development, security and regional integration (African Union, 2018, 2026). The framework’s third level comprises governance mechanisms namely; legal pathways, regional free movement, effective border governance, social protection, skills recognition, migration information and protection mechanisms. These mechanisms determine whether mobility produces vulnerability or resilience. Properly governed mobility can subsequently activate peacebuilding mechanisms, including livelihood recovery, social cohesion, cross-border cooperation, conflict prevention, community resilience and reintegration. The AU’s free-movement framework similarly links mobility with labour opportunities, trade, social integration, human rights and regional development. Finally, these processes can contribute to human-security outcomes from economic, personal, community, food, health and environmental security thereby strengthening regional stability. The framework consequently shifts analysis from mobility as a security problem toward mobility as a governed pathway through which peace and human security can be produced. This provides the missing conceptual bridge connecting AU–EU migration cooperation with peacebuilding rather than control alone.

Rethinking the AU–EU Partnership

From donor–recipient to strategic partnership. The AU–EU relationship should increasingly be understood as a strategic partnership based on reciprocal interests, shared responsibilities and institutional equality rather than a conventional donor–recipient relationship. The Joint Vision for 2030 already frames cooperation around prosperity, peace and security, migration and mobility, and multilateralism, while the 2025 monitoring process emphasises reciprocal partnership (African Union & European Union, 2025).

From migration management to mobility governance. A conceptual shift is required from asking “*How do we stop unwanted migration?*” toward asking “*How can AU–EU institutions govern mobility in ways that enhance security, development and human dignity?*” This approach recognises migration as involving labour mobility, skills, remittances, regional integration and social resilience, alongside irregular migration and protection challenges (European External Action Service, 2025).

From border security to human security. Analysis should move beyond borders to migrants, households, communities, cities, borderlands and regional institutions. Such an approach connects migration governance with livelihoods, protection, development and peacebuilding, consistent with recent AU–EU commitments to migrant dignity and human rights (AU–EU Ministerial Meeting, 2025).

From returns to sustainable reintegration. Return should incorporate livelihood reconstruction, psychosocial support, social inclusion, economic opportunities and community peacebuilding. EU programming increasingly recognises reintegration as requiring economic self-sufficiency, social stability and psychosocial wellbeing (European Commission, 2025). From externalisation to co-governance. Finally, African institutions should possess stronger ownership over priorities, financing, implementation and evaluation. This would transform cooperation from externally driven migration control toward jointly designed governance that strengthens African institutional capacity and continental development priorities.

Implications for West and Central Africa

This study considered the following implications:

Implications for AU institutions

Reframing AU–EU cooperation from conflict-driven migration control toward mobility, peacebuilding and human security requires stronger continental migration governance. The African Union (AU) should strengthen implementation of the Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA) 2018–2030, particularly its provisions on labour migration, free movement, forced displacement, border governance, migration data and migrant rights (African Union [AU], 2018). The 2026 mid-term assessment further demonstrates the need for improved coordination among Member States and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to translate continental commitments into operational outcomes (AU, 2026).

Implications for ECOWAS

For ECOWAS, mobility governance should protect the established free-movement regime while recognising cross-border livelihoods, pastoralism, trading networks and labour mobility as important regional economic and social systems. ECOWAS should therefore integrate conflict sensitivity into migration and border policies, ensuring that security measures do not unnecessarily restrict legitimate movement. Recent ECOWAS initiatives emphasise harmonised migration governance, integrated border management and protection of free movement (ECOWAS, 2026).

Implications for ECCAS

In Central Africa, cooperation should strengthen displacement governance, cross-border humanitarian mobility and regional peacebuilding. Conflict-sensitive mobility policies can improve protection for refugees, internally displaced persons and vulnerable mobile populations while linking humanitarian responses with longer-term peacebuilding.

Implications for EU institutions

For EU institutions, the framework implies greater investment in legal mobility pathways, African migration institutions and migrant protection. EU cooperation should complement rather than substitute African institutional capacity and reduce excessive dependence on border-control approaches. This is consistent with the AU–EU Joint Vision's emphasis on reciprocal cooperation in migration, mobility and peace and security (European Commission, 2025).

Implications for local communities

At community level, mobility-sensitive cooperation should protect livelihoods, strengthen social cohesion and support local peace infrastructures. Policies should also improve migrant–host relations through inclusive services, dialogue, livelihood opportunities and community-based conflict-resolution mechanisms. Such an approach can connect migration governance with human security and locally grounded peacebuilding across West and Central Africa.

Discussion

The discussion of this study is based on six (6) segments discussed below:

What the mobility lens explains that the conflict lens does not

The central theoretical contribution of this article is that mobility should not be understood merely as an outcome of conflict. A conflict-centred approach tends to interpret displacement, refugee movements and irregular migration primarily as consequences of insecurity. A mobility lens instead examines how people continuously move for employment, trade, pastoralism, education, family survival, environmental adaptation and protection. This is particularly important in West and Central Africa, where mobility is historically embedded in regional livelihoods and social relations (IOM, 2024). Thus, mobility can constitute both a response to insecurity and a resource for resilience.

What human security adds to migration governance

A human-security perspective shifts attention from protecting borders to protecting people. It highlights migrants' exposure to violence, exploitation, discrimination and deprivation across the migration cycle, while recognising that migration itself is not inherently a product of insecurity (McAuliffe et al., 2024). For AU–EU cooperation, this implies that migration governance should incorporate livelihood security, rights protection, social inclusion and access to safe mobility alongside border management.

Why peacebuilding should include mobility governance

Peacebuilding should address the institutions and livelihood systems through which people move. Safe labour mobility, cross-border trade, pastoral mobility and regular migration channels can strengthen household resilience and reduce some pressures associated with displacement and livelihood insecurity. Consequently, mobility governance can become a preventive component of peacebuilding rather than an issue addressed only after conflict occurs. Recent ECOWAS initiatives on labour migration and rights protection illustrate this potential (African Union, 2025).

The role of African agency in AU–EU cooperation

The framework also requires greater recognition of African agency. AU institutions and regional organisations such as ECOWAS should participate not simply as recipients of European migration-control priorities but as actors defining regional mobility priorities. The AU has explicitly promoted migration as a development issue rather than solely a security concern (African Union, 2024). Accordingly, AU–EU cooperation should build upon African migration frameworks, regional knowledge and locally defined priorities.

Reconciling security, sovereignty and mobility

Mobility governance does not require abandoning state sovereignty. Rather, it requires reconciling legitimate border responsibilities with regional freedom of movement and migrant protection. The AU–EU Joint Vision already recognises migration and mobility alongside peace, security and development as interconnected partnership areas (European Commission, 2025). Effective governance therefore requires coordinated borders, reliable migration data, legal pathways, rights protection and regional institutional cooperation.

Conditions under which mobility can produce insecurity

The argument is not that mobility automatically produces peace. Poorly governed mobility can facilitate trafficking, exploitation, unsafe migration, organised crime and conflict diffusion. Rapid population movement may also generate xenophobia or labour-market tensions where host communities perceive competition over employment and resources. Weak border institutions can further enable criminal networks to exploit mobile populations. Therefore, mobility contributes to human security under particular governance conditions especially when movement is safe, regular, rights-based, economically inclusive and supported by effective regional institutions. This balanced position recognises mobility simultaneously as a potential source of vulnerability and resilience (IOM, 2024).

Conclusion

This study has examined the tension between mobility facilitation and migration-control priorities within AU–EU cooperation in West and Central Africa. Although migration and mobility are now established components of the partnership, policy frameworks continue to combine development, human rights, security, border management, return, and irregular-migration objectives. The AU's Migration Policy Framework recognises migration as integral to development, integration, security, and cooperation, while the AU–EU Joint Vision for 2030 similarly combines migration and mobility with peace, security, and sustainable development (African Union [AU], 2026; AU & EU, 2022). The study argues that migration should not be conceptualised exclusively as an outcome or driver of insecurity. Mobility can also constitute a human-security and peacebuilding capability by sustaining livelihoods, strengthening household resilience, facilitating social and economic connections, supporting cross-border cooperation, and providing adaptive responses to conflict, environmental stress, and economic vulnerability. This perspective complements rather than rejects legitimate concerns surrounding trafficking, smuggling, forced displacement, and border insecurity.

The central contribution is the mobility–peacebuilding–human security nexus, which connects migration governance with conflict transformation and human security. The framework encourages AU–EU cooperation to examine how mobility can simultaneously address vulnerability, resilience, livelihoods, peacebuilding, and regional integration rather than treating movement primarily as a

security problem. It therefore provides a conceptual basis for linking existing migration, peace and security, and development pillars more coherently.

Future research should empirically test this framework through comparative country studies, borderland research, migrant livelihood surveys, longitudinal designs, and policy-process tracing. Comparative ECOWAS/ECCAS studies could identify regional differences in mobility governance, while systematic evaluations of AU–EU programmes could assess whether mobility interventions generate measurable peacebuilding, livelihood, and human-security outcomes. Such evidence would strengthen the theoretical and practical foundations of mobility-centred AU–EU cooperation.

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