

THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

9 December 2025 Column

By Tamuka Chekero
& Nyasha Mpani

UK ILR POLICY, AFRICAN MIGRATION ASPIRATIONS, AND CONTINENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Across African diaspora networks and social media, misinformation and uncertainty about the United Kingdom's Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) policy are shaping migration decision-making, affecting thousands of Africans who view ILR as a critical pathway to long-term stability.

Online spaces, including WhatsApp groups, family chatrooms, TikTok, and diaspora networks, act as informal information and support networks, mediating knowledge about UK policy changes and influencing migrants' strategic decisions. For thousands who travelled to the UK in search of stability, safety, and long-term security, ILR is more than just paperwork. It is a lifeline. Changes to ILR policy reverberate across borders, influencing both individual migration decisions and broader transnational mobility patterns.

**INDEFINITE LEAVE TO
REMAIN IS MORE THAN
JUST PAPERWORK. IT IS
A LIFELINE.**

While global economic negotiations dominated headlines, African migrants faced immediate policy uncertainty with personal and professional consequences. The ILR debate, however, emerged at a moment when the G20 summit frenzy largely consumed public attention. Simultaneously, the Trump administration paused all immigration applications from 19 non-European countries, including Afghanistan and Somalia, heightening anxieties about



how immigration policies abroad could abruptly shift and reshape migrants' strategic decisions. Thousands of African migrants were thus grappling with the implications of potential policy changes that could directly affect their lives. The timing meant that these issues received far less scrutiny than they deserved, even as their impact was deeply personal and far-reaching.

This moment of uncertainty demands careful reflection because African migration to the UK forms part of a broader regional trend. Afrobarometer data from 24 African countries indicate that nearly half of citizens have considered emigrating, with Europe, particularly the UK remaining a preferred destination, highlighting the direct influence of ILR policy on migration aspirations. Economic considerations drive these intentions, with nearly half of potential migrants seeking better work opportunities and almost a third aiming to escape poverty and financial hardship.

Liberia, the Gambia, Cabo Verde, and Ghana record some of the highest levels of migration aspiration, demonstrating that these aspirations are not casual. Migration intentions are strategic, reflecting a search for stability, professional growth, and long-term settlement.

The UK has long relied on African workers in health care, social care, hospitality, and technology. Many migrants in these sectors view ILR as confirmation that their contributions matter. When uncertainty arises around ILR, it shakes this confidence, not only affecting those already in the UK but also shaping the decisions of Africans still considering their next move.

While the proposed ILR changes remain under discussion, it increasingly appears that the UK's appetite for immigrants is waning. This stance contrasts sharply with Afrobarometer migration data, which shows that a significant number of Africans continue to view Europe, and historically the UK, as a desirable destination. Despite uncertainties and potential policy shifts, the UK remains a strong choice for many seeking stability, professional growth, and long-term settlement.

Continental frameworks underscore this dynamic. The African Union's Migration Policy Framework for Africa (2018–2030) recognises that migration is both a survival strategy and a pathway to development for many Africans.

It calls on member states to create policies that manage mobility effectively while maximising its benefits for economic growth and human development. The current ILR uncertainty in the UK interacts directly with these broader continental patterns, showing how migration policies abroad can influence African mobility and aspirations.

THIS HIGHLIGHTS THE URGENT NEED FOR THE CONTINENT TO STRENGTHEN THE FREE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE THROUGH THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA (AFCFTA)

If ILR becomes more restrictive, UK-bound migration may decline, as potential migrants, especially skilled workers, carefully evaluate long-term stability when selecting destinations. Afrobarometer evidence shows that migration aspirations respond quickly to policy signals. Some may redirect their plans toward Canada, continental Europe, or Australia. In contrast, others may choose to remain in Africa, where nearly one in four people considering migration already prefer to relocate to another African country. This highlights the urgent need for the continent to strengthen the free movement of people through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). At the just-ended 5th APRM Youth Symposium, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, former African Union Chairperson, urged African youth to push their governments to ratify the protocol on free movement, emphasising that facilitating intra-African mobility can provide more opportunities at home and reduce the pressures that drive migration abroad.

When formal migration channels become more restrictive, the pressure shifts to both potential migrants and their home countries, revealing the broader socio-economic and governance challenges that shape mobility decisions. Where legal pathways tighten without improvements in economic prospects at home, some may turn to irregular migration options, increasing social and security risks for both sending and receiving regions. At the same time, African governments face renewed pressure because rising migration aspirations reveal a more profound lack of confidence in public institutions and the domestic labour market. Migration is not simply a foreign policy matter. It is a governance matter. Afrobarometer data show clearly that when governments fail to provide economic security, citizens increasingly look outward for better futures.

These domestic governance gaps not only drive outward migration but also intersect with destination countries' policies, such as the UK, where migrant labour plays a critical role in key economic sectors.

MIGRATION IS NOT SIMPLY A FOREIGN POLICY MATTER. IT IS A GOVERNANCE MATTER.

Evidence indicates that UK economic sectors depend heavily on African migrant labour, making clarity and stability in ILR policy essential for maintaining these contributions.

Ensuring transparency and fairness in these policies will protect the UK's reputation as an attractive destination for global talent.

Meanwhile, African governments must address the root causes of migration by improving economic opportunities and public services, and by restoring hope among young people who feel trapped by their circumstances. Afrobarometer findings show that Africans will continue to seek opportunities abroad as long as structural conditions remain unchanged. The key question is whether African leaders will respond decisively, or if migration aspirations will continue to rise, with new destinations replacing the UK as preferred pathways.

- **Tamuka Chekero** is an anthropologist and researcher whose work focuses African migration through African epistemologies, ontologies of care, and relationality. He investigates how social ties, community practices, and digital networks influence migrant decision-making. His work connects lived experiences and policy, showing how structural factors and transnational governance interact with migrants' strategies and hopes.

- **Nyasha McBride Mpani** is the project leader for the Data for Governance Alliance Project based at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town.

PREVIOUS ISSUES



[A MIXED YEAR FOR AFRICA: A ROUND UP](#)



[WILL PRESIDENT SAMIA SULUHU HASSAN REGAIN THE TRUST OF TANZANIANS AFTER BLOODY ELECTION?](#)



[DEMOCRACY FATIGUE AND THE RETURN OF THE STRONGMAN TEMPTATION](#)

The opinions or recommendations expressed in this news column are strictly those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.