

Shifting Attitudes: The Impact of COVID-19 on Perceptions towards Immigrants in Africa

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Extended summary

Migration in Africa is a complex phenomenon involving significant numbers of international migrants moving both within and beyond the region (McAuliffe et al., 2024). Recent data shows that most international migration occurs within Africa, with around 21 million Africans living in host African countries. This marks a notable increase from 2015, when approximately 18 million Africans were estimated to be living outside their country of origin but within the continent. The displacement within and from Africa remains a prominent feature, with most refugees on the continent being hosted by neighbouring countries.

The roots of international migration in Africa are highly heterogeneous (McAuliffe et al., 2024). In North African countries, migration primarily involves in-transit migrants and refugees heading towards destinations outside the region. In contrast, East and South Africa mainly see migrant workers. Efforts to enhance integration in these regions have led to increased free movement of persons and labour. Alongside regular migration flows, irregular migration persists along four key routes, such as the northern route towards North Africa and Europe, and the eastern route towards the Arabian Peninsula. Lastly, countries in the western and central African regions are characterised by emigration driven by violence, instability, and conflict, particularly in the Sahel area. This heterogeneity can strongly influence the immigration attitudes of native-born majority groups.

As a consequence of it, migration inflows have the potential to reshape the political landscape, influencing electorates and governments to formulate policies that manage immigration and incorporate immigrants (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014). The impact of immigration on democratic politics largely depends on the attitudes of the native-born majority groups towards immigrants. Conversely, these inflows might exacerbate internal tensions and heighten instability within countries. For example, in Tunisia, early 2023 saw political rhetoric accusing migrants from sub-Saharan Africa of increasing crime and threatening the country's demographic composition and national identity, which led to racist violence.

CoVID-19 has been the most severe pandemic in a century, with its combination of high transmission, virus strains, and the severity of the disease forcing policymakers into previously uncharted territory. While the main focus was to respond to the global health crisis, part of the response involved drastic changes to the freedom of movement of people around the world,

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which in turn has massively impacted human mobility globally. The short-term impact of CoVID-19 on migration drivers and cross-border movements has led to increasing aspirations to leave and decreasing capabilities to do so. Whether this will lead to increased cross-border mobility or the number of frustrated potential migrants stuck in countries of origin will depend on the specific national context, the medium- to long-term impact of CoVID-19, and consequent policy responses (Litzkow, 2021).

However, unexpected changes in health conditions can lead to competition for scarce resources, as people are more likely to identify with and show favoritism towards their in-group, viewing members of other groups (i.e., immigrants) as a threat Ivlevs (2024). This can result in negative attitudes and behaviors towards immigrants. This effect is exacerbated when negative changes in health conditions coincide with reductions in individual well-being, a scenario more likely during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased the probability of significant income reductions due to decreased production and trade in many countries. In addition, Mula et al. (2022) suggest that the pandemic poses a destabilising threat to society, leading to an increased desire for tighter norms. While the strengthening of social norms in response to unexpected threats serves as an adaptive mechanism, it can also lead to intolerant attitudes towards out-groups (i.e., immigrants and foreign workers).

We contribute to the literature on the relationship between COVID-19 and immigrants' perceptions by analysing whether, after the onset of the pandemic, native-born citizens in host countries have become less favourable towards immigrants and foreign workers. Our empirical investigation uses data collected in the Afrobarometer Survey between 2017 and 2022 along with the information extracted from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT). By using data up to 2022, we consider the entire span of the pandemic, allowing us to perform a pre-post analysis that accounts for the varying spread of the pandemic across African countries. This approach has several benefits. It helps disentangle potential relationships and distinguish between countries affected early versus those impacted later by the CoVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis highlights that the continent's vulnerability stems from significant heterogeneity in the spread of CoVID-19 across different countries (Jr. Tabe-Ojong et al., 2023). This distinction is practically important, as countries that experienced an earlier or stronger impact of the pandemic are more likely to have altered their predispositions towards immigrant citizens compared to those where the pandemic's effect was negligible.

We model the relationship between COVID-19 and immigrants' perceptions using a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) approach applied to ordinal data (Hole and Ratcliffe, 2021). The primary empirical challenge in studying this relationship lies in the fact that migration perceptions follow an ordinal scale. This scale ranges from more favourable perceptions of immigrants, through more neutral perceptions, to more unfavourable perceptions. Typically, to apply a DiD approach, researchers need to lose the valuable information embedded in the ordinal responses by transforming the variable into a dichotomous one. This aggregated dichotomous variable oversimplifies the different modalities of perceptions and necessitates the use of a linear probability model. Such transformations impose significant limitations on the analysis. By aggregating the different modalities of the immigrant perception variable, researchers cannot discern whether changes in native perceptions involve those who were previously more neutral or those who held more favourable views. Our framework directly addresses this issue. By maintaining the ordered variable, we model the effect of the pandemic onset separately for each modality. Our baseline specification indicates that the onset of the CoVID-19 pandemic has worsened the native perception of the immigrant population. This effect is consistent across various sub-regions in Africa and is particularly pronounced in the central and southern sub-regions. Intriguingly, we show that the deterioration in perceptions of immigrants is primarily due to a decline in the most positive perceptions, rather than a reduction in the most neutral ones. We explore the heterogeneity of these results by considering the government's management of the CoVID-19

pandemic and the impact on countries with higher-than-median inflows of migrants. As expected, the analysis reveals that the negative effect of CoVID-19 on immigrants' perceptions is largely driven by poor pandemic management by the government and is more pronounced in countries with significant migrant inflows.

Our contributions to the literature are threefold. First, by using a comprehensive dataset covering a large set of African countries throughout the entire COVID-19 pandemic, we document a significant worsening in the perception towards immigrants. This is noteworthy because much of the previous research has focused on specific countries or African sub-regions, often with small sample sizes and limited to the initial wave of the pandemic. As a result, the generalisation of these earlier studies is questionable. Second, we provide an assessment the relative impact of government COVID-19 management on the perception of immigrants. This is crucial because, in line with the theoretical literature on the pandemic's effect on immigrant perception (Mula et al., 2022), we find that the COVID-19 crisis has heightened citizens' demands for effective state intervention. This increased demand may have fostered greater trust in the government, creating opportunities for better integration of foreign citizens, alleviating the perceived negative impact towards migrants. Finally, the transmission channels through which the pandemic affected the perception of immigrants are shown to be relevant: CoVID-19 seems to be responsible for an increased desire of a stricter norms, which correlates with the perspective that immigrants follow less the imposed rules of the hosting country. Clearly, the CoVID-19 increased the competition for health services between people born in a country and immigrants. Our estimates also support this specific channel at the aggregate African level.

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