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The African Dream

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For those left behind, the migrants who survive the journey to build a new life in Europe represent success and an income. With poverty and violence at home, the risks taken to cross desert and sea are seen as worth taking / By **AGBONKHIANMEGHE E. OROBATOR**

The African dream

FINDING A DECENT job in a society that had given up on him was no longer an option. At 33, Awaso (not his real name) was a loser in every sense of the word. A high-school dropout in west Africa, he had tried his hand at everything possible – including petty theft – to earn a living and raise a family.

As one door after another closed on his dream for a better life, he set his sights on Europe. It was the next logical thing to do. Several of his ne'er-do-well schoolmates had done the same thing and it had worked. One with whom he kept in touch regularly sent photographs of himself proudly posing beside

a luxury car. And there was the bimonthly ritual of his friend's relatives in town going to the Western Union money transfer kiosk to collect remittances from abroad. Awaso was determined to make it to Europe.

Awaso asked me for help because I knew him well. He needed US\$600 (£395) to pay his passage from West Africa northwards across the Sahara. That was the going rate for a place on the migrants' caravan to the shores of the Mediterranean. He explained the route, which I presumed the people smuggler had coached him to say, but he was cautious not to name his "sponsor", as he referred to the people smuggler. It would take five days to trek across the Sahara.

Awaso would be provided with a small bag of *garri* (a dry, gritty cassava meal, like couscous), a measure of roasted peanuts and some water. The "sponsor" would take care of any obstacles along the way through the Sahelian countries.

Once across the Sahara, Awaso would board a ship from Libya to Europe. He made it sound like a simple journey and claimed many of his friends had successfully migrated on the same route.

But I didn't have the money; and even if I had done, I was convinced that nobody could survive a five-day trek in the inclement Sahara. I tried to talk him out of it, but he would not be deterred.

Six months later, I received a letter from Awaso, post-marked Libya. He reported that he had made it to Libya and was waiting for a passage

to Europe as soon as he could make enough money by working for locals. I read his letter in disbelief. What would lead a person to trek the Sahara with only a bag of *garri* and no guarantee of survival?

NOWADAYS, THE story of Awaso is not unusual. But there is no typical migrant. Each person has his or her unique story, sometimes genuine, sometimes fabricated to win sympathy. The majority are forced to flee conflict and persecution. Commonly, though, each one is looking for a chance in life, to dwell in safety, security and peace, no matter how dangerous it would be to get that chance. For

those from Africa, the ultimate hurdle is the death-defying trek over the Sahara and the perilous passage across the Mediterranean.

Back to the story of Awaso. He eventually made the crossing with his wife and they now live in southern Europe. On occasion, I talk to him and his wife and their son. He once told me that when he dreams of returning to his country of origin, he wakes up in fright as if from a nightmare.

HIS NEW-FOUND European home offers him all that his own country never could. Like the rest of his friends abroad, he makes a modest living and prides himself on paying taxes. He will probably never be rich, but he will have enough to raise a family and put food on their table. That's all he could ever hope for.

His wife is a little more successful. She is now legally resident in Europe. With what she earns she is able to educate her two children still in West Africa. She recently completed paying for a five-bedroom house in her home town and takes care of the

needs of the rest of her family. For many young West Africans I know who have sought asylum in Europe, their meagre earnings are a priceless lifeline for their families left behind. And because of their relative success, the queue of would-be migrants gets longer.

People like Awaso and his family abound in Europe. Their profile and motivation fit the description given by Pope Francis: "They are men and women like us, our brothers and sisters who seek a better life; hungry, persecuted, injured, exploited, victims of war – they seek a better life. They were seeking happiness."

Awaso is the lucky one. I know some

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that first phone call from Europe. Some have waited 10 years. Considering the number of migrants who have perished in the Mediterranean, that call may never come. Nor is there any official count of those who die in the Sahara.

Recently, the British newspaper columnist, Katie Hopkins in *The Sun*, shockingly described them as “cockroaches” and “plagues” to be fended off with gunboats. Whatever the illogicality of her argument, such comments incite hatred of migrants, dehumanise them and distort the reality of migration.

The phenomenon of migration is not a single story. The untold part of the saga is that European (and North American) countries play a double game. At the same time as they try to shut out the likes of Awaso, they have in place policies that actively encourage bright and skilled men and women to settle in Europe.

I know six medical doctors who have left West Africa in the past few years and now work in Europe and North America. These highly qualified professionals were trained with the meagre resources of African countries, where they will never apply their skills. Such arrangements perpetuate a cycle of underdevelopment that leaves African governments more impoverished and incapable of investing in their youth.

The EU’s response to the issue of migrants has been to focus on deterrence. Yet given the desperation of migrants – and the sophistication of the people smugglers – this policy can always be circumvented by clever criminal gangs eager to protect their market share of the trafficking business. As Eneke the bird says in Chinua Achebe’s great novel *Things Fall Apart*: “Because people have learned to shoot without missing, I have learned to fly without perching.”

BESIDES, DETERRENCE does not distinguish between migrants. Unlike Awaso, the majority are fleeing persecution and conflict. If the EU has resources to invest in deterrence, it would do well to also explore joint strategies with countries that generate migrants and others where facilitation of their journey is a booming business. Without improvements to the local economies and an end to violent internal conflicts, the waves of people risking their lives on a treacherous journey to Europe will continue to swell.

Like Awaso, caught between suffering and hope, their trek across the Sahara and the Mediterranean is a risk worth taking. They have nothing to lose.

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families in West Africa who are still waiting for word from their son or daughter who took the trans-Sahara route in search of a better life. It’s a nerve-racking ordeal waiting for