

# **Nordic Africa Days 2018: African Mobilities Conference held in Uppsala, Sweden, 19-21 September 2018**

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On 19–21 September 2018, almost 300 scholars, researchers, academics, policy-makers and other experts from more than 40 countries gathered in Uppsala, Sweden, for the 11<sup>th</sup> annual Nordic Africa Days conference. Since 1997, the Nordic Africa Institute – one of the leading research institutes of African affairs in Europe – organises this event in order to provide a platform for sharing and expanding knowledge on Africa. With regard to the current global situation, the 2018 conference theme was set as “African Mobilities – reshaping narratives and practices of circulation and exchange.”

The conference offered eight panel sessions with 43 panels in total and the range of topics was accordingly broad and comprehensive, such as

- strengthening African governance to make movement free and fair,
- African migration and the Mediterranean crisis,
- mobility, globalisation and the policing of citizenship and belonging in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,
- urbanisation,
- the role of gender in migration processes,
- the conceptualisation of youth mobility.

One panel advocated for African governance to make movement free and fair, it also dealt with African migration and the Mediterranean crisis, issues of mobility, globalisation and the policing of citizenship and belonging in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, urbanisation, the role of gender in migration processes and the conceptualisation of youth mobility. However, the scope of the conference was much broader. As Iina Soiri, director of the Nordic Africa Institute, pointed out during her welcome

speech, we should not restrict our understanding of mobility to the movement of people. Rather, thinking about mobility should consider it as a complex process, which also includes the transfer of culture, social norms, information, knowledge, etc.

The first keynote speech was delivered by Kah Walla, a social activist, entrepreneur and politician from Cameroon. She discussed the root causes of migration in Africa, pointed out issues in the structure of African societies that are affecting mobility and highlighted the tremendous potential of the continent in the agricultural and energy sectors. Kah Walla concluded with an emphasis on the crisis of African governance as an overarching problem for other deficiencies.

Her inspiring speech was followed by a panel session on the relation between conflicts and migration. I attended a panel led by Sten Hagberg from the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology of Uppsala University. His introduction to the conceptual, methodological and epistemological challenges of security from below provided a fruitful background for the presentations of other panellists. These included mostly field research done in West Africa, engaging with, for instance, local self-defence groups or conflicts between state security forces and rebels and their impact on mobility. In the afternoon, I contributed to the “Beyond warfare – consolidating Africa’s piecemeal peace” panel, led by Anders Themnér, with a paper on the role of education in post-conflict Rwanda. The presentation was well accepted and the other panellists provided valuable feedback to further expand the implications of my field research. Later that day, I witnessed an intriguing presentation of Jesper Bjarnesen, another researcher from the Nordic Africa Institute. Explaining the issue of the invisible displacement of migrants in the incoming countries, he pinpointed the different expectations and realities in the everyday lives of migrants whose identity might be troubled, resulting from a sense of “not fitting” in the host country nor in their homeland after their return. As a framework, Bjarnesen developed a theory of (in-)visibilisation, which is being employed by migrants as a form of invisible integration.

Alongside regular panels, a roundtable on “African migration and the Mediterranean crisis” took place during the first day, bringing together a delegate from the Moroccan Government, Swedish policy-

makers and three researchers. Their discussion was about the specifics of migration from Africa through the Northern states and possible solutions. At the end of the day, two books from the Nordic Africa Institute were launched: *Agricultural Transformation in Ethiopia*, *Violence in African Elections* and *The Religious Nile*.

The second day of the conference began with a keynote by Francis Nyamnjoh. In his speech, Nyamnjoh advocated for an open mind while thinking about African issues and migration particularly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as mobility represents a broader pattern for the movement of people and a transmission of a variety of norms and beliefs. Among the morning panels, one discussion on the fate of development studies in Africa stood out. Panellists discussed the need for complex and specifically Southern theories. The results of this research will be published by Palgrave Macmillan. In the afternoon, Deniz Kellecioglu from the UN Economic Commission for Africa talked about the colonisation of the mind and presented a provocative statement questioning the neoliberal paradigm, which, according to him, is rather neoconservatism. In these terms, mainstream economic systems transfer the global stereotypes into economic relations, colonising the minds of people in the Global South by highlighting the success of the West over the developing world and thus strengthening the imbalance of power and of global economics. One possible solution suggested is a focus on pan-African discourses, multidisciplinary research and the critical tackling of powerful elites. At the end of the day, a panel on regional integration amid changing global balances provided insights into intra-regional trade mechanisms across Africa. It was noted that, despite significant progress made in particular regions, the growth of intra-African trade has been very limited during the past two decades. Scholars posed the question whether regional integration or the African Continental Free Trade Area is even needed. The second day also offered another round table in which the decolonisation of African(ist) academia and the role of media in this process were discussed.

The Nordic Africa Days represent a prominent event in which every single participant is an expert in a particular way. People from all over the world gathered at one venue to share their ideas, discussed both general and very specific issues and motivated each other to deepen knowledge about the dynamics of African affairs. It was an

opportunity to meet other Africanist scholars from various fields including peace research, gender studies, economy, anthropology or political science, as well as professionals such as Peter Wallensteen or Francis Nyamnjoh. Altogether, the Nordic Africa Days 2018 was indeed worthy of its title: *Expanding the discourse on Africa*. It offered a productive ground for further research, opened new perspectives on both general and specific issues, and served as a platform for establishing new academic and scientific networks.