The Rippling Effects of European Migration Governance in Africa: A Critical Research Agenda and Analytical Approach

Cathrine Talleraas (iD)
Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway

Ida Marie Savio Vammen (iD)
Migration and Global Order, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

This article advances the concept of "rippling effects" as an analytical approach in research on European migration governance in Africa. By adopting a targeted reflexive lens, it adds a conceptual dimension to critical externalization research—a growing yet fragmented field of inquiry that foregrounds Afrocentric, historized, and grounded perspectives. The article examines the far-reaching implications of European externalization interventions in Africa through a review of recent literature and shows how European migration governance extends across new territories and policy domains, engaging stakeholders across scales and fields. These interventions generate effects that reach well beyond their immediate and intended policy outcomes, particularly as they intersect with African actors and realities that simultaneously shape and resist them. By conceptualizing such implications as *rippling effects*, the article captures the multiscalar, often less visible, and potentially cumulative implications of migration governance, and moves externalization policy assessment beyond the binary of success or failure. Instead, the article offers an analytical approach that captures how interventions trigger local as well as broader political

Corresponding Author:
Cathrine Talleraas, Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway.
Email: cathrine.talleraas@cmi.no

and societal transformations. As an introduction to the Special Issue, *The Rippling Effects of European Migration Governance in Africa,* we present the articles included in the collection and situate the research discourse on externalization within the increasing securitization of European migration governance, and its intersections with emerging shifts in current African geopolitics.

Keywords
externalization, Africa, Europe, migration policy, rippling effects

Introduction

Migration governance has become one of the most politically charged and strategically contested arenas of international collaboration today. European interventions to curb irregular migration, fight human trafficking and migrant smuggling, and increase returns have intensified over the past decade, particularly in the wake of the so-called 2015 European migration crisis. These efforts have been entrenched and expanded, reflecting a broader trend of externalizing migration control beyond European borders and increasingly targeting Africa.

The European Union's (EU's) and European states' increasing focus on renewing or establishing new migration cooperation with key transit and departure countries, especially in North, East and West Africa demonstrates this trend. These efforts are highlighted through such as the growing budget set aside for EU security and migration policies from 2021 to 2027 (Jones, Kilpatrick, and Maccanico 2022), and the redirection of development aid toward migration management and the strengthening of African states' capacity to control irregular migration (Weisner and Pope 2023). A particular example is the new EU Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument, where 10% of the €79.5 billion budget—of which €29.18 billion is allocated to Sub-Saharan Africa—is designated for migration-related actions (European Commission 2022).

Simultaneously, the African geopolitical landscape is undergoing significant transformations. Debates over withdrawal from institutional frameworks such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)—as seen with the recent exits of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—signal major shifts in regional governance and alliances. At the same time, growing geopolitical rivalry between Russia, China, the USA, and Europe at the African continent, coupled with what may be seen as rising anti-Western sentiments (see e.g., Carbone and Ragazzi 2023; Cold-Ravnkilde and Sylla 2024; Lebovich 2024), underscore a dynamic and unpredictable political context that affects and is affected by migration governance. This emphasizes the urgency—and necessity—of critically interrogating the expanding externalization of European migration policy and its wider societal and political consequences. As both externalization policies and African responses continue to

evolve, it is imperative to closely examine the far-reaching consequences of European migration governance in Africa, as these policies are actively reshaping the political, economic, and social landscapes of the continent and redefining its relationship with Europe.

Understanding European externalization policy in Africa as being shaped by unequal geopolitical hierarchies and colonial continuities (Mbembe 2019; Niang 2018; Rodney 1972), this Special Issue scrutinizes the implications of North–South "partnerships" as they unfold across Africa. The authors' shared conceptual starting point for their work was the metaphor *rippling effects.* Initially, the term was used to capture how policy interventions can generate waves of transformation that extend far beyond their intended or immediate scope. However, as the six featured Special Issue articles demonstrate through their use of the term, *rippling effects* represents more than a useful metaphor. Its use allowed us to think beyond direct policy outcomes and implementation gaps and interrogate the broader multiscalar transformations they trigger. Through the authors' collective empirical engagements with externalization in diverse sites and practices, we, as editors, have seen how and why the metaphor should be developed into a targeted reflexive analytical approach, which is what we present in this introduction.

Unlike other policy effects, rippling effects may be less measurable, less obvious, and even less noticeable. Therefore, they require targeted attention. In our approach, we define rippling effects as the indirect, and often unintended, consequences of migration governance that may accumulate across scales, space, and time. These effects can be both material and nonmaterial, impacting structural practices as well as lived experiences, and are shaped by historical contexts, local responses, and the broader economic and sociopolitical dynamics they encounter. Just as ripples on water stir and transform their surroundings, European interventions in Africa enter unintended policy arenas, activate new actors, and produce effects of varying scale, scope, and duration. Some interventions may create only ephemeral ripples, leaving behind temporary impacts unless they are reinforced or repeated. Others, as the articles in this Special Issue illustrate, generate transformative and enduring effects. These effects reshape African (im)mobilities, influence sociopolitical landscapes and governance processes, and reframe visions of migration and placemaking across the continent.

While past research on European externalization in Africa has primarily focused on policymaking processes, governance narratives, and effectiveness measurements, often from a Eurocentric perspective, recent scholarship has shifted toward a more critical, Afrocentric approach. This emerging body of work examines the impacts of externalization through historically grounded analysis centered on African experiences and perspectives. Studies of everyday borderwork have taken center stage (see e.g., Deridder and Pelckmans 2020; Gazzotti, Mouthaan, and Natter 2022; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2021), with much research now contextualized within post- and neocolonial discourses (see e.g., Lemberg-Pedersen et al. 2022; Martins and Strange 2019). We advance this literature with the rippling effects

approach, as an invitation for other scholars to trace the often unpredictable and less visible effects of externalization. This approach transcends binary assessments of policy success or failure and moves beyond state-centric perspectives to illuminate how interventions trigger broader transformations as they unfold and are responded to on the ground.

The Special Issue is structured in three parts. The editorial introduction begins by reviewing the scholarship on European externalization and migration governance in Africa, carving out the emergence of critical externalization studies as a distinct field. Building on existing research and the six articles in the Special Issue, we introduce the rippling effects approach. As part of the approach, we propose a targeted set of analytical questions to guide and support critical and reflexive research on the various realities of externalization as they unfold and evolve in African societies. Second, the six featured articles explore diverse aspects of externalization specifically focusing on UK-driven migration governance capacity building (Ostrand 2024); EU externalization in Morocco and its impact on democratization (Faustini-Torres 2025); humanitarian borderwork in the Sahel (Weisner et al. 2024); border control strengthening in West Africa (Talleraas 2024); migration information campaigns in Senegal (Vammen 2024); and reintegration programs in Nigeria (Schreier 2024). Finally, the Special Issue concludes with a commentary by Bisong, highlighting how the EU's externalization agenda has contributed to rippling effects in the EU's own migration governance and third country cooperation, with a focus on policy fragmentation, legal tensions, institutional overstretch, and political backlash.

The Emergence of Critical Externalization Research

European involvement in African mobility and borders has a long history rooted in colonial legacies. Efforts to restrict mobility from the continent gained prominence in the 1990s (see e.g., Andersson 2014). Externalization policies, developed by the EU and individual European states, sought to manage migration beyond European borders. These policies and partnerships with so-called third countries shifted responsibilities to actors outside of Europe. They often targeted perceived areas of origin and transit, expanding European migration governance into new geographic spaces, including international waters and foreign territories (see e.g., Bialasiewicz 2012; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2015; Lavenex 2016; Lemberg-Pedersen 2017; López-Sala and Godenau 2022), and political spaces (see e.g., Deridder, Pelckmans, and Ward 2020; Lavenex, Lutz, and Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik 2024).

The proliferation of externalization policies gained momentum after 2015 since "unwanted" migration to Europe became an increasingly politicized area. Initiatives such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa exemplify this trend, channeling resources to address migration "downstream" and "at the source" through measures that blend development and humanitarian assistance with securitized border controls (Spijkerboer 2022). Contemporary externalization policy now

combines "hard" approaches, such as legal and technical measures, with "soft" strategies, such as migration information campaigns and capacity-building programs (Jegen 2023; Maâ, Van Dessel, and Van Neste-Gottignies 2023; Musarò 2019). Together, these measures reflect a complex and incoherent intertwining of security, border control, development, and humanitarian rationales, often blurring the boundaries between these domains.

Since the emergence of research on European externalization, the field has steadily expanded to become a critical area of scholarship in migration, migration governance, and border studies. As the politics of externalization have evolved, research has followed suit, leading to both a proliferation and a diversification of research over the past two decades (see also Cobarrubias et al. 2023 for descriptions of the development of the field). In the African context, research now covers a broad range and scale of externalization policies, encompassing overall European funding, structures, and collaboration with state and nonstate actors in Africa (see e.g., Frowd 2018; Tsourdi and Zardo 2025; Zanker 2019); research on transformations in African regulations, policies, and norms, including border enforcement (see e.g., Bjarnesen and Bisong 2023; Jegen 2023; Talleraas 2024); and research targeted at specific initiatives—for example, concerning return, information provision, capacity building, or development interventions (see e.g., Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2021; Zanker 2023; Zanker and Altrogge 2022).

Examining the development of externalization research over time, we identify three key transformations that have evolved in parallel, collectively steering the field toward a more critical and reflexive direction. We characterize these as: *Afrocentric*, *historicized*, and *grounded* turns. We explain these and build upon them when we introduce the *rippling effects* approach later in this article. Yet, it is first relevant to understand the patterns of critical migration governance research more broadly. Here, we find that more recent perspectives emphasize the inherently political nature of migration governance (see e.g., Carmel, Lenner, and Paul 2021). This marks a clear break from earlier, more instrumental analyses that focused mainly on whether policies met their stated objectives, such as reducing immigration numbers (Cornelius, Martin, and Hollifield 2004). This success-or-failure approach has been criticized for overlooking the complexities of policymaking and its outcomes (Boswell 2007; Castles 2004). In response, migration governance research has increasingly paid attention to themes such as multilevel and multiactor dynamics (see e.g., Panizzon and van Riemsdijk 2018), and calls to "decenter" the governance discourse (Triandafyllidou 2020). These developments align with longstanding efforts to overcome methodological nationalism and increase reflexivity in migration studies (Amelina 2021; Dahinden 2016; Wimmer and Schiller 2002). Returning to the externalization discourse, we see that the emergence of the critical research agenda in migration governance research—more broadly—parallels the three transformations described in this article (Afrocentric, historicized, and grounded).

In terms of Afrocentric transformation, earlier studies primarily explored the European motivations behind externalization, with a key focus on the securitization of migration and the export of border control practices, and also export of border control practices which at the time was still "new" (see e.g., Gibney 2005; Lavenex and Uçarer 2004; Rumford 2006). This research trend has increasingly been countered by an African-centered perspective. While early analyses also highlighted the unfair conditionalities in "partnerships" imposed on African states (see e.g., Bialasiewicz 2012; Hyndman and Mountz 2008), they often remained centered on European strategies, aims, or affairs. More recent research has incorporated African experiences and perspectives, often pushed for by Africanist scholars. This has revealed how European-driven migration policies are not only imposed upon countries but also reshaped through African responses, including resistance, highlighting nuances in power relationships, and how European and African policies are mutually constitutive (Adam et al. 2020; Lixi 2019; Triandafyllidou 2020; Zanker 2023, 2024). Indeed, recent research has underscored the need to analyze externalization through the lens of African agency, state autonomy, and symbolic politics (see the discussion by El Qadim and İşleyen in Cobarrubias et al. 2023).

The second, though clearly linked, transformation of historicization can be seen as a response to the field's tendency of "methodological presentism" (Cobarrubias and Lemberg-Pedersen 2025). Although the politics of externalization have evolved quickly over the past decades, research has followed suit and targeted these developments as they have unfolded. Yet, more recent scholarship has challenged this presentism and shifted the temporal lens by highlighting European–African relationships over time. In particular, scholars have explored how externalization reinforces historical power dynamics while reshaping sovereignty and local governance, often with a post-, de-, or neocolonial perspective by drawing on, for example, Mbembe's postcolonial theory (see e.g., Frowd 2022). For instance, scholars have criticized externalization policies for a colonial tendency to undermine democratization processes (see e.g., Faustini-Torres 2020, 2025), fostering encampment and restricting regional mobility frameworks, such as ECOWAS' free movement agreements (see e.g., Castillejo 2019; Opi 2021); and shaping and reproducing specific understandings of mobility (see e.g., Jegen 2023).

Other research illustrates what we see as a third, grounded, transformation, which is related to scale. In line with the original Eurocentric tendencies, externalization research has primarily targeted state-centered institutional and instrumental perspectives. While much research still centers on policy design, partnerships, and migration diplomacy, though also with a critical lens, there has been a downward shift in terms of scalar and spatial analytical focus. Increasingly, new research moves beyond mapping policy processes, and rather forefronts implementation, local experiences, and effects of externalization (see e.g., Pallister-Wilkins 2021; Talleraas 2025) and the role of nonstate actors (see discussion by Cuttitta et al. in Cobarrubias et al. 2023). Anthropological and securitization studies have shed light on the human face of externalization, through studies on topics such as the proliferation of

smuggling networks and the amplification of risks faced by migrants (Andersson 2016; Lucht 2022; Tchilouta et al. 2023), also highlighting how it can destabilize local economies, and exacerbate social, political, and environmental challenges (Chemlali 2023; Donko, Doevenspeck, and Beisel 2022).

These three transformations have led to the development of what we identify as critical externalization research. Here, driven by the Afrocentric, historized, and grounded push, alternative conceptualizations have also been suggested, seeking to replace the widely used and normative term (European) externalization with "containment strategies" (Landau 2019) or "external interventions" (Talleraas 2024). Alternative approaches have underscored not only the European, but also the transnational or hybrid spatiality of the field to overcome the inside/outside dichotomy (see Cobarrubias et al. 2023, and specifically the discussion therein by Cuttitta, Heller, and Lemberg-Pedersen). The rapid political evolution of externalization has triggered an urgent push to develop a common research field, with a shared language and discourse. This is reflected in the recent surge of article collections and Special Issues (see Table 1). These Special Issues, among which this one represents the latest addition, are relevant to include here not only as reference points for interested readers, but more specifically because the list reflects the development and expansion of critical externalization research. Most of these collections forefront reflexive approaches, centering African, neocolonial, and local perspectives, and thus illustrate the three transformations identified above.

This collection illustrates the pertinent addition of our Special Issue. To the best of our knowledge, ours is the first collection that focuses on the *implications* of externalization policy using a common analytical approach. That said, many individual studies have revealed how externalization policies have limited success in altering migration flows (see e.g., Bøås 2020; Hahonou and Olsen 2021; Raineri 2018) or suffer from poor implementation (see e.g., Stutz and Trauner 2022; Zanker 2019), and they also highlight unintended consequences, such as political shifts, disruptions to regional integration, exacerbation of migrant vulnerabilities, and growth of migration-related industries (see e.g., Castillejo 2019; Norman 2020; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2021).

We believe that the proliferation of such studies and the diversity in terms of their scope and findings on the effects of externalization underscore the need for a common discourse, terminology, and line of thinking when it comes to policy implications. Responding to this gap, our Special Issue builds on the critical scholarship of externalization and the three transformations therein and pivots toward a more in-depth examination of its rippling effects in particular. By drawing on existing work, we therefore introduce a collection of articles that *specifically* explore the often unforeseen or negative consequences of externalization. We aim to contribute to the unfolding of a common language that addresses externalization's impacts, and we call for the use of *rippling effects* as a targeted analytical approach, moving beyond the term as a metaphor or anecdotal observation. We advocate for an inductive approach, which is strategic and reflexive, to critically analyze the implications

Table 1. Special Issues in Externalization Research.

Year	Special Issue	Journal	Editors
2019	Externalization at work: responses to migration policies from the Global South.	Comparative Migration Studies	Stock, Üstübici, and Schultz
2019	Rethinking EU external migration policy: Contestation and critique	Global Affairs	Martins and Strange
2020	West African engagements with the EU migration–development–security nexus	Anthropologie et développement	Deridder and Pelckmans
2021	Borderwork in the Expanded EU–African Borderlands	Geopolitics	Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht
2021	Externalisation	Forced Migration Review	Philip and Couldrey
2023	Migration Governance Beyond 'Fortress Europe': Perspectives from the Middle East and Africa	Territory, Politics, Governance	Gazzotti, Mouthaan, and Natter
2023	Information Directed Towards Migrants and the (Un)Making of Borders	Journal of Borderlands Studies	Maâ, Van Dessel, and Van Neste-Gottignies
2023	EU External Migration Policy and EU Migration Governance	Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies	Niemann and Zaun
2024	Externalisation of Migration and Border Controls and Accountability Challenges in International Law	Netherlands International Law Review	Nicolosi
2025	Embedding Externalisation	Geopolitics	Cobarrubias and Novak
2025	Beyond Presentism in Border Externalization Studies	Geoforum	Cobarrubias and Lemberg-Pedersen
2025	The rippling effects of European migration governance in Africa	International Migration Review	Talleraas and Vammen

of European externalization. To enable this, we propose a specific set of questions, which are outlined below, as a guide to understand and interrogate the rippling effects of externalization policy in Africa—and potentially beyond.

Introducing the "Rippling" Metaphor (and its Alternatives)

Over the past few years, the metaphor of *rippling effects* has been used to describe the unintended or indirect consequences of externalization policies. By emphasizing how these policies unfold across multiple scales—spanning discourse, design, implementation, and beyond—the metaphor shifts attention from immediate policy

outcomes to the broader transformations they trigger. The metaphor foregrounds the often diffuse ways externalization fuels on-the-ground changes that are not necessarily directly causal. Its use, therefore, represents a shift from past research and the abovementioned focus on the success or failure of policy objectives, by highlighting the evolving and unpredictable impacts that extend beyond a policy's original scope. As a metaphor, rippling effects has been used to dive into an interrogation of how externalization policies interact with local contexts, create cumulative consequences, and influence social, economic, and political structures.

To assess the potential of rippling effects as an analytical approach for future research, it is essential to examine how the concept has been utilized in past scholarship. With this aim, we conducted a targeted review that explored its application and also revealed a range of other terms and metaphors that have been employed in similar ways. The recent increase in the use of such lenses reflects a growing recognition of the need to analyze broader policy impacts, yet none of the terms have been consistently applied in a systematic manner. Among the many terms, "rippling" or "ripple" effects emerge as one of the most frequently used, although it has been used in a range of different ways. Table 2 highlights scholars who, like us, have employed the metaphor of rippling effects or related concepts in research on migration and externalization policies.

To provide context for how rippling effects have been conceptualized and employed in migration and externalization research, we now move on to highlight

Table 2. Rippling Effects and Related Concepts in Migration and Externalization Research.

Concept(s)	Author(s)
Ripple/rippling effects	Augustova, Farrand-Carrapico, and Obradovic-Wochnick (2023), Cobarrubias and Novak (2024), Esposito, Francesca, and Arcidiacono (2019), Lemberg-Pedersen (2015, 2017), Menihívar, Morris, and Rodríguez (2018), Mesa et al. (2020), Simonsen (2016), Suárez-Orozco, López Hernández, and Cabral (2021), Chemlali (2023), Tazreiter (2015)
Unintended effects or consequences	Bøås (2020), Boswell (2011), Burlyuk (2017), Reslow (2019), Sylla and Cold-Ravnkilde (2023), Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht (2021)
Knock-on/local/temporal/ backlash/spillover/side effects	Ambrosius (2025), Bergmann and Müller (2023), Frowd, Apard, and Dele-Adedeji (2023), Laube (2021), Salvati (2021), Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht (2021)
Chain reaction	Lemberg-Pedersen (2017)
Borderwork creep	Frowd (2022)
Externalities	Ferrer-Gallardo and Gabrielli (2022), Norman and Micinski (2023)

what we see as key examples from the existing literature. These studies illustrate a diversity of applications of the term, emphasizing the metaphor's potential. First, Lemberg-Pedersen (2017) is a key reference among the early scholarly applications of rippling effects in externalization research. He used the term to emphasize the chain reactions triggered by European migration policies, which extend far beyond EU territories. He found that the closure of legal migration routes from Africa and the Middle East led to an unprecedented rise in smuggling networks, forcing migrants to travel along dangerous and often fatal alternative routes. Simultaneously, European border control measures and the so-called "fight against migrant smugglers" have created a massively profitable market for the European arms industry.

Adding an important existential and environmental dimension, Chemlali (2023) has conceptualized rippling effects as a metaphor to understand the complex and entangled consequences of EU border externalization in the Libyan–Tunisian borderlands. By exploring border externalization "from below," she introduces the concept of "felt" externalization to examine the lived, everyday experiences of local actors in Zarzis, a coastal town in Tunisia. Here, rippling effects foreground how externalization policies affect fishermen and their families, the marine environment, and local spatial order—symbolized by the creation of two migrant cemeteries. Chemlali's work demonstrates how these effects unfold across multiple spatial and temporal scales, underscoring their layered and far-reaching nature.

Beyond EU–African borderlands, Augustova, Farrand-Carrapico, and Obradovic-Wochnik (2023) analyze how pushbacks "ripple" outward from European borders to non-EU regions, creating sequential outcomes of externalization. Through ethnographic studies of the Bosnian–Croatian and Turkish–Iranian borders, they show how pushbacks emerge and proliferate as direct consequences of externalization processes. Importantly, they also highlight the role of local dynamics in shaping migration control mechanisms, revealing distinct contextual adaptations.

Other scholars extend the concept of rippling effects to examine broader direct and indirect consequences of migration control policies. For example, researchers have analyzed the psychological trauma and socioeconomic impacts of detention and deportation on migrants, deportees, and their families and communities (Esposito et al. 2019; Menihívar, Morris, and Rodríguez 2018; Suárez-Orozco, Hernández, and Cabral 2021; Weber and Powell 2018). Similarly, other studies explore how anti-immigrant discourse, policies, and attitudes influence the lived experiences of migrants and professionals working with migrant populations (Mesa et al. 2020; Simonsen 2016). Commonalities across these studies are their intention to unpack seemingly hard-to-measure impacts, often by using qualitative, ethnographic, and inductive research methods to uncover the effects. Moreover, the rippling effects are often described as multiplying or cumulative, and many are described as leaving a negative mark on local populations or sociopolitical dynamics, for example, by stirring conflict or tensions.

Though not referring to "ripple" or "rippling" effects specifically, other scholars have targeted similar effects, but referred to these with other terms, such as

unintended effects (Boswell 2011; Sylla and Cold-Ravnkilde 2023; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2021) or knock-on effects (see Table 2). Effects have included—but are not limited to—increased human rights violations, especially when responsibility is outsourced or divided in a multiactor landscape; the creation of new and contested border zones; disruptions to existing migration routes; and the destabilization of local livelihoods. While the word "unintended" often has been used to describe such effects, it is often left undiscussed. Indeed, the question of whether unintended effects are indeed unintended is difficult to assess. Further, the often incoherent, cross-sectional, and multiactor field of externalization may include both formal and informal discourses, where various actors may have different aims and rationales, which may dynamically change over time.

In sum, the existing literature has widely applied the metaphor of rippling effects and has demonstrated its usefulness for understanding the effects of European externalization policies. Reviewing existing research findings, we find that these effects transcend the mere efforts to stop or control mobility and may be structural, spatial, temporal, and deeply personal. The effects of European externalization identified through existing research are, as such, locally embedded but also multidimensional.

To further illustrate these different dimensions of ripples, we now introduce the articles included in this Special Issue, with the aim of showing how they, individually and taken together, contribute to our development of rippling effects as an approach for analysis. The articles included offer new empirical and theoretical insights into the ways externalization practices shape local realities across African contexts and illustrate how this can be understood by using rippling effects as a point of departure.

The Special Issue Articles and the Multiple Dimensions of Ripples

Based on new empirical insights, the six articles in this Special Issue highlight the multiscalar nature of rippling effects of externalization, with a particular emphasis on their often unpredictable, diffused, and—at times—cumulative effects, which are not necessarily causal or correlative. Each contribution employs the metaphor of rippling effects to explore how externalization policies generate consequences far beyond their intended scope, creating new dependencies, transforming power structures, altering social relations, and sometimes triggering resistance. In this section, we highlight their individual contributions and underscore the essential questions they provoke.

Ostrand's (2024) article offers fresh perspectives on externalization in Africa by analyzing the far-reaching consequences of the United Kingdom's overseas immigration liaison network, Immigration Enforcement International, in 17 African countries. Her critical analysis indicates the factors that shape and spread the rippling effects, arguing that relationships between UK immigration officials and their African counterparts are pivotal, illustrating how productive working relationships

can generate cumulative and sometimes unpredictable rippling effects. For example, Ostrand details how earlier training initiatives facilitated by the UK helped spur cross-border cooperation between Ghana and Nigeria. Here, the UK's role in fostering joint initiatives between different border control agencies—unplanned within the original strategy—demonstrates how small initial actions can expand into extensive and complex outcomes over time. The cross-national analysis further underscores the unpredictable nature of UK border control activities across Africa, revealing how externalized migration control efforts become diffused and distanced from their original policy intentions in ways unforeseen by policymakers. Similar to the power dynamics explored by Faustini-Torres in this issue, Ostrand's article demonstrates how externalization creates new relationships between different actors that alter governance structures.

In a context where the EU increasingly establishes and renews its migration partnerships with key countries in North and West Africa, Faustini-Torres' (2025) article highlights how externalization has profound political consequences in hybrid or authoritarian regimes, such as Morocco. The study foregrounds the perspectives and experiences of Moroccan stakeholders—government officials, civil society actors, and activists—to show how externalization reinforces authoritarian resilience by empowering ruling elites, marginalizing opposition actors, and weakening democratic norms. EU externalization in Morocco creates rippling effects that alter both structural and agency dynamics. Structurally, it reconfigures power linkages, bolsters the Moroccan regime's coercive apparatus, and diminishes EU leverage as Morocco capitalizes on its role as a migration gatekeeper. At the agency level, ruling elites use EU-provided resources to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and exclude, sideline, and repress reform-oriented civil society organizations. While migration control takes precedence over human rights obligations, migrants endure systemic neglect, violence, and displacement. Despite their diverse positions, the article points out that national stakeholders largely critique the EU's externalization policy agenda for prioritizing short-term border control over long-term democratic development. Faustini-Torres thus demonstrates how more than two decades of external interventions have perpetuated political repression and human rights abuses while entrenching autocratic governance, but also fueling critique. The reinforcement of authoritarian resilience echoes the dependencies identified by Talleraas and Schreier in this issue, underscoring how externalization often strengthens existing power hierarchies and imbalances.

In the West African context, Talleraas (2024) also explores the unpredictable outcomes of European-driven border externalization, applying the concept of rippling effects to articulate the far-reaching impacts of European policies at Ghana's borders with Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo. Talleraas explains that these policies produce "subtle and rippling consequences" that extend beyond localized interventions to reshape broader societal structures. Unlike alternative metaphors such as "knock-on effects," "felt externalization," and "borderwork creep," she uses the notion of rippling to underscore the unpredictable and cumulative nature of externalization effects across scales. Talleraas identifies several key rippling

effects: First, the European-supported modernization of Ghana's border control systems has deepened the country's reliance on external funding for infrastructure maintenance, creating long-term dependencies rather than fostering autonomy. Second, pressures to curb irregular migration have led to the unintended criminalization of certain legal migration pathways, blurring the line between legal and irregular (e)migration. Finally, Talleraas highlights how the expansion of border staff and technologies has transformed relationships between border officers and local communities. While these changes have introduced new tensions, they have also fostered novel forms of cooperation, altering longstanding social structures and relationships in border areas.

Similar dependencies on external funding can be seen within the context of return migration in Nigeria. Schreier's (2024) article examines the expanding return migration industry in Nigeria that emerges as a cumulative rippling effect of EU-funded return and reintegration programs. Beyond the primary goal of returning migrants and facilitating reintegration, broader political and economic systems were altered. Schreier notes that these policies create a "complex web of consequences" that "ripple through the Nigerian political economy," reshaping governance structures and affecting the livelihoods of returnees and local communities. Her use of rippling effects captures the less visible consequences of external migration policies. In her case, she highlights that the new expanding return migration industry involves both governmental and nongovernmental actors that contribute to the formalization of migration management as an economic sector, as a key rippling effect. Like Talleraas, she points to how introducing external actors, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), into migration management creates new dependencies on foreign funding and expertise. However, she also highlights how the sectoral demands for services related to reintegration and training for returnees contribute to shifts in the Nigerian labor market and how corruption and mistrust in local institutions have emerged as unintended consequences, complicating the reintegration process and undermining the transparency and effectiveness of the return programs (Schreier 2024). While Schreier's contribution focuses on the institutional responses to externalization policies, both Vammen and Weisner et al.'s articles turn attention to how individuals and communities respond to externalization from below, but also how they become catalysts for local resistance, demonstrating the multiscalar nature of rippling effects.

At a more existential level, Vammen's (2024) contribution demonstrates how examining rippling effects helps us understand how counter-pressures and antiexternalization initiatives emerge in response to European externalization. By following a Senegalese activist in Dakar, she ethnographically illustrates how Europe's increasing externalization measures in the EU–Africa borderlands and Senegal unintentionally trigger rippling effects that catalyze collective action in the shape of activist-led migration information campaigns. These rippling effects thus go beyond intended or unintended policy outcomes, directly influencing the daily lives and emotions of local populations, shaping political agency, and fostering

alternative forms of activism. In this case, alternative counter-narratives challenge the traditional European-funded migration information campaigns prevalent in Senegal. Using similar repertoires of action—such as personal testimonies, collaborations with local artists, and emotive documentaries—the activist's campaigns instead highlight the structural nature of contemporary border violence and the unjust treatment of migrants. Unlike traditional campaigns, which often individualize migrant suffering and depoliticize border dynamics, these initiatives aim to expose the political and violent human implications of European externalization, linking them to the longue durée of Europe's violent colonial history.

Taking us into the contested European–African borderlands in the Sahel, Weisner et al.'s (2024) contribution uses the concept of rippling effects to describe how mistrust in humanitarian organizations emerges among migrants as a rippling effect of the externalization process. Comparing two key locations for West African transit migration in Niger and Mali, they explore the experiences and perceptions of humanitarian borderwork among transit migrants in Agadez and Gao. Their analysis shows how migrants develop mistrust and express concerns that aid organizations might compel migrants to return, collaborate with police or local authorities for denunciation and deportations, or engage in campaigns discouraging migration. The authors thus point to how increasing migration control and campaigns unintentionally come to affect the relationships between migrants and aid organizations, ultimately leading to serious protection gaps and vulnerabilities in transit. Some migrants, for example, actively avoid engaging with organizations such as the IOM, believing they will facilitate their deportation, while others try to avoid visibility or actively refuse aid to protect themselves from potential risks. This highlights the cumulative rippling effects of different migration control environments that, in very concrete ways, shape the migrants' experiences in unintended and potentially harmful ways.

Collectively, the Special Issue papers point to critical dimensions of externalization's rippling effects. First, the contributions highlight the unpredictable nature of policy outcomes and how initial interventions evolve in unanticipated ways. Second, they reveal how externalization creates new dependencies on external funding, politics, and expertise, transforming governance structures at national and local levels. Third, they illuminate how externalizations fuel counter pressures and resistance as affected communities and policy actors find their own ways to navigate or challenge the restrictions imposed on preexisting priorities, mobility, or practices. Finally, the papers point to the potentially cumulative nature of rippling effects, when different bordering interventions come in contact and create far-reaching consequences beyond their immediate outcomes.

Rippling Effects: From a Metaphor to an Approach for Reflexive Analysis

Based on the findings from the articles in this Special Issue, we propose that rippling effects is more than a metaphor. It represents a valuable analytical approach for

understanding the broader implications of externalization policies, representing a subfield within critical externalization studies. By emphasizing "rippling" rather than the more static "ripple" effects, we aim to capture the dynamic, ongoing, and interconnected nature of external interventions and policy processes when they encounter African realities.

The contributions in this Special Issue demonstrate that external interventions generate complex rippling effects across multiple dimensions—outward through spatial diffusion, downward through local and social impacts, and upward through institutional and political changes. Capturing these indirect, potentially cumulative, effects require grounded analysis that examines how local actors experience, navigate, adapt to, cooperate with, shape, and resist such interventions. This analytical approach extends beyond simple process tracing to consider broader temporal, spatial, and scalar dynamics, while incorporating crucial nonmaterial and human impacts such as emotional responses and shifting local perceptions, as highlighted by Weisner et al. (2024) and Chemlali (2023). To unpack these dynamics, we propose a set of key analytical questions to guide future research, ensuring more consistent and encompassing analyses within a common discourse.

Doing this, we want to underscore the importance of situating these rippling effects within the broader historical and political contexts into which the "stone" of externalization policies is cast. This enables a deeper understanding of the friction and disruptions generated by these interventions. A grounded analytical lens should therefore critically examine the multiple and often unforeseen dimensions as they unfold across scales, temporalities, and places, and their entanglements with history and on-the-ground realities.

To this end, we propose a set of guiding questions for future research. The stone is herein referring to the policy in question, which in this case may be a single and specific European externalization intervention, or a broader set of European policies. The water represents the empirical reality, in this case Africa, where the stone is thrown, and the ripples unfold:

- **Which stone, who is throwing it, where, and why?**
  Which interventions are taking place, what are their objectives, and do their guiding (im)mobility norms differ from local norms?
- **Who and what do the ripples affect, and how is this experienced?**
  Which individuals, communities, or systems bear the immediate, direct, or indirect brunt of these disturbances?
- **What shape and form do the ripples take?**
  How do they emerge, and what determines their speed, directionality, and intensity?
- **What is the temporality and duration of these effects?**
  When do they emerge, and do they dissipate, recur, or endure?
- **Are there any broader, long-term, or transformative implications?**

How do these interventions alter mobility patterns and norms, local actors and their practices, policy responses, and environments over time?

- **What can be found in the—potential—cumulative nature of the ripples?**
  What kinds of social and political implications (including friction) may the initial ripples produce? How do these potential implications manifest across scale and space?
- **In what ways are the rippling effects entangled in, or become shaped by history and other preexisting local dynamics?**
  How do external interventions interact with historical, colonial, and imperial relations, but also preexisting social, political, and economic processes in local contexts? What synergies, tensions, or adaptations arise as a result?
- **Do the ripples encounter any countercurrents or backlash effects?**
  How do local actors, institutions, or broader sociopolitical forces react, reshape, or push back against these interventions? Do these counter-effects generate new forms of ripples?

With these guiding questions, we aim to foster a critical and expanded understanding of externalization, one that encompasses not only the processes of European border-making in Africa but also the active roles African actors play in shaping, implementing, resisting, and ultimately living with the effects of these interventions. We hope these questions will help future research identify, trace, and compare under-researched or newly emerging rippling effects of externalization and their long durée, advancing an already vibrant research agenda within critical externalization and border studies.

Moreover, such a "granulation" of the field will not only refine scholarly discourse, but may also enable us to, in the words of Landau, "envision new frontiers of action" (2024). While specific ripples may be detected by chance, a continuous reflexive analytical approach, targeted at understanding the multiple and potential impacts of externalization, will enable the development of a more coherent, just, and encompassing research and—potentially—policy field. As the inherently broad nature of rippling effects necessitates narrowing the scope of analysis to traceable policies and impacts, this may involve focusing on specific programs or frameworks and systematically exploring their rippling effects over time. Yet, this can be done while still asking open, critical questions, targeted at uncovering less tangible, rippling effects. Our hope is that future research will systematically trace how interventions produce rippling effects across geographies, actors, and temporal scales, advancing our understanding of the nuanced and often unpredictable consequences of migration governance.

Conclusion

The rippling effects of Europe's increasing externalization efforts in Africa extend far beyond their immediate, measurable, and intended policy outcomes. As a growing

bulk of research emphasizes, these effects reshape political landscapes, social relations, and mobility patterns across the continent, while also being shaped by African actors, history, and local realities. The studies in this Special Issue highlight some of the far-reaching implications of these processes: from the emergence of new migration industries and dependencies in Nigeria to the transformation of border practices in Ghana, the reinforcement of authoritarian control in Morocco, the rise of counter-narratives and protests in Senegal, and the growing mistrust in humanitarian organizations among migrants in the Sahelian borderlands. Collectively, the articles illustrate the need for careful, critical, and reflexive analyses that consider both the immediate disruptions caused by externalization policies and the responses and resistance they generate among affected communities.

By introducing the rippling effects lens as an analytical approach, we seek to advance critical externalization research and build on what we see as three key transformations within the field: the Afrocentric, historicized, and grounded turns. Using this framework, we aim to push the discourse forward and offer a targeted way to dissect the highly complex dynamics of externalization policies. Our proposed approach provides a set of open-ended, critical questions that enable researchers to explore the indirect, often unpredictable, consequences of external policy interventions, particularly as they intersect with local realities and power dynamics in Africa. Our aim is to expand the analytical scope to better encompass the interconnected nature of rippling effects, attending both to their immediate disruptions and their potential long-term, cumulative, and transformative changes. We argue that ripples of externalization are not limited to spatial or political changes; they also manifest in social, emotional, and perceptual shifts that local actors navigate, resist, and adapt to. A grounded, reflexive approach that considers the historical, political, and socioeconomic contexts in which these interventions unfold will enable more nuanced analyses and better capture the diversity of consequences and responses.

Our framework invites a broader temporal perspective, urging researchers to consider both pre- and postintervention dynamics. Rather than focusing solely on the immediate aftermath of policy interventions, we must also explore the conditions and historical experiences that shaped migration governance before external interventions were introduced. These culturally entrenched elements influence the trajectory of externalization policies and their rippling effects in ways that are often overlooked but essential for understanding their full scope. Examining these deeper histories could help researchers trace the long-term legacies of externalization policies, not only in terms of the disruptions they cause but also in terms of the alternative futures they may inspire.

As the rippling effects of externalization evolve across scales, many of the articles in the special collection find that they not only reshape contemporary African societies and sovereignties (see also Cobarrubias et al. 2023), but they also leave a lasting mark on Africa–Europe relations. A critical, yet understudied, dimension of rippling effects lies in what may be called backlash effects. While ripples may be wavered or adapted to at local levels, what happens when cumulative ripples from

different policy interventions converge and trigger new, more forceful reactions? These recursive movements, where interventions trigger counter-responses that may reverse or reconfigure earlier changes, deserve further exploration. Our framework includes questions to guide such analyses, encouraging a deeper understanding of how local political resistance and adaptive capacities can challenge or reconfigure external policy agendas.

While our proposed research agenda and guiding questions are rooted in the European–African externalization context, we believe they also serve as a useful approach for research in other areas of migration governance and in different regional settings. While the framework may hold potential for migration governance research in general, we believe it is particularly relevant in contexts shaped by structural inequalities. Especially in spaces where the stone is primarily thrown by external and dominant actors, often wielding disproportionate influence over the waters disturbed.

However, with both externalization and other areas of migration policy, it is crucial to underscore that these do not operate in isolation. The rise of pan-African movements and regional integration initiatives are recent examples of African efforts to leverage external pressures while advancing African sovereignty and interests. Moreover, in a time where the tectonic plates of the rule-based international world order appear to be shifting and new geopolitical alliances in Africa are emerging, externalization cannot be studied in a vacuum. Migration governance is increasingly entangled in evolving power relations and global processes. At the same time, shifts in other global policy domains—such as climate change governance, international development and humanitarian aid, and trade—also generate their own rippling effects. In this changing landscape, it is crucial to recognize that African actors, too, cast their own stones, generating waves of influence, shaping migration governance in ways that interact with but are not solely determined by European interventions.

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ORCID iDs

Cathrine Talleraas https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3293-3449
Ida Marie Savio Vammen https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6112-7353

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