



Migration Profile

GABON

A. Executive Summary

The Republic of Gabon is located on the Atlantic coast of Central Africa.ⁱ Its land is geographically very diverse, with three distinct regions: the coastal plain, the mountain regions, and the Savannah.^{ii iii}

Gabon has always been considered an immigrant country due to its strategic place and economic stability.^{ivv} In 2020, the main countries of origin for immigrants were Equatorial Guinea, Mali, Benin, Cameroon, and Senegal.^{vi} As far as the emigration phenomenon, the main destination countries are France, Mali, Congo, Bulgaria, and Cameroon, while the push factors are education, better job opportunities, and family reunification.^{vii} Nevertheless, the diaspora is not very significant, nor is the remittance incidence on the local economy.^{viii} Gabon is historically known as a host country for thousands of refugees coming from other African states (mostly from Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and Burundi).^{ix} They also have free circulation in some towns and access to multiple services in the whole country.^x

The Gabonese Republic is an example of fairly economic stability in Central Africa.^{xi} It is the fourth largest oil producer in Sub-Saharan Africa.^{xii} Its economy has experienced a strong growth over the past decade, mainly driven by oil and manganese production.^{xiii} However, between 2014 and 2017, the economic development slowed down and the public deficit increased because of the drop of international oil prices.^{xiv} Gabon's economy is recovering from the pandemic, supported by more robust external demand and higher oil prices.^{xv} However, according to the World Bank, 32% of its population still lives below the poverty line (using international standards at \$5.50 per capita per day in 2021 PPP).^{xvi}

In 2021 Gabon's GDP amounted to US\$ 18,269,350.43,^{xvii} experiencing an annual growth rate of 1.5% in comparison to the yearly decrease of -1.8% in 2020.^{xviii} Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) net inflows in 2020 represented 11.2% of the country's GDP.^{xix} The inflation rate in 2020 was 1.2% of its GDP compared to the previous year's 2.5%.^{xx}

B. Country Profile

I. Basic Information

Gabon is a Central African country with roughly 2.3 million people (2021) and covers an area of 267,667 sq. km.^{xxi} Rainforests make up about 85% of its land.^{xxii} It shares borders with

Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, the Republic of the Congo, and the Atlantic Ocean.^{xxiii} The country is divided into nine provinces (Estuaire, Ogooué-Maritime, Nyanga, Moyen-Ogooué, N'Gounié, Woleu-Ntem, Ogooué-Ivindo, Ogooué-Lolo and Haut-Ogooué).^{xxiv}

Its capital city, Libreville, has 845,000 inhabitants.^{xxv} French is the official language, but there are also more than 50 other local idioms.^{xxvi} Concerning ethnic distribution, indigenous groups represent about 80.1% of the population, and the most significant tribes are the Fang, Shira-Punu/Vili, and the Nzabi-Duma. Immigrants coming from other African countries who have acquired Gabonese nationality make up the remaining population.

Regarding religion, around 75% of the population is Christian (55% Catholics, 12% Protestants, and a growing number of people affiliated to other independent churches), and 13% is Animist.

II. International and Internal Migration

Gabon registered 416,651 migrants in 2020, and only 35.67% of them were women. Many immigrants arrived from Equatorial Guinea (20.98%), Mali (13.30%), Benin (12.59%), Cameroon (12.22%), and Senegal (7.36%).^{xxviii}

In Gabon migrants are usually identified as a single group of West Africans despite their cultural differences. Their communities are spread out in different places and are divided into francophone subgroups, with the presence of Senegalese, Malians, Burkinabe, Ivorians, Togolese, Beninese, Guineans, and other anglophone speaking enclaves, including mainly Ghanaians and Nigerians.^{xxix} Their sense of belonging to the Christian or Muslim religion is an additional element in their community identity.^{xxx}

Gabon is a preferred destination because of its strategic location within the region.^{xxxi} Low-skilled migrants from West Africa are enticed by employment opportunities, primarily in agriculture, construction, or domestic services. Usually migrants arrive by air, while irregular migrants mostly get to Gabon by sea^{xxxii} and are often subject to casualties and life losses in the Gulf of Guinea and along the Gabonese coasts.^{xxxiii}

A much smaller group of migrants attempts to cross land borders by Kyé-Ossi, located near Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, or by Douala and Yaoundé.^{xxxiv} Oyem city, the regional capital in North Gabon, represents a strategic place for newcomers trying to set up their own business activities. Its closeness to neighbouring countries also enables small traders to import and export products by land.^{xxxv}

Recently, highly skilled internal migrants have settled in wealthier neighbourhoods in Gabon's urban areas, especially in the coastal communities of Libreville.^{xxxvi} As a matter of fact in 2017, 32% of international migrants moved to Libreville and Port Gentil.^{xxxvii} Families migrating from foreign countries or East Gabon are usually wealthier than those arriving from South Gabon and moving to Northern regions.^{xxxviii}

Internal migration flows mainly involve extended family members integrating host families in Libreville and Port-Gentil cities.^{xxxix} As a result, households in these cities include 75% of nuclear family members and 15% of extended family members coming from rural areas. Individuals migrate for family reunification purposes or more significant labour and educational opportunities.^{xl} Rural north and west are recently becoming desired destinations, thus changing internal migration patterns. These tendencies are motivated by increasing investment in agriculture development projects and in infrastructure created in rural areas.^{xli}

Rural-to-urban migration reached 89% in 2017, the highest percentage in Africa.^{xlii} Poverty and social inequalities have increased due to a higher concentration of non-skilled workers segregated in various neighbourhoods in suburbs and peri-urban areas. This level of stratification can be observed in Grand Libreville, Port Gentil, and Franceville communities.^{xliii} Access to water, sanitation, and hygiene is limited compared to wealthier areas such as Akanda and Owendo, where highly educated migrants settle.^{xliv} Moreover, almost half of Gabon's urban dwellers are concentrated in Libreville (40%) and Franceville (8%).^{xlv}

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

Gabon registered 48,392 emigrants in 2020 (and 52% of them were women), representing barely 2.2% of its population.^{xlvi xlvi} The main destination countries were France (46.8%), Mali (28.7%), Congo (6.5%), Bulgaria (6.2%), and Cameroon (2.5%).^{xlviii} The most important push factors for Gabonese emigrants are education, work opportunities, or family reunification.^{xlix} Nevertheless, there is also a portion of them leaving the country for exile-related reasons.^l

Although its diaspora is not very significant and the level of its remittances has been shallow in recent years,^{li} the Gabonese government seeks to encourage the investment of its expatriates in the local economy, especially in the agro-industrial and forestry sectors.^{lii} To this end, it offers preferential investment opportunities for its expatriates through the Special Economic Zones created in 2015 by the Ministry of Equal Opportunities and Gabonese Abroad.^{liii} Its measures include incentives for companies such as preferential rental rates for plots and sheds to Gabonese abroad.^{liv} Similarly, Gabon is working to regulate its migratory flows and prevent brain drain.^{lv} Therefore, the country promotes a public policy engaging the diaspora into circular migration patterns to bring back skills, knowledge, investment and capital flow to Gabon.^{lvi}

Finally, the Gabonese diaspora has been increasingly active in political terms, especially in France and the United States.^{lvii} This has been more vibrant since 2016 and cooperates with many civil society organisations founded by other African expatriates.^{lviii lix lx lxi}

IV. Forced Migrants (Internally Displaced Persons, Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Climate Displaced Persons)

In 2022, 251 refugees and 53 asylum seekers were registered, a percentage very similar to the one of the previous year (272 refugees and 53 asylum seekers).^{lxii} They came mainly from Chad (31.61%), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (26.83%), the Congo (22.06%), the Central African Republic (6.99%), and Burundi (2.20%).^{lxiii} Most of them were men (61.23%).^{lxiv} The UNHCR Cameroon Cluster Office handles Gabon, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Sao

Tome and Principe,^{lxv} and provides protection, documentation, and self-reliance to refugees and IDPs.^{lxvi}

Gabon has been historically known as a host country for thousands of refugees. By 2000 the total number of refugees in the country reached 20,000. The main factors driving these people to Gabon have been wars and violence in their countries of origin, as well as political and social instability.^{lxvii} However, in recent years the number of refugees in Gabon has decreased thanks to the voluntary repatriation and resettlement programs available for refugees, thus determining the end of their refugee status.^{lxviii} This phenomenon has been quite consistent since the announcement of the termination of refugee status for Congolese nationals on Gabonese territory, knowing for sure that they could safely return to their country of origin.^{lxixlxx}

Furthermore, refugees do not live in refugee camps, but rather have access to free circulation in some towns in Gabon.^{lxxi} Most refugees have settled in the provinces of Nyanga and Haut-Ogooué, while others live in the urban centres of Libreville, Franceville, Tchibanga, and Moanda.^{lxxii} They also obtain unique refugee identification cards to move freely throughout Gabon and can even choose their residence.^{lxxiii} In addition, the Gabonese government has allowed the UN to provide humanitarian services to those seeking refuge,^{lxxiv} especially medical care, assistance, support for integration into the Gabonese society, and help in the voluntary repatriation process for refugees willing to move back to their country of origin.^{lxxv}

Nevertheless, refugees have currently faced issues related to high unemployment rates or difficulty to find jobs. In fact, the Gabonese government has required companies to prove that no Gabonese are available for the job before hiring a refugee.^{lxxvi}

Regarding internally displaced persons, in 2020 only two of them were recorded because of flooding.^{lxxvii}

V. Victims of Human Trafficking

Despite its efforts, Gabon does not meet the minimum standards to counter human trafficking activities.^{lxxviii} For three consecutive years (2020-2022), the Gabonese government could not adopt its National Action Plan (NAP) against trafficking and has not yet set up an inter-ministerial commission to coordinate efforts on the matter.^{lxxix} Gabon has identified very few potential victims of trafficking, and endeavours to provide justice, identify, and protect adult victims remain inadequate.^{lxxx} Furthermore, it has not amended its legislation to ensure that penalties for adult sex trafficking align with those for other serious crimes.^{lxxxi}

Traffickers exploit both local and foreign victims in Gabon, as well as Gabonese abroad. The country is a preferred destination and transit point for West African men, women, and children often subjected to forced labour and sex trafficking.^{lxxxii} In the fight against the Coronavirus, travel restrictions, quarantines and school closures have increased the vulnerability of children, informal sector workers and migrants to exploitation.^{lxxxiii} Poverty also continues to be a critical risk for forced labour and trafficking in the country.^{lxxxiv} Criminals exploit girls, forcing them to work in domestic service, markets, and roadside restaurants; boys instead are employed as street vendors, mechanics, minibus assistants, and

in the fishing sector.^{lxxxv} In addition, they force West African women to work as domestic servants or in the sex trade.^{lxxxvi} Child exploitation also takes place in illegal gold mining and wildlife trafficking, and NGOs have reported Gabonese and Cameroonian recruiters associated with large multinational agricultural companies exploiting English-speaking Cameroonian IDPs.^{lxxxvii} Moreover, these recruiters force Cameroonian adults to work in northern Gabon's rubber and palm oil fields, while others abduct West African children employing them in Libreville's big markets, such as NKembo, Mont Bouët and PK7, and others in Port-Gentil.^{lxxxviii}

VI. National Legal Framework

The Gabonese Constitution upholds freedom of movement within the country, as well as entry and exit from Gabon to all Gabonese citizens.^{lxxxix} It also states that all Gabonese citizens residing temporarily or permanently abroad can benefit from the protection and assistance of the state.^{xc}

The Nationality Code, Law No. 37/98 of July 20 1999, sets out conditions and modalities for the eligibility for nationality by either origin or acquisition.^{xc1} Law No. 05/86 of June 16, 1986 outlines admission and stay norms for foreigners arriving in the Republic of Gabon. This law was implemented by Decree 6/86 of June 18, 1989 creating a special fund for immigration, and Decree No. 999/PR of July 31, 1986 regulates the conditions to apply for residency permits, which vary according to each category of residence.^{xc2}

Gabon is a state party to the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees and its 1967 Protocol, as well as to the 1969 OAU Convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa. In 2011, Gabon also ratified the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the Kampala Convention).^{xc3}

Regarding international protection, the national Law 5/98 of March 5, 1998 (the Refugee Law) handles refugee issues.^{xc4} Decrees 645, 646 and 647 of July 19, 2000 further complement the Refugee Law.^{xc5} The law establishes conditions to obtain asylum or refugee status and provides refugees equal access to public services. According to the Refugee Law, the government is responsible for the protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers.^{xc6}

Gabon agreed to the French-Gabonese Framework on the Concerted Management of Migration Flows and Co-Development. In 2010, the Gabonese government also ratified the Additional Protocol to the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children.^{xc7xc8xc9}

VII. Main Actors

The State

The National Police Force, under the Ministry of Interior, and the National Gendarmerie, under the Ministry of Defence, are responsible for law enforcement and public security.^{xc10}

The Ministry of the Interior and Security, Decentralization and Local Development oversees immigration affairs, the repatriation of persons in an irregular condition and voluntary repatriation. It is also in charge of Border Management through the General Directorate of Documentation and Immigration.^c

The Gabonese General Directorate of Documentation and Immigration is responsible for collecting and centralising all information on the territory's security, institutions, and national economy. It is also involved in setting up plans regulating aspects of emigration in order to issue travel documents and immigration by establishing entry and stay conditions for foreigners in Gabon. It also ensures the compliance and application of these regulations.^{ci}

The Refugee Law states that the National Commission for Refugees (NCR) is the responsible governmental institution in charge of refugee protection.^{cii} The NCR deals with legal assistance, reception of asylum seekers, examination of their applications, preparation of protection documents, and legal counsel available to refugees and asylum seekers.^{ciii}

With regards to emigration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Cooperation, Francophonie, Regional Integration, and Gabonese Abroad is responsible for designing and implementing the government's foreign policy, as well as coordinating and conducting the state's external action in the fields of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation, Consular Affairs, Francophonie, Law of the Sea, Refugees, and Diaspora Engagement.^{civ}

International Organisations

IOM falls under the purview of the IOM Regional Office for Central and West Africa, located in Dakar, Senegal. It implements several migration initiatives in the country and supports the government in developing national policies to combat human trafficking.^{cv}

UNHCR covers Gabon under the Multi-Country Office (MCO) in Cameroon. UNHCR MCO Cameroon focuses on protection needs, providing documentation, and promoting self-reliance for refugees and internally displaced persons. UNHCR has also been involved in emergency aid, life-saving assistance, and work to prevent statelessness.^{cvi}

UNICEF cooperates with the World Health Organization (WHO) on children's protection, adolescent development, children's survival, as well as development and social inclusion for the most vulnerable groups.^{cvii}

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Regional Office for Central Africa and the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa also provides assistance to Gabon.^{cviii} The office promotes and protects human rights through research, advocacy, human rights mainstreaming, advisory services and technical cooperation with national authorities, national human rights institutions, civil society, and international and regional organisations.^{cix}

Furthermore, FAO and the Gabonese Government have agreed to join their efforts to achieve the expected outcomes in the following priority areas: strengthening institutional governance and national capacities; natural resource management and the development of sustainable value chains in agriculture, livestock, forestry, fisheries, and aquaculture.^{cx}

NGOs and Other Organisations

Gabon is a country of origin and destination for minors who often become the victims of human trafficking. In this regard, *Manos Unidas* supports the work of the Carmelite Missionaries of Charity (*Vedrunas*) in their projects of reception and awareness capacity for children.^{cxix}

Manos Unidas has been receiving monetary support through the project "Training and community prevention against child abuse."^{cxix} This program started in 2013 and was developed by the "Arc en Ciel" association in the *Espoir* centre and *Moanda*, a rural area on the outskirts of the capital city (*Libreville*).^{cxix} There, 970 children in vulnerable conditions receive training and awareness-raising on the possible cases of trafficking and abuse to which they may be subjected if they get trapped into a human trafficking network.^{cxix}

As far as migrants and refugees, no NGO or law firm have been identified as providing legal assistance in Gabon.^{cxix}

The Catholic Church

The Bishops' Conference has a specific commission - the *Justice et Paix* Commission, providing aid to refugees.^{cxix}

The Episcopal Conference of Gabon is also a member of the Association of Episcopal Conferences of the Central Africa Region (ACERAC), together with the Episcopal Conference of the Congo, Chad, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea, which met in July 2022 for an extraordinary youth migration conference.^{cxix} At this conference, the bishops committed themselves to fight against the phenomenon of migration of young people in their countries, and they plan to develop a pastoral guide on migrants to raise awareness regarding the importance of this issue.^{cxix}

Centres d'accueil Arc-en-Ciel welcomes children living on the street and victims of all kinds of trafficking, violence, or conflict with the law, offering them a welcoming environment with or without accommodation thanks to the supervision of a multidisciplinary team.^{cxix} Its goal is family, social, school, and professional reintegration of these children experiencing these troubled conditions.^{cxix}

This organisation has two centres: *Arc-en-Ciel* for boys and *Espoir* for girls, where they host the most vulnerable children, both those living on the street and those who are victims of violence, aged between 7 and 18 years old.^{cxix} These centres belong to Caritas Gabon and are run by the Carmelite Sisters of Charity.^{cxix} The association also offers educational activities to juvenile detainees and benefits the neighbourhood's children.^{cxix}

In Gabon, Caritas focuses on reducing poverty, particularly among the most vulnerable, such as the elderly, refugees, and street children.^{cxix} Its mission includes the promotion of equality between men and women, and providing food, medical assistance, and support for displaced persons. Caritas also has stores where clothes are available at affordable prices.^{cxix}

As far as emergency aid and support for refugees and displaced persons, Caritas Gabon relies on volunteers.^{cxix} To achieve its objectives and better coordinate its efforts on behalf of people

most in need, Caritas pursues its advocating and awareness-raising activities by using local media to promote messages from the bishops and in collaboration with other humanitarian organisations.^{cxxvii}

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