

# EU Migration Policy and Regional Integration in Africa: A New Challenge for European Policy Coherence

by Luca Barana

As intra-European tensions on migration policy rage on, more attention should be devoted to the long-term consequences of the EU's actions in Africa. The security-driven approach underpinning European responses to the current migration phenomenon could have more lasting effects than expected, undermining development cooperation while running counter to traditional EU approaches in Africa.

A major casualty of this approach is policy coherence within the EU itself. The EU's efforts to externalize the migration burden and enhance border security in key origin and transit countries may well put the future of regional integration in Africa in danger.

Policy coherence is a European goal established by the Treaties, namely Article 208 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The EU has been keen to promote this principle: the Policy Coherence for Development is an official EU policy

since 2006, when it was embedded in the new European Consensus on Development, a statement advocating a more integrated and focused approach to development cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Such efforts have been confirmed recently in the new European Consensus on Development adopted in 2017.<sup>2</sup>

Coherence is part of a package of broader policy goals – such as coordination and consistency – that are needed in order to improve the impact of European policies: adding European funding to the bilateral aid of individual member states still makes the EU the first donor

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, *The European Consensus on Development*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, June 2006, [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/publication-the-european-consensus-on-development-200606\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/publication-the-european-consensus-on-development-200606_en.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Council of the European Union, *The New European Consensus on Development. Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future*, 7 June 2017, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:42017Y0630\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:42017Y0630(01)).

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in the world. Nonetheless, competing interests at the European and national level are endangering effective responses. Furthermore, beneficiary states are burdened by consultation fatigue, having to deal with multiple foreign governments, international donors and NGOs. A more coherent and coordinated policy should be promoted to ease their task.

Regional integration in Africa has long been identified as a strategic goal shared by both the EU and African states. For its part, the EU has pushed regionalism as a development strategy in its agenda with the African Union. Integration is enshrined as an objective both in the Cotonou Agreement, expiring in 2020, that manages development cooperation with a large part of African countries as well as in the Strategic Partnership signed in 2007 with Africa.<sup>3</sup>

An indigenous path towards integration has a long history in Africa and has been pursued both at a continental and sub-regional level. While difficulties persist, African countries have long endorsed regional integration as a development strategy. African states and European donors found common ground on this matter, and, despite strategic tinkering from both sides,

<sup>3</sup> For further information, see: European Commission, *The Cotonou Agreement, signed in Cotonou on 23 June 2000, revised in Luxembourg on 25 June 2005, revised in Ouagadougou on 22 June 2010, and Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-20*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.2841/43863>; Council of the European Union, *The Africa-European Union Strategic Partnership. Investing in People, Prosperity and Peace*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.2860/55618>.

have generally advanced the cause of regional integration.

This is no longer the case, at least from the European side. Suddenly, regional integration has disappeared from EU-Africa development cooperation discourse. Managing migration is the new priority, especially in the Sahel area, where significant funds from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) have been earmarked for border control and security.

Enhanced closures and controls along African borders stand in stark contrast to the free movement of people, a core principle of regionalism and a key component of the EU's own history and model. Not coincidentally, the new EU approach focuses particularly on those areas where some of the most integrated regional bodies are found, the Sahel and West Africa.

Among these, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)<sup>4</sup> is one of the most advanced expressions of regionalism in Africa, particularly regarding the free movement of people. Established in 1975, ECOWAS has adopted a Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment since 1979.<sup>5</sup> ECOWAS citizens are entitled to visa-free entry in other

<sup>4</sup> ECOWAS member states are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo.

<sup>5</sup> ECOWAS, *Protocol A/P.1/5/79 Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment*, Dakar, 29 May 1979, [http://documentation.ecowas.int/download/en/legal\\_documents/protocols/PROTOCOL%20RELATING%20TO%20FREE%20MOVEMENT%20OF%20PERSONS.pdf](http://documentation.ecowas.int/download/en/legal_documents/protocols/PROTOCOL%20RELATING%20TO%20FREE%20MOVEMENT%20OF%20PERSONS.pdf).

member countries. An ECOWAS passport was devised in 2000, too. Today, visa-free entry and free circulation in Western African states are consolidated realities, reflecting a long tradition of seasonal and circular migration in the region. While mobility in West Africa is largely a bottom-up phenomenon, with migration patterns that long pre-date both African institutions and EU policies, such dynamics are still largely ignored at the EU policy level.

Europe, therefore, is not only hindering institutional efforts, but also disrupting patterns of migration and mobility that often pre-date the current colonial borders of African states. Cases of micro-regionalism in Western Africa (i.e. locally-based and informal areas of economic integration across borders) are usually well engrained in the development strategies of local populations.

Countries like Niger or Mali, heavily influenced by European migration policies, are both part of ECOWAS and host cross-border corridors, such as the Mopti-Ouahigouya area between Mali and Burkina Faso.<sup>6</sup> The impact of stronger border controls at both the regional institutional level and that of informal corridors have been significantly underestimated however.

A regional framework for mobility in Africa is needed. European migration policy has developed bilateral tools with priority countries (Migration

Partnerships), but more needs to be done for the regional dimension. Some EUTF resources have been devoted to regional projects. In so doing, current European policy seems to retain a degree of coherence with more traditional development cooperation approaches. For example, Regional Indicative Programmes have become the main tool at the EU's disposal to financially support regional integration as a mean to eradicate poverty.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, the mere existence of regional initiatives on migration does not mean that the free movement of people is safeguarded. Projects financed by the EUTF can have cross-border objectives, but for the most part are deeply rooted in the security-driven approach privileged by the current EU political debate.

For example, the biggest regional project in the Sahel area is aimed at the stabilization of target countries,<sup>8</sup> through "a more effective control of borders", in order to fight irregular migration and human trafficking.<sup>9</sup> Such measures therefore also risk disrupting consolidated patterns of regional mobility.

<sup>7</sup> For further information, see: European Commission, *European Union–West Africa Regional Indicative Programme 2014-2020*, July 2015, <http://europa.eu/ljd94BD>.

<sup>8</sup> For further information on the GAR-SI Sahel project, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/node/30>.

<sup>9</sup> Jonas Bergmann et al., "Protection Fallout. How Increasing Capacity for Border Management Affects Migrants' Vulnerabilities in Niger and Mali", in *GPPI Research Papers*, November 2017, <http://www.gppi.net/publications/human-rights/article/reinforcing-border-control-whats-at-stake-for-migrants>.

<sup>6</sup> Fredrik Söderbaum and Ian Taylor (ed.), "Micro-Regionalism in West Africa. Evidence from Two Case Studies", in *Nordic Africa Institute Discussion Papers*, No. 34 (2007), <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:nai:diva-141>.



In order to avoid distortions in policy incentives for African countries and, at the same time, preserve real policy coherence for development, the EU should integrate its current drive towards the reduction of migratory flows with transnational agreements already on the ground. One solution could be to provide decisive support for the ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration, adopted in 2008.<sup>10</sup> Its declared objective is to establish a link between migration and development, ostensibly the same purpose of EU's policies, at least on paper.

The Common Approach could be used as a concrete instrument towards policy coherence, not least considering that it acknowledges a direct link between the free movement of people in West Africa and a reduction in the numbers of migrants towards Europe. Nowadays, around 84 per cent of movements in the region takes place within West Africa:<sup>11</sup> if mobility could flourish, based on traditional patterns and strengthened by the institutional framework of ECOWAS, it is highly likely that migration towards Europe would become more manageable.

Nonetheless, Europe is pushing in the opposite direction. On the face of it, in order to preserve a minimum level of coherence, the EU should at least include a frank debate on mobility in the coming negotiations for the post Cotonou agreement. Discussions should move beyond anxieties about the management of migration flows towards Europe and address development opportunities deriving from intra-regional mobility.

In this respect, the political discourse should move from an antagonistic denunciation of "migration" towards a realistic discussion of "mobility". Otherwise, short-term political contradictions will continue to block efforts to establish concrete European policies that support regional integration and mobility, thereby neglecting past efforts and undermining EU policy coherence on development.

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<sup>10</sup> ECOWAS, *ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration*, Ouagadougou, 18 January 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/49e47c8f11.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Alexandre Devillard, Alessia Bacchi and Marion Noack, *A Survey on Migration Policies in West Africa*, 2nd ed., Vienna/Dakar, ICMPD and IOM, January 2016, p. 20, [https://www.icmpd.org/fileadmin/ICMPD-Website/ICMPD-Website\\_2011/Capacity\\_building/Migration\\_and\\_Development/A\\_Survey\\_on\\_Migration\\_Policies\\_in\\_West\\_Africa\\_EN\\_SOFT\\_\\_2nd\\_edition\\_.pdf](https://www.icmpd.org/fileadmin/ICMPD-Website/ICMPD-Website_2011/Capacity_building/Migration_and_Development/A_Survey_on_Migration_Policies_in_West_Africa_EN_SOFT__2nd_edition_.pdf).



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