

Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for the Africa–EU Partnership Agenda on Migration and Mobility: A Continental Perspective

by Otilia Anna Maunganidze and Tsion Tadesse Abebe

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the partnership between Africa and Europe on migration and mobility. It highlights the tensions between the approaches of the two blocs, and offers suggestions for policymakers to consider in their negotiations on migration cooperation. These suggestions focus on migration governance, returnees, development, legal pathways to migration and international protection. The paper notes that the COVID-19 pandemic has already had and will continue to have an enormous impact on mobility due to global travel restrictions and the evolving impact of health security on mobility. It recognises the continued need for cross-regional collaboration on migration and mobility, and, in particular, the need to ensure safe, regular and orderly migration. The paper assesses how partnerships, such as that between the EU and Africa, would have to change to reflect new realities.

European Union | Africa | African Union | Migration | Refugees | Coronavirus

keywords

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Introduction

Starting in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated travel restrictions to limit the spread of the virus have impacted the movement of people in and out of Africa.¹ Since 2015, migration has been a key aspect of the partnership between Africa – through the African Union (AU) and individual countries – and Europe – through the European Union (EU) and individual countries – following the rise in migration out of Africa towards Europe. This period has been characterised by securitised approaches to migration becoming more commonplace² in some instances. It has also seen a greater focus on the need to better understand migration dynamics on the continent.

The imposition of travel restrictions and lockdown regulations in response to COVID-19 resulted in an intensification of securitised migration management.³ This has had a short-term negative impact on thousands of migrants.⁴ African migrants have experienced being abandoned by transporters and smugglers on perilous journeys, and being trapped or stranded in transit or destination

¹ Aimée-Noël Mbiyozo, “COVID-19 Responses in Africa Must Include Migrants and Refugees”, in *ISS Today*, 8 April 2020, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/covid-19-responses-in-africa-must-include-migrants-and-refugees>.

² Tsion Tadesse Abebe, “Securitisation of Migration in Africa: The Case of Agadez in Niger”, in *ISS Africa Reports*, No. 20 (December 2019), <https://issafrica.org/research/africa-report/securitisation-of-migration-in-africa-the-case-of-agadez-in-niger>.

³ International Organization for Migration, *Migration Factsheet No. 6 – The Impact of COVID-19 on Migrants*, March 2020, https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/ICP/MPR/migration_factsheet_6_covid-19_and_migrants.pdf.

⁴ Migration Data Portal, *Migration Data Relevant for the COVID-19 Pandemic*, last updated on 23 November 2020, <https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/migration-data-relevant-covid-19-pandemic>.

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This paper was prepared with partial support of the Open Society Foundations, in the framework of the project “A New European Consensus on Asylum & Migration”. Views expressed are the authors’ alone.

countries.⁵ In this situation, some migrants have taken greater risks to reach their destinations. There is also potential for heightened pressure and instability in borderlands.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on global economies⁶ as ordinary economic activity is greatly affected by restrictions on movement and travel as well as limitations on trade. Africa's economies, for example, are expected to contract with an average gross domestic product per capita reduction of 348 US dollars for lower-middle-income countries and 50 US dollars for the continent's low-income countries.⁷

According to the World Bank, when viewed through a migration lens, the economic crisis induced by COVID-19 "could be long, deep, and pervasive".⁸

Beyond the travel bans, there are other far-reaching economic impacts linked to migration. For example, host countries that rely on migrant labour in, among others, the health and agriculture sectors will be impacted. Further, migrants could possibly lose their jobs, wages and health insurance coverage. The knock-on impact on reduced migrant remittances could increase poverty for sending countries. In addition, the crisis could exacerbate discriminatory treatment of migrants. All this interlinks with the relationship between Africa and Europe.

While countries have forged partnerships to work together to counter the pandemic's immediate impact and there is general consensus on the need to sustain this in the long term, many are forced to look inward to protect their economies. For the partnership between Africa and Europe, this evolving dynamic could affect how the two regions relate and work together going forward. Already, the pandemic and divergent views on mobility have scuppered negotiations between the two parties aimed at updating of the joint Africa–EU strategy.⁹

Both continents recognise the importance of their partnership and will continue to work together even if resources are limited to sustain the engagement. But their agenda on migration and mobility will depend largely on emerging trends. This overview explores these developing trends from a continental perspective. It assesses the Africa–EU partnership agenda on migration and mobility through

⁵ Lucia Bird, "Smuggling in the Time of Covid-19: The Impact of the Pandemic on Human-Smuggling Dynamics and Migrant-Protection Risks", in *Global Initiative Policy Briefs*, 28 April 2020, <https://globalinitiative.net/?p=30991>.

⁶ World Bank, "COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens", in *Migration and Development Briefs*, No. 32 (April 2020), <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/33634>.

⁷ Jakkie Cilliers et al., "Impact of COVID-19 in Africa. A Scenario Analysis to 2030", in *ISS Africa Reports*, No. 24 (July 2020), <https://issafrica.org/research/africa-report/impact-of-covid-19-in-africa-a-scenario-analysis-to-2030>.

⁸ World Bank, "COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens", cit., p. viii.

⁹ Benjamin Fox, "Pandemic Has Derailed EU-Africa Strategy, Concedes Borrell", in *EURACTIV*, 22 September 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1509399>.

three main axes. First, it analyses Africa's stance on migration. Second, it takes stock of the existing frameworks on regular and irregular migration. Third, it looks at how these existing frameworks connect with (i) securitisation of migration, (ii) legal labour migration pathways, (iii) migration and economic development, (iv) remittances, (v) international protection and observance of migrant rights and (vi) return, readmission and reintegration. It concludes by reflecting on these key issues as entry-points for the future of the relationship between Africa and Europe.

1. Understanding Africa's stance on migration

Migration is a development issue in Africa. Poverty, lack of employment opportunities and food insecurity, together with conflict caused by political instability, are the leading push factors of migration.¹⁰ The nexus between migration and development is articulated accordingly by the AU's policy documents, including the African Common Position on Migration and Development, Agenda 2063, the Migration Policy Framework for Africa and the Joint Labour Migration Programme. Africa's efforts to stimulate trade are also part of the continent's overall development agenda and are connected with aspirations to advance regional integration and facilitate freedom of movement. It is for this purpose that the AU adopted two complementary instruments on trade and free movement in 2018. These are the Agreement on Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area and the Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community Relating to the Free Movement of Persons, Right to Residence and Right to Establishment.

Specific to migration's nexus with development, the African Common Position on Migration and Development states that "well-managed migration may have a substantial positive impact for the development of countries of origin and yield significant benefits to destination States".¹¹ Migrants contribute to the economy of their country of origin through remittances, investment, and transfer of skills and knowledge. At the same time, they spend 85 per cent of their income in their destination country in addition to paying taxes and responding to labour market needs.¹²

¹⁰ UN Food and Agricultural Organization, *Evidence on Internal and International Migration Patterns in Selected African Countries*, 2017, <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7468e.pdf>.

¹¹ African Union, *African Common Position on Migration and Development*, Banjul, 25-29 June 2006, p. 2, https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/cap_migrationanddev_2006.pdf.

¹² Michael Clemens, Helen Dempster and Kate Gough, *Promoting New Kinds of Legal Labour Migration Pathways between Europe and Africa*, Center for Global Development, October 2019, p. 4, <https://www.cgdev.org/node/3128129>; Marta Foresti and Jessica Hagen-Zanker with Helen Dempster, "Migration and Development: How Human Mobility Can Help Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals", in *ODI Briefing Notes*, September 2018, p. 3, <https://www.odi.org/publications/10913-migration-and-2030-agenda-sustainable-development>.

2. Existing frameworks on migration between Africa and Europe

The Africa–EU Strategic Partnership is the formal channel through which African countries and the EU work together.¹³ The relationship between Africa and the EU on mobility and migration is largely framed within the scope of the Joint Africa–Europe Strategy adopted at the second EU–Africa Summit in Lisbon in December 2007.¹⁴ Migration, mobility and employment is one of eight areas for the strategic partnership. The main focus is on better managing migration flows and creating opportunities in Africa as a means towards sustainable development. Among key international agreements and declarations between the EU and Africa are the Tripoli Declaration on Migration and Development,¹⁵ the Ouagadougou Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings, Especially Women and Children¹⁶ and the Ouagadougou Declaration and Plan of Action for Promotion of Employment and Poverty Alleviation.¹⁷ Working together, the AU Commission (AUC) and the European Commission consult on a flexible thematic and geographic basis and craft joint policies and interventions.

In March 2020 the European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy issued a joint communication¹⁸ proposing five key areas for consideration as part of the new partnership between Africa and Europe. Migration and mobility is one of the priority areas, together with the green transition and energy access, digital transformation, sustainable growth and jobs, and peace and governance. These proposals were officially adopted in June 2020 by the Council of the EU in their council conclusions on the Africa–EU Strategy.¹⁹

Migration cooperation between Africa and Europe is also being discussed within the framework of ongoing negotiations between the EU and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) States on a future partnership agreement (post-Cotonou). While the existing agreement between the EU and the ACP expired in February 2020, it is expected to be renewed in 2021. Migration cooperation

¹³ Africa-EU Strategic Partnership website: <http://www.africa-eu-partnership.org/en>.

¹⁴ African Union and European Union, *The Africa-EU Strategic Partnership. A Joint Africa-EU Strategy*, Lisbon, 9 December 2007, http://www.africa-eu-partnership.org/sites/default/files/documents/eas2007_joint_strategy_en.pdf.

¹⁵ African Union and European Union, *Joint Africa-EU Declaration on Migration and Development*, Tripoli, 22-23 November 2006, https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32899-file-4._the_joint_africa_eu_declaration_on-migration_and_development_2006.pdf.

¹⁶ African Union and European Union, *Ouagadougou Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings, Especially Women and Children*, Tripoli, 22-23 November 2006, https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32899-file-3._ouagadougou_action_plan_to_combat_trafficking_en_1.pdf.

¹⁷ Africa Union, *Declaration and Plan of Action on Employment, Poverty Eradication and Inclusive Development (Ouaga+10)*, Addis Ababa, 30-31 January 2015, https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32899-file-assembly_au_20_xxiv_e.pdf.

¹⁸ European Commission, *Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa (JOIN/2020/4)*, 9 March 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0004>.

¹⁹ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Africa (9265/20)*, Brussels, 30 June 2020, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44788/st_9265_2020_init_en.pdf.

will feature in the summit between the EU and the AU, as well as the preceding negotiations. The European Commission's Joint Communication and Council Conclusions related to the Africa–EU Strategy include enhancing returns and readmission as a critical area. Strategy negotiations were supposed to be finalised in October 2020 at a summit between the two parties, but were postponed to 2021 due to COVID-19.

For the most part, for the EU migration and mobility is discussed from a security perspective as manifested by two of its four critical areas of focus: fighting irregular migration through enhancing border controls and improving return and readmission. This is further supplemented by the proposed New Pact on Migration and Asylum²⁰ released on 23 September 2020 by the European Commission.

The New Pact aims to address the imbalances in EU member states' burdens related to migrant arrivals and streamline the asylum process. However, the proposal focuses primarily on technical aspects and does not deal substantively with values and broader migration trends. Further, it delays some tough decisions on regular migration and permanent relocation. The New Pact also did not benefit from consultations with and reflections of African policymakers and practitioners. The result is that the New Pact is technical and process-focused, and does not address the human toll inflicted by the current system.

The New Pact heavily focuses on decreasing irregular migrant arrivals and enhancing returns using three key strategies: first, the establishment of a solidarity system that allows EU member states to choose between relocating refugees or sponsoring returns; second, enhancing border control; and third, strengthening returns processes and securing readmission agreements and arrangements with third countries. These third countries are primarily African: 13 of the 16 priority countries under the 2016 New Partnership Framework with third countries are in Africa.²¹

The New Pact also proposes an accelerated approach to asylum decisions. This includes the proposed "one stop asylum" system that requires mandatory pre-entry identity, health and security screening within five days of arrival. Those considered likely to receive asylum would then follow the normal asylum-seeking procedure. This would take place either in the country of first arrival in line with the Dublin III Regulation or in a designated EU country in the case of relocated applicants. Those considered unlikely to receive asylum would be placed into a "fast track" application process in border facilities. If rejected, they would be directed to the "return border procedure", to be returned (from the EU external borders) to their country of origin.

²⁰ European Commission, *Migration*, September 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/new-pact-on-migration-and-asylum-package.pdf>.

²¹ European Commission, *On Establishing a New Partnership Framework with Third Countries under the European Agenda on Migration* (COM/2016/385), 7 June 2016, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0385>.

This proposed new approach would effectively erode refugee protection regimes. There are many procedural and human rights concerns, including regarding the right to appeal once rejected and to be able to do so in the country of arrival.

This approach aligns with existing EU policies and practices in Africa. For example, in the Sahel, the policy remains heavily securitised²² and has impacted stimulation of regional economic growth and free movement of people already in place in West Africa in terms of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment of the Economic Cooperation of West African States (ECOWAS).²³ A critical reflection on where current practices do more harm than good, an effort to listen reflectively to concerns and forge a more sustainable partnership between Africa and Europe will be instrumental.²⁴

3. Taking stock of key issues in Africa-EU relations on migration

3.1 Securitisation of migration

The securitised perspective on migration is evident in the EU's priority areas on fighting irregular migration and improving return and readmission. Enhancing border management from the perspective of building effective migration management is also an EU priority. On fighting irregular migration, the European Commission emphasises efforts against the smuggling of migrants and strengthening border control. These speak to the priorities of Africa, but from the perspective of facilitating the movement of people. For the African continent, enhancing border control that facilitates the movement of people and controls the smuggling of people and goods, for instance, is a prerequisite for successful implementation of the agenda on free movement of people. Border management and fighting smuggling of migrants are among priorities of the AU's Migration policy framework for Africa and its Plan of Action (2018–30).²⁵ Further, for African states there is an economic imperative to control illicit flows (lost state revenue, trafficking, criminal networks, etc.), while for Europe there is a political imperative in controlling people arriving on their shores.

However, the focus on border control to limit the movement of people goes against Africa's integration agenda, enhancing the securitisation of intra-African

²² Andrew Lebovich, "Halting Ambition: EU Migration and Security Policy in the Sahel", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, September 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/halting_ambition_eu_migration_and_security_policy_in_the_sahel.

²³ Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), *Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment (A/P 1/5/79)*, 29 May 1979, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/492187502.html>.

²⁴ Geert Laporte, "The AU-EU Summit Didn't Prove Immune to COVID-19 – But That May Be a Blessing in Disguise," in *ECDPM blog*, 14 September 2020, <https://ecdpm.org/?p=40622>.

²⁵ African Union, *Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018–2030)*, May 2018, https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/35956-doc-2018_mpfa_english_version.pdf.

migration. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that migrant flows can be limited when more restrictive migration and mobility measures are imposed. However, it has also revealed that migrant smuggling patterns quickly alter to reflect the reality of COVID-19 travel restrictions. This dynamic has grown the industry and seen more migrants embark on their journeys through dangerous and unregulated routes.²⁶ If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions have shown how resilient and adaptive smuggling networks are, and how determined migrants are despite risks.²⁷ The prohibitive responses to irregular migration adopted by several countries have in fact exacerbated the precarity of migration during the pandemic.²⁸ Such European countries as Greece, Italy and Malta have used the pandemic to reinforce their already restrictive migration policies.²⁹ These measures have exposed migrants and asylum seekers to greater risks. In addition, the rescue of migrants in the Mediterranean, resettlement and family reunification were halted in ways that have had grave consequences.

The European reiteration of securitised approaches to deal with African migration, the strong emphasis on returns³⁰ (see Section 3.6) and the rejigging of the asylum process threaten the relationship between Europe and Africa. Whether in response to irregular migration or as part of returns policies, Africa and Europe should prioritise alternative policies that promote safe and legal migration pathways. This may help as an indirect response to reducing the need to use smugglers.

3.2 Legal labour migration pathways

For both Africa and Europe, legal pathways connected to labour migration are the preferred avenue for migration. However, the limitations of access mean that this is an avenue not always open to migrants. Expanding cooperation on the facilitation of legal migration within Africa and from Africa to Europe is key. This

²⁶ Lucia Bird, "Smuggling in the Time of Covid-19", cit.; Benjamin Bathke, "Europol: Migrant Smuggling Patterns Changing Due to Coronavirus", in *InfoMigrants*, 18 May 2020, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/24819/europol-migrant-smuggling-patterns-changing-due-to-coronavirus>.

²⁷ See generally, Amanda Bisong, "Will COVID-19 Change Migration Cooperation between European and African Countries?", in *ECDPM Briefing Notes*, No. 121 (October 2020), <https://ecdpm.org/?p=41003>.

²⁸ Duncan Breen, "On This Journey, No One Cares If You Live or Die." *Abuse, Protection, and Justice along Routes between East and West Africa and Africa's Mediterranean Coast*, UN High Commissioner for Refugees and Mixed Migration Centre, July 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/5f1ab91a7>.

²⁹ Maurice Stierl, "Migration: How Europe Is Using Coronavirus to Reinforce Its Hostile Environment in the Mediterranean", in *The Conversation*, 13 May 2020, <https://theconversation.com/migration-how-europe-is-using-coronavirus-to-reinforce-its-hostile-environment-in-the-mediterranean-137840>; Emma Wallis, "'Deprived of Their Liberty': Long-Term Asylum Seekers in Italy Who Test Positive for COVID-19 Sent to Quarantine Ships", in *InfoMigrants*, 14 October 2020, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/27902/deprived-of-their-liberty-long-term-asylum-seekers-in-italy-who-test-positive-for-covid-19-sent-to-quarantine-ships>.

³⁰ See generally, Aimée-Noël Mbiyozo, "Returning Migrants: Europe's Focus, But at What Cost?", in *ISS Policy Briefs*, 28 May 2019, <https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/returning-migrants-europes-focus-but-at-what-cost>.

speaks directly to the developmental benefits of migration in Africa.

For Africa, under the broad umbrella of Agenda 2063 and the AU Migration Policy Framework (MPFA), together with its 2018–30 Plan of Action, issues of labour migration are intrinsically linked with aspirations for regional integration and intra-African trade. Further, at least on paper, there is a drive to develop policies aimed at the progressive elimination of obstacles to the free movement of capital, labour, goods and services among AU member states. The MPFA highlights the potential of the Joint Labour Migration Programme (JLMP) in this regard. The JLMP was adopted in 2015 by the AU, the UN Economic Commission for Africa and the International Labour Organisation to further the provisions of Article 71(e) of the Abuja Treaty aiming at establishing and strengthening labour exchanges to facilitate the employment of available skilled workers across member states. The JLMP seeks to facilitate the movement of workers and to harness labour migration for development. Its critical objective is to enhance the capacity of Africa to put in place free movement of people for the purposes of labour through building harmonised national migration policies.

Increasing intra-labour and skills mobility on the continent requires regional cooperation and the harmonisation of labour migration policies. This would be the next key step for Africa to advance legal pathways in a more coherent and consistent manner.

For its part, Europe, through the Global Skill Partnership for example, has adopted an approach where the destination country technically and financially supports the training of “potential migrants with targeted skills in the country of origin, prior to migration”.³¹ The country of origin provides the training and gets support for the training of people not intending to migrate, thereby increasing its own human capital.³² An example is the partnership between Morocco and Belgium to address the prevailing shortage of skills in their respective ICT sectors.³³ Another example is the European Commission’s 2018 legal migration pilot project. Four African countries (Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria and Tunisia)³⁴ and five EU countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Lithuania and Spain)³⁵ are participating in this pilot project that focuses on expanding legal employment possibilities for African migrants through cooperation with private employers in the EU. In the New Pact, the EU also proposes enhancing “talent partnerships” which would build on existing frameworks.

³¹ Michael Clemens, Helen Dempster and Kate Gough, *Promoting New Kinds of Legal Labour Migration Pathways between Europe and Africa*, cit., p. 6.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ European Commission, *Progress Report on the Implementation of the European Agenda on Migration* (COM/2019/481), 16 October 2019, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019DC0481>.

³⁵ Key informant interview.

3.3 Migration and economic development

The AU's MPFA extensively discusses the link between migration and development, covering issues such as remittances, the diaspora and brain drain.

The substantial developmental contribution of migration towards enhancing Africa's integration agenda is also articulated by Agenda 2063. In this respect, aspiration 2 envisions creating "an integrated continent, politically united, based on the ideals of Pan Africanism and the vision of Africa's renaissance".³⁶ Linked with this is the expansion of the free movement of people and capital as one of the critical issues examined, together with fast-tracking the continent's economic integration through the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). To achieve this, in 2018 the AU adopted the Protocol Relating to the Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment (Africa Union Free Movement Protocol), and the AfCFTA agreement.

Although the AfCFTA entered into force in May 2019 with the plan to launch it in 2020, the free movement protocol was ratified only by four countries (Mali, Niger, Rwanda, and São Tomé and Príncipe) out of the required 15.³⁷ The increasing tendency by African states to view people's movement as a security concern is part of the reason. The implementation of EU policies³⁸ that aim to stem Africa's migration to Europe played a significant role in securitising intra-African migration.³⁹

3.4 Remittances

Remittances are central to the migration–development discussion in Africa since they serve as a significant and dependable source of foreign exchange to African countries. In 2018 Nigeria received 22.3 billion US dollars more in remittances than Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) combined. Similarly, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal and Zimbabwe received 1.8 billion US dollars, 1 billion, 1.5 billion and 1.1 billion, respectively, more in remittances than ODA and FDI. In 2019 Sub-Saharan Africa received a total of 48 billion US dollars in remittances.⁴⁰

³⁶ African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want (Popular Version)*, September 2015, p. 4, https://au.int/en/Agenda2063/popular_version.

³⁷ African Union, *Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment*, Addis Ababa, 29 January 2018, <https://au.int/en/node/34268>.

³⁸ These include the Revised EU Neighbourhood Policy (2015), the Valletta Summit Action Plan (2015), the EU Partnership Framework on Migration (2016) and the European Agenda on Migration (2015).

³⁹ Tsion Tadesse Abebe, "Securitisation of Migration in Africa: The Case of Agadez in Niger", cit.

⁴⁰ World Bank, "Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook", in *Migration and Development Briefs*, No. 31 (April 2019), <https://www.knomad.org/node/1285>.

Recognising the importance of remittances, the MPFA states that “remittances can improve people’s resilience to shocks and even offer a pathway out of poverty through investments in education, health and income-generating activities”.⁴¹ The African Institute of Remittances emphasises the importance of facilitating the flow of remittances. The Institute was established in 2015 to support African countries to harness the development benefit of remittances.⁴²

The MPFA also covered the importance of engaging the diaspora to enhance the migration and development nexus, as well as addressing brain drain to facilitate migrants’ contribution to their countries of origin through financial, skills, technology and knowledge transfers.

COVID-19 has already heavily impacted remittances. The World Bank estimates that the amount of money migrant workers send home is projected to decline by 14 per cent by 2021.⁴³ Though they forecast a modest recovery thereafter, the decline in remittances is likely to continue the longer the pandemic persists and the higher the potential for unemployment rises. Notably, despite this decline, the relative importance of remittances as a source of external financing for low to middle income countries is expected to increase as economies contract and opportunities diminish.

Governments, the AU and the EU must support remittance infrastructures. This would include recognising that remittance services are essential. Further, there is need to reduce the cost of remittances, incentivise methods of money transfer such as through digital channels, as well as improve access to banking services. Already, the governments of the United Kingdom and Switzerland, the World Bank, International Fund for Agriculture Development and the UN Capital Development Fund have called for efforts to keep remittances flowing.⁴⁴

3.5 International protection

COVID-19 and related restrictions have had an impact on humanitarian assistance and aid delivery. This is particularly concerning for over 26 million refugees and internally displaced persons in Africa, especially those in camps in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Further, temporary bans on travel have resulted in asylum seekers and refugees not having access even to countries with usually welcoming refugee reception policies. With the suspension of refugee resettlements,

⁴¹ African Union website: *Somewhere to Call Home; The Migration Dynamics in Africa*, <https://au.int/en/node/36605>. For more: African Union, *Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018–2030)*, cit., https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/35956-doc-2018_mpfa_english_version.pdf. For the summary: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/35956-doc-2018_mpfa_summary_english_version.pdf.

⁴² African Union, *Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018–2030)*, cit.

⁴³ World Bank, “Phase II: COVID-19 Crisis through a Migration Lens”, in *Migration and Development Briefs*, No. 33 (October 2020), <https://www.knomad.org/node/1311>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

emergency transit mechanisms in Niger and Rwanda for asylum seekers and refugees in Libya were gravely impacted.⁴⁵ The seven-month suspension ended on 15 October and saw the resumption of resettlements.⁴⁶ However, thousands of migrants remain at risk⁴⁷ and it remains uncertain what the long-term plan is to facilitate an inclusive protection approach.

Finding durable solutions to refugee management will be key for the partnership between Europe and Africa. For African states that already host large numbers of refugees, technical and financial support is critical. There is mutual recognition that African countries host one-third of the world refugees. Already, seven of the 15 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) pilot countries are in Africa.⁴⁸ The EU's willingness to resettle persons in need of international protection in Europe will contribute to fairer responsibility sharing between the two sides. In 2017 the EU pledged to resettle 50,000 refugees by October 2019 in a two-year programme. However, by the deadline of October 2019, the EU had resettled 37,520 refugees⁴⁹ and, to date, there has not been a follow-up action of the same kind.

Strong attention should be given to supporting refugee host communities in Africa within the GCR framework.⁵⁰ In this respect, efforts to combine humanitarian support to refugees and host communities with development plans would go a long way.⁵¹ An approach that goes beyond providing international support to facilitate better access to services only to refugees addresses challenges faced by host communities and will be key to sustaining comprehensive refugee responses.⁵²

3.6 Returns, readmission and reintegration

Return and readmission is the other primary focus of the EU when it comes to its relations on migration with Africa. Return and integration of irregular migrants were critical objectives of the EU's 2016 Partnership Framework as per the objectives of the European Agenda on Migration.⁵³ The EU's New Pact calls for strengthening

⁴⁵ Red Cross EU Office et al., *Resettlement Can't Wait!*, 21 September 2020, <https://redcross.eu/latest-news/resettlement-can-t-wait>.

⁴⁶ "More Refugees Evacuated from Libya Arrive in Rwanda", in *Xinhua News*, 19 November 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/20/c_139529591.htm.

⁴⁷ ANSA, "Libya: 3,200 Migrants Held in Detention Centers", in *InfoMigrants*, 22 October 2020, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/28066/libya-3-200-migrants-held-in-detention-centers>.

⁴⁸ These countries are Djibouti, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia and Somalia.

⁴⁹ Tom Wills, "EU Breaks Promise of Safe Passage for 50,000 Refugees", in *Deutsche Welle*, 14 October 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3RALw>.

⁵⁰ Tsion Tadesse Abebe and Allehone Abebe, "How Africa Can Reduce COVID-19's Impact on Displaced Persons", in *ISS Today*, 12 May 2020, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/how-africa-can-reduce-covid-19s-impact-on-displaced-persons>.

⁵¹ Tsion Tadesse Abebe, "Ethiopia's Refugee Response. Focus on Socio-Economic Integration and Self-Reliance", in *ISS East Africa Reports*, No. 19 (October 2018), <https://issafrica.org/research/east-africa-report/ethiopias-refugee-response-focus-on-socio-economic-integration-and-self-reliance>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Heliodoro Temprano Arroyo, *Using EU Aid to Address the Root Causes of Migration and Refugee*

cooperation to enhance voluntary returns, with sustainable reintegration in countries of origin as well as improving cooperation with third countries in cases of deportation and forced returns – including by using positive and negative conditionalities linking cooperation on return to visa facilitation or restriction. This stance is a slight departure from that agreed by the AU and EU following their joint summit in 2017 in Abidjan where emphasis was placed on preference for voluntary returns and commitment to the protection of fundamental rights.⁵⁴ Furthermore, in 2017, the AU and EU included the principle of “*non-refoulement*” in the joint declaration. This is absent from the European Commission’s Communication, as well as the New Pact.

Returns remain politically sensitive in Africa since migration is considered a coping mechanism to address poverty and the associated lack of socio-economic opportunities. African governments have therefore resisted the EU’s intensified returns policies. Due to this, the EU’s previous efforts to conclude formal return and readmission agreements with African countries failed, except for Cabo Verde, with which an agreement was signed in 2014.⁵⁵ This provided the basis for the informal agreements entered into by the EU with African countries, such as those with Ethiopia, Guinea, The Gambia and Côte d’Ivoire.⁵⁶ The AU and most African countries maintain that returns must be voluntary, safe, dignified and in line with international human rights and humanitarian norms.⁵⁷

Europe’s emphasis on returns is driven by the increasing number of declared undocumented migrants, which rose from 1.4 million in 2011 to around 6 million in 2018. These numbers were reached primarily due to the rejection of a large number of asylum applications.⁵⁸ This led to debates about security in European countries, which partly triggered the strong push towards return and reintegration policies.

Conclusion

For both Africa and Europe, migration and mobility remain key priorities. However, there is not always agreement on policies and practices related to these priorities. On the one hand, Europe’s stance has increasingly followed a technical,

Flows, Florence, European University Institute Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 2019, <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/61108>.

⁵⁴ African Union and European Union, *Investing in Youth for Accelerated Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development*, Abidjan, 29-30 November 2017, <https://au.int/en/node/37747>.

⁵⁵ European Commission website: *Return & Readmission*, <https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/node/99>.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Slagter, “An ‘Informal’ Turn in the European Union’s Migrant Returns Policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa”, in *Migration Information Source*, 10 January 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/node/16384>.

⁵⁷ Kate Gough, “The Global Compact on Migration Is Now Being Negotiated. Here Are Three Sticking Points”, in *CGD Blog*, 20 February 2018, <https://www.cgdev.org/node/3126260>.

⁵⁸ World Bank, “Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook”, cit., p. viii.

security-centred response to immigration. On the other, Africa sees migration through a developmental lens. For both, migration cooperation remains key. While the COVID-19 pandemic and responses to it, which include restrictions to travel, have impacted migration and mobility, they have also laid bare underlying issues requiring urgent attention. These include growing inequality, unemployment (or precarious employment), challenges faced with remittances, returns and readmission, the gaps in effective protection mechanisms and the lack of coherence on migration governance approaches.

As states focus on economic recovery after the pandemic, policies and practices on migration may shift. This shift could inform future relations between Africa and Europe. There are areas in which “easy wins” can be gained by adapting policy and practice and reflecting mutual benefit. For one, migration can contribute to growth and economic recovery in countries whose productive sectors are reliant on migrant workers. In particular, through leveraging its connection with regional integration and free trade, migration can serve better in stimulating development and economic growth. Enhancing legal pathways for labour migration, improving remittance systems and focusing more on migration *governance* over securitisation, will also strengthen the partnership between Africa and Europe. That said, as the long-term impact of COVID-19 on migration patterns is still unknown there do remain some uncertainties. However, COVID-19 pandemic or not, it should be accepted that initiatives that have been so far predominantly based on restricting movement of Africans and securitisation of migration are more detrimental than they are beneficial.

Africa and Europe should design their policies and practices on migration and mobility in a collaborative, comprehensive and consultative manner. Doing so will ensure better migration cooperation outcomes. If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity to reflect and look to innovative approaches.

Updated 11 December 2020

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