

# EU–Africa Partnership on Migration and Mobility in Light of COVID-19: Perspectives from North Africa

by Mehdi Lahlou

## ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic has turned into a global economic crisis with severe social effects in the least developed countries, particularly in Africa. Pre-existing challenges related to widespread poverty, demographic growth, food insecurity and governance issues have been exacerbated by the pandemic. While migration remains one of the key elements of the partnership agenda between Africa and the European Union, the aggravating socioeconomic situation in the African continent due to the impact of COVID-19 and its implications for migration dynamics requires going beyond business-as-usual approaches. The renewed scenario calls for a more comprehensive and development-oriented approach to migration, requiring new policy initiatives addressing the wider set of conditions that, beyond constituting developmental challenges in their own right, also drive migration in North Africa as well as in Sub-Saharan African countries.

*Africa | Health | Coronavirus | Migration | Mediterranean | Maghreb | European Union*

**keywords**

# EU–Africa Partnership on Migration and Mobility in Light of COVID-19: Perspectives from North Africa

by Mehdi Lahlou\*

COVID-19 is potentially catastrophic for millions who are already hanging by a thread. It is a hammer blow for millions more who can only eat if they earn a wage. Lockdowns and global economic recession have already decimated their nest eggs. It only takes one more shock – like COVID-19 – to push them over the edge. We must collectively act now to mitigate the impact of this global catastrophe.

Arif Husain, World Food Programme's Chief Economist<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic, which began as a major health crisis, has gradually turned into a global economic downturn with severe social effects keenly felt in the least developed countries, particularly in Africa.

The effects of the pandemic risk being even more devastating at the human, social and economic level in the continent than in other global regions, even though COVID-19 seems to have affected African citizens proportionately less than elsewhere in terms of its immediate repercussions on health. The pandemic acts as a multiplier of challenges faced by many African countries and their citizens, especially in the socioeconomic sphere. Many African states already struggled in the pre-pandemic era to provide a satisfactory level of access to basic services like health, as also highlighted – and further deepened – by significant emigration of their medical personnel. They also face a worrying deterioration of their public finances due to rising external debt. Today, these countries, with an external debt of nearly 600 billion US dollars (on average almost 60 per cent of their GDP), allocate

<sup>1</sup> United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), *COVID-19 Will Double Number of People Facing Food Crises Unless Swift Action Is Taken*, 21 April 2020, <https://www.wfp.org/node/22359>.

\* Mehdi Lahlou is Professor of Economics at the National Institute of Statistics and Applied Economics (INSEA) in Rabat, Morocco, and an associated professor at University Mohammed V (Rabat). 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 author's alone.

more than 15 per cent of their respective budgets to debt service, much greater than the sums mobilised for education, health or preparedness against epidemics.

Lingering governance difficulties, paired with fast demographic growth and enduring poverty, are worsened by the dependence of most of the African countries on global tourism and trade flows, including those of food, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment or raw materials – which were all disrupted by the pandemic.

Against this background, the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic will likely lead to more poverty and unemployment, especially in the informal sector, which consequently could increase the migratory potential in many African contexts. This might imply increasing tension around the issue of migration between the European Union and different African countries, both in the Maghreb and in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Policy-makers on both sides should take into consideration the two-way relationship between migration and development. A further deterioration of socioeconomic conditions in Africa, beyond constituting a developmental challenge in its own right, could also incentivise further migration in the future. At the same time, well-managed migration and mobility could play a positive role in improving livelihoods and revitalising economies on both sides of the Mediterranean in a post-pandemic world. The new context therefore requires the Africa-EU partnership to prioritise a developmental and comprehensive approach that can effectively tackle the socioeconomic challenges emerging from the pandemic and make migration part of the solution, rather than the problem.

## 1. Health-related and socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on Africa: A multiplier of fragility

When the first COVID-19 cases started to be detected in Africa in March 2020, most African countries, like the rest of the world, decided to confine their populations, close their borders and restrict economic activity to contain the spread of the virus. It was possible to make two observations at this initial stage of the pandemic: The first related to the individualistic and protectionist reflexes of states. Many states around the world prioritised the interests of their own citizens and showed reluctance when it came to fostering cooperative approaches between countries. The second was a blunt re-realisation of the extreme fragility faced by developing countries, particularly in Africa. The immediate effects of the pandemic and the worldwide measures to contain it suddenly locked these countries into their borders, obliging them to only count on their own resources – in terms of food and healthcare in particular – to feed and care for their populations.

As it has become already clear, it is the poorest and the socially most fragile populations in wealthy countries and – even more so – in developing countries, who will suffer the effects of the health crisis. In developing countries one can expect

the effects of the crisis to be further aggravated due to the importance of informal economic activity and the lack – or insufficiency – of social protection. This is highly likely to worsen already existing problems related to unemployment and income generation, and deepen hunger and malnutrition among the populations.

In this sense, rather than creating these problems from scratch, COVID-19 is revealing the structural development problems experienced by African countries. Beyond constituting major policy challenges in their own right, these structural problems also inform, reinforce and possibly perpetuate incentives for migration – including precarious and risky forms of it.

At the onset of the pandemic and during the period in which air, land and sea borders especially between Europe and African countries were almost completely sealed off, migration flows from the southern shores of the Mediterranean to the northern ones declined sharply, seeing “record lows in April”.<sup>2</sup> The potential for migration from Africa has, however, not disappeared. On the contrary, the (current and future) effects of economic and social crises, which are and will continue to be aggravated by the health crisis, suggest that the incentives to migrate in search of subsistence or better living conditions will most probably become much stronger.

In terms of the direct consequences of the coronavirus on public health, so far, the African continent has suffered less than America, Europe or Asia. As the data on detected COVID-19 cases and the deaths linked to the disease indicate (see Table 1), Africa ranks lower than all the other continents (except for Oceania) in terms of both cases and deaths.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1** | COVID-19 cases and deaths (31 December 2019–21 January 2021)

Region	COVID-19 cases	Deaths linked to COVID-19
America	42,257,586	969,992
Europe	29,927,859	662,326
Asia	19,076,296	324,294
Africa	3,263,605	78,894
Oceania	56,822	1,201
Other	705	6
Total	94,582,873	2,036,713

Source: ECDC, *COVID-19 Situation Update Worldwide, as of Week 2 2021*, cit.

<sup>2</sup> Frontex, *Situation at EU External Borders - Arrivals Picking Up, Still Down for the Year*, 18 August 2020, <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/news-release/situation-at-eu-external-borders-arrivals-picking-up-still-down-for-the-year-nqkCT5>.

<sup>3</sup> European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), *COVID-19 Situation Update Worldwide, as of Week 2 2021*, <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/geographical-distribution-2019-ncov-cases>, accessed 21 January 2021.

Within Africa the three countries that are most affected by the spread of the pandemic are South Africa, Morocco and Tunisia, as of 21 January 2021. In terms of accumulated cases, South Africa tops the list with 1,337,926 cases, followed by Morocco (459,671 cases) and Tunisia (181,885 cases). The highest numbers of deaths are recorded in South Africa, Egypt and Morocco with 37,105, 8,583 and 7,942 losses of life respectively.

Even if the health-related effects of COVID-19 have been felt with less intensity in relative terms, Africans have seen their living conditions deteriorate sharply following the pandemic. Beyond its immediate adverse effects, projections on the impact of the socioeconomic fallout from the pandemic on food security, unemployment as well as income and economic growth in Africa depict a rather dim picture. Regardless of these deteriorating conditions potentially driving a higher number of people out of their countries of origin, immediate action and long-term planning at the humanitarian–development nexus is needed in order to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic from a human and socioeconomic development perspective.

First, the economic impact of COVID-19 is expected to aggravate food insecurity in Africa. According to a World Food Programme (WFP) projection, in the absence of immediate action to mitigate the economic fallout from the pandemic, globally, the number of people facing acute food insecurity is expected to rise to from 135 million in 2019 to 265 million by the end of 2020.<sup>4</sup> Among the 10 countries constituting the worst food crises in 2019, five were African: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan and Nigeria.<sup>5</sup> A further deterioration of economic and food security prospects would therefore imply a deepening of already existing food crises in Africa.

The impact of COVID-19 already is, and will continue to be felt also on exacerbating challenges related to high youth unemployment and high dependence on the informal sector in the African labour markets. A report by the African Union estimates that close to 20 million jobs in Africa will be threatened by the economic impact of COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> Considering that the youth unemployment rate is already doubling that of older adults, this trend is likely to feed into further discontent particularly among the younger sections of populations, and might reinforce potential for social unrest.<sup>7</sup> The gap between newly created formal jobs (3 million

<sup>4</sup> Food Security Information Network and Global Network Against Food Crises, *Global Report on Food Crises 2020 September Update: In Times of COVID-19*, Rome, September 2020, [https://www.fsplatform.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC2020\\_September%20Update\\_0.pdf](https://www.fsplatform.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC2020_September%20Update_0.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> African Union, *Impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) on the African Economy*, April 2020, p. 21, <https://au.int/en/node/38326>.

<sup>7</sup> Chido Munyati, "COVID-19 Is Likely to Increase Youth Unemployment in Africa: This Is How Business Can Mitigate the Damage", in *World Economic Forum Articles*, 5 June 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/covid-19-is-likely-to-increase-youth-unemployment-in-africa-this-is-how-business-can-mitigate-the-damage>.

annually) and the number of young people who enter the workforce (10 to 12 million annually) is another major challenge faced by the African labour markets: 85.8 per cent of employment, and 95 per cent of youth employment in Africa is in the informal sector.<sup>8</sup>

The health crisis and the measures to contain the spread of the virus have already hit economic activity hard, in particular daily or weekly jobs and income-generating opportunities in the informal sector. Notably, in the first month of the crisis, it has been estimated that the income of workers in the informal sector in Africa dropped by 81 per cent.<sup>9</sup> Considering the large share of informal jobs as a source of employment and income in Africa (particularly for the youth), unless comprehensive measures are put in place in a swift manner, this trend is likely to exacerbate.

The multidimensional economic impact deriving from the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to a decline in the GDP of the entire continent in 2020 – and possibly further ahead. As mentioned above, one of the reasons behind this is the decline in employment. Furthermore, a considerable decrease is expected in migrants' remittances to African countries, which constitute a significant source of income for the origin countries.<sup>10</sup> The disruption in trade leads to a sharp drop in exports from Africa to all regions of the world, whereas the dramatic decline in the volume of international tourists is expected to hit hard particularly those countries whose economies rely to a considerable extent on tourism, such as Morocco, Tunisia or the Republic of South Africa. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF),<sup>11</sup> the expected decline in GDP during this year will be 7 per cent in Morocco and Tunisia, 8 per cent in South Africa and an average of 3 per cent in all Sub-Saharan countries.

It should be noted that COVID-19 is not generating these problems from scratch, but rather reinforcing them against a background of already existing economic and social challenges, caused by a multitude of other reasons. Indeed, the African continent was host to 22 out of the 25 poorest countries on the planet already before the current crisis.<sup>12</sup> The consequences of climate change<sup>13</sup> have already been

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), *ILO: As Job Losses Escalate, Nearly Half of Global Workforce at Risk of Losing Livelihoods*, 29 April 2020, [https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_743036/lang-en](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_743036/lang-en).

<sup>10</sup> According to United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), remittance inflows to the African continent could decline by 21 per cent – or 18 billion US dollars – in 2020 alone. See, UNECA, *Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and Migrant Remittances: Protecting an Economic Lifeline*, September 2020, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/one.org/pdfs/Coronavirus\\_disease\\_and\\_migrant\\_remittances\\_report.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/one.org/pdfs/Coronavirus_disease_and_migrant_remittances_report.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> IMF, *World Economic Outlook, October 2020: A Long and Difficult Ascent*, October 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/09/30/world-economic-outlook-october-2020>.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Stebbins and Grant Suneson, "25 Poorest Countries in the World", in *24/7 Wall Street*, 27 August 2020, <https://247wallst.com/?p=731474>.

<sup>13</sup> See, Olivia Serdeczny et al., "Climate Change Impacts in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Physical

severely impacting on livelihoods, increasingly leading to forced migration.<sup>14</sup> Years of regressive economic and social policies, which are often also consequences of financial guidelines prescribed by external actors such as the IMF and the World Bank, have rendered most societies vulnerable, while contributing to the weakening of education and health systems in most African countries. Similarly, the activities of the private sector in the black continent, large multinational groups in particular, remain exclusively oriented to profit-making, without making an important contribution to wealth generation in the local contexts and the well-being of local populations. It is quite the contrary, as indicated for example by the behaviour of the oil company Shell in Nigeria, which has led to severe environmental consequences in the Niger Delta.<sup>15</sup> Similar assessments may be made on certain international agreements, such as those between the EU and West African countries on fisheries, which are very unfavourable to local employment as well as to the preservation of marine resources in the long term.<sup>16</sup>

The effects of the pandemic are being even more devastating in Africa in human, economic and social terms, as the global inequalities and the interconnected developmental and governance challenges described above feed into the loss of human capital at the societal level, while severely limiting states' capacity to provide basic services to their populations.

Migration (and skilled labour migration policies of wealthier countries) plays a significant role in terms of the former: Africa has an average of only two medical doctors per 10,000 inhabitants,<sup>17</sup> whereas this number is 35 for OECD countries.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Africa sees a very large part of its skilled medical personnel – among many other skills – emigrate annually, including to OECD countries, where foreign doctors and nurses represent a considerable share of the medical personnel: more than 17.7 per cent of the medical staff in OECD countries were foreign nationals in 2017.<sup>19</sup>

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Changes to Their Social Repercussions”, in *Regional Environmental Change*, No. 17, No. 6 (August 2017), p. 1585-1600.

<sup>14</sup> See, Awil Mohamoud, Alpha Kaloga and Sönke Kreft, *Climate Change, Development, and Migration: An African Diaspora Perspective*, Berlin, Germanwatch, April 2014, <https://germanwatch.org/en/8456>.

<sup>15</sup> Muhammad Bello, “Nigeria: Amnesty International Accuses Oil Giants of ‘Negligence’ in Niger Delta”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 16 March 2018, <https://p.dw.com/p/2uSwa>.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Binet and Pierre Failler, “A Critical Review of the European Union-West African Fisheries Agreements”, in *A Planet for Life*, 2011, <http://regardssurlaterre.com/en/node/20580>.

<sup>17</sup> World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Africa, *The State of Health in the WHO African Region. An Analysis of the Status of Health, Health Services and Health Systems in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals*, 2018, p. 57, <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/275292>.

<sup>18</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Health at a Glance. OECD Indicators*, 2019 (revised version May 2020), p. 172-173, <https://doi.org/10.1787/4dd50c09-en>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186-187.

At another level, the pressure of external debt on African countries, some of which are among the poorest on the planet (see Annex), is diverting an increasing part of their financial resources from other essential areas of public spending. As a result, these countries, with an external debt of nearly 600 billion US dollars (i.e., on average almost 60 per cent of their GDP),<sup>20</sup> allocate more than 15 per cent of their respective budgets to debt service. This largely constrains states in terms of the amount of public funds they could have otherwise mobilised for sectors such as education, health, hygiene or the fight against epidemics.

These are just two examples illustrating how deeply ingrained developmental and governance issues as well as economic inequalities between the global North and South – which are often also connected to migration from the latter to the former – feed into the dynamics underlying fragility in Africa. These dynamics weaken the capacity of states and societies not only to mitigate the risks deriving from the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to effectively respond to future health and/or socioeconomic crises.

## 2. The impact of COVID-19 on the socioeconomic context and migration trends in the Maghreb

As COVID-19 cases started to rise – particularly in Morocco as explained in the previous section – states in the region introduced restrictions on movement, as elsewhere. The slowing down of economic activity, combined with the effects of disruption of travel and trade at a global scale adversely affected the economies in the region. Both Tunisia and Morocco, whose economies are highly dependent on tourism and the export of mainly agricultural and textile products to Europe, are expected to experience a significant drop in their GDPs – by 7 per cent, as mentioned in the previous section. A sharp increase in unemployment among their working populations will be accompanying this trend. This, among other implications, is likely to translate into an increasing trend in terms of migration pressure out of these countries. This might be especially true for young Tunisians, as the economy is expected to shrink sharply this year and “unemployment has risen from 15 percent to 18 percent overall, reaching 36 percent among youth”.<sup>21</sup> To a certain extent, this is also the case in Morocco.

Beyond the impact on citizens, socioeconomic effects of the health crisis are likely to hit migrants living in these countries even harder, as it has been clear in the case of Morocco. Morocco closed its external borders on 15 March 2020 and applied a strict confinement between this day and 20 June, which brought economic activity almost to a standstill, leading to losses in jobs and income-

<sup>20</sup> French Senate, “L’Afrique face au Coronavirus”, in *Rapport d’information*, No. 560 (24 June 2020), p. 9, <http://www.senat.fr/rap/r19-560/r19-560.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Layli Foroudi, “COVID-19 Fallout Drives Tunisians to Italy Despite Deportations”, in *The New Humanitarian*, 1 September 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/node/261672>.



generating opportunities, particularly in the informal sector. The government provided financial support worth nearly 200 euros to the 900,000 employees who lost their jobs during the health crisis as well as to nearly 4 million people working in the informal sector. No social protection measure has however been extended by the national authorities or the international community to the irregular migrants (estimated to be between 30,000 and 50,000 persons) living in Morocco. Banned from traveling between Moroccan cities – like all Moroccans – and stranded in Morocco as exiting the country became impossible due to strict controls at the borders, these migrants found themselves in extremely difficult living conditions. Stripped from the few income-generating opportunities that were available to them before the health crisis, often in the informal sector, they had to rely mainly on social aid.

In short, further deterioration in the living conditions of not only local populations but also – and more so – of migrants is likely to act as a strong factor feeding into increasing migratory pressure from the Maghreb. These developments suggest that COVID-19 would potentially introduce an additional – and unnecessary – element of trouble into Maghreb-EU relations on (irregular) migration.

Irregular migration from and through the Maghreb has gained increasing centrality in the relations between the EU and the region in the last decades, even if human mobility has been a constant in the shared European–North African history. Geographic proximity and the economic and social realities in both regions have been, and still are, major drivers for cross-border migration.<sup>22</sup> The movement of people from Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco was complemented in the late 1990s with a trend of (mainly) irregular migration from Sub-Saharan countries crossing the Maghreb en route to Europe.

Within this framework, regional migration dynamics between mainly, but not exclusively, Sub-Saharan countries, the Maghreb and the European Union have undergone many changes especially from the 2000s onwards. The combined effects of worsening economic conditions in many African regions and the deteriorating security situation mainly in Libya, but to a certain extent also in Tunisia, caused by the Arab Spring, have led to an erratic flow of irregular migration from the shores of North Africa to the European shores, and mainly those of Spain and Italy. The scale of these flows has been fluctuating, while the centre of gravity of border crossings has been shifting between the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) and the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR).

<sup>22</sup> Donatella Giubilaro, “Migration from the Maghreb and Migration Pressures: Current Situation and Future Prospects”, in *International Migration Papers*, No. 15 (1 January 1997), [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS\\_201190/lang--en](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS_201190/lang--en). See also, Mehdi Lahlou, “Regional Migration Dynamics and Implications for Innovation and Development in North Africa”, in Anna Triandafyllidou (ed.), *Handbook of Migration and Globalisation*, Cheltenham/Northampton, Edward Elgar, 2018, p. 247-261.

Irregular movement along the WMR – and the Western Atlantic Route (WAR) towards the Canary Islands – rose steadily between 2000 and 2006, then tapered off over the next four years as migratory routes shifted from Morocco to Libya and the Central Mediterranean. The WMR saw a surge in irregular crossings – mainly by Syrian refugees – in the 2011–2012 period, while the CMR became the main route used by migrants setting off from the Tunisian and Libyan coasts during the peak years of 2015–2016. From 2017–2018 onwards, irregular movement between Morocco and Spain rose again, making the WMR the main corridor to access the EU via the Mediterranean, with around 57,000 crossings accounting for 38 per cent of detections of irregular entry in 2018.<sup>23</sup> 2019 saw a general decline in irregular arrivals at the EU's external borders (by 4.9 per cent compared to 2018 and by 92 per cent compared to the peak in 2015), whereas the crossings fell by 40 per cent along the CMR, and by 57 per cent along the WMR.<sup>24</sup> The latter decline is largely informed by strengthened border controls exercised by African countries in the region, Morocco in particular. Morocco's implementation of a new migration policy since 2014 has arguably also played a role. This could particularly be a factor contributing to the declining share of Sub-Saharan Africans using this route relative to Moroccans and Algerians, which were the main nationalities detected on the WMR in 2019.<sup>25</sup>

With the impact of the health crisis and the ensuing movement restrictions and border closures implemented globally, including in the Maghreb, irregular movement along the CMR and WMR initially saw a dramatic drop in 2020. However, the number of departures from Tunisia and arrivals in Italy in particular started to rise from July onwards.<sup>26</sup> Frontex detected a 155 per cent increase in irregular crossings via the CMR in the first eleven months of 2020 compared to the same period in the previous year.<sup>27</sup> Accounting for 38 per cent of migrants arriving in Italy in 2020, Tunisia has become the first country of origin for this migratory corridor.<sup>28</sup>

The number of irregular migrants detected by Frontex in the Western Mediterranean dropped by 28 per cent between January and November 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.<sup>29</sup> An increasing trend is nonetheless visible on the WAR between the West African coast and the Canary Islands. According to available data, between January and November 2020, 19,600 irregular migrants (mainly from Morocco,

<sup>23</sup> Frontex, *Risk Analysis for 2019*, February 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2819/224322>.

<sup>24</sup> Frontex, *Risk Analysis for 2020*, February 2020, p. 22 and 61, <https://doi.org/10.2819/46797>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24 and 61.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Operational Portal, *Mediterranean Situation – Italy*, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205>.

<sup>27</sup> Frontex, *Situation at EU External Borders – Western African Route at Record Highs*, 16 December 2020, <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/news-release/situation-at-eu-external-borders-western-african-route-at-record-highs-yzD0DS>.

<sup>28</sup> UNHCR Operational Portal, *Mediterranean Situation – Italy*, *cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Frontex, *Situation at EU External Borders – Arrivals Picking Up, Still Down for the Year*, *cit.*

Senegal, Mali, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea) have arrived on the Canary Islands.<sup>30</sup> However, the trend has accelerated particularly from the autumn onwards, with 5,400 arrivals during the month of October alone, and 1,400 migrants arriving on the day of 7 November.<sup>31</sup> This represents the largest number of migrant arrivals in this region since the summer of 2006.

These developments suggest that despite the closure of borders and restrictions on movement, migratory pressure from North Africa (and Africa in general) continues to be a reality. And the dramatic effects generated by COVID-19 in an already fragile socioeconomic context are highly likely to increase such pressure. The increase in the departures from Tunisia is certainly related to the decline in economic activity linked to COVID-19. Similar effects are visible also in Morocco and Algeria. In the case of Tunisia, the political and social difficulties that this country has been going through since the summer of 2019 arguably play an additional role in driving people out. Similarly, the movement towards the Canary Islands should be read against a background of deteriorating living conditions that African populations are experiencing – both in the countries of origin and in the North African countries they reside in – as a result of the broader impact generated by the pandemic.

Cooperation mechanisms between (North) Africa and Europe on migration would therefore need to go beyond a narrow reading of migration as primarily a security issue to be addressed with control-oriented measures, and consider in a more holistic way the structural and socioeconomic context informing the migration trends we are (and will be) observing. How the current pandemic will be changing this context in Africa, and how deepened vulnerability deriving from its far-reaching socioeconomic effects could be mitigated are therefore questions that are relevant not only to the broader scope of development and humanitarian action, but also to policies and partnership initiatives on migration and mobility.

### 3. The Euro-African partnership in light of COVID-19 and its consequences

Migration occupies an increasingly central stage in EU-Africa relations, while divergences between the approaches and priorities of both sides continue to stand as a challenge to developing and rolling out a common partnership agenda. COVID-19 has – once again – clearly shown that such an agenda needs to be based on a better understanding of the broader socioeconomic and developmental issues underlying migration in and from Africa. As will be argued in this section, migration in and from Africa will continue to be closely intertwined with poverty

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Sandrine Morel, "Les Canaries débordées par l'afflux de migrants", in *Le Monde*, 16 November 2020, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/11/16/les-canaries-debordees-par-l-afflux-de-migrants-ces-citoyens-dorment-au-milieu-des-rats\\_6059914\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/11/16/les-canaries-debordees-par-l-afflux-de-migrants-ces-citoyens-dorment-au-milieu-des-rats_6059914_3210.html).

and demographic factors. This suggests that focusing cooperation on migration primarily on the management of (irregular) flows in the narrow sense of the term – which has largely dominated the EU priorities so far – would have limited impact on the dynamics that incentivise migration and sustain migratory pressure, especially in the long run.

Before delving into the major underlying causes of current and future migration in and from Africa, policy and public discourses based on “the myth of African invasion” or framing African migration as a potential threat to the “European way of life” should be put into perspective. The former, suggesting that Africa is “the” continent sending a disproportionately large share of migrants to other parts of the world, including Europe, is simply incorrect. Data on migration on a global scale shows that the number of migrants from Africa is equal to that of migrants from Latin America, and these two continents are only in front of Oceania and North America (see Table 2). Among the top 20 countries of origin of migrants in 2019, there is only one African country, namely Egypt, which ranks 19th.<sup>32</sup> The latter discourse, framing African migration as a threat to European security and/or identity, has much more to do with looking at migration through the lenses of race, ethnicity and religion – because African migrants are more visible, either because they are black, because they are Arab, because they are Muslim or because they are all three at the same time – than with empirical evidence.

**Table 2** | Number of international migrants in 2017 by region (in millions)

Regions	Where migrants are living	Where migrants come from
Asia	80	110
Europe	78	64
North America	58	5
Africa	25	38
Latina America	10	39
Oceania	8	2
Total		259

Source: Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC), *Global Migration Indicators 2018*, Berlin, June 2019, p. 21, <https://publications.iom.int/node/1977>.

While current numbers regarding migration from Africa should be put in perspective, it should also be acknowledged that indicators of and projections on poverty and demography suggest that migration from Africa is certainly expected to increase over the next years. Africa is today the poorest continent in the world (see Annex) and the COVID-19 crisis is expected to further aggravate this. In addition, “Sub-Saharan Africa is projected to become the most populous of the

<sup>32</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), *World Migration Report 2020*, Geneva, November 2019, p. 26, <https://publications.iom.int/node/2221>.

eight geographic regions [...] around 2062, surpassing both Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and Central and Southern Asia in size."<sup>33</sup>

With regard to poverty, the rate of people living in extreme poverty in Africa has fallen significantly from 54 per cent in 1990 to 41 per cent in 2015, but "given high population growth (2.7 percent per year), the number of Africans living in poverty nonetheless rose, from an estimated 278 million in 1990 to 413 million in 2015".<sup>34</sup> By 2100, Sub-Saharan Africa's population is expected to reach close to 3.8 billion people,<sup>35</sup> to claim over one third of the world's population (currently it is only 14 per cent). In terms of its "demographic transition", the African population is still in the explosive phase of its growth, a phase that other regions in the world went through centuries or decades ago (e.g., Europe, Asia and Latin America). While there are many factors behind this, poverty, the lack of education (among women in particular) and the failure of the social systems in most parts of Africa certainly play significant roles.

The aim is not to ring alarm bells, but to highlight that policies towards and cooperation with Africa need to take this economic and demographic landscape and its long-term implications into account. It is also to underline that this landscape suggests not only a migratory challenge, but also an economic, humanitarian and security one. It is evident that migration management policies alone – and particularly measures focusing on controlling the borders and human mobility in and out of Africa – would be ineffective if the current forms of social and political governance in the African continent are sustained and reproduced.

Migration is a crosscutting issue, intricately linked to development processes and the quality of governance. This implies that a broader set of policy instruments related to development, security, socioeconomic inclusion, trade, macroeconomic governance, etc. need to be mobilised in order to address the conditions driving migration, and especially irregular, risky and precarious forms. In other words, and in relation to Africa, migration policies alone cannot address issues such as demographic growth or poverty, and unless these issues are addressed in a comprehensive and cooperative manner, migratory pressure would inevitably remain high.

This does not mean that migration governance cannot be part of a policy and cooperation agenda focusing on development and improved governance. On the contrary, a comprehensive and cooperative approach to human mobility that acknowledges the complex developmental drivers of migration (and

<sup>33</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2019: Highlights*, New York, United Nations, 2019, p. 6, <https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications>.

<sup>34</sup> Kathleen Beegle and Luc Christiaensen (eds), *Accelerating Poverty Reduction in Africa*, Washington, World Bank, 2019, p. 34, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/32354>.

<sup>35</sup> UNDESA Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2019: Highlights*, cit., p. 6.

developmental benefits of migration), as put forth by the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), adopted in Marrakech in December 2018, could constitute a significant component of such an agenda. In that sense, the fact that nine EU member states refused to endorse the GCM has obviously dealt a severe blow to the commitment of the EU as a whole to a positive migration policy agenda; one that certainly includes combating irregular migration and the trafficking in human beings, but also opens up opportunities for other forms of regular mobility, beneficial to migrants as well as to their countries of departure and reception.

Seen from this perspective, the European Commission's recently published New Pact on Migration and Asylum<sup>36</sup> appears to be missing an opportunity to move towards a more comprehensive and positive migration cooperation agenda with third countries, including, if not primarily, those in Africa. Apart from making almost no reference to the coronavirus crisis and its multiple effects, the Pact mainly deals very little with the reasons for migration – especially irregular – as well as its human cost for migrants, and economic costs for the countries of departure, especially when one considers the strong attention paid to countering irregular migration and increasing the effectiveness of returns of irregular migrants.

In particular, the establishment of strong positive and negative conditionalities between readmission cooperation on the side of third countries and the visas issued by the EU to the citizens of these countries does not do a good service to the development of a positive migration partnership agenda. Given that improving cooperation on return and readmission is one of the major priorities of the EU in its migration relations particularly with Africa, the message that reads “either cooperate on readmission, or you will have fewer visas” is clearly – albeit not exclusively – addressed to African governments as well as the African Union.

Considering that return and readmission – not only but particularly of third country nationals – is a contentious issue for most African countries, this message unfortunately sets off the new phase of dialogue and negotiation between Africa and the EU on migration and mobility on the wrong foot. In addition, it is doubtful how much service linking readmission to visa facilitation (or restriction) would do to reducing irregular migration, as further limitation of regular entry opportunities (even if short-term) would produce, without any doubt, more incentives to access Europe through irregular ways.

<sup>36</sup> European Commission, *New Pact on Migration and Asylum* (COM/2020/609), 23 September 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0609>.

## Conclusion

The pandemic not only acts as a multiplier of existing developmental and socioeconomic challenges in Africa – and thereby contributes to increasing migratory pressure in and out of the continent – but it also reveals interdependencies between Africa and the EU. It is hoped that the current health and socioeconomic crisis would also act as an opportunity to substantially rethink the relations between the two continents on, and well beyond migration.

A shift at the ideational level is needed first and foremost. The two fundamental parameters that condition current and future migratory pressure from Africa are demographic growth and poverty. And, generating an impact on the demographic variable largely depends on the reduction of poverty. Policies that focus on the management of migratory flows from Africa as they are currently rolled out would therefore have no significant impact on changing any of these parameters. Second, poverty and socioeconomic crises in Africa are also a function of unbalanced economic and trade relations between the global North and the global South in general, and between the North and the South of the Mediterranean in particular. Migration from the South is a consequence of social and economic inequalities, reproduced by such skewed relations. A genuine attempt to reducing poverty in Africa therefore goes through a substantial rethinking of these broader economic and trade relations, including the diverse agreements governing commercial relations and free trade zones between the EU and African countries (as, for example, in the case of certain Maghreb countries). Third, Africa and Europe are at one another's doorstep, and as the COVID-19 crisis clearly demonstrated, they are interdependent in many issue areas, including migration. It would be inconceivable to believe that Europe can be shielded from the fallout of various humanitarian, economic or security crises unfolding in Africa, which can worsen unless significant action is taken. This implies that a greater awareness is needed on the fact that the future of Africa is – and should be – an important concern for Europe, and not only because of irregular migration flows originating from the continent.

Such a shift at the ideational level should lead to changes of a political and institutional nature, mainly on the side of Europe. A reorientation of development cooperation with Africa is needed in ways that prioritise structural and comprehensive responses, multi-dimensional instruments and long-term thinking. A comprehensive "Africa Plan" or a "Development Programme for (and with) Africa", that would also ensure the involvement of the international community beyond the EU, would go in the right direction. Revising broader economic and trade policies should accompany development action. For instance, the EU should reform some of its common policies, its industrial policy as well as its Common Agricultural Policy in particular, so as to look for greater complementarities with Africa rather than moving towards competitive situations (such as resorting to public subsidies in industrial and agricultural sectors). It should also reform its trade policies vis-à-vis Africa as a whole. Such reform should aim to reduce the

various imbalances generated in financial terms, and, above all, to address the challenges African countries have been experiencing in creating employment that arise from the application of the various free trade agreements signed between the EU and several regions of the continent in recent decades.

Migration should be part of this broader agenda. Policy measures should be based on a better understanding of the bidirectional relationship between development and migration – notably in the context of the Sahel and West Africa. Future partnership mechanisms should equally draw on development cooperation and concerted management of migratory flows. Combating irregular migration as well as return and readmission should obviously be part of this, but a positive partnership agenda based on mutual benefits and responsibilities would necessitate discussing these issues as part of a comprehensive approach combining migration and development, as well as human rights and democracy issues.

A fair and constructive approach to cooperation on readmission should focus on the readmission of partners' own citizens, and exclude third-country nationals. Cooperation on the side of African countries could be, if necessary, linked to some relevant political conditionality excluding visa facilitation/restriction measures. The logic of further restricting regular access channels to Europe in order to reduce irregular migration is simply counterproductive, as more limitation of legal pathways (even if short-term) is highly likely to lead to more irregular migration. A positive and comprehensive partnership agenda anchored to sustainable development should instead focus on how regular mobility could be regulated for the benefit of migrants as well as countries of departure and destination. Such a framework should certainly consider the concerns of countries of origin, regarding losing an important part of their (particularly qualified) human resources, as the current health crisis has once more highlighted.

Finally, future cooperation between the EU and Africa would certainly benefit from a rethink of the broader political framework to encompass and frame such a potentially comprehensive web of relations. In fact, there is no need to reinvent the wheel: the Barcelona Process adopted in 1995, which was a unique and ambitious initiative that laid the foundations for a new regional relationship and which could have represented a turning point in Euro-Mediterranean relations, could serve as a model. The next EU-Africa partnership could take inspiration from the Barcelona Process's three comprehensive – and intertwined – “baskets”, namely, the Political and Security Basket, aiming at a common area of peace and stability; the Economic and Financial Basket, aiming at a zone of shared prosperity; and the Social, Cultural and Human Basket, aiming at fostering exchanges between peoples and civil societies. Having been reminded by the pandemic of the connectedness of the two continents and of the need to effectively manage interdependencies linking them, migration and mobility could – and should – be conceived as a transversal issue cutting across all these three dimensions in a post-COVID future.

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## Annex: World's poorest countries

Country	2021 population (millions)	Demographic growth rate %	GNI per capita (in US\$)	International rank
Burundi	12.2	3.07	780	1
Central African Rep.	4.9	1.87	1,060	2
Malawi	19.6	2.71	1,080	3
Congo Dem. Rep.	92.3	3.14	1,110	4
Niger	25.1	3.82	1,150	5
South Sudan	11.3	1.68	1,280	6
Mozambique	32.1	2.90	1,300	7
Liberia	5.1	2.42	1,320	8
Chad	16.9	2.98	1,620	9
Madagascar	28.4	2.66	1,660	10
Togo	8.4	2.41	1,670	11
Sierra Leone	8.1	2.06	1,670	12
Haiti	11.5	1.22	1,790	13
Uganda	47.1	3.02	2,210	14
Burkina Faso	21.4	2.84	2,220	15
Guinea-Bissau	2.0	2.41	2,220	16
Rwanda	13.2	2.50	2,240	17
The Gambia	2.4	2.91	2,260	18
Ethiopia	117.8	2.53	2,300	19
Afghanistan	39.8	2.33	2,230	20
Solomon Islands	0.7	2.49	2,350	21
Mali	20.8	2.99	2,360	22
Guinea	13.4	2.78	2,520	23
Tanzania	61.4	2.95	2,700	24
Zimbabwe	15.0	1.54	2,730	25

Source: Author's compilation from: Samuel Stebbins and Grant Suneson, "25 Poorest Countries in the World", cit.; and World Population Review, *Total Population by Country 2021*, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries> (accessed 2 February 2021)

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Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 697683

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

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