

By Amanda Bisong

October 2020

This briefing note highlights six issues that European and African policymakers should consider when negotiating migration cooperation between countries in both continents in a post-COVID-19 setting. These focus on irregular migration, return migration, migration and development, mobility of migrant workers and students, legal pathways to migration, and diaspora engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic is having an enormous impact on mobility. But migration cooperation between European and African countries has continued nonetheless, responding to the changes in the policies of governments as they tackle the crisis. In some cases, migration has continued regardless of the restrictions to mobility. Global travel restrictions have in some instances even led to an increase in the smuggling of migrants.

This brief analyses how migration cooperation may need to change to reflect the new realities. But many questions still remain unresolved. For instance: How to ensure mobility for migrant workers and students, while taking steps to curb irregular migration? And will there be a change in the use of official development assistance (ODA) in promoting and supporting migration cooperation?

One thing remains certain: policymakers need to come up with out-of-the-box solutions to promote policies that will benefit migrants, their families and their communities of origin and host communities. The postponed AU-EU Summit offers the time to reshape migration cooperation between European and African countries.

Introduction

Migration has remained a significant political and humanitarian issue during the COVID-19 pandemic, as migrants are stuck in transit and rescue operations are being frustrated or ignored by some countries (Stierl 2020). In June 2020, Libya and Malta negotiated a new migration deal aimed at keeping migrants in unstable regions in Libya (Martin 2020). In Greece, controversial restrictive measures by the government have resulted in migrants being expelled and abandoned in the sea (Kingsley and Shoumali 2020). The pandemic has exacerbated salient and often ignored failures of migration governance within and between Europe and third countries. Migration cooperation between European and African countries has been criticised for being conditionality-laden and dominated by a European agenda and funds – often ignoring the perspectives of African countries. COVID-19 however provides an opportunity to reflect on how migration cooperation can better take into account the interests and priorities of African countries and their citizens (Lopes 2020). This is especially important with the European Union (EU)'s proposed Pact on Migration and Asylum, that is once again pushing for a stronger focus on deepening international migration partnerships.

Migration cooperation between African and European countries is being discussed within the framework of ongoing negotiations between the EU and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) on a future (post-Cotonou) partnership agreement. It will also feature prominently in next year's summit between the EU and the African Union (AU), as well as the preparations leading up to it. This briefing note presents six issues for policymakers to consider when negotiating migration cooperation between Europe and Africa.

One: Stemming irregular migration entirely may be difficult to achieve

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed that migrant flows can be further reduced when more restrictive migration and mobility measures are imposed in

African countries and regions. With the exception of movement for essential reasons at the discretion of border agents, lockdown measures halted the flow of both regular and irregular migrants (UNHCR 2020b). Yet, migrant smuggling patterns quickly altered to reflect the reality of COVID-19 movement restrictions, leading to increased use of misinformation tools and dangerous routes (Bathke 2020). The initial stop and subsequent resumption and increase of irregular migration as a result of COVID-19 has revealed the resilient and adaptive nature of smuggling networks and the determination of migrants to move despite the risk.

Countries have adopted prohibitive responses to irregular migration, which has led to more precarity and a loss of migrant lives during the pandemic (UNHCR 2020a). Some European countries, such as Greece, Italy and Malta, have used the pandemic as a basis to reinforce hostile migration policies (Stierl 2020). These measures, which include pushing back migrants to Libya, cancelling rescue missions and declaring their ports as unsafe, have exposed migrants and asylum seekers to further risks (BBC News 2020). Migration policy failures have prevented the rescue of migrants in the Mediterranean (Stierl 2020). Furthermore, resettlement and family reunification were also halted due to the closure of public services in Europe and abroad (EASO 2020). Most EU countries however set up ad hoc measures for the registration of asylum seekers (UNODC 2020). But the closure of borders may have contributed to more migrants using smugglers (UN 2020).

Together, African and European countries need to prioritise creating alternative policies that promote safe and legal migration pathways. This may help as an indirect response to reducing the need to use smugglers. Furthermore, counter-smuggling measures should be based on cooperation between European and African countries. These measures should have a holistic approach and be more humane, less militarised and less securitised to ensure the safety of migrant lives (Bird 2020). Counter-smuggling initiatives which take the community of origin perspective into account have been shown to be more successful in reducing irregular migrant flows (UNODC 2018). These

involve dismantling existing migrant smuggling networks within communities and building awareness of key stakeholders in the community about the negative impacts of irregular migration on families and individuals (UNODC 2018). It equally involves jointly designing community-driven alternatives to irregular activities linked to smuggling, through creation of other sources of livelihood for households and individuals within such communities.

Two: The focus on return migration needs to be re-examined

Returns to countries of origin mostly stopped because of restrictions on mobility (ECRE 2020). However, it is not clear how the pandemic will affect the focus of European countries on return migration in the long term. Irregular migrants in the informal economy have supported the agricultural sector in Italy and the gig economy during the pandemic. Hence, temporary regularisation measures are being undertaken in countries like Italy and Portugal (Geis-Thöne 2020). Portugal has allowed migrants to have the same access to healthcare as Portuguese citizens to improve healthcare delivery and public welfare. Other European countries have introduced similar measures - albeit to a lesser scale - based on public health, economic and social reasons (OECD 2020). At the same time, the proposed new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum aims to increase and speed up returns of those without authorisation to stay, for instance by focusing on "ensuring effective prohibition of the employment of irregularly staying third-country nationals" (EC 2020).

African countries were initially reluctant to repatriate their citizens stuck in other countries during the pandemic. They still have difficulties reintegrating these returned migrants, including seasonal workers, into societies that are facing severe economic pressure as a result of a contraction in demand (FT 2020). Moving forward, while regularisation procedures may offer opportunities to irregular migrants already within Europe, EU member states still see stronger measures on return and readmission as deterrents to continued irregular migration. Voluntary return migration and reintegration schemes for failed asylum seekers or irregular migrants from

Europe to Africa have been largely ineffective, because they did not lead to the envisaged reintegration of returned migrants (Vermeulen 2020; Zandonini 2020). In some programmes, return migrants have been unable to access agreed reintegration assistance, resulting in protests.1 Migrants have also used funds from these programmes to engage in re-emigration despite the known risks. It is important for African countries to set up efficient reintegration systems that can cater to the needs of not only returned irregular migrants from European countries, but also returning migrant workers from other regions, like the Gulf, where rising unemployment has led to massive returns of migrant workers. African countries also need to be more vocal and join international organisations² in condemning the ongoing practice of returns to conflict areas.

African and European countries can streamline their priorities in designing reintegration systems, creating a common and shared understanding of what the reintegration process should entail. Where these systems exist, they can be strengthened to better respond to domestic realities, and provide an avenue for monitoring data on return migration. Existing reintegration systems should be linked with domestic labour market opportunities by involving the private sector in identifying skills for returnees and the available employment opportunities.

Three: The links between migration and ODA should be re-thought

European and African countries have prioritised strengthening their public healthcare systems and designing measures for financial and economic recovery from the impact of the crisis. This has pushed migration and asylum to – at least temporarily – become less of a priority among EU actors for the first time in years (EPC, KAS and IFOK 2020). However, EU citizens still want to see stronger controls of the EU's external border (Dennison and Zerka 2020). African countries are more interested in discussions on debt relief and suspension and how to ensure that the predicted recession on the continent will not push more people into poverty or exacerbate the already precarious living conditions of their citizens (Ofori-Atta 2020).

A significant portion of official development assistance (ODA) in the years before the COVID-19 era has been spent on migration and migration-related areas to tackle the root causes of migration. It is still uncertain how the tension between funding migration through ODA and funding other traditional development sectors such as health and education (now made relevant because of the pandemic) will affect the ongoing EU budget negotiations and future funding of development activities (Breed and Sternberg 2020). However, there will be a focus on strengthening public health and social welfare systems in African countries. What is clear for now is that donors are shifting priorities towards COVID-19 preventive measures and economic recovery (Johnson, Vera and Zühr 2020). Programmes are thus currently exhibiting flexibility in aligning their objectives with the realities of the pandemic. For example, migration- and refugeerelated programmes are ensuring that migrants and refugees benefit from health, food security and employment within the COVID-19 response. There are impending funding risks in other areas which fail to demonstrate how public funds contribute to mitigating the impact of the pandemic threat.

African and European policymakers can jointly identify strategic programming choices which will contribute to building resilient societies and responding to the economic impact of the pandemic in both continents. They can also determine the channels through which ODA can be directed to improve its efficiency in tackling the current challenges. Some of these choices may still be linked to existing migration programmes. This includes for example ensuring that the private sector, especially micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, is included in government support measures, with a view to promoting and sustaining employment of young people.

Four: Mobility for migrant workers and students is needed

As borders reopen, migrants, especially migrant workers and students, may not return immediately because of a lack of resources to travel or family constraints, such as the loss of a family member or the need to provide care to family members. For other

migrants still in countries of destination, there may not be job opportunities available, especially for those employed in the services sector, like tourism. However, to restart economic recovery, migrant labour is needed, especially in European countries where key sectors like agriculture and health are dependent on migrant labour from Africa and Asia (Islam 2020). During the pandemic, migrants were acknowledged as essential and useful to keep economies afloat (ODI 2020; Foresti 2020).

Countries that benefit from the high enrolment of international students are impacted by the pandemic and by the consequent decrease of international students who choose to stay to work in these countries after their studies (Gutterer 2020). For higher education institutions and international students, the gaps created by the pandemic will need to be filled through strategic efforts. These efforts should aim to attract international students, while understanding that the spending power and ability of internationals to pay high fees may be affected by the negative economic impact of COVID-19 in most migrant-sending countries. Therefore, a mix of scholarships and flexible mobility conditions (a reduced threshold of financial standing requirements for instance) may be required for countries that intend to attract international students from Africa.

Five: Legal pathways to migration for various categories of migrants need to be designed

The pandemic offers an opportunity to rethink our current method of classifying skilled migrants, and, by extension, which migrants have access to visa facilitation schemes (MPC 2020). African and European countries are developing pilot skills mobility partnerships to expand access to legal migration pathways. The EU's new Pact on Migration and Asylum proposes to pilot talent partnerships, including with African countries (EC 2020 p. 23). Most of the current schemes target migrant workers within specific sectors, such as IT, construction, tourism or agriculture. However, some of these have been negatively affected by the pandemic, resulting in severe job losses (UNCTAD 2020). The pandemic has

equally refocused the attention on the terrible working conditions of migrants in some sectors, like the agricultural sector (Borges and Huet 2020). Migrant workers have been classified according to their skills or pay level. But these classifications do not capture the importance of migrant workers in their host and origin communities. For example, a majority of the migrant workers who were working in the essential services sectors during the pandemic are socalled 'low-skilled' migrants (Fasani 2020). Countries like Germany have introduced reforms that allow migrants the flexibility in changing employers. However, in some countries visas are still tied to employment and migrants are unable to flexibly apply for or change jobs even though they legally migrated for work, thus limiting their access to employment opportunities in these countries.

Moving forward, African and European countries can broaden the target of the current pilot schemes on labour migration. The labour market needs of the destination countries and realities of the available labour in countries of origin should determine which migrant workers are included in these schemes. Through dialogues and expert exchanges, such as the migration and mobility dialogue between the EU and the AU, the partnership should encourage countries to move beyond the categorisation of migrants according to skills (high-, low- or unskilled migrant workers) and pay (low or high pay). These schemes should also focus on improving the employment conditions for migrant workers, especially those working in less desirable sectors.

African and European countries need to devise responsive policies that promote safe and legal migration pathways as alternatives for migrants into Europe. Current schemes can be reviewed to include broader categories of migrants. These policy measures should equally aim to limit migrants' use of smugglers by providing facilitated access to legal pathways such as resettlement and family reunification.

Six: Diaspora engagement in host and origin countries should be re-examined

Diaspora organisations play an important role in development in both their host communities and

communities of origin. For example, they actively support the integration of newly arrived migrants in the host communities and support social development projects in their communities of origin, such as schools or clinics. European countries have realised the importance of the diaspora in entrepreneurship and creating employment opportunities. Countries of origin target diaspora communities for their investments to be harnessed for development projects through diaspora bonds, which have been set up in Nigeria for instance (Kazeem 2017). Beyond remittance flows, the diaspora provides opportunities for African countries of origin to tap into their expertise, know-how and networks, thus leading to increased development benefits from migration (Surdakasa 2020).

The African diaspora has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways. While some diaspora communities have mobilised resources through crowdfunding, fundraising and sensitisation, these activities are mostly targeted at assisting migrants who have been negatively affected by COVID-19 within their immediate host-country communities (Adept 2020. Musa et al. 2020). For example, in Belgium, the Helping Hand project raised funds for food vouchers for African migrants, including students who had lost their jobs as a result of the lockdown measures and could not benefit from social welfare benefits.

Migrant communities are faced with hardships and have suffered disproportionately from the effects of the pandemic in their host communities (Musa et al. 2020). Diaspora groups are also facing a difficult situation, with job losses and impending returns as a result of losing their employment and migration status. The envisaged reduction in remittances is an immediate outcome of these difficulties (WB 2020). But diaspora communities have also raised funds and donated personal protective equipment (PPE) to their communities of origin. Medical workers in host countries have supported workers in their countries of origin through virtual exchanges, sharing experiences on how to respond to the pandemic (Dipeolu 2020). Subregional governments in host countries have engaged with the diaspora to support at-risk

communities through targeted interventions, like translating COVID-19 rules into local languages.

However, host and origin countries need to rethink their engagement with the diaspora. The African Union acknowledges the diaspora as the Sixth African Region and has formal mechanisms for engaging with the diaspora (AU 2020). It has also drawn on the experiences of diaspora support during the Ebola epidemic to tailor their engagement during this pandemic. Several African countries equally have diaspora agencies or ministries which formally engage with diaspora organisations worldwide. However, current initiatives³ in both host and origin countries focus on professionals and exclude low-skilled workers, who form a significant portion of the diaspora community and are responsible for sending the bulk of remittances to their families back home. They are at risk for being overlooked by their host and origin communities because of the level and type of work they do. African and European policymakers need to rethink their engagement with diaspora communities to include all members of this community – both high- and low-skilled workers – as they contribute to their host and origin communities. More so, diaspora engagement should equally consider what services host and origin countries can offer migrants and not only what migrants can offer host and origin countries.

Concluding remarks

Migration cooperation in a post-COVID-19 setting may see some – positive and negative – changes as states focus on economic recovery. Migration can contribute to growth and economic recovery in countries which have productive sectors that are reliant on migrant workers. However, most of these sectors that depend on immigration have been severely impacted by the crisis (COE-EDP 2020). On the one hand, the pandemic may change the perception of essential migrant workers in Europe, thus increasing the need to have a positive discourse on migration. The long-term impact

of COVID-19 on migration patterns remains unclear. If anything, it has reinforced inequalities of access and opportunities available to African migrants seeking to gain entry to Europe. It is still unclear if this appreciation will lead to more acceptance of migrants through liberal entry policies, in addition to the current move towards regularisation in some countries. However, in a bid to protect domestic jobs, European societies may be a bit more reluctant to accept migrants. This may result in incentivising governments to have more restrictive migration cooperation with African countries.

One thing is clear: the regular solutions of restricting movement of Africans, securitisation of migration and conditionality-based migration cooperation are costly to both governments and migrants and have mixed results (COE-EDP 2020). Moving forward, migration policies and cooperation between European and African countries should be designed in a comprehensive and consultative way to ensure that states, migrants and other relevant stakeholders, including the private sector, contribute to finding and developing better migration outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic offers a time of reflection, to think outside the box and usual proposals. But this should be done with both parties pushing beyond their ideologies and positions to find solutions that reflect our shared humanity – another truth exposed by the pandemic (Sundberg Diez et al. 2020). We may see a relationship based on shared values and respect for both parties (EESC 2020). But with African countries seeking debt relief for their economies, it may be difficult to envisage a balanced relationship not shrouded by dependency. African and European countries need to reflect on how their diverse responses to the impact of COVID-19 on migration cooperation can be used to design a more comprehensive approach towards systematically addressing the migration governance issues exposed by the pandemic (O'Brien and Eger 2020).

Bibliography

- Adept. 2020. Media Campaign COVID-19 ENG.
- African Union (AU). Newsletter The continental day of prayer to counter COVID-19 spreads messages of hope in Africa and beyond. July-September 2020.
- Al Jazeera. 2020. UN chief urges closure of all migrant detention centres in Libya. 4 September 2020.
- Altrogge, J. and F. Zanker. 2019. The return of migrants from Europe is causing problems for The Gambia. Quartz Africa. 21 November 2019.
- Amnesty International. 2020. <u>Libya: between life and death: refugees and migrants trapped in Libya's cycle of</u> abuse. 24 September 2020.
- Bathke, B. 2020. <u>Europol: Migrant smuggling patterns changing due to coronavirus. Info Migrants</u>. 18 May 2020.
- BBC News. 2020. Letter from Africa: Spare a thought for stranded migrants. 17 May 2020.
- Bird, L. 2020. <u>Human smuggling / Movement should be safe for migrants; not profitable for smugglers</u>. Enact. 4 August 2020.
- Borges, A. and N. Huet. 2020. <u>Invisible workers: Underpaid, exploited and put at risk on Europe's farms</u>. Euronews. 22 July 2020.
- Breed, D. and L. Sternberg. 2020. <u>How are aid budgets changing due to the Covid-19 crisis?</u> Development Initiatives. 22 July 2020.
- COE-EDP. 2020. <u>Migration post-COVID 19: Taking cues from the past to rebuild economies</u>. Devdiscourse. 17 May 2020.
- Dennison, S. and P. Zerka. 2020. <u>Together in trauma: Europeans and the world after COVID-19</u>. ECFR. 29 June 2020
- Dipeolu, A. 2020. <u>Beyond Remittances: COVID-19, the African diaspora and homelands</u>. King's College London. 15 July 2020.
- EASO. 2020. COVID-19 emergency measures in asylum and reception systems. 2 June 2020.
- ECRE. 2020. Return as 'non-essential travel' in the time of pandemic.
- European Commission (EC). 2020. Communication from the commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and social committee and the committee of the regions on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum. COM(2020) 609 final. 23 September 2020.
- European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). 2020. <u>EU-Africa relations during the COVID-19 pandemic a partnership that must be preserved</u>. 30 April 2020.
- European Policy Centre (EPC), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) and IFOK. 2020. <u>Preliminary results of an online survey How Brussels sees the future of Europe after COVID-19</u>. 3 September 2020.
- European Policy Centre (EPC), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) and IFOK. 2020. <u>How Brussels sees the future of Europe after COVID-19</u>. August 2020.
- Fasani, F. 2020. <u>Immigrant key workers in Europe: The COVID-19 response that comes from abroad</u>. VoxEU. 5 May 2020.
- Financial Times (FT). 2020. Pandemic threatens African economic success.
- Foresti, M. 2020. Migrant key workers: time to act. ODI. 16 April 2020.
- Geis-Thöne, W. 2020. <u>Should EU countries regularise undocumented migrants due to the COVID-19 pandemic?</u> Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. 4 June 2020.
- Gutterer, J. 2020. <u>The Impact Of COVID-19 on International Students Perceptions Part 2: the perception gap between studying at home and abroad.</u> Study portals.
- Islam, S. 2020. <u>COVID-19 spotlighted European migrants' vital role; the EU must tell their story</u>. Friends of Europe. 19 May 2020.

Johnson, Z., I. Vera and R. Zühr. 2020. <u>How are donor countries responding to COVID-19? Early analyses and trends to watch</u>. Donor tracker. 13 May 2020.

Kazeem, Y. 2017. Nigeria's first ever diaspora bond has raised \$300 million. Quartz Africa. 26 June 2017.

Kingsley, P. and K. Shoumali. 2020. <u>Taking Hard Line, Greece Turns Back Migrants by Abandoning Them at Sea</u>. The New York Times. 14 August 2020.

Lopes, C. 2020. <u>Europe and African relations post COVID-19</u>: time to add size, scale and speed. The Conversation 31 March 2020.

Martin, I. 2020. Malta-Libya deal sets up centres 'against illegal migration' Times of Malta. 28 May 2020.

Migration Policy Centre (MPC). 2020. MPC Webinar: "Rethinking Migrants' Skills and Labour Immigration Policies".

Mohammed, A.J. 2020. OP-ED: Africa can build back better after COVID-19. Africa Renewal. 25 May 2020.

Musa, A., J. Norman, M. Bradbury, M.A. Hassan and N. Kleist. 2020. <u>Tech and Trust Challenges: Emerging</u> Trends in Somaliland Diaspora Response to Covid-19. DIIS. 21 September 2020.

O'Brien, M.L. and M. A. Eger. 2020. <u>COVID-19 Will Have Long-Lasting Effects on Migration</u>. Fair Observer. 14 May 2020.

ODI. 2020. Key workers - Migrants' contribution to the COVID-19 response.

OECD. 2020. Managing international migration under COVID-19. 10 June 2020.

Ofori-Atta. 2020. <u>Ghanaian finance minister: Africa deserves more Covid help</u>. Financial Times. 13 October 2020.

Stierl, M. 2020. <u>Migration: how Europe is using coronavirus to reinforce its hostile environment in the Mediterranean</u>. The Conversation. 13 May 2020.

Sundberg Diez, O., M. Lücke, L. Jegen and F. Zanker. 2020. <u>European and African perspectives on asylum and migration policy</u>. <u>Seeking common ground</u>. 22 April 2020.

Surdakasa, M. 2020. Tapping diaspora capital for the post-COVID-19 economy. Africa Portal. 25 May 2020.

UNCTAD. 2020. COVID-19 and tourism assessing the economic consequences.

UNHCR. 2020a. <u>Thousands of refugees and migrants suffer extreme rights abuses on journeys to Africa's Mediterranean coast, new UNHCR/MMC report shows.</u>

UNHCR. 2020b. Most common nationalities of Mediterranean sea and land arrivals from January 2020.

Operational Portal Refugee Situations. Last updated: 21 September 2020.

United Nations (UN). 2020. <u>COVID-19 measures likely to lead to an increase in migrant smuggling and human trafficking in longer term, UNODC report finds</u>. Office on Drugs and Crime. 14 May 2020.

UNODC. 2018. Global study on smuggling of migrants 2018. New York. June 2018.

UNODC. 2020. <u>How COVID-19 restrictions and the economic consequences are likely to impact migrant smuggling and cross-border trafficking in persons to Europe and North America.</u> Research brief.

Vermeulen. 2020. What happens to migrants who are sent back? I spent a year following 12 people to find out. The Correspondent. 9 January 2020.

World Bank (WB). 2020. World Bank Predicts Sharpest Decline of Remittances in Recent History. 22 April 2020.

Zandonini, G. 2020. <u>Nigerians returned from Europe face stigma and growing hardship.</u> The New Humanitarian. 28 July 2020.

- ¹ In the Gambia, returning migrants have protested their treatment by international organisations and their government in failing to provide the agreed reintegration assistance (Altrogge and Zanker 2019).
- The United Nations has been very vocal about migrant returns to Libya and has called for the closure of all detention centres in Libya (Aljazeera 2020). Amnesty International published a report documenting the human rights violations of migrants who are returned to Libya (Amnesty 2020).
- Examples of joint EU-African diaspora initiatives are the EU global diaspora facility https://diasporafordevelopment.eu/;

 ADEPT pool of expertise https://www.adept-platform.org/2020/09/04/call-for-diaspora-experts/.

About ECDPM

The European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) is an independent think tank working on international cooperation and development policy in Europe and Africa.

Since 1986 our staff members provide research and analysis, advice and practical support to policymakers and practitioners across Europe and Africa – to make policies work for sustainable and inclusive global development.

Our main areas of work include:

- European external affairs
- African institutions
- Security and resilience
- Migration
- Sustainable food systems
- Finance, trade and investment
- Regional integration
- Private sector engagement

For more information please visit www.ecdpm.org

This publication benefits from the structural support by ECDPM's institutional partners: The Netherlands, Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark and Austria.

ISSN1571-7577

