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Research Report

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Briefing Paper, No. 9/2018

Provided in Cooperation with:

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

Suggested Citation: Castillejo, Clare (2018) : EU engagement with Africa on migration: a change of approach required, Briefing Paper, No. 9/2018, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), Bonn,
<https://doi.org/10.23661/bp9.2018>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/199821>

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EU Engagement with Africa on Migration: A Change of Approach Required

Summary

Migration was an important issue at the November African Union (AU)-European Union (EU) summit. While the tone of discussion was somewhat improved on that of recent years, divisions between the two continents remain great. Europe and Africa still have fundamentally different positions in relation to migration, with the EU and many European member states prioritising prevention and return, while African governments focus more on remittances and legal migration opportunities. However, Europe's current approach does not acknowledge these differing interests and instead seeks to impose its own agenda in ways that threaten to undermine important African ambitions.

In recent years, the EU has launched initiatives aimed at curbing migration from Africa that have caused significant controversy, notably the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) and the Migration Partnership Framework (MPF). These initiatives suffer from a number of weaknesses. The EUTF is based on the flawed premise that development assistance can prevent migration. It diverts aid to migration goals, and its projects often do not comply with development principles such as transparency, ownership and alignment. Meanwhile, the MPF seeks to use positive and negative incentives across a range of external action areas to encourage partners to cooperate with the EU's migration goals – primarily on prevention and return. So far, results have been limited and it has soured relations with some partner countries.

The case of Ethiopia illustrates the limitations of the EU's current approach. The country is an important regional player on migration and refugee issues and has been largely

constructive in multilateral migration processes, such as Khartoum and Valetta. While Ethiopia is an MPF priority country and a recipient of large amounts of EUTF funding, the goals of the EU and Ethiopia on migration have not been aligned. The EU is frustrated that Ethiopia has not cooperated on returns, while Ethiopia is disappointed that the EU has offered little in terms of legal migration and that EUTF funding has led to multiple, uncoordinated projects that are disconnected from local priorities and are implemented by outsiders.

It is clear that the EU needs to change its approach to migration in Africa, beginning with the recognition that Europe will need African migration in years to come. The EU should explore how Africa and Europe can work together to foster intra-African movement that supports Africa's economic growth, to ensure protection for refugees and vulnerable migrants, and to allow both continents to benefit from safe and orderly African labour migration to Europe. It should also move from attempting to address "root causes" of migration with short-term development funds, to examining how Europe could readjust its trade and investment policy in Africa to create more decent jobs and opportunities. Importantly, the EU must continue to press African governments to live up to their responsibilities to provide a decent life for citizens so they do not have to migrate in such large numbers and insecure circumstances.

Critically, the EU must be honest about conflicting interests and positions among its own member states and work towards effective common migration and asylum systems. However, such a change in approach requires European leaders to shift the current political discourse around migration to a more constructive one.

The AU-EU Summit: joint declaration, differing interests

Issues of migration took centre stage in the AU-EU summit at the end of November, as shocking stories about slaves in Libya emerged and EU and African leaders issued a statement agreeing to evacuate thousands of migrants from Libyan detention camps. However, beyond this welcome emergency response, little progress was made in developing more constructive engagement on migration.

The summit declaration that Europe and Africa would “deepen cooperation” on migration hides the reality that EU and African priorities are not aligned. Since 2015, the EU has increasingly focused on preventing migration and enforcing returns. Meanwhile, African countries see migration as an important source of remittances and seek more legal migration routes to Europe, as well as greater European investment to create economic opportunities at home. Problematically, the EU does not openly acknowledge these different agendas, but seeks to impose European interests by means of a range of positive and negative “incentives” while giving little space for African interests.

The current focus of EU migration policy threatens to undermine important political and economic ambitions of the AU and some African regional organisations. Central among these are aspirations towards greater intra-African mobility to foster economic development. The EU approach that presents migrants as a threat and pressures African countries to tighten borders runs counter to these ambitions, as well as to European long-term interests in a prosperous and open Africa.

Likewise, the EU’s shift towards more bilateral and transactional engagement with Africa on migration – for example offering aid incentives to specific countries in return for cooperation on “migration management” – undermines AU ambitions to develop a common position on migration. Instead, it increases divisions among African countries, with some rejecting the imposition of European interests, while others want to see what they can gain from it. It was hoped that the summit would offer a chance to rebalance this approach with stronger continental-level dialogue, but commitments in this area were vague and such a shift seems unlikely.

It is important to note that European member states have differing interests in relation to migration from Africa which shape their approach to the collective EU migration agenda. Member states particularly affected by migration are largely supportive of the EU’s incentives-based approach and emphasis on borders and returns. However, other member states are keen to avoid pressure being applied to African states where they have strong bilateral relations or strategic interests. At the same time, others are sceptical about the diversion of development aid for migration goals and the use of incentives.

Equally, there are internal differences on the African side, with many African governments and regions not supporting free

movement in practice. And likewise, there are divisions among African governments regarding responsibility for the human rights of migrants and refugees – divisions that were highlighted in the debate on Libya at the summit. More broadly, African governments obviously have primary responsibility to provide both the economic opportunities and the rights and freedoms their citizens require so that they do not need to migrate to Europe. There is understandable frustration on the EU side that some African governments make little effort in this regard but yet are highly critical of the EU’s efforts to manage migration flows.

The EU’s migration initiatives: a focus on prevention and return

Since the Valletta summit of 2015, the EU has launched some high-profile initiatives aimed at curbing migration from Africa – notably the EUTF and MPF. Both have been controversial and reveal significant flaws in the EU’s current approach.

The EUTF was launched in 2015 with the aim of addressing the “root causes” of irregular migration in North Africa; the Sahel and Lake Chad; and the Horn of Africa. The fund is currently around EUR 3.1 billion.

The basic premise of the EUTF is that migration from Africa is driven by poverty, insecurity, and environmental, demographic and humanitarian pressures and that addressing these will reduce irregular migration. However, the fund’s five-year period and limited budget does not seem well suited to addressing the enormity of such challenges. Moreover, the basic theory of change underlying the fund is questionable. While insecurity and crisis may fuel migration, there is little evidence that lack of development does so. Indeed, research demonstrates that increased socio-economic development is likely to increase migration (Martin-Shields, Schraven, & Angenendt, 2017).

There are serious questions over the EUTF’s governance, management and implementation, which are not in line with development best practice – particularly in the areas of ownership, transparency and timeliness. There are also concerns regarding its willingness to overlook partner countries’ poor human rights records. For example, Sudan – an EUTF beneficiary – sees migration cooperation as a way to re-engage with Europe. However, migration experts report that Sudan’s actions to curb the flow of migrants – which are presented as a success by the EU – do not comply with basic human rights standards.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the EUTF is that it diverts aid money to migration and security goals. The EUTF channels official development assistance (ODA) towards countries based on their migration profile. Its projects frequently focus on communities that migrate rather than those most in need and offer quick fixes rather than promoting long-term development. Moreover, it seems the comparatively large amounts of money available under the EUTF have created a “feeding frenzy” in some

countries, resulting in a proliferation of inexpert players and unstrategic projects.

The MPF was established in 2016, with the aim of mobilising the EU's and member states' influence and instruments to build cooperation with partner countries in order to "sustainably manage migration flows". So far, the MPF has been implemented in five priority countries – Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal – and has been used in a more ad hoc way with other countries. Migration partnerships involve a mix of political, aid and security engagement by the EU and member states, adapted to each country context. They do not involve any dedicated political dialogue or programming instrument and migration funding in MPF countries flows through the EUTF.

The MPF emphasises keeping migrants out of Europe and sending them back, with the EU being explicit that "cooperation on readmission and return will be a key test of the partnership [... and] all relevant instruments and sources of funding should be mobilised in a coherent manner in support of the approach" (European Council, 2016). The MPF is therefore the most openly interest-driven of the EU's migration initiatives, and the one that appears furthest removed from the principles of genuine partnership. As such it epitomises the EU's current approach, promoting short-term migration goals through bilateral, transactional engagement with African partners.

The MPF has a number of controversial aspects. These include the ambition to mobilise other areas of external action such as trade, education or development for migration goals, and the application of positive and negative incentives in doing so. Indeed, EU officials report that development aid, as well as some trade and visa cooperation, are already being used as bargaining chips in these partnerships. However, given the EU's wide range of interests in the MPF partner countries (from climate change to poverty reduction), making broader cooperation dependent on progress on a limited migration agenda may run counter to Europe's long-term interests.

The MPF appears to undermine the EU's development and human rights principles. In making migration management a central goal of development assistance, by targeting such assistance based on migration rather than on poverty factors, and by explicitly using development aid as both a "carrot and stick" to ensure partner cooperation on migration, the MPF is breaking with good development practice. Moreover, in the drive to achieve the EU's migration goals – particularly on the tightening of borders – issues of protection and human rights are being overlooked.

So far, the MPF's achievements at country level have been limited and it has rarely managed to incentivise the type of cooperation that the EU has been seeking. This is particularly striking in the area of returns where there has been almost no progress in the five MPF priority countries, and where European expectations that modest financial incentives would foster cooperation on this sensitive issue have been misplaced. Among the priority countries, the

strongest results have been in Niger, where EU and national interests most closely converge, EU incentives have greater weight, and the sensitive issue of returns is less relevant. However, in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Senegal and Mali progress has been more limited, with the EU expressing frustration that these countries are not cooperating on returns, and partner governments expressing frustration that they have so far seen little benefit from the MPF in terms of investment in jobs or legal migration opportunities. As the EU begins to apply negative incentives in some of these countries, EU officials privately report that the MPF has been a failure, producing few results and souring relations with African partner countries (see Castillejo, 2017).

Box 1: The case of Ethiopia

Ethiopia is an MPF priority country and has received large amounts of EUTF funding. However, it illustrates the limitations of the EU's approach to migration.

Despite Ethiopia not being a major country of origin and itself hosting nearly one million refugees, the EU has prioritised returns in its partnership with the country. Ethiopia has not cooperated in this area and the EU, deeply frustrated, is now beginning to apply negative incentives in an effort to force such cooperation. The returns issue has come to entirely overshadow the EU-Ethiopia relationship.

For their part, Ethiopian officials report that they expected more from the MPF partnership in terms of European investment for job creation and legal migration possibilities. Ethiopian and international actors also express concern that EUTF funds are leading to multiple, uncoordinated and irrelevant migration projects.

The EU's attempts to incentivise Ethiopia to cooperate on European migration goals have been a miscalculation. The financial incentives on offer are simply not strong enough given the country's other sources of finance, internal political sensitivities, and Addis Ababa's determination not to be dictated to by Brussels. Ethiopia does not want migration to continue to dominate political engagement with Europe, but the EU insists that progress on returns is a prerequisite for strengthening collaboration in other areas. In the EU's desperation for short-term migration 'wins', it appears to have mismanaged engagement with a country that has been a largely constructive player in multilateral migration processes.

Need for a new approach

The EU's current approach to migration, as seen in the EUTF and MPF, is largely failing to achieve its goals and is undermining more constructive engagement with Africa on migration.

The EU must accept that demographic and socio-economic realities mean that Africans will continue to migrate and that Europe will increasingly need African labour (although matching African skills to European markets is a challenge).

Hence, the EU needs to work with African partners at national, regional and continental level to explore how best to foster intra-African movement that supports Africa's economic growth and allows both continents to benefit from safe and orderly African migration to Europe. This must include creating different types of migration opportunities – including circular migration, research and educational opportunities – and hence strengthening remittances and skills transfer to Africa. Indeed, many African countries at the summit urged the EU to do more in terms of visa facilitation and circular migration. The European Commission's recent communication on the delivery of the EU migration agenda hints at possible progress in this area, with plans for piloting legal migration.

The EU must move from attempting to address "root causes" of migration with short-term emergency funds to examining how the EU could really readjust its trade and investment policies in Africa to create more decent jobs and opportunities. It must also continue to press African governments to deliver on their own responsibilities to provide a decent life for their citizens.

The EU must look again at its approach to returns. A functioning migration system requires the return of those ineligible to stay. However, making this issue so central to

cooperation – given the small numbers involved and the much bigger weaknesses in Europe's internal migration systems – is disproportionate and unhelpful, as many EU officials privately recognise. Concessions on legal migration could perhaps help unlock the returns issue in a more constructive way.

The EU also needs to give much greater priority to ensuring protection of refugees and vulnerable migrants. While help for those trapped in Libya is important, it is a short-term "band-aid". What is required is a systematic focus on enabling people with genuine claims to access asylum and on providing protection to all vulnerable people on the move.

Finally, the EU needs to get its own house in order on asylum and migration. This requires being honest about conflicting interests between member states and working towards effective common systems that can effectively manage fluctuating migration flows and integrate incoming people. It also requires European leaders to shift the current political discourse to build public acceptance of migrants and migration. A change in the European mindset is crucial if Europe is to build a more constructive and realistic engagement with Africa on migration in the future. However, given the current populist and xenophobic political climate in much of Europe, this is a very tall order indeed.

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This paper is part of the research project "Europe's role in the world: from development policy towards a policy for global sustainable development?" of the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) funded by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

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DOI:10.23661/bp9.2018

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ISSN 1615-5483



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