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Refugees from Africa

Can a Marshall Plan Help?

Stefan Mair

The recent relief action carried out by the organization Cap Anamur in the Mediterranean Sea has met considerable response in the German media. It did not only result in a debate on the treatment of refugees from Africa and on the EU asylum policy but also on the situation of the refugees' region of origin. The point of departure in many media reports is to ask whether it would be better to undertake measures at the source of refugee stream, rather than to get tangled up in the issue of how the stream can be held back at Europe's gates. In other words, wouldn't it be better to combat the causes for seeking refuge rather than act against the refugees? Though it is easy to achieve consensus across the political spectrum for the idea of attacking the problem at its roots, the majority of proposals published to date do not do justice to the complexity of the matter.

In the social scientific literature on the causes of refugee flight, or to put it more neutrally, causes of migration, there is generally a distinction made between push and pull factors. Pull factors refer to the reasons a migrant moves to a particular place, while push factors are what motivates him or her to leave some place.

In the case of migration of Africans to Europe, both dimensions are clearly at play. For most Africans, Europe is the land of milk and honey, and to reach it is worth every risk and effort. In light of the obvious differences in the states of development between the two continents this belief is easy to comprehend. In addition, those Africans who succeed in making it to Europe do little to correct this impression

among those left behind. Their situation as illegal refugees or asylum seekers in reception centers may subjectively appear very desperate, yet by and large it is only the positive aspects that are communicated back home. Anything else would be tantamount to admitting failure and would disappoint those left behind, who are expecting to receive considerable transfers of money from Europe into the family coffers. Many refugees who set out for Europe from Africa know somebody who "has already made it."

But even if the positive image of Europe in Africa weren't so exaggerated, there are plenty of reasons for Africans to flee their countries of origin. The most important and obvious push factors mentioned in the

public discourse are civil war, humanitarian disasters, poverty and a lack of economic prospects. The problem with these factors is that those people in Africa who are most directly affected by them represent only a small minority of those who seek refuge in Europe.

Who Is Fleeing?

It should be noted at the outset when discussing the profile of refugees from Africa that the EU states are affected by such immigration in very different degrees and that Africans represent a small, though easily identifiable, proportion of the total immigration to the EU. In 2000, 21 million foreigners lived in Europe, of whom 3.4 million came from Africa. And two-thirds of them were from the North African states of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. The current overall breakdown of the migration stream is unlikely to be much different, though no reliable statistics exist to prove this, in part due to the illegal nature of the immigration now taking place. France and Portugal are the only states where Africans represent on the order of 50 per cent of all the foreigners living in the country. In Italy they make up about one-third and in Spain and the Netherlands about one-fourth of the foreign population. With the exception of Portugal, the majority of Africans in these countries are from North Africa. In Germany well under 10 per cent of the foreign population is African. Despite the Schengen agreement, the high level of African immigration to some EU countries does not mean that these are then automatically distributed evenly across the Schengen states. One reason is linguistic, but the main explanation is that migrants generally seek the social connections provided by already existing migrant communities.

The dominance of North Africans among migrants from Africa already indicates that it is not the continent's poorest countries and those most affected by civil war from which the majority of immigrants in Europe come. Even among sub-Saharan

countries the dominant source countries of Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria and Cape Verde (about 100,000 people from each of these four states live in Europe) are not among the worst off economically from an African perspective. The only exception is Somalia, which is also one of the leading countries of origin of refugees from black Africa. But here too the high numbers can only partially be traced back to the country's civil war. There was already a relatively large exile community from Somalia in Europe before the country fell apart. The vast majority of the 4.3 million African refugees who, according to the estimates of the International High Commissioner for Refugees, have fled their homes because of humanitarian disasters, civil wars and abject poverty don't make it to Europe. Instead they settle in safer areas of their native countries or in neighboring countries.

The origin of the overwhelming majority of migrants leads one to conclude that the stream of refugees that reaches Europe is mainly the result of three factors: geography, history and money. Firstly, geography makes it shorter and easier for North Africans to reach Europe than for people from the rest of the continent. Secondly, there are close historical relations between the North African states and France, Italy and Spain. And thirdly, there is the issue of the cost of migration. According to estimates in a report done for the Council of Europe, the fee paid to human smugglers for transport from North Africa to Spain ranges from US\$ 2,000 to 3,500. For those who begin their flight south of the Sahara, there is no doubt a considerable additional sum to be paid for the passage across the Sahara. The much cheaper method of flying to Europe is hardly an option due to the strict control at the airports in the countries of origin. Such high costs for migration can only be borne by people who are either relatively well-off by African standards, able to loan money from family and friends, who place them under considerable pressure to succeed, or, even worse,

who go into debt with the human smugglers. The traffickers demand rates of repayment that the debtor can usually only meet through income from illegal activities.

What Is to Be Done?

The fact that only a minority of migrants from Africa in Europe match the profile of the refugee fleeing hunger and war places in a new light a series of demands that are raised in connection with combating the causes of migration. First and foremost among them are the calls to increase development aid or even to launch a Marshall Plan for Africa. German development aid has in recent years, like that of most other bilateral donors, been aimed at combating poverty, as called for in the UN Millennium Development Goals. Those who accept the risks of migration, generally young men from Africa's major cities, haven't to date been among the main target group of development aid.

The reasons for their misery lies less in abject poverty and more in a lack of jobs and opportunities in general to improve their economic and social situations. The reasons for this are not so much the bad state of the health and education systems and the rural infrastructure, but rather an economic system that suffers from state mismanagement, corruption and the lack of the rule of law. These problems have been recognized in development policy circles and have been addressed at the conceptional level, but they have not been sufficiently integrated into actual aid programs. Despite a discussion that has been going on since the late 80s over the importance of the political conditions necessary for social and economic development, in practice the emphasis of German development aid up until recently has been on technical projects for the improvement of the social and physical infrastructure.

Before more development aid for Africa is demanded, it's fair to ask why the successes of development policy have thus far

fallen well below expectations. Those who call for a Marshall Plan for Africa cannot avoid this issue as well. If one takes the volume of development aid to date as a basis, it becomes apparent that there has always been a Marshall Plan for Africa. The financial volume of the Marshall Plan amounted to 2.5 per cent of the greatly reduced gross national product (GNP) of war-ravaged countries like France and Germany. In the 90s, sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa and Nigeria) received development aid equal to more than 12 per cent of GNP. In Mozambique and Rwanda the figure was even above 40 per cent. Moreover, the model of the Marshall Plan is at odds with the recently popular notion of partnership in development aid. The flow of aid from the historical Marshall Plan was tied to strict conditions and dependant on the success of the previously distributed aid.

German Policy towards Africa

One demand that has been put forward by Federal Interior Minister Otto Schily in connection with the refugee problem can hardly be criticized, namely the call for a coherent European policy towards Africa. A precondition for such coherence at the European level however is that the policy goals at the national level are clearly defined and represented persuasively in the European coordination process. Unfortunately, this is hardly the case in German policy towards Africa. While there is broad consensus at the level of conception that the focus of attention should be on fighting poverty, crisis prevention, and conflict resolution, as well as addressing the problems of bad governance, disintegrating state structures and barely functioning private economies, the implementation stage presents problems. Among them is the continuing debate between the Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, both of whom claim to be in charge of African policy. Another issue is the qualifications of

the personnel at organizations responsible for implementing German development cooperation and their approach in implementing this cooperation. Both are only marginally orientated towards the demands of the new focal points, especially towards the politicisation of development aid. Instead of experts in water supply and health systems, it is people who are capable of advising governments and who are experienced in managing conflicts and preventing crises who are needed now.

But a coherent German and European policy towards Africa requires more than just aligning institutions, structures and processes of foreign and development policy towards the new goals, as it has been done in Great Britain, for example. It also means being willing to intervene militarily in emergency situations. The intervention of Britain in Sierra Leone in 2000 and the European-led Mission Artemis to the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2003 have proven that small, well equipped and appropriately trained military forces are capable of preventing the escalation of violence, relieving the suffering of the affected civilian population and thereby creating the preconditions for a peace process. This could also work in Darfur.

For German decision-makers who are still very reluctant to get involved in military interventions the settlement of crises by the use of force means a particular challenge. But since the Federal Government signed on to the Franco-British initiative of creating so called "battle groups" – troops that can be rapidly deployed to regions of conflict – the government can no longer avoid considering where and under what conditions these troops should be used. Great Britain and France have repeatedly stressed that a main area of deployment of these battle groups should be in African conflict regions.

Conclusion

Even if it is possible to follow a coherent European policy towards Africa, to initiate an effective development policy and to put an end to the policy of agricultural subsidies, the difference in development between Europe and Africa will remain so extreme for decades to come that the pull factors of migration will continue to maintain their power. If one wants to stop the flow of refugees and is unprepared to take the leap towards a generous immigration policy, there is no way of avoiding using restrictive measures. A strict policy against human smugglers ought to be largely uncontroversial. But European refugee policy will also have to include early screening of the stream of migrants and determined deportation proceedings. But in the public discourse on this issue it should not be overlooked that migration from Africa makes up only a small proportion of the total immigration to Europe.

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