



Europe Fighting Irregular Migration – Consequences for West African Mobility

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In collaboration with African countries, the EU is fighting irregular migration to Europe through border control and deportations. However, rather than halting irregular migration, such policies reconfigure mobility flows and make migration routes more dangerous and difficult.

The arrival of over 40,000 African migrants and asylum seekers to the Italian island of Lampedusa this year has caused Denmark and other EU countries to reconsider their policies in relation to African migration. Images of ramshackle boats crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa have caused public and political anxiety around the perceived high number of Africans waiting to enter Europe, sometimes described as an ‘invasion’ or ‘flood’. Such apocalyptic metaphors imply a potentially uncontrollable catastrophe that Europe must counter. Indeed, one response to the ‘boat migration crisis’ has been a call for more intensive control of Europe’s external borders and return of irregular migrants to their countries of origin or transit.

This DIIS Brief explores the consequences of EU migration policies for West African migration, particularly irregular migration, and calls for consideration of their human consequences. While the admission of skilled and temporary circular migrants is being furthered, the combatting of irregular migration is reinforced through tightening visa and asylum legislation, externalisation of border control, and deportations. The overall policy tendency is thus a differentiation of African migration flows, making mobility easier for educated and privileged groups and more difficult and dangerous for the large majority. This not only applies for migration to Europe but also for migration within Africa, with grave consequences for migrants and their families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on research in this and related fields, the DIIS Migration Unit points to the following areas for policy development:

- Ensure evidence-based and context-sensitive policies. Internal, regional and international migration and mobility are established livelihoods strategies in West Africa and legal means of migration should be facilitated for all socio-economic groups, taking local practices of mobility into consideration.
- Carefully consider the human and political costs of the externalization of border control and collaboration with undemocratic regimes on combating irregular migration, border control, detention, and readmission. These measures may come at the cost of migrants’ human rights and without consideration of the social and economic (re-) integration of migrants and deportees. This risks increasing social tensions and conflicts between migrants, deportees and locals. Likewise migration within Africa becomes more difficult and dangerous with high human, social, and economic costs and, hence, loss of potential development contributions.
- The closing of established migration routes and exclusion from legal mobility flows cause the emergence of new and often more dangerous means of irregular entry, thereby also making migrant smuggling a more lucrative business. The most efficient way of avoiding high-risk and irregular migration is to ensure access to legal mobility and, in the long run, to support development processes to further safer migration as well as local opportunities.



THE EUROPEAN FIGHT AGAINST IRREGULAR MIGRATION

The large majority of undocumented African migrants in Europe entered legally as students, labour migrants or tourists but have subsequently overstayed their visas. A smaller number have entered irregularly with forged papers or by clandestine crossing of European borders. It is important to emphasise that irregular entry migration is first and foremost a consequence of lack of access to legal migration and is often more expensive, dangerous and difficult. Since the early 1990s and the 1995 introduction of free mobility within the Schengen Area, the EU has tightened its visa legislation for third country citizens and increased control and patrol of its external borders. Irregular crossings of the Straits of Gibraltar and of Sicily followed the introduction of visa requirements for North Africans in Italy and Spain in 1990 and 1991. From 2000 North African migrants were joined by sub-Saharan. European border control and patrol has subsequently been extended to the high seas and African territories and territorial waters, conducted by European states or the European border agency FRONTEX. This externalisation is combined with strengthening of African coastguards, migration management and border control systems as well as the stationing of European immigration liaison officers and police and military personnel in some African countries.

Voluntary repatriation and enforced removal of irregular migrants have also become an important policy priority for the EU and its member states. An EU return directive (2008/115/EC) was passed in 2008, obliging member states to remove irregular stayers following common procedures. While transpositions to member state legislations have not yet been implemented, forced removals are likely to become an even more prominent policy and practice area. So far the EU has entered into a range of readmission agreements, mainly with third countries bordering the EU and also, recently, with Pakistan. Currently there are no readmission agreements with African countries at EU level but the European Commission is negotiating with Cape Verde and Morocco. A joint EU-Tunisia operational project is also being launched to address irregular migration in the Mediterranean region. In addition, there are a range of bilateral agreements between European countries and countries of migrant origin and transit, linked to re-admission of deported nationals or third country nationals. Often readmission agreements go hand in hand with financial and logistical support to migration management systems, migration-development schemes, favourable visa arrangements and quotas for admission of temporary labour migrants.

Finally, the EU is engaged in risk awareness campaigns in countries of origin and transit, often in collaboration with IOM, UNHCR, FRONTEX and immigration authorities in the involved states. The aim is to warn would-be migrants against the dangers of irregular migration through outreach seminars, telephone hotlines, YouTube videos, radio and television announcements, posters, and migration informa-

tion offices. The underlying expectation seems to be that if Africans without legal means of migration are properly educated about the risks and dangers of irregular migration, they will – or should – stop moving and simply ‘stay home’.

AFRICAN MIGRATION REGIMES

Together these measures can be classified as non-entry policies based on differentiation of access to Europe. The mobility of some (desired) migrants thus comes at the expense of the immobility of others. Similar policy tendencies can be seen in African countries where the battle against irregular migration has become an important part of general migration policies and migration management. This not only has implications for African migration towards Europe but also for intra-African mobility. ECOWAS provides an example. Since 1979 the Economic Community of West African States has promoted free mobility and residence of member state nationals within ECOWAS. Bordering the Maghreb countries of Mauritania, Algeria and Libya, this implies that ECOWAS nationals have the right to move legally to the southern borders of these countries. However, inspired by the 2006 joint EU-Africa Tripoli Declaration on Migration and Development, ECOWAS adopted a ‘common approach to migration’ in Ouagadougou in 2008. While this approach emphasises free mobility, it also sets the combatting of irregular migration as one of the main objectives and commits ECOWAS member states to strengthening migration management and control as well as to returning irregular migrants.

In addition, a number of Maghreb states – being countries of migration exit, transit and settlement – have tightened their migration legislation and started to enforce immigra-

CROSS-SAHARAN ROUTES

There are currently three main sets of cross-Saharan routes: The coastal West African routes towards Mauritania, Western Sahara, and Morocco – possibly onwards to the Canary Islands (which peaked in 2006 and then declined); the West Saharan routes towards Algeria and Morocco – possibly onwards to mainland Spain or France; and the Central Saharan routes towards Libya and Tunisia – possibly onwards to Lampedusa, Sicily, or Malta (which currently is the most used). For migrants without sufficient economic means for air travel or the necessary legal documents, the cross-Saharan routes are divided into a range of separate elements. Travelling usually takes place in lorries between towns of migratory transit or settlement and is characterised by a high risk of violence, rape, and other kinds of abuses in addition to the risk of vehicle breakdown and abandonment in the desert. Furthermore the tightening and enforcement of immigration legislation and stricter border control and internal security checks in the Maghreb states make these journeys more difficult, dangerous and expensive, with risks of detainment and deportation, often under deplorable conditions.

tion control and deport undocumented migrants. In Morocco, for instance, immigration legislation has been enforced since the early 2000s; resulting in increased border controls, frequent checks of migrants' status and reports of deportations of migrants to neighbouring Algeria, where they are abandoned in the desert. Concurrently Libya was offered and received development aid – such as the now-repudiated Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation signed by Berlusconi and Qaddafi in 2008 – to curb African migration towards Europe and to receive irregular migrants apprehended in Italy. Following the recent political changes in North Africa and Libya, this and other agreements between EU member states and North African states have been suspended but new ones are underway.

While the stated aim of such measures is to manage migration and, in particular, prevent irregular migration, non-

entry policies and deportations have a range of side effects. Rather than simply stopping migration, they make it more dangerous and more expensive as established routes are closed and the means of legal migration are diminished. This development is further spurred by changes of regional migration systems where common destinations for West African migrants – notably Côte d'Ivoire and Libya – have experienced political and economic crises, prompting deportations of migrants and furthering the reconfiguration of mobility flows.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WEST AFRICA-MAGHREB MIGRATION SYSTEM

West Africa-Maghreb migration offers an example of the reconfiguration of an established migration system. Migration between these regions dates back to pre-colonial times



Simplified map of international migration routes in and from West and North Africa. Most West African migrants move and settle within West Africa or the Maghreb countries, rather than in Europe. Sources: Brachet (2010), Haas (2008), www.imap-migration.org, migrantsatsea.wordpress.com



when ancient trade and caravan routes traversed the Sahel and the Sahara. The routes were impeded by the imposition of colonial and later national borders but regained importance from the early 1960s with migrant workers from the Sahel belt working in development projects in Algeria and in Libya's oil industry. From the 1990s a larger number of sub-Saharan Africans (and migrants from elsewhere in the world) started to migrate to Libya and, from the late 1990s, also to Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. West African migration to the Maghreb countries is very diverse, ranging from labour migrants to students pursuing higher education or Islamic studies. While some have migrated for economic reasons, others have fled conflict and violence in their countries of origin or (former) residence, and some hope to move on to Europe.

The journeys from West Africa to the Maghreb often prove to be longer and more costly than anticipated, taking from a few weeks to several years, because of prolonged waiting times at transit points where migrants take up informal work to finance the onward journey, or wait for money to be wired from family or friends. Some migrants get 'stuck' en route, unable to move on or go back. There are now sizable and growing communities of sub-Saharan migrants living in cities like Nouakchott in Mauritania, Rabat and Oujda in Morocco, Algiers in Algeria, Tunis in Tunisia, and Tripoli and Benghazi in Libya (although many sub-Saharan migrants have fled Libya due to the civil war). While some migrants have entered these countries without the necessary documents, others have entered legally but overstayed. Undocumented migrants mainly find work in the informal labour market, often living under very difficult circumstances without opportunities for mobility or legalisation of their stay, and hence without any legal protection from economic exploitation and other kinds of abuse. Some of these migrants have been caught, detained or returned to a country of transit; some have tried to re-migrate several times – whether across the Sahara or the Mediterranean – and plan to do so again, given the opportunity or finances. Other migrants have come to work in the Maghreb countries, or resigned themselves to do so, given the difficulties, dangers and cost of onward migra-

tion to Europe. In all cases, the majority of sub-Saharan African migrants end up staying in the Maghreb countries with only a minority reaching Europe.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF NON-ENTRY POLICIES

Situations of confinement and irregularity are not only difficult for migrants but also for their families. West African migration is often part of family livelihood strategies, financed by the pooling of family resources with ensuing expectations of remittances or of support for the migration of other family members. Failing to 'succeed' as a migrant and fulfil such expectations can have economic consequences for households expecting or depending on remittances. Deportation is often seen as extremely shameful and sometimes results in exclusion from the family and local community as well as risky attempts at re-migration.

The emphasis on managing migration and combating irregular migration has thus made migration for the majority of African migrants more difficult, dangerous and expensive. Rather than bringing irregular migration to a halt, non-entry policies interrupt, decelerate and reconfigure mobility flows, often conflating intra-African migration with irregular migration to Europe. In addition to the problem of being based on alarmist perceptions rather than facts, these policies ignore the reality that the bulk of African migration takes place within the continent rather than to Europe. Finally, the European fight against irregular migration in African countries of exit and transit often comes at the price of collaborating with undemocratic regimes and authorities, and of violating human rights. The rise in boat migrants and asylum seekers from North Africa to Lampedusa this year is a lesson in the fragile and problematic nature of such strategies and an urgent signal for EU member states to reconsider the human consequences of their migration policies.

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FURTHER READING

Brachet, J. 2010. *Blinded by Security: Reflections on the hardening of migratory policies in central Sahara*, *IMI Working Papers*, No. 26.

De Haas, H. 2008. *Irregular Migration from West Africa to the Maghreb and the European Union: An Overview of Recent Trends*, Geneva: International Organization for Migration.

ICMPD map on migration routes: www.imap-migration.org

Migrants at Sea: <http://migrantsatsea.wordpress.com/>