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The EU's migration blind spots

Rather than addressing the so-called migration crisis, the EU has moved it to Africa

Routine cross-border trade and travel characterise mobility patterns in Africa. At a broader level, labour migration, forced migration, seasonal migration and migration for educational purposes form part of the migration dynamics in Africa. These happen at the domestic, regional and international levels and can be documented or undocumented. Currently, 85 per cent of mobility occurs within the continent. Conflicts and repressive governments, however, remain major sources of displacement in African countries. There are now an estimated 40.4 million forcibly displaced Africans (internally displaced persons, refugees, and asylum seekers), with an estimated 96 per cent of them hosted by neighbouring countries within the continent.

These figures starkly contrast with what migration within and from Africa is made out to be by popular European discourses. Images of 'illegal' migrants flooding Europe foreground the European Union's externalisation visions. Such labelling has resulted in externalisation policies that look at African migrants as individualised agents that are a threat to the EU and its member states. Consequently, these parties have outsourced migration management to border countries outside Europe to prevent migrants from reaching its internal borders. This includes several state and non-state actors, mainly in border countries like Libya, Tunisia and Morocco.

In Libya, EU externalisation projects have led to an influx of arms and funds to state and non-state actors (private security firms) willing to enact the European containment agenda. The funds have granted these actors political legitimisation that has been used to undermine migrant rights (interception from sea, forcible return, torture, unlawful killings, sexual violence and forced labour). The Libyan government and militia have further limited access to humanitarian actors, and many organisations have had problems getting visas (including the UN). In Tunisia, Sub-Saharan African migrants currently face human rights abuse from state authorities and civilians. Because of this Cote d'Ivoire and Tunisia have started procedures to restore entry visas for Ivorians following their mass repatriation from Tunisia due to externalisation and xenophobic rhetoric.

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The EU's externalisation projects have also negatively impacted African migrants further inland. For instance, in 2015, the Nigerien government passed Law 2015-36 under considerable pressure from the EU. The law – as applied since 2016 – , criminalises migration movements starting from the north of Agadez. Agadez is a transit city that has historically been a route for migrants from West Africa travelling to North Africa for trade purposes or seasonal jobs. Law enforcement agencies have capitalised on the strictness of the law to extort huge bribes from regular traders and migrants using the major travelling routes, consequently resulting in some of them preferring covert, non-monitored roads with the aid of smugglers. It has been insinuated that discontent with EU-promoted migration control policies partly contributed to the unpopularity of the toppled Nigerien president Mohamed Bazoum during a military coup in July 2023. In November 2023, Niger's junta revoked the law, claiming to look out for those whose economies had long relied on the traffic along the route.

Increased securitisation and militarisation, especially along the popular migration corridors in Africa, have also increased the overall cost of migration. Migrants must pay smugglers more money to go through new clandestine routes that emerge from these efforts. The more restrictions Europe puts in place, the more money smugglers make — and the more violent, organised and sinister the criminal groups attracted to the business get. African countries that have entered into agreements with the EU to process migrants in their territories are hotspots for smugglers. These countries, unfortunately, cannot prosecute smugglers as they have weak capacities and weak legal regimes to enforce such legislation. Rather than addressing the so-called 'migration crisis,' the EU has moved it to Africa.

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EU's externalisation agenda has resulted in more restrictive migration regimes within the African continent, as seen in the case of Niger and Cote d'Ivoire. Such restrictions have consequently fuelled irregular migration within the continent and go against Africa's migration and development agenda. For instance, Africa's Agenda 2063, Africa's Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), and the African Union's Free Movement Protocol, enshrined in the 2018-2030 Migration Policy Framework for Africa, advocate for free and safe movement as a step towards realising economic and social prosperity.

Free movement of goods, services and people have been cornerstones of Europe's socio-economic growth and should similarly be allowed to flourish within the African continent. The benefit of regular migration, especially regarding remittances, is a priority area for African countries and should not be overshadowed by the EU's limitedly informed occupation of preventing irregular migration from Africa. Contrary to popular narratives, most African migrants remain on the African continent (85 per cent), and those who move off the continent do so via legal channels. Further, 90 per cent of migrants entered Europe regularly and only 10 per cent irregularly in 2022. These figures necessitate the need to change the narrative on skills, too. Recognition of African migrants' skills will facilitate more regular migration and economically benefit the EU and AU. The EU must change its approach to migration cooperation with African states to realise the full benefits of migration.

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