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African perspectives

Holding a mirror up to Europe's migration policies

EVENT REPORT



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Listen up policymakers: Africa is not coming to Europe

Why do people from Africa move and where do they go? The answers – which are as varied, complex and multi-layered as the continent itself – can seem ‘obvious’ to those who live the experience or work in the field. Yet the perception of migration from – and within – Africa remains stubbornly disconnected from reality.

What should be done to change this distorted, often toxic, narrative once and for all? How can policymakers ensure that Europe’s migration policies are based on facts, rather than false, politically-convenient assumptions? After taking a minute’s silence to honour the countless people who have lost their lives crossing the Mediterranean in recent years, participants at Friends of Europe’s 5 December Policy Insight “African perspectives: holding a mirror up to Europe’s migration policies” grasped the challenge through an interactive discussion that also included live video links from across Europe.

“As a starting point we need to get away from this idea that Africa is coming to Europe,” said **Heaven Crawley**, Chair in International Migration at Coventry University, who carried out a major piece of research on the experiences of people crossing the Mediterranean to Europe in 2015.

“We need to change our perceptions. Think of Africa as an opportunity – a potential – and not a beneficiary of our largesse

Shada Islam, Director of Europe & Geopolitics at Friends of Europe

“The vast majority of migration that happens in Africa stays within Africa,” she said.

The disconnect between political rhetoric and people’s real experiences is such that EU policies and the debate around them has “more to do with the symbolism of what migration represents” than the clear evidence before us”, she said, adding, “Instead of evidence-based policymaking we now have policy-based evidence-making.”

“I really think we need to change our perceptions. Think of Africa as an opportunity – a potential – and not a beneficiary of our largesse,” agreed Friends of Europe’s Director of Europe & Geopolitics **Shada Islam**.

Why people move: a European obsession

Too many European politicians are obsessed with the question ‘Why do African people want to move to Europe?’ They are, arguably, equally intent on finding a solution to the so-called ‘problem’, throwing up barriers and looking for ways to decrease or stop migration.

“Talking about Africans as an undifferentiated mass is entirely unhelpful from a policy perspective. What we instead need to do is really unpack some of the different complex and multi-faceted factors that might be driving that movement

Heaven Crawley, Chair in International Migration at Coventry University

Both are based on false assumptions – firstly, that ‘all’ of Africa is trying to come to Europe and, secondly, that it is in Europe’s best interests to prevent that from happening.

“Talking about Africans as an undifferentiated mass is entirely unhelpful from a policy perspective. What we instead need to do is really unpack some of the different complex and multi-faceted factors that might be driving that movement,” said Crawley.

For those who do make their way to Europe, the reasons behind their decision-making cannot be neatly pigeonholed – they are hugely diverse, overlapping, and ever-shifting as life and circumstances fluctuate. Decisions are impacted by gender, age, class, economic opportunities and other factors. Often the ‘choice’ is made long after the initial move away from the country of origin – for example, a move from Nigeria to Libya for work, or from Eritrea to Sudan for protection, may result in an unsuccessful or unsafe situation that necessitates a new decision to move on.

Research published by Crawley on the experiences of those crossing the Mediterranean during Europe’s so-called ‘migration crisis’ in 2015 showed that conflict, poverty and lack of opportunity are certainly part of the story but, she added, “they are always intercepted by other factors that shape why it is that somebody feels that place they moved to initially is not a place in which they can rebuild their life”.

“And that’s really critical because the points of intervention at which we can make people’s lives better – either in terms of rights or opportunities – are not at the border of Europe, they are elsewhere.”

“[Europe has] got it all wrong, this feeling that all Africa is coming to Europe,” said **Issiaka Konaté**, Director-General of Ivorians Abroad in Côte d’Ivoire’s Ministry of African Integration and Ivorians Abroad. “It’s very important that we keep repeating this until it is taken into consideration,” he said.

The proof is in the data

When it comes to dealing in realities, the data on the true picture of migration as well as the quantifiable economic benefits it brings should be brought to the fore more comprehensively and convincingly. Such figures can serve to counterbalance the voices

of the populists and other interested parties who seek to control the agenda. This includes highlighting to policymakers the real data on Europeans migrating to Africa.

The vast majority of Africans move “to give, to learn, to explore, to contribute,” said **Natasha Kimani**, Head of Programmes at Well Told Story.

“A lot of us don’t want the data, facts are boring. It is much more interesting to be sensational and over-emotional

Natasha Kimani, Head of Programmes at Well Told Story

“If data shows migration is not what we perceive then we must see things changing... But a lot of us don’t want the data, facts are boring. It is much more interesting to be sensational and over-emotional. I find this also a challenge even within the African context.”

There was agreement that it should be a priority to engage with young people to change the narrative around migration. “How are we talking to young people about migration and foreigners?” asked Kimani. “In Kenya we speak extremely negatively about Kenyans of Somalian descent. It’s something I grew up with.”

“It begins when people are young,” she added. “The best time to begin with behavioural change is between 13 and 24 years old. We should change the conversations towards agency – that people are migrating for agency. For opportunity.”

“Most young people were leaving because they feel they don’t have the right platform in order to excel. I see that as an opportunity

Mbakeh Camara, Head of University Relations and Innovation at the University of the Gambia and Founder of Be Inspired Internationally

When people do opt to move to Europe it should be viewed as an opportunity for the destination countries, said **Mbakeh Camara**, Head of University Relations and Innovation at the University of the Gambia and Founder of Be Inspired Internationally.

“We found... most young people were leaving because they feel they don’t have the right platform in order to excel. I see that as an opportunity, because these are young people with determination, who are willing to take risks, and to invest, with a passion to succeed. These are criteria that everyone needs to nurture.

“They feel like The Gambia does not have what it takes for them to succeed and they are willing to do everything to go elsewhere. The question is what can we do



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1. **Mbakeh Camara**, Head of University Relations and Innovation at the University of the Gambia and Founder of Be Inspired Internationally
2. **Shada Islam**, Director of Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe
3. **Kenneth Johannesson**, Member of the Access to services for Migrants with Disabilities (AmiD) project's Community Advisory Board and Councillor in Sweden's Värmland region
4. **Giulia Tranchina**, Human Rights Lawyer at Wilson Solicitors
5. **Heaven Crawley**, Chair in International Migration at Coventry University



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so that these young people stay at home to advance our economic development?” asked Camara, who said their work at the university was geared towards providing such a platform.

Human rights violations

In some cases, the motivations for leaving home can be attributed more easily to specific circumstances, such as in the case of Eritrea where the spectre of forced, indefinite military and government service – and the human rights abuses that frequently come with it – has been a major driver for hundreds of thousands of young people to leave the country.

“It is not migration in the case of Eritreans, it’s human rights abuses in the extreme

Lul Seyoum, Director of the International Centre for Eritrean Refugees and Asylum Seekers (ICERAS)

“Once they cross there are vultures – traffickers who start bargaining with them,” said **Lul Seyoum**, Director of the International Centre for Eritrean Refugees and Asylum Seekers (ICERAS). “It is not migration in the case of Eritreans, it’s human rights abuses in the extreme.”

In other cases, migration is forced by kidnappers and traffickers who then sell people – many of them children – on to other traffickers. Many are taken to Libya, which is a recipient of EU funds to prevent migration to Europe and is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

“When you provide no safe legal channels to move and seek safety, people are forced into the hands of traffickers

Giulia Tranchina, Human Rights Lawyer at Wilson Solicitors

“This partially undermines the assumptions constantly made at the moment about the reasons why people move or end up in detention in Libya or in unsafe dinghies in the Mediterranean Sea. Chains of traffickers have been empowered by European policies,” said **Giulia Tranchina**, a human rights lawyer at Wilson Solicitors, who called on the EU to stop “collaborating” with regimes such as Libya, Sudan and Eritrea.

“When you provide no safe legal channels to move and seek safety, people are forced into the hands of traffickers to save their lives, and then they become victims of slavery and torture and sexual exploitation,” she said.

And what about factors that, demonstrably, don't drive migration yet so often find themselves at the centre of the political discourse?

"The assumptions that underpin policymaking in Europe, despite everything we know to the contrary from multiple studies that have explored the drivers of migration, still operate on the idea that welfare is a pull factor... and that search and rescue attracts people. I can tell you now that anybody we've spoken to who has crossed that sea does not do it on the basis of it being the best option available to them," said Crawley.

Policy vs reality: how can Europe reflect the facts?

Why has the wealth of research on migration been falling on deaf ears within the political and policymaking sphere, and will the new European Commission take a new direction? Will the plethora of planned summits on Africa in 2020 continue to look at the EU-Africa relationship largely through a migration prism?

The mission statement given by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson calls for a "fresh start" on migration, focusing on: creating a new pact on migration and asylum; relaunching the reform of asylum rules; closing loopholes between asylum and return rules; working towards a more sustainable approach to search and rescue operations; creating genuine legal pathways to the EU; stepping up the fight against human traffickers and smugglers; and reinforcing the European border and coast guard agency.

“ Human beings will move from one country to another... they need to understand that Africans have the same aspirations and there is nothing wrong with that

Issiaka Konaté, Director-General of Ivorians Abroad in Côte d'Ivoire's Ministry of African Integration and Ivorians Abroad

"As we come to the end of a turbulent 2019 and start afresh for 2020, what is the European Commission going to be able to do and what is the African Union going to do in this renewed fresh partnership, this partnership of equals that everyone keeps talking about?" asked Islam.

Issues with the EU's policy response to date were highlighted, including: continuation of the containment and externalisation approach; insufficient action to address drivers of primary and secondary migration to Europe, and the protection and integration needs of those already here; insufficient legal routes; failures of implementation, for example on resettlement and relocation; and division between the EU member states and resistance to change.

"The themes and trends have not changed since 2015, if anything they have just become more embedded. We largely have a border control agenda," said Crawley. Moreover, some EU member states have double standards when it comes to their

attitudes towards immigration, when many of their own citizens are exercising their freedom to migrate across the border to, for example, the UK, said Konaté.

“We are saying to these countries that the same needs their own nationals have to cross the border to go somewhere else – which are recognised by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – exist everywhere. Human beings will move from one country to another... they need to understand that Africans have the same aspirations and there is nothing wrong with that.”

“ We need to talk less about ‘migration’ and more about how we can support opportunities for people there to fulfil their aspirations

Anna Knoll, Head of the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM)’s Migration Programme

And yet discussions on EU external financing and instruments are still being used as leverage for migration governance, and the same scenario is also playing out in future budget discussions, said **Anna Knoll**, Head of the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM)’s Migration Programme. Ongoing talks around reserving a minimum 10% of the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) for migration governance was “very much a narrow framing”, said Knoll.

How could migration policies better reflect the economic and social reality and could a new kind of EU-Africa relationship be addressed in next year’s summits?

“We need to talk less about ‘migration’ and more about how we can support opportunities for people there to fulfil their aspirations, and that does not necessarily have to start with a migration lens. It’s much more useful for migration to come in as a mainstream issue. And if we talk about employment, for example, in African countries, we need to talk about creation of employment also for mobile populations, it’s not like they are static,” said Knoll.

Can local action disrupt the negativity?

Instead of solely relying on the EU member states and institutions to get their act together, should there be more emphasis on positive actions at a local or regional level, both in terms of creating policies that work and changing the narrative among citizens?

“At the local and regional level we are constructive...It’s important not to see it as a problem that needs to be solved, it’s an opportunity that needs to be achieved in the best way possible, and that should be our focus,” said **Kenneth Johannesson**, a member of the Access to services for Migrants with Disabilities (AmiD) project’s Community Advisory Board and Councillor in Sweden’s Värmland region. Although at the national level, populist leaders and increasingly negative public opinion

can make compromise difficult, Johannesson noted that “in the meantime, we have the human rights, we have the legislation, we have the decisions we can work with at a regional level – which means we can improve the way we are doing things.”

“When we are working in a constructive, pragmatic way, this will change... It’s important to bring everyone together to discuss this

Kenneth Johannesson, Member of the Access to services for Migrants with Disabilities (AmiD) project’s Community Advisory Board and Councillor in Sweden’s Värmland region

More inter-regional cooperation, the sharing of positive ideas and a genuine multi-stakeholder approach also has the potential to turn public opinion around, he said, “When we are working in a constructive, pragmatic way, this will change... It’s important to bring everyone together to discuss this. You will get more interesting ideas, you will do it better, and when you have concluded something you will also have a bigger sense of ownership.”

There’s an irony in the fact that we see more civil society action, more mobilisation, more grassroots advocacy, and more people living alongside migrants than at any time in human history, concluded Crawley. “Those alliances between people who are being marginalised by capitalism, and by other social and political processes, are where we start to make change. That’s where the potential lies.”

Recommendations

As the new European Commission takes over and addresses its priorities for the years ahead – including creating a new comprehensive strategy for Africa and getting a ‘fresh start’ on migration – they must work together with their African counterparts to ensure that their policies address the realities of migration. They would do well to bear in mind the following recommendations:

1

Pay attention to the data

Policies should be built around migration data and evidence, reflecting the complex and multi-faceted realities of the factors that drive movement. Policymakers should take the initiative to speak to migrants and refugees about their experiences, and this evidence together should form the backbone of a new migration narrative.

2

Support safe, legal pathways

Rather than concentrating solely on strengthening and externalising borders, focus on creating safe and legal pathways for those who wish to migrate. In doing so, cease supporting countries with unsafe human rights records – including Libya, Sudan and Eritrea – as a measure to stop migration to Europe. Look instead at ways to improve people's lives at other points along their journeys.

3

Migration is not creating an emergency

So stop treating it like it is. Develop longer-term thinking and fund strategies which focus on increasing inclusion. Push back against any moves to water down the basic human rights that underpin international conventions.

4

Encourage empathy

Engage with the youth in both Europe and Africa to encourage behavioural change and tackle xenophobia. Increase diversity within policymaking bodies to encourage open-mindedness and new ways of thinking. Tell the stories of ‘ordinary’ migrants to change the media's default position of covering only the ‘horror’ of the gang criminal or the ‘romance’ of the immigrant doctor.

5

Improve cooperation between Africa and Europe

Transform the relationship into one which frames Africa as an opportunity, not a beneficiary. In the long term, consider linking the new Africa Continental Free Trade Area with the European Single Market. Work as partners and listen to each other's priorities.

6

Don't ignore what is happening in cities and regions

Pay attention and give voice to the increasing amount of positive action that is happening at the community level. Strive for a truly multi-stakeholder approach, drawing out fresh ideas, common ownership and better outcomes. At the same time, increase regional cooperation and policy idea exchanges between European and African cities and regions.



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2. **Issiaka Konaté**, Director-General of Ivorians Abroad at the Ministry of African Integration and Ivorians Abroad, Côte d'Ivoire
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