

Knowledge Platform for Migration Governance in Africa

Platform Policy Brief 01

Migration Governance in Times of COVID-19

This is the first policy brief of the Knowledge Platform for Migration Governance in Africa¹ produced by the African Diaspora Policy Centre. The platform is devoted to strengthening the interface between research, policy, and practice in the area of migration governance at continental, regional, national, and local levels. The motto of the platform is: organizing a knowledge network for better migration governance in Africa. It contributes to the migration and mobility dialogue from the perspective of Africa. Additionally, it is committed to contributing to a better migration governance system that works to the benefit of all. The platform organized its first webinar in June to reflect on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on meeting the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) goals in Africa. The webinar was also an opportunity for the platform's network to convene virtually, since they cannot meet face to face at this moment as the coronavirus continues to rage across countries.

Introduction

Migration governance is a system of rules, regulatory frameworks, and policy tools for a viable migration strategy. It is also a policy mechanism instituted to govern the multiple facets of migration and human mobility dynamics in an integrated and holistic manner. Furthermore, migration governance is a system drawn up to promote viable policy instruments that result in good and tangible practical outcomes in different dimensions of migration. More specifically, and from a practical point of view, the system of migration governance is essentially geared towards minimizing the negative effects of migration while maximizing its benefits. Still, governing migration and its related issues remains a daunting task. This is certainly the case in times of relative stability; however, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its major social and economic upheavals, has exposed a number of the deficiencies in the system. The crisis has made it harder for the system to work in a modest manner. Its overwhelming impact on countries has also made it more difficult for governments to meet their obligations with regards to the Global Compact for Migration (GCM²) goals. In certain instances, this has resulted in the breakdown of the migration governance system, at least temporarily. This is because the migration governance system is

¹ A project assisted by the German Government via the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. The content reflects the author's views, and the GIZ is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

²The document of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) was formally signed and adopted by 164 countries in Marrakech on 10 December 2018. See further: <https://www.iom.int/global-compact-migration>.

more than regulatory frameworks, policy instruments, and legal mechanisms. It is about structured implementation plans, capacities, enforcement mechanisms, and coordinated responses that can translate policy into action. Migration governance as a system is generally discussed in abstract or in policy terms; this policy brief will examine the practical implementation of the migration governance system in three areas, selected because of their centrality in the discussion about the topic of migration and human mobility. They are: protection of migrants; migration management; and migration and development. In short, an ideal migration governance system is one that can deal with all three aspects effectively and in a balanced manner.

Protection of Migrants

The protection of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons is a key pillar underpinning a robust, coherent, and comprehensive migration governance system. This responsibility applies in both normal times and in times of crisis, like the current COVID-19 pandemic. Migrants, refugees, and displaced persons move to a place or a country for safety, refuge, or work. Current human mobility within Africa has been gradually growing in recent decades. Consequently, almost every country in Africa has become simultaneously origin, transit, and destination. In some countries, migration conditions are such that refugees and migrants have been stuck for years, even decades, without minimum protection and support from the host country. Examples include Liberian and Sierra Leone refugees in Ghana and Somali refugees in Kenya. The protection of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons includes, but is not limited to, granting them physical security, provision and access to basic services and livelihoods, employment, and permission to stay and settle if necessary. It also means taking additional steps to guarantee that migrants, refugees, and displaced persons residing long-term in a host country can be integrated into the economic, educational, societal, and cultural milieu and that citizenship is granted to those who aspire to become naturalized. Notably, the protection of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons encompasses more than granting their safety or access to basic services.

Protection should not be a piecemeal; it must be holistic. Currently, there are significant numbers of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons who have been residing in several countries in Africa for a long period of time without sufficient protection from host governments. They have not integrated into host societies and have not been provided a path to citizenship; thus, they remain strangers barely surviving in a country for decades. Displaced Liberians in Ghana is a case in point.³ It is clear that if host governments do not integrate migrants, refugees, and displaced persons into host societies in their respective countries, the dire situation will compel some of them to move beyond Africa in search of better protection. A key observation here is that host governments' responses to the protection of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons remains inadequate in many African

³ See the article, "Forgotten people: Former Liberian refugees in Ghana", published on Forced Migration Review (FMR) on 27-7-2020. See further the publication by Adepoju A., Boulton A., and Levin M. (2007). "Promoting integration through mobility: Free movement and the ECOWAS Protocol", Working Paper No.150, New Issues in Refugee Research, UNHCR. www.unhcr.org/476650ae2.pdf

countries today. They are yet to meet the obligations they committed to with regards to the GCM objectives, which urge host governments to provide inclusive protection to migrants, refugees, and displaced persons. Consequently, the welfare of this population is largely at the mercy of host communities, civil society organizations, and NGOs, both local and international, operating in host countries. This was generally the case even before the COVID-19 outbreak.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, many governments in countries hosting migrants, refugees, and displaced persons have turned their backs on them. They have adopted a nationalistic policy approach that conveys an “our nation first” message in relation to support after the lockdown. As a result, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis has hit migrants, refugees, and displaced persons in general hardest because of their precarious situation. Host governments’ neglect of this population has exposed in this instance the failure of the migration governance system at the national level. Once again, it has been the host communities, civil society organizations, and NGOs that have responded to the plight of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons in this devastating crisis. They have provided them with, among other things, food, medicine, and hygiene kits during the lockdown period.⁴ Similarly, Diaspora organisations have also supported migrants, refugees, and displaced persons badly affected by the crisis. A good example is the Diaspora organizations that have organized crowd-funding initiatives for stranded migrants, refugees, and displaced persons in different parts of Kenya and Ethiopia.⁵ Such civil society action illustrates a migration governance system working at the local level but failing at the national level in terms of a response to the COVID-19 crisis. That said, civil society organizations still lack sufficient resources and require support to strengthen the response from the migration governance system at the local level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected the commitment of many governments in Africa and elsewhere to meet the GCM goals in relation to the Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals, intended to be achieved by 2030. The GCM directly addresses the protection of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons and recommends host governments to act accordingly. For example, GCM goal 7 states that host governments must address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration, while GCM goal 15 urges host governments to provide access to basic services for migrants. Yet, many host governments do not provide sufficient protection for migrants, refugees, and displaced persons in their countries who have been badly affected by the pandemic. This can be partly explained by the magnitude of the crisis that governments have had to deal with suddenly and, perhaps understandably, we have seen them prioritize their nationals. In short, it is fair to say that the COVID-19 crisis has exposed the malfunctioning of the current migration governance system at national levels when it comes to the protection of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons. This challenge, which exists in both normal times and, as the pandemic attests, in times of crisis, must be addressed.

⁴ Observations from experts of the platform working on the ground in different African countries, who participated in the webinar.

⁵ Another example is the humanitarian relief that the Ethiopian Diaspora provided to refugees, displaced persons, and the poor in Ethiopia through their Ethiopian Diaspora Trust Fund (EDTF), created in 2018. Further details on the website of the Fund. www.ethiopiastrustfund.org.

Migration Management

Another key pillar underpinning a robust migration governance system is the management of migration in a feasible manner. This is the rationale that the GCM goals were formulated to promote safe, orderly, and regular migration. Essentially, management entails controlling the movements of people across countries and continental borders. People move due to pull and push factors. Push factors include conflicts, wars, extreme hardships, climate changes leading to droughts and desertification, lack of economic opportunities, etc. Pull factors include seeking personal safety and security, or better opportunities in terms of employment, education, freedom, stability, and a better life in general. Push factors are evidently just the other side of the coin of pull factors and vice versa. However, addressing the root causes (push factors) that force people to move and migrate to other places requires bold action. It cannot be resolved by controlling and managing the movement of people, which is effectively putting a bandage on a bigger problem.⁶

Ensuring an orderly management of migration is imperative, but it also avoids tackling the multiple root causes of migration listed above, which is indeed a complex undertaking. Migration management is a concept largely viewed in terms of the perceived risks that undocumented and uncontrolled migration movement can cause to new host countries.⁷ It is also a perception that feeds into the prevailing assumption that migration is primarily a problem that must be managed. In practice, migration management encompasses, among other things, border controls, combating human trafficking and smuggling, and gathering data on migrant routes.

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, the policy of managing movements of people took priority over the protection of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons. This explains the enormous policy attention and resources that have been devoted to the management of migration across-the-board in recent years. This has been the case, in particular, for migrants departing Africa and crossing international borders. On another level, managing migration has had a profound impact on current development cooperation relations between Africa and Europe. For instance, the European Union (EU) and some of its member states are using developing aid to pressure the African Union (AU) and certain African countries to stop migration from Africa to Europe. Specifically, traditional development aid has been instrumentalized to advance a restricted migration management policy. As a result, development aid has become a commodity for conditionality, forcing African governments to accept the readmission and reintegration of deported migrants from Europe if they want to receive aid.⁸ Yet, it is evident that aid conditionality is not effective in reducing the tendency of people to migrate.⁹ The most realistic approach to managing migration is to

⁶ See: Kappeli, A. (2018) 'The EU's answer to migration is to triple funding for border management. Will this do the job', Centre for Global Development (CGD). <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/eus-answer-migration-triple-funding-border-management-will-do-job>

⁷ See: de Haas, H. (2007) 'The myth of invasion: Irregular migration from West Africa to the Maghreb and the European Union', International Immigration Institute (IMI) research report.

⁸ See: Koch, F. (2017) 'Carrot and Stick? EU migration policy on Africa now marching to a different drum', in the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) publication.

⁹ See: Clemens, M. (2016) 'Development aid to deter migration will do nothing of the kind', in Refugee Deeply. <https://www.newsdeeply.com>.

address the root causes that force people to migrate, such as grave poverty, conflicts, unemployment, and deepening economic inequality. This is a long-term goal. However, a short-term goal, which is achievable with the necessary political will, is to create legal and regular pathways for labour migration. This kind of action is a way of tackling irregular migration and many African governments are now proposing such a policy in migration and mobility dialogues with their European counterparts. It is currently also the most sensible approach to ensuring an orderly migration process that benefits the development of both continents.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has seen harsh measures for managing migration consolidated. The movements of migrants and refugees have been restricted and, in some cases, they have been confined to certain locations. This has resulted in migrants and refugees becoming stuck in countries that do not want them after borders closed. This situation has exacerbated their vulnerable state and even those who want to return to their countries of origin have no means to do so and no one will take responsibility for repatriating them. This contrasts with the tourists from rich countries whose governments chartered planes to bring them home after the lockdown. This is how privilege works if you are not a migrant or a refugee in a time of crisis.

The harsh migration management measure taken in this time of unprecedented crisis raises questions about the repressive nature of the current migration governance system. Concern has been raised that the system as it now stands works to promote the management of migration above all, to the detriment of protecting migrants or promoting the development benefits of migration. It also raises suspicions that the system generally advances the migration management agenda of rich Western countries, i.e. an agenda aimed at controlling migration at all costs, even in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, the crisis offers an opportunity to revisit the status of the migration governance system and, in particular, its selective enforcement mechanisms. This will require learning more about how the system has been deployed to address migration dynamics in Africa. It is also important to reflect on how the system can serve the development agenda of migration, i.e. the development benefits of migration, pursued by African governments. A well-functioning migration governance system is one that works to the benefit of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons wherever they find themselves. It is a system that works to the benefit of both migrant-generating as well as migrant-receiving countries. The commitment by all governments to implement the GCM goals effectively can perhaps contribute to an improved migration governance system that works for all.

Migration and Development

A third key pillar underpinning an effective migration governance system is migration and development. Migrants, largely labour migrants, provide regular financial support to the families they have left behind. This support, in turn, makes a tangible contribution to development efforts in the homeland. The involvement of migrants in improving the livelihoods and economic well-being of families and communities back home has made them a defined constituency for development and their role is expected to become even more

decisive in the future. Migrants contribute to development both individually and collectively. Collectively, they have been organizing themselves as **development practitioners, business entrepreneurs, and skilled professionals** to increase the scale of their impact on homeland development. As development practitioners, members of migrant communities set up organizations in host countries, such as Home Town Associations (HTA). They use such organizations to join forces and collect resources in order to sponsor community development projects in a broad range of areas with the aim of reducing poverty and improving the livelihoods of local communities in cities, towns, and rural areas. Likewise, as business entrepreneurs, members of migrant communities have built up their own businesses in host countries. Some of them then extend their business activities to their respective homelands by setting up small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or by initiating joint business ventures with local entrepreneurs and counterparts on the ground. These partnerships and joint ventures between migrants and local entrepreneurs have, in many instances, facilitated local companies gaining access to financial resources, expertise, innovative trade practices, and valuable networks abroad. In addition, the enterprises set up by migrants have been contributing to skills development, job creation, and employment back home, which are extremely important at this time in many African countries. Similarly, as skilled professionals, migrants transmit and share their knowledge with local counterparts, namely, in three critical sectors: health; education (i.e. vocational education and training); and the promotion of private enterprises in their respective countries. For example, over the years, we have followed the work of organized Ethiopian Diaspora medical doctors from Europe and North America, who regularly return to Ethiopia to support, among others, local hospitals.¹⁰ Others specialized in different areas are returning to Ethiopia and to other countries through projects such as the Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA) programme,¹¹ which make it possible for Diaspora professionals to return home and support the skills development and capacity building of local institutions in their respective countries of origin.

During the coronavirus outbreak, organized migrant groupings were the first responders aiding affected communities. They quickly mobilized all kinds of urgently needed resources, be it financial, medicine, or hygiene kits and sent them back home. As has been evident for a while, migrant organizations and associations play a crucial role in improving the lives and livelihoods of poor and marginalized groups in home societies. They have also been contributing to the reduction of abject poverty in general. For a while, the strategic role and added value of migrant organizations and associations in development were recognized

¹⁰ A good example is the Ethio-American Doctors Group (EADG), which has recently announced plans to build a city medical centre that will focus on treating poor and marginalized groups in the society.

¹¹ MIDA, was used as an instrument to assist African governments to achieve their development goals through the creation and strengthening of sustainable links between Diaspora populations abroad and their countries of origin. The MIDA programmes were largely supported by donors, notably in Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands, among others.

among development community circles. As a result, donors and development cooperation agencies were willing to partner with them in their efforts to improve the development outcomes in their countries of origin. This recognition made it possible for migrant organizations to access government subsidies and financial support from the development cooperation budget of many Western countries, namely in Europe. This financial support enabled migrant organizations to thrive and promote all kinds of development-related activities that often cut across both social services and financial sectors. For instance, they became active, to varying degrees, in community development, health, education, employment promotion, micro-entrepreneurship, and business. Unfortunately, since 2017, many Western governments have halted or substantially reduced their support for development activities implemented by migrant organizations in their homelands. These subsidies have been diverted to activities geared to managing the movement of migrants and refugees in their respective homelands in different parts of Africa. The activities are implemented under an initiative hailed as a “Better Migration Management Programme”.¹² As the title of the initiative indicates, it is fundamentally aimed at monitoring cross-border movements of people and transit locations along migration routes within and across regions in Africa. It is also aimed at enhancing the capacity for border management to combat irregular migration and cross-border movements, which means choosing migration management over migration and development. In short, the decision to divert subsidies previously provided to migrant organizations and associations has resulted in the demise of many them. It has also resulted in an end to many long-standing development activities aimed at reducing poverty and improving the overall development in their countries of origin. Hence, the action to divert funding from development to management is a patent contradiction to the commitment made by many governments to goal 19 of the GCM – to create conditions for migrants and Diasporas to fully contribute to sustainable development in all countries.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the state of migration governance system in times of COVID-19 is illuminating. It sheds light on the system’s ability to respond, under the pressure of a crisis, to the needs of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons badly affected by the pandemic. It also reveals the extent to which the pandemic has temporarily halted the efforts of many governments in Africa and beyond geared towards meeting the GCM goals.

Migration governance as a system is generally viewed in abstract, policy, and practical terms. This policy brief examines the different practical responses of the system to the three aspects discussed above both before and after the COVID-19 crisis, namely, the protection of migrants, migration management, and migration and development.

The appraisal in this policy brief demonstrates that even before the crisis, the current migration governance system was not functioning well in terms of the protection of migrants

¹²For more information, see: https://europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/regional/better-migration-management-programme-phase-ii_en.

or with respect to promoting the development benefits of migration. Rather, the system is set up to facilitate the management of migration, which advances the policy interests of receiving countries outside Africa. The interests of transit and receiving countries in Africa are largely overlooked, despite the fact that they are dealing with bigger migration influxes. This situation has worsened during the ongoing pandemic crisis, as many governments are failing to offer basic humanitarian support to migrants, refugees, and displaced persons locked down in their countries. Others have used harsh migration management measures to control and confine migrants and refugees to certain locations, preventing them from returning to their homes.

The conclusion is that the current migration governance system works best for migration management purposes and is failing in terms of the protection of migrants and the promotion of the development benefits of migration. It serves the needs of receiving countries in the Western hemisphere over those of origin, transit, and receiving countries in Africa. Such concerns have been often echoed by many African stakeholders working on migration and development-related issues. The current COVID-19 crisis provides lessons for reflection and an opportunity to revisit the shortcomings of how the current migration governance system works in certain areas. This re-evaluation is needed in order to institute a holistic migration governance system that works better and also works to the benefit of all.

The analysis in this policy brief is informed by first-hand information from experts who participated in the first webinar of the Knowledge Platform for Migration Governance in Africa. It is also informed by the experiences and expertise of the experts in the field of the migration governance with respect to the dynamics in Africa and beyond. The experts who participated in the webinar represented different partner countries in Africa, namely: Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Kenya.