

BRIEFING PAPER

EUROPEAN MIGRATION NETWORK ROUNDTABLE

Sustainable migration from Africa to Europe

9 December 2020

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

- EU policymakers are giving renewed attention to achieving “sustainable migration”, which aims to benefit both the European and African countries involved. This approach is consistent with the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which emphasises the need to establish a credible dialogue between EU and third countries, based on equal partnership.
- Regional solutions represent a sustainable and politically viable option to address the need for international protection. Evidence shows positive results for development-based solutions in neighbouring countries that expand the capabilities and entitlements of refugees and host communities. Such initiatives conceptualise new settlement models beyond camps and urban settings and seek to create employment and education opportunities aligned with host countries’ economic needs.
- Regional solutions are not designed as a containment strategy but, rather, see the choice to migrate as an integral part of individual and social transformation. Irregular migration is often the last resort for individuals to achieve their aspirations for social and economic mobility to secure a better future. The high level of irregular migration to the EU has resulted in calls to create more legal pathways.
- Circular migration could provide a sustainable model for labour migration and a basis for constructive dialogue with third countries. The effectiveness of circular migration depends on transformed narratives that no longer identify Europe as the default outlet for young, aspirational individuals, but instead focuses on the economic prospects of African countries.

INTRODUCTION

The European Migration Network (EMN) online Roundtable on ‘**Sustainable Migration from Africa to Europe**’ took place on **9 December 2020**. It explored how to define and operationalise the concept of ‘sustainable migration’ by considering the whole-of-route approach from countries of origin to destination. By bringing together policymakers, researchers and practitioners representing different sectors and perspectives, the event fostered a better understanding of how to design sustainable migration policies that work for Europe and for third countries.

ROADMAP TO SUSTAINABLE MIGRATION

The first panel reflected on the meaning of ‘sustainable migration’ (as developed under EMN Norway’s *Sustainable Migration Approach*) and the [New EU Pact on Migration and Asylum](#), which emphasises the external dimension of migration management through enhanced cooperation between the EU and third countries.

Sustainable migration is a normative concept and could be a goal for migration policies in selected countries. Migration is sustainable if it has the democratic support of populations, meets the long-term interests of all parties involved, and fulfils basic ethical obligations. The question of sustainability, as well as the costs and benefits of migration, is best assessed from economic, social, cultural and political perspectives and should apply to countries of origin, transit and destination - the ‘whole of route’ approach. Sustainable migration offers policymakers the opportunity to achieve managed migration that is mutually beneficial for sending and receiving countries. Policy change in a receiving society might have a significant impact on emigration from a country of origin: what is sustainable in one country may not fit for another.

Circular migration has the potential to meet the conditions for sustainable labour migration by bringing mutual benefits to both sending and receiving countries. Circular migration offers a model to achieve the reciprocal benefits of economic migration, especially where careful matching enables that needs of both countries of origin and destination are met. It can also align migration and development objectives, providing a framework for constructive dialogue with third countries.

The approach proposed in the new Pact on Migration and Asylum underlines the need for sustainable approaches to migration. The Pact proposes to engage with third countries on a renewed partnership basis, seeking to find mutually beneficial migration solutions. It emphasises five key areas: 1. protecting those in need and supporting host countries; 2. building economic opportunities and addressing migration challenges and their root causes; 3. strengthening migration governance and management; 4. fostering cooperation on readmission and supporting reintegration; and 5. developing legal pathways to Europe.

The Pact offers an opportunity for the EU to engage in dialogue with partners to identify mutual benefits and find innovative ideas for sustainable migration. This will require acknowledging the complexity of different stakeholder interests (political leaders, businesses, citizens, etc.) and identifying the right stakeholders to engage in the EU and in third countries. Proposed solutions should consider which policies will work in the best interests of EU and African societies alike, focusing not only on incentives for highly skilled migration to the EU but on measures to mitigate brain-drain among the best-trained individuals from African countries. Policy and practice can achieve effective outcomes when they are results-driven and based on evidence, drawing on knowledge of what works, when, and under which circumstances.

COSTS AND BENEFITS OF EMIGRATION FROM AFRICA TO EUROPE

This panel provided an overview of current and future trends in mixed migration flows (i.e., economic and forced migration) from Africa to Europe. It addressed the costs and benefits, as well as mechanisms and tools to ensure sustainability for countries of origin and destination.

Mixed migration provides a useful lens to describe, understand and address the nature of contemporary movement. People in mixed migration flows face similar risks on the move, irrespective of whether they are economic or forced migrants. The drivers of movement are often complex and interlinked, and the decision to leave the home country can reflect a variety of reasons. The perceptions of mixed migration flows from Africa to Europe in policy and media debates are often based on emotional rather than factual arguments, yet, in reality, such migration is a relatively small-scale phenomenon.

The costs and benefits of emigration from Africa are difficult to calculate but brain-drain remains an obstacle to development in some African countries. The costs and benefits related to different categories of migrants and countries in Africa depend on the type of migration (regular or irregular), skill levels, and country context. Emigration generates benefits in the form of skills transfers from the diaspora and cash flows generated by remittances. However, it can also result in brain-drain, including from critical sectors like healthcare and infrastructure, and widen inequalities between households (e.g., those in/not in receipt of remittances). Although potentially opening opportunities for economic and social mobility, migration can also result in reduced living standards, rights violations, and risks to life, particularly for individuals travelling irregularly.

Sustainable migration solutions acknowledge that choosing to migrate is an integral part of individual and social transformation. Travelling irregularly is often a measure of last resort in the search for a better future. The high level of irregular migration to the EU has resulted in calls to create more legal pathways.

Demographic change can be used to build long-term investment and economic opportunity in African countries, rather than short-term 'panic' reactions to prevent migration. Europe benefits from migrant workers and African countries benefit from remittances, creating the potential for mutually advantageous migration if public policies were to encourage circular migration. Accepting circular migrant workers from African countries into the EU on the condition that their governments facilitate return once the employment opportunity has expired could build trust and further the development of circular migration as a legal channel.

A positive narrative about African countries' prospects of development and growth could encourage circular migration and ultimately produce brain-gain in Africa as well. Inadvertently, media images of poverty and political unrest as root causes of migration from some African countries create a narrative of instability and low investment potential, and of migrants as a potential net cost to European societies. New public narratives focusing on positive images and success stories could contribute to achieving the vision of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, recognising migrants as a resource, as well as the economic potential of developing African countries.

Better cooperation between Europe and Africa could maximise the benefits of migration and minimise its costs. This could be achieved through multifaceted approaches, including circular migration schemes. African and European authorities could seek to maximise the benefits of remittances and skills transfers to support the development of services and infrastructure in Africa for instance. Development aid could focus on skills development programmes and subsidies for new businesses, supported by more comprehensive foreign policies promoting fair terms of trade, better local cooperation, etc.

PROTECTION AND DEVELOPMENT IN REGIONAL HAVENS

The third panel explored the nexus of protection and development and how protection models can maximise the potential for sustainable development in the longer term.

Solutions for refugees must be sustainable in the face of long-term and cyclical trends - they must respect rights, be politically viable, and endure. With 25 million people displaced – the highest number since World War II – the rising need for protection is mirrored by declining political will to provide asylum in developed countries, the growth of right-wing political movements and increasingly restrictive migration and asylum policies. Hosting refugee in neighbouring countries offer a solution that is politically compatible with the mutual interests of western donor countries (who want managed migration) and host countries (who want development assistance). It also has the potential to meet the needs of refugees who may prefer to remain closer to their home country rather than risk a long and perilous journey to safety.

There is, however, a need to imagine new forms of settlement opportunities. Interventions for displaced persons are typically linked to camps, cities, and boats. Indeed, the general approach is to keep

people in camps in rural areas (30 %) or in urban settings (60 %), with few opportunities for gainful employment, active life and integration into host communities. Camps are currently not designed for the long term and refugees often struggle to thrive in cities. Drawing on available evidence, development-based solutions that expand the capabilities and entitlements of refugees can bring positive results for refugees and their host communities.

Findings show that access to education, vocational training and employment are the most important indicators for opening opportunities for refugees. Limited access to employment and education remains the principal reason for the systematic gap in welfare outcomes between refugees and their host communities. Data collected from camps in Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia show that years of education, the right to work, freedom of movement, integrated settlements, and market-based interventions are correlated with income. Improving these variables will result in better socioeconomic outcomes for refugees and host communities.

Refugee responses have both a humanitarian and economic element: sustainable regional solutions require benefits for host communities in order to foster social cohesion and opportunities for all. Evidence suggests that areas where refugees are settled have seen overall increases in wealth for local citizens. However, providing services to migrants can incur host community resentment, often focusing on access to services, cash transfers, and jobs. Where host communities believe that the arrival of refugees puts additional pressure on services like health, education and jobs, governments need to ensure adequate provision so that these services remain accessible to all, and where possible, demonstrate visible gains to the local population. This can be difficult in practice but is achievable with the support of the international community.

Preliminary results suggest a reverse relationship when applying the 'migration hump' theory to refugees. The theory robustly claims that development and income gains are correlated with a higher preference to migrate but when looking at data from refugees in selected African countries some development indicators (such as asset holding) may actually be negatively correlated with both actual international migration and with the aspiration to migrate. Refugees were found to be more likely to move to a nearby African country. While the ability to move may be linked to the availability of resources, the willingness to move is linked to other factors, such as family or social networks in potential destination countries.

Spontaneous settlement, resettlement, legal pathways to employment in countries of destination, and interventions to support countries of origin are all elements of a sustainable migration agenda. Fostering economic activity in regions of origin is central to creating a viable economic environment where settled communities and refugee populations can prosper, although it can be challenging to encourage firms to relocate. Promoting economic growth should not serve as a containment agenda, however, and host countries should consider how resettlement schemes could be aligned to match their labour market needs. For example, migration-hungry countries could consider recruiting people with the necessary skills and qualifications directly from refugee camps, with their governments topping-up skills and converting qualifications on arrival. Further, legal pathways could facilitate movement among people across the spectrum of low, medium to high-skilled work as well as seasonal work.