



DESIGNING LABOUR MIGRATION POLICIES THAT WORK FOR THE EU AND AFRICAN COUNTRIES

ABSTRACT

European Union (EU) labour markets increasingly need non-EU workers to fill the labour shortages that exist at all skill levels across the EU. Yet hostile attitudes in EU countries towards immigration stand in the way of addressing domestic shortages with non-EU workers. As for Africa, labour migration to the EU can play a key role in Africa's development, provided that policies are designed with African interests in mind. African countries should therefore be equal players in designing labour migration agreements to safeguard their interests and ensure co-ownership. This policy brief, after unpacking some of these complexities of Africa-EU labour migration, provides recommendations on how to improve labour migration policy for both parties. It calls for better communication on the need for labour migration to the EU, better integration policy and labour migration agreements that are developed in the interests of African countries.



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1. What is the current state of play of labour migration between the EU and Africa?

In 2022, all 27 EU countries experienced labour shortages, and analysis over time shows that most sectors have faced shortages for the past five years or more, meaning that shortages are structural and persistent.¹ Looking ahead, EU labour shortages are expected to increase considerably across a range of sectors and occupations, particularly in STEM occupations, healthcare and ICT.² Given the scale and nature of labour shortages in EU member states' economies, countries will need non-EU workers to fill in gaps in the labour market. Some of the factors causing shortages include an ageing population and the changing labour needs and skills mismatches associated with the digital and green transitions.³ While there are other labour market policy measures that can help, such as lowering the barriers for people entering the labour market and better matching between education and labour market needs, research shows that such measures need to be complemented with labour immigration.⁴

Social and political attitudes in the EU towards labour migration are mixed. Most EU countries recognise that labour immigration is necessary both now and in the future, yet some countries are more open than others. The majority of EU governments are caught in the paradox of wanting to expand recruitment from abroad to address labour shortages, but at the same time having to appease domestic anti-immigrant sentiments. A common strategy by governments in this instance is to differentiate between labour migrants, who are portrayed as desirable, and other categories of migrants, such as refugees and irregular migrants, who are depicted more negatively.⁵ A more extreme case is the Netherlands, where the attitudes of large parts of the government and the public have become so hostile that almost all types of immigration are perceived negatively. Even prior to Geert Wilders' successful election campaign, which had anti-immigration at its core, the

government's criticism of immigration not only included irregular migrants and asylum seekers, but also highly qualified foreign workers and international students.⁶

Another dimension is the differentiation sometimes made between skilled and unskilled migrants. Increasingly, EU member states are designing labour migration systems to facilitate entry exclusively to so-called 'highly skilled' migrants.⁷ Yet labour and skills shortages in the EU exist across all employment levels.⁸ In Finland, for example, despite shortages across different occupational skill levels, including those considered low-skilled – such as clerks, machine operators and other elementary occupations – legal labour migration pathways only provide access to foreigners with the highest salaries and levels of education.⁹ Part of the reason for this tiered approach is that highly qualified workers are often seen as more desirable, whereas the term 'low-skilled' comes with more negative assumptions that may be underpinned by racial and class biases.¹⁰



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Turning now to Africa, labour migration is becoming increasingly important, partly due to Africa's young and mobile population.¹¹ Labour migration can benefit development in African countries of origin. Firstly, labour migration can allow countries of origin to deal with domestic labour surpluses by supporting nationals to find employment abroad, and thereby avoid the unemployment of qualified individuals, referred to as 'brain waste'. Labour migration can also result in knowledge, skills and technology transfer to the countries of origin, referred to as 'brain gain'. The other side of the coin is

that labour migration has the potential to harm origin countries if outmigration contributes to domestic labour shortages, sometimes referred to as 'brain drain'.

The potential benefits for countries of origin are not always realised, however, partly because they may not be prioritised in labour migration agreements. One of the EU's flagship schemes for labour migration is the Talent Partnership framework. The Talent Partnerships initiative aims to ensure the EU has the right skills in the future; however, they are being increasingly communicated as a leverage to incentivise partner countries to cooperate on return and readmission. Not only does this approach risk harming relations with countries of origin, but conditionality on migration is becoming less likely to succeed. As was the case in Serbia, migration is being increasingly instrumentalised by third countries to suit their own aims. A conditionality approach therefore ignores the fact that it is the EU that needs the help of partner countries on migration, not the other way around.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Governments should make a stronger case for labour migration

EU member state governments should improve their public communications on the nature and scale of national labour shortages. This also implies communication about the need for workers at all employment levels, not solely for those considered highly skilled. Making a stronger public case for labour migration will not happen in member states with governments that are tough on migration. Yet, ultimately,



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as long as negative attitudes towards labour immigration remain, EU economies will find it harder and harder to meet their labour demands, meaning businesses will fail, economies will stagnate and welfare services for EU citizens will decline. Moving beyond this impasse requires honest communication with citizens.

2.2 Labour migration agreements should be negotiated on an equal footing

In the EU labour migration policy world, we often hear about the importance of building mutually beneficial partnerships with origin countries. Yet building such partnerships requires careful planning and equal negotiating positions. Done properly, labour migration provides an opportunity for positive dialogue and improved relations with countries of origin, something which has become increasingly important in the current geopolitical context. However, if agreements are not based on the principle of mutual benefit but instead on conditionality approaches to negotiate the return of migrants then international relations can be harmed. Countries of origin should be equal players in the design and implementation of labour migration partnerships, so that labour migration can contribute not only to the economic and social development of the destination country, but also to that of the migrant-sending country.

2.3 Integration is key for successful labour migration

Integration policy can help to improve public support for labour immigration, by creating more cohesive societies and promoting inclusion and respect between groups. In some EU countries, one of the arguments commonly made against more immigration is that the capacity to absorb more migrants has been reached. This point is often based on a perception or feeling rather than hard evidence, or may be influenced by disinformation and propaganda. In practice, the real problem may be poor integration or a low level of interaction between groups. Improving integration is therefore a helpful way to challenge

anti-immigrant sentiments. Finally, integration policy should not only focus on new recruitment from abroad, but also on the regularisation of undocumented people who are already in EU countries but do not have access to services or the labour market.

2.4 The developmental benefits of labour migration should be prioritised

Labour migration can benefit countries of origin in a number of ways. To ensure labour migration works for the country of origin, a context-specific approach based on rigorous labour market analysis is necessary. Moreover, to unlock the full potential of remittances (money that is sent home by labour migrants), which represent an enormous potential for household, community and national development and poverty alleviation in low- and middle-income countries, transaction costs should be minimised.¹²

Endnotes

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Founded in 1925 and named after Germany's first democratically elected President, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany. In more than 100 countries across the world, FES is promoting the values of social democracy, peace, and international solidarity.

The FES Flight and Migration Competence Center (FES FMCC) in Addis Ababa, established in 2019, facilitates migration dialogue among AU member states, migration experts and civil society organisations on the African continent. Focusing on four thematic areas, FES FMCC works with African and European stakeholders on EU-Africa dialogue, climate mobility, migration and development as well as gender and migration.

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ON SIMILAR TOPICS

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THE 'IRREGULAR' DISTRACTION IN THE NEW PACT

ENTRY POINTS FOR EUROPE AND AFRICA

ABSTRACT

In September 2020, the European Commission presented a New Pact on Migration and Asylum that proposed 'a comprehensive approach, bringing together policy in the areas of migration, asylum, integration and border management, and European Union's (EU) relations with third countries'. The proposal consists of an intricate and complicated set of legislation that, at least in theory, should reform the EU's current asylum and migration policy, and ensure a holistic approach to migration management. According to the agreed roadmap, the European legislators should adopt the 'new Pact' by May 2024. However, the outcome of the ongoing negotiations is impossible to foresee, as EU member states' deeply conflicting interests may eventually jeopardise a final agreement. In its current form, the Pact has been criticised by many observers, who regard it, beyond the dominant rhetoric that speaks of reform, as 'old wine in a new bottle'. The Pact, in fact, insists on the existing EU strategy, focused on curtailing 'irregular migration' and on the securitisation of migration. Such a regressive approach does not comply with human rights standards and worsens migrants' vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the Pact does not take into consideration the interests and needs of the origin and transit countries it will have an impact on. This policy brief argues that only a negotiated strategy between Africa and Europe that reflects a common understanding of migration, mobility and development can eventually benefit both continents.



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POLICY BRIEF
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A NO-WIN SITUATION

DECONSTRUCTING THE EFFICACY OF EU EXTERNALISATION POLICIES FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

EU narratives around externalisation are centred on the large and 'dangerous' flows of African migrants arriving by sea, and ignore the stories of the thousands of asylum seekers stuck in border countries in inhumane conditions or of the millions of Africans who prefer to migrate within their continent for trade and work purposes. This policy brief highlights the political, economic and social transformations caused by European externalisation policies within African states. The EU and its member states – using their political and economic leverage – are making deals with African states, urging them to replace their existing free movement protocols with the EU's requirement to stop migration flows. The emphasis on restricting migration to Europe combined with the shortage of legal migratory pathways is contributing to prolonged displacement in border towns and camps where asylum seekers and refugees suffer deprivation and fall prey to smugglers and traffickers. The funds from externalisation deals are being channelled towards the militarisation of borders and are bolstering the capacity of both state and non-state actors – especially in Libya and Tunisia – to perpetrate human rights abuses against African migrants. This policy brief surmises that externalisation perpetuates immobility amongst historically mobile African groups, results in the loss of livelihoods, introduces new forms of displacement, creates a surge in human smuggling and trafficking, and leads to unprecedented human rights abuses.



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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN EU MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

TOWARDS AN UPDATED POLICY COHERENCE FOR DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

ABSTRACT

Migration policymakers often desire to use development cooperation to manage migration, while development experts insist that development policy should be first and foremost about the Sustainable Development Goals. This policy brief examines how this approach is reflected in the current reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and other policy initiatives, to what extent the current use of development cooperation for migration management is in line with the SDGs, and whether and how the controversies between the two policy areas can be overcome. It concludes that the EU's current migration and asylum policies are at odds with the SDGs and the EU's Aid Effectiveness Agenda, both in spirit and in practice, for example when it comes to the use of conditionality. The policy brief posits that a progressive migration policy could even argue for the instrumentalisation of migration policy for development goals, promoting fair and well-regulated migration arrangements to foster economic and social development.



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COMMUNICATING ON MIGRATION: CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES

ABSTRACT

Media, policy and public debates about migration in European countries, and around the world, are often polarised and negative, contributing to demand for restrictive migration policies.

Where organisations are keen to shift this paradigm they commonly work to insert themselves and their more positive messages more firmly into public debates on migration. This paper discusses whether this proactive engagement is more effective in shifting public debates than the counter-intuitive strategy of attempting to lower the volume of the debate through less participation. We consider these options by examining the question through the lenses of framing and agenda-setting theories.



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COMMUNICATING ON MIGRATION: A CASE FOR COMMUNICATING HONESTLY

ABSTRACT

Migration is commonly framed in policy and media debates as a crisis (or crises) to be solved. In recent years public concerns shaped by this crisis framing have increasingly driven European voters toward populist political parties who offer ostensibly 'simple' answers such as numerical limitations on migration, migrant push-backs or mass deportations.

These policies are harder to implement than to promise, and as a result will tend to disappoint voters. They are unlikely to end public concerns about migration, nor resolve the migration challenges facing the states who put them into effect.

On the other side, advocates for more liberal policymaking commonly propose their own simplistic solutions such as the expansion of safe and legal routes to reduce dangerous or irregular migration flows, despite little evidence that these approaches would be effective.

These approaches on both sides fuel polarisation, underestimate the complexity of migration, overstate the likely efficacy of the policy tools available to manage migration and ignore potentially difficult consequences. This paper explores the implications of this for policy debates and considers how to reduce polarisation and work toward honest and realistic migration policymaking.



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COMMUNICATING ON MIGRATION: A CASE FOR COMMUNICATING CLEARLY

ABSTRACT

The words we use to discuss any issue have a bearing on how we understand it, and this is particularly true of migration debates, where the terms we use can be infuriatingly vague – creating generalised impressions of 'who people are' that can be entirely misleading and lead to policy decisions that may be misguided, affect the rights and opportunities of individuals or even place lives at risk.

This paper argues that terminology matters in the policymaking process, and that nuance and clarity are vitally important. It sets out suggested guidelines for policymakers and media dealing with the issue of migration.



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