

Business As Usual for Migration: The Sixth EU-African Union Summit

Some interesting initiatives have been agreed upon during the Summit regarding migration and mobility that, if rightly implemented, could mutually benefit both continents. However, they hardly signal a paradigm shift in the traditional donor-recipient relationship between Europe and Africa.

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – ANALYSIS

By Yasmine Akrimi– North Africa Analyst

1. UNDERSTANDING INSTABILITY AND (IM)MOBILITY WITHIN AFRICA

There is a fundamental fact that is hardly taken into consideration when it comes to African migration: more Africans are moving within Africa than from Africa to Europe. It is hence of equal importance to support African states in strengthening both development and mobility. The first portion of the AU-EU Joint Communiqué¹ seems to principally address European interests. The focus on “preventing irregular migration, enhancing cooperation against smuggling and trafficking in human beings, supporting strengthened border management and achieving effective improvements on return, readmission and reintegration” falls within a

¹ https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54412/final_declaration-en.pdf. All subsequent citations are from the same document.

logic of reinterpreting long lasting local and regional mobility and migration patterns as dangerous, both for African and European states.

The externalization of European borders in Africa has technologically modernized and militarized border management, threatening visa-free mobility, border economies and freedom of residence in the continent. The AU-EU Communiqué's language surrounding support for "strengthened border management" signals a continuation of the disruption of historically diverse mobility patterns, which in turn stifles regional economies.

Unable or unwilling to develop their interior regions and borderlands since independence, several African states have tolerated informal mechanisms of income-generation, particularly smuggling, as to limit risks of instability. This uncultured form of economic development allowed the state – through law enforcement – to maintain control over neglected territories through trade monitoring and mediation, and municipal taxation of the markets where the contraband goods are circulating.

Recently, internal conflicts and European pressure have shifted the perspective regarding porous frontiers, now considered as signaling a lack of sovereign territorial control and overall regional vulnerability. Western militarized approaches to border management flourished, supported by significant western training, equipment, and money.

Smuggling has historically played a role in keeping borders safe. Security forces relied on residents to provide information on unfamiliar or dangerous goods or people. Westernizing border management bears consequences both vis-à-vis efficiency and the livelihood of entire communities. Small-scale smuggling networks are becoming unviable and abuse by security forces has increased, resulting in impoverishment, grievances, and protests. In this sense, the EU-AU's will to address "the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement" passes by a careful attention to the fragile balance between modern border securitization and citizens' livelihoods.

Harsh border management has not proven to prevent terrorism either. Although most governments and international institutions systematically link smuggling to terrorism, in reality the nexus is rare. Association with terrorism is harmful for a smuggler's business – intimately linked with one's livelihood – as security forces'

laxity regarding contraband mobility transforms into a crackdown if terrorism is at stake. Radicalization is more likely to stem from economic marginalization, lack of political representativity and the security apparatus's abuse, all of which are exacerbated by border militarization.

2. WAYS FORWARD FOR EFFECTIVE COOPERATION

The announced Africa-Europe investment package, estimated at around 150 billion euros, aims to focus on investment, health, and education, specifically supporting public and private investment, as well as a green transition that considers African states' interests. Education is supported by programs like Team Europe Initiative on Youth Mobility for Africa, which, through "helping to strengthen Africa's higher education space and promoting the continent as a study destination for African students, can support African continental integration". Programs as such can specifically address "the challenges posed by the brain drain" and invest "in youth and women". If these investments go beyond a donor-recipient relationship, they can represent a promising first step towards a balance partnership.

The collaboration between the AU and the EU also offers a unique frame to focus on encouraging circular labor migration in mutually beneficial sectors, per instance by promoting regular migration avenues through the EU's talent partnerships, diaspora expertise and remittances for development.

When considering enhancing "pathways for legal migration", Europe should seriously listen to the AU's concerns about African migrant workers' conditions while the AU should understand European worries regarding pressures on public services in receiving countries. With the EU's push for a larger cooperation between its border agency Frontex and African states, the AU and the EU should discuss a clearer definition of the agency's own role in protecting migrants. Only in this way will "promoting voluntary return and facilitating sustainable reintegration of returned persons" and "strengthen(ing) asylum systems with a view to providing adequate reception and protection for those entitled, as well as work on their integration" succeed.

Perhaps one of the most important opportunities for cooperation is mobility within Africa itself. Although the EU supports the AU's free movement protocol, it continues to heavily invest in measures that constrain the movement of Africans both inside and outside Africa. Europe should rather focus on efficiently supporting

and improving existing mobility patterns within the African continent. Aiming for a better economic and geographic African integration passes through an attentive look at local or regional initiatives, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area. Here, support is a keyword as it is crucial to respect African states ownership of the free movement agenda.

Ultimately, the AU-EU's Summit did not signal a fundamental shift in the unbalanced interests between the two continents, although some promising initiatives have been announced. This is hence a call for coherence as a fine balance must be reached between the EU's will to implement restrictive migration measures and the AU's regional commitment towards the free movement of Africans.

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Authors

Yasmine Akrimi



 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 www.bic-rhr.com  info@bic-rhr.com

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel: +32 027258466