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The Impact of COVID-19 on Africa/European Union (EU) Migration

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1. Introduction

In December 2019, China reported a number of pneumonia-like cases in Wuhan, a city in Hubei province. By 4 January 2020, Beijing and the World Health Organization (WHO) had confirmed the infection as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which is the causative agent of coronavirus disease 2019, otherwise known as COVID-19. The pattern of its transmission and high mortality rate subsequently became a global concern. Thus, state borders around the world were closed completely or partially in an attempt to halt mobility and reduce the rate of infections.

In an effort to enhance the development of concrete and constructive policy approaches to managing Africa/European Union (EU) migration amidst the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 crisis, the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC), South Africa, and the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) in Sweden, held two joint webinars in June 2020 on "The Impact of COVID-19 on Africa/EU Migration". Both webinars also aimed to consolidate a Community of Practice (CoP) on implementing the United Nations (UN) 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. About 60 African and European policymakers, scholars, and civil society activists participated in the webinar series, with some attending both sessions.

During the first webinar on 12 June 2020, Dr Ahmed Bugre, a Malta-based Advisor to the Office of the Commissioner of Social Affairs at the African Union (AU) Commission in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Dr Franzisca Zanker, Research Fellow at the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute in Freiburg, Germany, led the discussion, while Dr Adeoye O. Akinola, Senior Researcher at IPATC, chaired.

While the first webinar focused on the overall impact of COVID-19 on Africa/EU migration, the second engaged more specifically on the 2018 UN Global Compact on Migration within the context of Africa/EU migration. During the second webinar on 26 June 2020, Dr Joy Kategekwa, the Strategic Advisor to the Regional Director at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Regional Bureau for Africa in New York, and Ms Anna Knoll, the Head of the Migration Programme at the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) in Maastricht, the Netherlands, led the discussion, while Dr Jesper Bjarnesen, Senior Researcher at NAI, chaired.

This report is based on key discussions and policy recommendations that emerged from both webinars on 12 and 26 June 2020.



“ COVID-19's transmission pattern and high mortality rate became a global concern. State borders around the world were partially or completely closed in an attempt to halt migration and reduce the rate of infections. ”

THE SKOMAGERHUS BORDER CROSSING BETWEEN DENMARK AND GERMANY CLOSED DURING COVID-19.

IMAGE SOURCE - UniGR-CBS
PHOTO CREDIT - Martin Klatt 2020
LINK - <http://cbs.uni-gr.eu/en/resources/borderobs>

2. The Challenges of COVID-19 for Migration

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of human life across the globe. By 31 July 2020, Africa had recorded 927,661 cases of COVID-19, including 19,650 deaths. Europe has been more severely affected: the continent (including non-EU states) had confirmed 1,716,071 cases by the same date, including 182,282 deaths. Beside the immediate health and socio-economic impacts, international travel and movement have been restricted, as governments attempt to curb the spread of the virus and to halt the rate of fatalities. In March 2020, 42 African countries issued travel bans and closed their borders as a way of curtailing the movement of people and the transmission of the virus. Such restrictions influence, among others, the pace and patterns of migration within Africa, as well as from Africa to Europe. Similarly, European states like Italy and Spain took drastic measures to combat the infection, with most EU borders closed by March 2020.

While Africa is not the epicentre of the pandemic, according to a May 2020 policy brief by UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, titled “Impact of COVID-19 in Africa”, the 25.2 million African refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and stateless people are some of the most vulnerable to COVID-19. The pandemic and its effect on the economic livelihoods of vulnerable African populations, and the accompanying concerns about how this phenomenon will shape migration to the EU, has deepened the conversation around Africa/EU migration. African states and their European counterparts have incurred significant economic losses and strains in governance as a result of the “lockdown” imposed by governments around the world to restrict the spread of COVID-19 infections. The current global economic recession triggered by the pandemic will also affect Africa/EU relations in many areas, including migration governance. This realisation has created a renewed search for innovative and sustainable policy solutions at the national, regional, and global levels.



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THE EXTERIOR OF THE AFRICA CENTRES FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (AFRICA CDC) IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA.

IMAGE SOURCE - Africa Union (AU) Africa CDC
PHOTO CREDIT - African Union Commission

LINK - <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20191212/africa-centres-disease-control-and-prevention-receives-support-world-bank>

3. The Impact of COVID-19 on Migration Governance

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), COVID-19 presents one of the biggest challenges to mobility. As the UN marked World Refugee Day on 20 June 2020, Africa/EU migration had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, about 40,000 African migrants attempted to cross the Mediterranean (mostly from Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria) to Europe (mostly to Spain, Italy, and Malta), with 739 fatalities recorded. Between January and June 2020, 3,638 Africans crossed the Mediterranean and arrived in the EU. In addition, 277 African migrants died in this period while attempting the trip. Most of these migrants that successfully made it to Europe are from Tunisia, Côte d’Ivoire, Sudan, Algeria, Morocco, Somalia, Guinea, Mali, and Nigeria, countries in which governance and security challenges persist. Indeed, weak public health infrastructure increases the continent’s vulnerability, and the structural causes of migration — conflict, underdevelopment, and limited economic opportunities — have thus been compounded by COVID-19.

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Relations between the AU and the EU have been impacted by the pandemic, particularly in terms of how migration from Africa to Europe has been managed, and how migration patterns are affecting political and economic relations between the two organisations in light of the pandemic. Broadly speaking, in Africa, migration to the EU is seen as an important livelihood strategy and as a developmental phenomenon with economic and social benefits for the countries involved. Most EU governments, in contrast, tend to treat irregular migration from Africa as a problem to be managed and curtailed. However, in 2015, the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) was established to provide an integrated and corresponding response to address the diverse root causes of insecurity, irregular migration, and forced displacement. This partnership has benefited some African countries: for example, in 2019, 3 per cent of Niger's gross domestic product (GDP) was drawn from EUTF funds.

The EU has, however, lacked a coordinated response to COVID-19. In some European countries like Germany and France, irregular migrants have been offered a fast-track to legal residence as the difficulty of containing the virus among undocumented persons became apparent. Even though fewer Africans arrived in the EU by June 2020 than in previous years, many European governments have refused them entry, citing COVID-19 as the reason. The EU also stopped its search-and-rescue missions in the Mediterranean, relying instead on aerial surveillance and the Libyan Coast Guard to block entry. These measures further aggravated the plight of African migrants under COVID-19. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Italy-based Mediterranean Saving Humans described these practices as illegal, and a violation of international human rights law.

While the migration of Africans to the EU has slowed, it will, however, not cease. Conflicts and governance challenges in Africa will continue to push migrants to attempt the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean from Africa to Europe. For example, when the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, called for the observance of a global cease-fire in May 2020 due to the pandemic, warlords in Libya — a major transit point for African migrants to Europe, where over 43,000 irregular migrants are currently trapped — broke the cease-fire on the very day that it was announced. Elsewhere in Africa, conflicts also continue to trigger migration flows. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), two decades of war has resulted in the displacement of about 6 million people. South Sudan's seven-year conflict spilled more than 2.5 million refugees into neighbouring countries. Instability in the Central African Republic (CAR) has resulted in 1.2 million displaced persons, while conflict in Cameroon has displaced 325,000 people. In addition, Burundi's instability has led to 400,000 people being internally displaced, while Nigeria's instability has internally displaced 2.5 million people.

Migration of Africans thus predominantly occurs internally, and the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the trajectory and processes of migration within Africa, where about 39 million people are internally displaced. In the UN Secretary-General's 2020 report, COVID-19 was described as a triple crisis for migrants in terms of health, socio-economic challenges, and security. The IOM recorded a 48 per cent decrease in migration flows in West and Central Africa between January and June 2020, owing to travel bans and restrictions on movement.

“ The EU stopped its search-and-rescue missions in the Mediterranean, relying instead on aerial surveillance and the Libyan Coast Guard to block entry. ”



A BOAT CARRYING AFRICAN MIGRANTS STRANDED IN THE STRAIT OF GIBRALTAR.

IMAGE SOURCE - The National
PHOTO CREDIT - Moreno / AFP
LINK - <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/by-shutting-its-ports-europe-is-letting-desperate-migrants-die-at-sea-1.1017949>

4. The Impact of COVID-19 on Labour Migration and Remittances

One major impact of COVID-19 on Africa/EU migration relates to labour. Many Africans in the EU, as with workers elsewhere in the world, have lost their jobs as economies and labour markets have shrunk due to COVID-19 complications. For many African migrants, mobility is essential to earning an income. Thus, lockdown measures and border closures have negatively impacted their job opportunities within the EU. This situation has forced European governments and citizens to recognise the significant contributions that low-skilled workers – many of them migrants – play in their economies, as debates over “essential workers” have increased due to the pandemic. According to an April 2020 report by the EU Commission on “Immigrant Key Workers: Their Contributions to Europe’s COVID-19 Response”, 13 per cent of essential workers in the EU are immigrants. The dire economic consequences of COVID-19 have resulted in countries, including EU member states, adopting nationalistic economic policies thereby neglecting migrants, notwithstanding their essential contributions to the economies of their host and home countries.

In addition to job losses and a lack of economic opportunities, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionately negative impact on migrant labour and the remittances sent home by African migrants from Europe. According to the World Bank, COVID-19 has triggered the sharpest ever decline of remittances. In sub-Saharan Africa, remittances are expected to fall from \$48 billion in 2019 to \$37 billion in 2020. The UN Secretary-General’s 2020 report also noted that remittances – a crucial revenue source for African countries – are projected to decrease by 23 per cent under COVID-19. In many African countries – Comoros, Gambia, Lesotho, Liberia, and Somalia – remittances constitute 10 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In addition, the cost of sending money from the EU to Africa, through banking apps and cell-phone services, are among the highest in the world. In the first quarter of 2020, the cost of sending \$200 in remittances to Africa is 8.9 per cent on average. Coupled with a reduction in remittance flows, the high costs of remitting funds have further compounded the effects of COVID-19 on African migrants and their dependents in their countries of origin.



“ The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionately negative impact on migrant labour and the remittances sent home by African migrants from Europe. ”

A PASSENGER WASHING HANDS USING A NEW INNOVATIVE DEVICE BEFORE BOARDING A PUBLIC SERVICE VEHICLE AT MUANGATSI MARKET CENTRE BUS STAGE IN BUSIA COUNTY, KENYA.

IMAGE SOURCE - InDepthNews
 PHOTO CREDIT - Kevin Wafula
 LINK - <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/the-world/africa/3496-kenyans-are-innovative-in-finding-ways-to-fight-covid-19>

5. The Implications of COVID-19 for the UN Global Compact

In November 2018, 163 governments agreed the UN Global Compact on Migration in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh. African and EU governments were the main players in the negotiations, and agreed on several controversial issues, despite their divergent views on migration. The Compact remains the first-ever UN global agreement on a common strategy for managing international migration. While not legally binding, the Compact was founded on values of state sovereignty, responsibility-sharing, non-discrimination, and human rights, and

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recognises that a multilateral approach is required for exploring the benefits of migration, while addressing its risks and challenges for individuals, as well as countries of origin, transit, and destination. While the UN Global Compact is strategically located to generate concrete recommendations for policymakers, its implementation will be impacted significantly by COVID-19.

The gains made by the UN Global Compact stand to lose considerable ground in the face of global restrictions on migration and mobility. According to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) in Washington D.C., two major implications arise for the Compact in relation to COVID-19: first, the pandemic is likely to lower the political interests of signatory states in pursuing policies for migration and mobility, given widespread restrictions on movement; and second, COVID-19 will most likely see funding for the implementation of the Compact's goals decrease, as many EU donor countries prioritise responses to internal crises related to the disease. However, African and European policymakers, civil society, and researchers have argued that the Compact already provides a progressive and global framework, which should be supported during and beyond the current COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic presents a unique opportunity for rethinking migration governance, inter-governmental partnerships, and the mobility of people more broadly.



“ In November 2018, 163 governments agreed the UN Global Compact on Migration in Marrakesh. ”

DELEGATES AT THE UN GLOBAL COMPACT FOR SAFE, ORDERLY, AND REGULAR MIGRATION CONFERENCE IN MARRAKESH, MOROCCO, IN DECEMBER 2018.

IMAGE SOURCE - International Organization for Migration
PHOTO CREDIT - Reuters/Abderrahmane Mokhtari
LINK - <https://unofficenyiom.int/global-compact-migration>

6. Policy Recommendations

The following nine key policy recommendations emerged from the two webinars in June 2020:

1. African governments should devise a viable programme of repatriation and integration for migrants from Europe. Repatriation should be a means to achieving a better life in the long term; African governments, policymakers, and civil society actors should therefore support transformative development in Africa by effectively expanding socio-economic opportunities for Africans.
2. Africa must embrace more intra-African migration through its regional economic communities (RECs) such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the East African Community (EAC), as well as through the AU's 2018 Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence, and Right of Establishment. The implementation of this protocol should prioritise public health issues, and be fast-tracked in order to protect migrants and ensure safe and orderly movement across borders. The AU must further construct new mobility policies that can simultaneously promote equitable intra-continental migration and increased trade.
3. The EU's pathways to legal migration should be more than just rhetoric and must be visible, accessible, credible, and sustainable. Racism, xenophobia, and the stigmatisation of migrants in Europe should be unequivocally condemned.

4. The EU has a human rights obligation to craft effective legal pathways that inform resettlement programmes for African migrants, and it must thus facilitate the transition from “ungoverned” to “governed” migration by implementing regulations that prevent migrants from slipping into irregular status.
5. The EU and other European governments should change the current narrative on migration and cultivate a new discourse, which meaningfully considers the voices of African migrants, governments, and civil society, and also addresses the asymmetrical power relations between Africa and the EU.
6. The EU should constructively revise its policies relating to the use of cheap African labour in precarious work, given how heavily the bloc relies on such workers. The COVID-19 pandemic has serious policy implications for labour regulation in the EU, given its disproportionately negative impact on migrant labour.
7. The cost of remittance transfers must be reduced. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs) of 2016–2030 projected a 3 per cent remittance transfer cost by 2030. The private sectors in both Africa and Europe have a critical role to play in achieving this goal.
8. Socio-economic and public health responses to COVID-19 in the EU and Africa should closely involve migrants, and their essential contributions to economic growth must be duly acknowledged. Furthermore, COVID-19 testing, treatment, and vaccinations should be made available to all, regardless of nationality.
9. The UN Global Compact must be engaged constructively to create an enabling environment for states and non-state actors in Africa and the EU to make the Compact a lived experience. There should be a clear definition of “free movement”, including the kind of borders this would entail and the spaces afforded migrants to lay claim to the Socratic “good life”.



“ COVID-19 testing, treatment, and vaccinations should be made available to all, regardless of nationality. ”

A MAN WASHES HIS HANDS AT A PUBLIC HAND WASHING STATION AS A CAUTIONARY MEASURE AGAINST THE CORONAVIRUS IN KIGALI, RWANDA, IN MARCH 2020.

IMAGE SOURCE - The Globe And Mail
 PHOTO CREDIT - Margaret Andresen/Reuters
 LINK - <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-african-countries-move-to-restrict-european-visitors-amid-coronavirus/>



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