FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

<u>Home</u> > Europe Is Making Its Migration Problem Worse

Wednesday, September 5, 2018 - 12:00am
Europe Is Making Its Migration Problem Worse
The Dangers of Aiding Autocrats
Loren B. Landau, Caroline Wanjiku Kihato and Hannah Postel

Loren B Landau is a research professor at the African Center for Migration and Society at Wits University in Johannesburg and former visiting fellow at Princeton University's Institute for International and Regional Studies.

Caroline Wanjiku Kihato is Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Johannesburg and Global Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

Hannah Postel is a PhD student in Demography and Social Policy at Princeton University.

Three years after the apex of the <u>European refugee crisis</u> [1], the European Union's immigration and refugee policy is still in utter disarray. In July, Greek officials <u>warned</u> [2] that they were unable to cope with the tens of thousands of migrants held on islands in the Aegean Sea. Italy's new right-wing government has taken to turning rescue ships with hundreds of refugees away from its ports, leaving them adrift in the Mediterranean in search of a friendly harbor. Spain offered to take in one of the ships stuck in limbo, but soon thereafter turned away a second one.

Behind the scenes, however, European leaders have been working in concert to prevent a new upsurge in arrivals, especially from sub-Saharan Africa. Their strategy: helping would-be migrants before they ever set out for Europe by pumping money and technical aid into the states along Africa's main migrant corridors. The idea, as an agreement hashed out at a summit in Brussels this June put it, is to generate <u>"substantial socio-economic transformation"</u> [3] so people no longer want to leave for a better life. Yet the EU's plans ignore the fact that economic development in low-income countries does not reduce

migration; it encourages it. Faced with this reality, the EU will increasingly have to rely on payoffs to smugglers, autocratic regimes, and militias to curb the flow of migrants—worsening the instability that has pushed many to leave in the first place.

THE FIRST WAVE

How did we get here? In many ways, European leaders are still grappling with the impact of the refugee crisis that has shaken the region since 2015, when record numbers of people landed in Greece, Italy, or Spain after crossing the Mediterranean Sea in rickety, overcrowded boats. Arrivals leaped from 60,000 in 2010 to 280,000 in 2014 to over one million in 2015. In 2014 and 2015 alone, more than 7,000 died while making the perilous journey across the sea, leading Pope Francis to describe the Mediterranean as a "vast cemetery." Almost 80 percent of the newcomers sought protection from conflicts in the Middle East. A smaller contingent came from central Africa, the Horn of Africa, and countries such as The Gambia, Nigeria, and Senegal, most without an entry visa.

Still recovering from the 2008–09 global recession [4], struggling to contain a debt crisis in Greece, and facing renewed fears of terrorism, the European Union was ill prepared [5] to handle the new arrivals. Europe's migration rules meant that gateway countries—such as Spain, Greece, and Italy—were disproportionately charged with processing asylum requests and were soon overwhelmed. Attempts to distribute asylum seekers more evenly across the bloc's member states failed spectacularly. Meanwhile, populist far-right parties quickly gained ground across Europe, fomenting fears of an invasion by unassimilable refugees. Fearing political losses, centrist parties hardened their stances on immigration, promising to end the crisis.

Even though some leaders, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel, initially took in many asylum-seekers, they quickly took steps to contain the number of new arrivals. In 2016, the EU struck a deal with Turkey, which tightened controls along its coastline and stemmed the tide of people crossing over to Greece in exchange for a pledge of six billion euros in EU financial assistance. Several countries, including Hungary, also put up fences along sections of their borders. As a result, the number of sea arrivals has declined sharply, to under 70,000 [6] over the first eight months of 2018. European leaders nonetheless remain anxious to discourage further arrivals and are looking southward across the Mediterranean for solutions.

DON'T MOVE

So far, Europe's response to migration from Africa is taking two forms. First, in what some governments have billed as a "Marshall Plan with Africa," Europe is recalibrating its development assistance to eliminate some of the "root causes" of migration, with a focus on education, unemployment, and high fertility. Second, and more immediate, the EU is clamping down on African migration through ramped up border security, data collection, and technical aid to African strongmen such as Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir and various Libyan militias. Yet neither of these two strategies will work—at least not in the way leaders in Brussels or Berlin intend.

For one, this is a matter of demographics. Today's most mobile people are not Africans but Europeans themselves, who make up 8.25 percent of the world's emigrant population against Africa's 2.89 percent. And of the sub-Saharan Africans who do move, the vast majority stay in Africa [7]. A small number live in refugee camps; most others move to neighboring countries to support their families, with little intention of ever migrating to Europe. This is likely to change, however. Sub-Saharan Africa's young and fertile population, which today is about 40 percent larger than Europe's, will be six times the size of Europe's by 2100. Even if fertility rates drop soon, the momentum for population growth will continue as today's children reach adulthood. Generating employment opportunities for them will require unprecedented economic growth [8]—not just in one or two countries for a few years, but across the continent for multiple decades.

Europe's proposed investments in African education, vocational training, and even infrastructure will not be enough to achieve the growth required to locally absorb the next generation of African labor. If anything, they will instead create conditions for further mobility: research suggests that economic growth in low-income countries tends to increase rather than reduce migration. As the UN special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants has pointed out [9], moving costs money, especially on risky and clandestine journeys. The most desperately poor are usually not in a position to bear these costs. Yet even modest increases in wealth and education provide more people with the resources and tools to move.

Eventually, economic growth will slow emigration, but those days are decades off [10]: our analysis of UN data indicates that migration usually begins to fall only when a country's GDP per capita reaches about $11,000—many orders of magnitude above most African countries' current levels of development. Indeed, only a handful of countries on the continent are anywhere near this threshold. According to the World Bank [11], The Gambia's GDP per capita in

2017 was a mere $483, Somalia's around $500. Even Nigeria, the richest of the major refugee-sending countries in the region, still had a GDP per capita of under $2000.

In short, the legacies of colonialism, weak governance, and misguided aid policies will continue to push Africans to move for the foreseeable future. Some will be absorbed by wealthier states on their own continent, such as Botswana and South Africa. Yet both of these countries are increasingly hostile to African migrants. And as long as earning potential between Europe and Africa differs dramatically, some will head north. Even if the proportion of Africans on the move does not increase, their absolute number will.

KEEP OUT

This leaves European leaders with a choice: accept continued African migration or double down on efforts to shut European borders. So far, they have opted for the latter. Uneasy with the sight of migrants arriving on its shores, the EU has sought to prevent people from getting that far in the first place. In practice, this has meant empowering dubious partners to curb the movement of people across their territories. These efforts began long before the recent refugee crisis, with millions of euros paid to Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi to stop migrant boats from setting off from his country's coast. Qaddafi was ousted and killed in 2011, but Europe's deals with authoritarian leaders and militias persist: in 2017, the Italian government signed a new deal [12] to strengthen Libya's coastguard, even though the country's security forces are known for rampant abuse and torture of migrants. A 2016 summit deal between European and African leaders in Malta offers another example of this strategy: the summit paved the way for a European "Emergency Trust Fund for Africa" of at least 1.8 billion euros to be spent by 2020. Almost all of this assistance is dedicated to countries feeding refugee streams across the Mediterranean, including Mali and Niger in the Sahel and Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan in the Horn of Africa. Needless to say, support to leaders such as Eritrea's President Isaias Afwerki and Sudan's ruler Bashir not only contains migration flows but also protects and strengthens broader patterns of authoritarian governance in the region.

In addition, the EU is seeking to externalize its border by pushing it southward: recent EU agreements have included calls to explore "regional disembarkation platforms"—centers in North Africa where migrants are processed before those who are deemed eligible for a visa or asylum are relocated to Europe. Yet the

platforms remain a proposal, as some European parliamentarians, various human rights groups, and several African states have refused to support their establishment.

Even EU aid programs labeled as developmental tend to have a strong security component. Take, for example, the tens of millions of euros being sent to cities such as Agadez in central Niger, long a hub for smugglers and migrants en route to Europe. Although ostensibly intended to help the region's poor by creating jobs in migrant transit areas, the plan for Niger [13] is far more elaborate. By supporting law enforcement to close routes across the Sahara [13], it effectively bisects the country into north and south, putting a heavily militarized border across an invisible line that was previously permeable and largely unregulated. Europe is trying similar strategies in Mali and elsewhere by investing in both local development and coercive structures in a two-pronged attempt to hold people in place. Yet if the United States' experience [14] in trying to stem the flow of migrants to its southern border is anything to go on, enhanced border controls can only do so much to prevent people from moving. In fact, they often generate increasingly elaborate mechanisms to subvert such controls. And rather than weakening smuggler networks, the EU's strategy of outsourcing its border control appears to strengthen them. Libya's detention centers, where migrants are often bought and sold as slaves, are the most notorious example, but similar trends have emerged in Sudan and Niger, with state and state-like authorities forming profitable smuggling networks and partnerships.

The EU-backed militarization of North Africa and the Sahel through patrols, deportations, and surveillance is not only costly, but enormously harmful to Europe's global reputation and self-image as a region committed to human rights and the rule of law. Moreover, the EU has promoted speed and dexterity at the expense of accountability: because its Trust Fund for Africa is paid for through emergency mechanisms, almost none of these funds are subject to oversight by the European Parliament. Some politicians and civil society actors have called for increased democratic control, but given the sense of political urgency and the glacial pace of democratic decision-making at the EU-level, their calls will likely go unheeded. Meanwhile, the EU's strategy of outsourcing its border control is making the bloc vulnerable to blackmail by authoritarian leaders: Libyan [15] authorities are unhappy with the deal they have received, and have refused to "tak[e] in more illegal migrants." [15] Meanwhile, both Kenya [16] and Tanzania [17] have threatened to close large refugee camps and disperse migrants. Statements by Kenyan officials suggest that they may seek

to replicate the model of the EU-Turkey deal and secure large amounts of funding from Western countries in exchange for limiting the flow of people to Europe.

Make no mistake: efforts to promote inclusive and equitable economic growth in Africa through vocational education, improved reproductive health, or enhanced institutional capacity could positively affect the region's future. But continent-wide success will ultimately depend on the ability of some of the world's most persistently stagnant and mismanaged economies to reform themselves. This, in turn, would require not tighter border controls across the continent but the opposite: open borders that allow for the movement of people and goods, expanded comparative advantages, integrated markets, and reduced tariffs. It would also allow those living under authoritarian rule to "vote with their feet" by moving elsewhere. In almost all cases—particularly in sub-Saharan Africa—these moves will remain local. Yet in absolute terms, the number of people heading to Europe will continue to grow.

EU leaders, meanwhile, should be careful what they wish for. Sustainable aid interventions can help set fragile states in sub-Saharan Africa on a path toward greater development and stability. But in the foreseeable future, these interventions will serve only to increase migration flows, not reduce them. And by relying on the cooperation of unaccountable, authoritarian governments with abysmal human rights records, Europe risks deepening political tensions south of the Mediterranean, ultimately undoing whatever progress its aid projects could bring. The regional bloc's energies and funds would be better dedicated to creating significant legal and humane channels for African migration. These might include greatly expanded labor migration programs, opportunities for students and internships, and a credible visa lottery system to encourage people to secure documents before leaving home. Given Europe's aging population, such efforts could be beneficial to both continents. If European leaders won't do this for Africa's benefit, then perhaps they will do it for Europe's.

Source URL: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2018-09-05/europe-making-its-migration-problem-worse

Links

[1] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2017-02-13/destination-europe

[2] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-greece/greece-seeks-eu-funds-staff-to-ease-migration-burden-idUSKBN1K826P

[3] https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/28-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf

[4] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-08-13/forgotten-history-financial-crisis

[5] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2017-05-11/europe-s-migration-dilemmas

[6] https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean

[7] https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2018/06/07/figures-of-the-week-internal-migration-in-africa/

[8] https://www.cgdev.org/publication/can-development-assistance-deter-emigration

[9] https://www.euractiv.com/section/development-policy/news/un-official-more-development-doesn-t-mean-less-immigration/?_ga=2.86334106.38505067.1535402281-1192543324.1535402281

[10] http://www.cgdev.org/publication/can-development-assistance-deter-emigration

[11] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD

[12] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/23/mother-and-child-drown-after-being-abandoned-off-libya-says-ngo

[13] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-niger/in-saharan-outpost-europes-unwanted-stuck-in-limbo-idUSKBN1GV082

[14] https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/why-wall-wont-work

[15] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/07/20/libya-refuses-accept-proposed-eu-migrant-processing-centres/

[16] https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/as-the-kenyan-minister-for-national-security-heres-why-im-shutting-the-worlds-biggest-refugee-camp-a7020891.html

[17] https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/tanzania-withdraws-from-un-refugee-programme-20180210