



Out of (and inside) Africa: migration routes and their impacts

by Roderick Parkes

The migration crisis in the central Mediterranean is proving to be a formative experience for the EU, in a similar way to the migration crisis of the 1990s. After several months of improvisation, the long-term impact on its foreign policy is gradually becoming clear. Three new features are identifiable in European thinking: the idea of ‘flows’, ‘pools’ and ‘bridges’.

The shock of the new

Between 1989 and 1994, an average of 480,000 asylum-seekers lodged their claims in Europe each year, reaching a peak of more than 600,000 in 1992. While this was a major shock to the EU, the impact on its foreign policy only gradually became clear. The EU needed time to turn its immediate reaction to the crisis into a more systematic engagement with the geopolitical drivers of migration.

In the past three years, the EU has been hit by another migration shock, not from the east this time, but the south. Between 2014 and 2016, more than half a million people crossed the central Mediterranean to Europe, moving from the Horn and West Africa through Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. These flows are again fundamentally challenging European foreign policy and its setup.

The foundations of this policy were laid in the 1990s, in the wake of the first migration crisis. This was the doctrine of ‘concentric circles’, or ‘arcs’, whereby the EU attempted to radiate a transformative kind of order abroad. The EU has encouraged deep structural reforms foremost in a nearby arc of Western Balkan countries, then in a longer and more varied arc stretching from Belarus to Morocco, and then across a broad swathe of Eurasian, Latin American and African countries where it has been carrying out classic development policies.

If that setup is now being challenged, it is because today’s migrants and refugees come from sub-Saharan Africa – from the outer swathe of countries where EU engagement consists of little more than development cooperation and is least driven by Europe’s own narrow interests. In other words, they come from places where the EU has the fewest tools to stem the flows. The migrants are also ignoring the EU’s carefully-delineated concentric arcs, moving from the outer arc in Africa, through Europe’s near abroad in North Africa, and into the EU itself.

The last few months have therefore seen a considerable degree of improvisation on the part of the EU as it tries to link up existing reform



programmes across the three arcs, refocus them on job creation and border management, and give them the added bite of diplomatic, humanitarian and military engagement. This response seems far less systematic than the clear-cut European approach which emerged from the 1990s. And yet the migration flows today, just as they were before, are merely a symptom of deeper geopolitical shifts.

Back in the 1990s, the migration flows were fuelled by a shift of global power, from east to west; now power is shifting from north to south, as wealth spreads to poorer economies and new powers emerge. In the 1990s, the EU had actively encouraged that shift; likewise today, the EU is feeling the effects of its long-standing trade and development policies in Africa. And lastly, in the 1990s, the EU would have undermined decades of international engagement had it sealed itself off from the migration flows. This is again the case today.

Filtering economic flows

The most obvious impact on EU foreign policy is that it now comprises a far greater component of what has been called ‘flows diplomacy’. European diplomats talk about focusing on ‘lines’ rather than ‘circles’ – they concentrate on the strings of countries crossed by the migrants, rather than trying to roll out reforms across whole arcs of states. So far this new policy has had a blunt motivation. The EU aims to manage the tricky relationships between the states on the routes out of Africa, to contain the flow of people, and where possible to provide migrants with better livelihoods close to home.

EU member states had been hoping for some quick wins, particularly when it came to West Africa and the irregular flows across the Sahel. After all, the migrant source countries in West Africa are relatively wealthy and democratic. The EU could reasonably hope to spur job creation in Nigeria or Cote d’Ivoire, and to quickly take the burden off poorer transit states like Niger and Mali.

However, this optimism was misplaced. These West African source countries, precisely because they are relatively wealthy and open, have an

interest in maintaining the flow of their people into European labour markets. Their goal is often to build up their diaspora in Europe, and to secure the continued flow of remittances. At the EU-Africa summit in late 2015, West African representatives delivered a stark warning to Brussels: migration is your problem, not ours. Since then, they have reportedly pursued a range of tactics to keep the path to Europe open, including reducing the opening times of their consulates in transit states like Libya, in a bid to push even vulnerable citizens onwards into Italy.

The situation is complicated by a new class of ‘predatory investor’ in Africa – emerging economies like China or Saudi Arabia. Beijing has not only set up logistical and military hubs at key trade chokepoints such as Djibouti, it has invested heavily in Africa’s cross-border transport networks through its Silk Road Infrastructure Fund, played divide and rule amongst littoral states to sew up their fisheries concessions, secured contracts in countries like Sudan by wining and dining political elites and – most notoriously – sent in its own citizens to fill many of the jobs created. Given all this, no wonder some in Brussels reached a bleak conclusion; that economic flows in Africa are the problem, not the solution.

The EU had been hoping that Africa’s growing prosperity, industrialisation and urbanisation would shrink family sizes and give people a reason to stay at home. Instead, the growth of economic flows seems to be spreading chaos and priming a demographic time-bomb, allowing Africans to afford big families and to move them abroad. Nigeria alone is destined to have more citizens than the US by 2050, and many of them will travel abroad by regular or irregular means. Some European analysts label this the ‘dark side of globalisation’.

The EU could easily have fallen into a zero-sum response. In the Horn, it could have exploited the region’s chronic *under*-development to stem migration, working with the Eritrean politicians who worry about population loss and want to close their country off from the world. In West Africa, it could have exploited the weakness of poor transit states: it could have turned a blind eye to smuggling networks for tobacco, petrol or subsidised goods, hoping to allow Nigerian or

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Guinean migrants to get rich during transit and saving them the need to come to Europe.

Instead, the EU has tried to take a positive approach towards the economic flows. The migration paths from the Horn and West Africa broadly follow economic superhighways such as the Red Sea and Salt Route. To truly succeed with its 'flows diplomacy', the EU has recognised that it must help replace the disorderly economic flows of irregular migrants, drugs or arms with orderly flows of resources, finished goods, investments and, of course, regular migrant labour. This provides a guiding rationale for the EU to coordinate its development, trade, agricultural, fisheries and labour migration policies in the region.

The EU has also perceived that the spread of economic flows brings certain benefits – notably that not all migration routes lead to Europe. Emerging economies like China are themselves becoming attractive destinations for African migrants. This realisation gives the EU's diplomacy a constructive international flavour, and the Union is slowly reaching out to countries like China or Saudi Arabia, with positive results.

When the EU launched its new programme to boost investment conditions in Africa, for instance, it worried about China free-riding on its efforts. But the EU soon discovered that China's predatory practices, such as courting African elites or sending its citizens to carry out work contracts, were in fact about mitigating investment risks. If anything, these practices should be assuaged by the EU initiative.

Creating regional pools

The EU is further tempering the old notion of 'concentric circles' with a new vision of 'interlocking circles': across Africa, it is helping to build up regional economic organisations, in particular those which provide options for local migration. European diplomats use the image of reservoirs or pools: by supporting the integration of Africa's regional labour markets, they will provide a pool of jobs for migrant workers close to home.

In West Africa, ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States) already

has an advanced free movement regime, covering major sending countries like Nigeria. In the Horn, the Intergovernmental Authority on

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Development (IGAD) has shown interest in the idea, although it freezes out major source country Eritrea. The EU is incentivising ECOWAS and IGAD's efforts by exporting its Schengen know-how. It has also talked about helping reduce the cost of remitting money across Africa (currently

as much as four times more expensive than between the EU and Africa) and about rewarding, under its Blue Card scheme, African migrants who had previously worked legally in their home region instead of heading straight for Europe.

In the long run, the EU's hope is that these 'new Schengens' will border each other and operate in unison, so that one zone's migrant entry system would be corroborated against another's exit system – hence the vision of interlocking circles. Or this at least was the initial hope. But it is now becoming clear just how difficult the undertaking is. These regional labour markets will only integrate, for instance, if they overlap with Africa's biggest national economies, and with the continent's manufacturing and agricultural value chains. But Africa is a real noodle bowl of regional groupings, each with a major sponsor state.

Under the umbrella of the African Union (AU), there are 15 regional African organisations. Thus IGAD's eight member states between them belong to three further groupings, COMESA, the EAC and CEPGL. Meanwhile, ECOWAS members hold overlapping memberships of CEN-SAD, MRU, WAMZ, UEOMA, and LGA. African states tend to shop between their various memberships, depending on where their interests are best met.

Even if ECOWAS and IGAD do succeed in developing EU-style free movement zones, moreover, there is no guarantee that they will actually remain open to EU know-how. ECOWAS members have, for instance, criticised the EU for its recent migration controls in northern Niger, painting this as a contravention of the ECOWAS regime. ECOWAS has been slow to do what every free movement zone should do – develop its own external border policy, including in northern Niger. EU member states have ended up pouring ever



more personnel into the region to take on border functions.

These, and other, difficulties have led some in Brussels to ask whether the free movement of people in Africa is the problem, rather than the solution. Even in a relatively cohesive region like West Africa, border-free travel exists more *de facto* than *de jure*, and its poor regulation could become a major source of international tension. Most countries in Africa lack decent civil registries for foreigners, and only a handful of Africa's 54 states operate an automated fingerprinting system. Migrants caught working irregularly across ECOWAS tend to claim that they come from a vibrant economy like Cote d'Ivoire: they are keen to be deported to a country with good job opportunities.

Ahead of the November 2017 EU-AU summit, however, EU policy has received a necessary correction. The EU is being obliged to aim for an all-of-Africa approach on migration and regional free movement. Due to the EU's heavy focus on IGAD and ECOWAS as the main baskets for its free movement policy, it neglected other key migration routes and organisations. Ahead of the summit, however, the EU has earmarked the sum of €10 million to manage the flow of people away from the EU, to the south. The EU has also begun lifting the distinction it makes between sub-Saharan Africa and its arc of North African neighbours – a simple reflection of regional migration flows.

Building bridges

The EU has long been under pressure to rethink what it does, and where. Cooperation partners everywhere have been calling for the EU to drop what they see as the artificial distinctions between various arcs and to mix and match its toolbox in new places. South-East Asian states like Laos have, for instance, pressed for the kind of deep structural engagement which the EU reserves only for its closest arc of neighbours. Ukraine has expressed frustration that the EU does not encourage transport routes through the eastern neighbourhood, in the same way as it does in Africa, merely because these would cut across one or more arcs.

The migration crisis in the central Mediterranean has spurred the EU to act on these impulses. It has encouraged the EU to move a little away from its old policy of radiating its norms outwards and to focus more on global economic flows and partnership with other regional

groupings. This seems a fitting response to the expansion of the global economy and the onset of global multipolarity. And, in Brussels, the discussion has now turned to setting its crisis policies on a firmer footing. The EU might try to transform its border-management activities in northern Niger, for instance, into a more-rounded customs hotspot approach, whereby it helps ECOWAS filter the region's flow of labour and goods.

But it is worth recalling that there are reasons why the EU has resisted shifts of this kind in the past: they are often the expedient option. Passing responsibility to regional organisations – be it in Africa, the Balkans or the eastern neighbourhood – can be a smokescreen for diminishing the EU's responsibilities abroad. During the migration crisis, this temptation to shift the burden to other parts of the world has only increased.

For that reason, the third feature in Europe's new foreign policy thinking will probably be the litmus test of how well it manages any deeper strategic shift. This is the discussion in Brussels about building up 'bridging states'.

Morocco in particular has positioned itself as a bridge between Europe and Africa in recent months. It is reintegrating itself into the AU, applying to join ECOWAS, and offering Brussels a bridgehead to the south. Such a bridging role would indeed make sense to the EU's new foreign policy approach, as Morocco both offers a link to a nearby region and is pursuing new infrastructure projects to improve economic and resource flows from West Africa to southern Europe.

And yet, in reality, Rabat's main point of attraction for the EU probably comes down to blunt migration control: Morocco is graduating out of its old status as a sending and transit country, and is becoming a country of destination for African migrants. If the EU pursues a special partnership with Morocco solely to exploit this fact, it risks breaking the bridge and turning Morocco's attention southwards.

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