

“In the long run, a policy whose main focus is on improving so-called border management in countries that are known to trample human rights and disrespect the rule of law cannot be successful.”

European Missteps on African Migration

NICOLE HIRT

In 2015, Europe experienced an unforeseen surge in the number of incoming refugees, mainly fleeing the civil war in Syria but also from other countries. This had a dramatic effect on public opinion, in part due to intensive media coverage of what was portrayed as “a flood of refugees” storming border fences and moving northward. Although Africans made up only a small percentage of the arrivals, the European Union has since engaged in a multitude of efforts to prevent people from the neighboring continent from reaching Europe by way of Libya. This may be due to latent fears that the rapid growth of Africa’s population and the lack of job opportunities at home will drive growing numbers of illegal migrants toward European shores. But have the measures taken by the EU to curb migration—partly to quell rising right-wing nationalism that feeds on discontent over immigration—been successful or instead counterproductive?

In the early years of the twenty-first century, European policy makers were worried about rising numbers of migrants and refugees from West Africa entering Europe through Spain’s overseas territories. They arrived either by boat in the Canary Islands or on foot in Ceuta and Melilla, two Spanish exclaves on African soil bordering Morocco. In response, the Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development (also known as the Rabat Process) was launched in 2006 with more than 50 participating states. The process is supposed to coordinate action by countries of origin, transit, and destination along the migration routes that connect Central, West, and North Africa with Europe. One of its aims is countering irregular migration, with a focus on border management and return policies. Another goal is to identify the root

causes of migration and to strengthen development initiatives that address them.

Under the Rabat Process, Morocco, as the main transit country on the Spanish route, has been encouraged to play the part of border guard for Europe. Ceuta and Melilla are now heavily fortified, and migrants are exposed to excessive force applied by both Moroccan and Spanish border guards; many have lost their lives while trying to climb the border fences or to reach Spanish shores by boat. Moroccan authorities have arrested large numbers of Africans who tried to circumvent these barriers and deported them to desert areas near the Moroccan-Algerian border.

However, closing down one migration route merely diverted traffic to others. When Italy experienced an increase in arrivals of Africans via Libya, then-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi did not hesitate to reach an agreement with the Libyan dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi. In 2009 they signed what Human Rights Watch called a “dirty deal to enable Italy to dump migrants and asylum seekers on Libya and evade its obligations.”

Italy pledged \$200 million a year for infrastructure projects in its former colony, purportedly as compensation for colonial-era misdeeds. In return, Qaddafi promised to block migration across the Mediterranean from Libya. The border patrols of both countries cooperated on transporting refugees and migrants back to Libya, where they were held in detention centers under inhumane conditions in a nation that was not a party to the United Nations Refugee Convention.

As passage from Africa to Europe through Spain and Italy became increasingly difficult, a new route across Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula to Israel opened up for a limited time for refugees from the Horn of Africa. From 2006 to 2012, it was used by people fleeing Sudan’s civil war and the autocratic regime in Eritrea, which forces its citizens to en-

NICOLE HIRT is a research fellow at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies.

list for national service for indefinite periods. They set out for Israel in the hope of finding protection there. But Israeli politicians soon complained that the country was being overwhelmed by what they called “illegal infiltrators.” The government started building a wall along the border with Egypt in 2010. Its completion in 2013 made entry for refugees virtually impossible.

Meanwhile, Qaddafi had been toppled by an uprising during the Arab Spring in 2011, which was backed by a NATO military intervention against his regime carried out by France, Britain, the United States, and Canada. Since then, Libya has fallen into disarray. Lacking a functioning government in control of the national territory, the country has turned into a migration and human trafficking hub once again. The number of migrants and refugees from both West and East Africa flocking to Libya in hopes of seizing the opportunity to reach European shores rose sharply after the fall of Qaddafi.

These developments coincided with increasing flows of refugees from war-torn Syria as well as Iraq and Afghanistan, crossing the sea from Turkey to Greece and continuing northward on the Balkan route. The EU’s Dublin agreement, which established that asylum seekers have to remain in the first EU country they reach to process their refugee claims, became obsolete under the pressure of their growing numbers. Over a million refugees entered Europe in 2015, triggering an array of measures ranging from the erection of border fences by some countries to unprecedented endeavors by volunteers in other countries to welcome the newcomers.

The differing responses of European nations depended on their politics and cultural backgrounds. The four Central European countries that make up the Visegrad group—Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia—have refused to accept EU plans to distribute refugees among member states according to a quota system and so far have taken only negligible numbers of refugees. Other countries such as Sweden and Germany were more welcoming.

The number of migrants and refugees reaching the shores of Italy also increased sharply. The Italian government responded by commencing rescue operations in the Mediterranean, motivated by shocking images of thousands of refugees who drowned after their boats capsized. At the same

time, however, it started to disregard the Dublin regulations.

In earlier years, fingerprints of all migrants were taken in Italy to prevent them from filing asylum claims in other European countries. But now Italy was transporting refugees to its northern frontiers with Switzerland and France to facilitate their border crossings. This accorded with most refugees’ desire to submit an asylum application in central or northern European countries, which provide far better social security benefits, housing, education, and job opportunities than Italy.

The bulk of the African migrants came from Eritrea. In 2015, when 27,600 Eritrean refugees were granted protection in Europe, they were the second-largest group after Syrians. Of course, the influx that led to the breakdown of Europe’s border protection system was mainly caused by the conflicts in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries. Eritreans and smaller numbers of Sudanese, Somalis, and Ethiopians simply took the chance of reaching Europe amid the prevailing chaos.

Many Eritreans had relatives in Europe who had fled during the 1980s, when Eritrea was locked in a long war of independence against Ethiopian occupation. Yet most refugees in the Horn stayed in neighboring countries,

where they remain to this day.

Many European decision makers still regard refugees as purely economically motivated.

MIGRATION MANAGEMENT

Many Europeans were shocked by the sharp increase in the number of refugees arriving not only via the Balkan route but also from Africa in 2014 and especially 2015. Right-wing anti-EU populists were on the rise in many countries, including France, Britain, and Germany. The EU fell into a reactive mode and approved a number of measures to curb migration and prevent refugees from entering Europe.

In East Africa, the Khartoum Process, an EU initiative intended to facilitate cooperation among countries of origin, transit, and destination on migrant routes from the Horn of Africa to Europe, was launched in 2014 as a counterpart to the Rabat Process, which addressed migration from West and North Africa. In particular, the EU aimed to take action against human trafficking through a dialogue with the governments of Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and South Sudan. Participating countries promised to take concrete measures to

improve “migration management,” a euphemism for stopping the flow toward Europe.

One year later, European and African heads of state met at Malta to approve the Valetta Action Plan, which aims to prevent human trafficking, improve migrant protection, and increase cooperation with sending countries on readmission and reintegration of repatriated refugees. A statement by the European Commission in the run-up to the Valetta summit made it clear that the main purpose of the plan from the EU’s perspective was to limit the numbers of refugees reaching Europe via Libya. African leaders hoped for additional resources and increased European investment—not only development projects, but also technical equipment for their paramilitary forces under the pretext of improving border protection. One major component of Europe’s strategy was to help Libyan authorities establish a coast guard and train guards to serve on the border with African nations to the south. It would provide 2.85 billion euros in financing for these measures from the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa.

In 2016, the EU established a Migration Partnership Framework that included bilateral deals with Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Ethiopia to take action against gangs involved in human trafficking and facilitate the voluntary return of migrants to their home countries. The long-term aim is to tackle the reasons for flight by supporting the political, social, and economic development of the five African partner countries with an investment of 8 billion euros between 2016 and 2020.

There is nothing new in this concept. For the most part the plan consists of conventional development aid packages, though one component is exceptional: it calls for breaking the business model that enriches human traffickers by opening safe and legal pathways to Europe for refugees in need of protection. Resistance by right-wing politicians in Europe will make it extremely difficult to pass the necessary legislation. The only exception to date is a small French outpost in Niger, which offers the possibility for migrants to be interviewed before embarking on the perilous journey to Europe and allows legal transit for a small number of people who are awarded refugee status. Yet its capacity is insufficient to make a difference.

What have the policies enacted so far actually accomplished, for better or for worse? The number of refugees and migrants reaching Europe by sea decreased from 360,000 in 2016 to 160,000 in 2017. Those who seek to use transit routes run-

ning through the African continent toward Europe face more obstacles, and crossing the Mediterranean via Libya has become more difficult. But disturbing trends continue: 246 lives were lost in the Mediterranean in the month of January 2018 alone. In November 2017, CNN broadcast a shocking report about slave markets in Libya, which triggered action by the EU that included organizing the voluntary repatriation of some 30,000 vulnerable African migrants from Libyan camps to their countries of origin. The EU also increased its support for international organizations such as the UN refugee agency that provide assistance to those who remain in Libyan detention centers under unbearable conditions.

Nonetheless, the EU did not shy away from proceeding with its plans to improve border management by training Libyan coast guard officers who are known for operating like warlords and engaging in human trafficking. Europe also cooperates with dictators such as Sudan’s Omar al-Bashir, whose militias get funds through the Khartoum Process and hunt down refugees headed for Libya. Those who get caught are detained and eventually deported.

FLIGHT FROM THE HORN

Farther south, Ethiopia is one of Europe’s most important regional partners in the Horn of Africa. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Ethiopia currently hosts over 800,000 refugees, almost half of them from South Sudan, 250,000 from Somalia, and more than 160,000 from Eritrea. Most refugees in the region have fled protracted conflicts such as those in Somalia and South Sudan. In Eritrea, open-ended military and national service conscription, which resembles a system of forced labor organized by the country’s military leadership and ruling party, has caused an exodus of hundreds of thousands of citizens since it was implemented in 2002.

Ordinary Ethiopians have little chance of winning asylum in Europe, but some make the journey anyway in the hope that they will be able to pass as Eritreans, who have good odds of being granted asylum status or at least temporary protection. Ethiopia is ruled by an authoritarian government that claimed 100 percent of the parliamentary seats in the last national elections in 2015. It has used antiterrorism legislation to mute critical voices. Nevertheless, the ruling party has been struggling with rising dissent in recent years, which continued despite a state of emergency declared in Oc-

tober 2016 after months of protests by citizens who felt betrayed by the ruling elite and excluded from the benefits of economic growth. The state of emergency was not lifted until August 2017, but antigovernment protests are on the rise again. In February, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned, leaving the country's future in limbo.

Europe is funding a project called Stemming Irregular Migration in Northern and Central Ethiopia, which is part of the Khartoum Process and financed by the Emergency Trust Fund. It has the broad aim of improving the living conditions of the most vulnerable groups in this country of 100 million, with a special focus on women and youth in the capital, Addis Ababa, and in all densely populated areas of Ethiopia. But the project lacks cohesion and gives the impression that money is being haphazardly sprinkled around. The rationale is also questionable: while labor migration from Ethiopia to the Persian Gulf states is common, there have been few signs of mass migration of impoverished youth and women to Europe.

Another EU project, the Regional Development and Protection Program, seems more targeted: it aims to improve living conditions in the refugee camps in Ethiopia. To boost the economic prospects of their Eritrean and Somali inhabitants, the program is designed to create job opportunities for both refugees and locals in industrial zones.

DUBIOUS PARTNERS

Eritrea is another party to the Khartoum Process. Despite its small population of around 5 million, the country is among the leading sources of refugees on the African continent. The autocratic government of President Isaias Afewerki has imposed rules that bar Eritreans from leaving the country without an exit visa, which is virtually unobtainable for citizens from 18 to 60 years old who are eligible for national service. People who try to cross the border illegally are at risk of being shot or detained in penal camps.

There are no EU projects related to migration in Eritrea, but one bizarre project dubbed “Better Migration Management” is supposed to be implemented by GIZ, a German government agency that focuses on international development cooperation. The project's aims include training officials in Eritrea to identify vulnerable migrants and refugees and direct them to suitable aid programs, and training public prosecutors to curb human smuggling more effectively. The problem with this approach is that Eritreans try to avoid military and

government officials, who will treat them as deserters if they are caught crossing the border to flee national service. Unless they have the financial capacity to bribe officers involved in the smuggling business, they face draconian punishments.

The GIZ strategy ignores the fact that Eritrea lacks even the most rudimentary form of the rule of law. The constitution has never been implemented, and the office of chief justice has been vacant since 2002. There is simply no such thing as a public prosecutor's office because the state, personified by a narrow ruling clique around the president and some high-ranking military officers, does not care about formal legal processes. No institution of higher learning has offered legal training since the country's only university closed in 2006.

It remains a mystery how the German development organization plans to convince Eritrean border guards that refugees should be given help rather than treated as traitors. As this example demonstrates, European actors often ignore the political reality on the ground and attempt to cooperate with African dictators under the pretext of improving the humanitarian situation.

Similarly, the EU plans to provide more assistance for vulnerable refugees in Sudan, including psychosocial support systems for unaccompanied minors. The UNHCR has maintained refugee camps in eastern Sudan since the 1970s, most of which over time have turned into permanent settlements. Improving living conditions in these communities and providing durable shelters for newly arrived refugees would certainly make sense. But most refugees leave the camps near the Eritrean border as soon as they can—along with a dearth of nearby economic opportunities, there is a high risk of being kidnapped by human traffickers and held for ransom.

Another growing risk is falling into the hands of Sudanese or Eritrean security officers, who often cooperate with each other, and being deported to Eritrea. Since the establishment of the Khartoum Process, the Sudanese government has granted authority to arrest refugees to the so-called Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary formerly known as the Janjaweed militia, which was notorious for massacres of civilians in the Darfur region of Sudan.

That is yet another instance in which the current EU strategy to limit migration and address the root causes of flight has brought internationally isolated authoritarian leaders in from the cold. They are now seen as “partners in migration manage-

ment” by European policy makers. Consequently, the kinds of political reforms that are a precondition of effectively tackling those root causes have become less likely.

Afewerki, the Eritrean president, faces no pressure from EU officials to change the requirement of open-ended national service, which is the main reason for the exodus from the country. Ethiopia’s government has been closing down political space for dissent for many years without audible protests from the European donor community in Addis Ababa. Sudan’s Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity, has been indirectly encouraged to deploy the infamous Janjaweed against refugees under a new name.

It seems that many European decision makers still regard refugees as purely economically motivated and believe that a scattering of development projects in Africa will be enough to satisfy their desire for a better life. But there are not enough programs that actually improve living conditions in refugee camps and settlements or facilitate the integration of refugees in the labor markets of their African host countries.

LAWLESS LIBYA

In North Africa, the EU has announced plans for a Regional Development and Protection Program that will offer “migrant-friendly inclusive services,” whatever that might mean. The Europeans also want to improve social cohesion and create local employment opportunities through micro-credit programs and crowdfunding activities.

In Libya, the EU approved 20 million euros in funding to guarantee certain minimum conditions for a dignified life for migrants, despite the environment of widespread abuse and systematic mistreatment of refugees. It plans interventions in reception centers and detention facilities, which, as the European Commission noted with some understatement, “are currently severely understaffed.” In fact, Libya is a failed state, where refugees and migrants are often taken hostage by rival warlords, traded between human trafficking gangs, and held for ransom by traffickers and security forces alike.

The short-term measure favored by the EU to curb refugee numbers is training the Libyan coast guard, which many European policy makers ex-

pect will be able to shut down the maritime border for good. However, this plan relies mostly on the Government of National Accord, an interim administration set up under UN auspices that has struggled to establish its authority and failed to unify the country. The EU knows full well that its partner is one of three competing governments that claim to rule Libya from their strongholds. Other areas are ruled by local leaders or Islamic State and al-Qaeda splinter groups. As the German foreign ministry acknowledged in 2017, “There is currently no functioning juridical system in Libya.”

Elements of the Libyan coast guard are closely linked to various competing human trafficking gangs and actively involved in the business. They regularly abuse refugees and try to prevent rescues by humanitarian organizations such as Sea Watch and Doctors Without Borders. Coast guard personnel have repeatedly fired live ammunition at refugees adrift at sea, killing many, in order to

undermine their competitors’ smuggling operations. It is also known that the coast guard regularly detains refugees to exploit them as forced laborers and subject them to sexual abuse.

Even apart from the doubtful reputation of the coast guard, the refoulement of refugees to Libya amounts to a total breach of European ethical standards. German journalist Michael Obert described the hellish situation in the detention camps, where people live crammed together under appalling conditions without access to any sanitary facilities, in a report aired by the ARD television network in the summer of 2017.

UNICEF also spoke of “hellholes” in a February 2017 report, referring to camps where thousands of women and children have been kept for months, often subjected to repeated rapes and other abuse. Little has changed since then. Despite the gruesome conditions, refugees and migrants continue to enter Libya in hopes of reaching fortress Europe.

TAILORED SOLUTIONS

In the long run, a policy whose main focus is on improving so-called border management in countries that are known to trample human rights and disrespect the rule of law cannot be successful. On the contrary, there is a risk of bolstering inhumane

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regimes, fueling the trafficking business in Libya and elsewhere. This will only perpetuate the flow of refugees.

The EU's current activism in the form of countless new programs, processes, partnerships, and compacts is unlikely to curb migration from Africa. Instead, it benefits authoritarian rulers and their cronies. In addition to the deplorable border management strategy, large sums are being distributed in a way that is hardly distinguishable from conventional development aid and will have little effect on migration.

First and foremost, it will be necessary to develop tailored solutions that take the specific political and economic conditions of a given country of origin into consideration. Research has shown that development initially fosters migration through rising incomes, which make it possible for families to save money and send some of their members abroad, but outmigration declines at a later stage as remittances further accelerate progress in the home country. For instance, many West African countries have a tradition of temporary labor migration within the region and beyond, which has helped them to develop faster. The economies of these countries benefit from migrants' remittances, which are often channeled through strong and vital civil society organizations.

If Europe were to facilitate temporary labor migration and make multiple entries possible, fewer people would have to risk their lives by crossing the Mediterranean on unseaworthy vessels. But this still would not address the problem of countries like Eritrea that produce large numbers of refugees because the ruling elite is making a dignified life virtually impossible for ordinary people. It is difficult to understand why European policy mak-

ers are pursuing a strategy of whitewashing that reality instead of putting pressure on the Eritrean regime to reform its policy of open-ended conscription and forced labor, which has been clearly identified as the cause of the current exodus.

Migration has always been a part of human history and will not cease to exist in our age of globalization. It will continue to be a common strategy of people seeking to either secure their survival or follow their dreams for a better life. As long as there is a vast wealth gap between Europe and Africa, south-to-north migration will persist. Therefore, measures are needed to make flight to Europe less risky for those in need of protection, and to facilitate temporary migration for those in search of economic opportunities. Europe would benefit from such a policy. In the long term, the aging European population will need immigration from regions with rapid population growth such as Africa.

Refugees with a high probability of having their asylum cases approved should be offered the possibility of completing their proceedings while they are still on African soil. This would also be a highly effective measure against human trafficking and smuggling, because people who have been granted asylum could enter Europe legally via regular and safe means of transport. Europe could also establish resettlement programs similar to those of the United States (in the pre-Trump era) and Canada.

European policy makers must change course. The more they try to turn Europe into a fortress, the more incentives human traffickers will have to carry out their business. And more Africans will lose their lives along the routes toward the promised land. ■