POLICY BRIEF

Returning migrants
Europe's focus, but at what cost?

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Europe's focus on returning migrants to Africa, despite resistance at continental and country levels, is growing and is likely to increase in scale and scope. These policies and practices are some of the most contentious in the migration domain. Prioritising returns irrespective of the costs could be damaging in multiple ways, including exacerbating the 'root causes' of migration and even resulting in higher migration flows.

Key findings

▶ Migrant arrivals to Europe have dropped substantially. As Europe moves away from a 'crisis' response, policymakers are prioritising deterrence and returns.

▶ African countries have low return rates of their nationals residing irregularly in Europe. Pressure on African countries to facilitate forced returns is high and will increase.

▶ The AU and African states have resisted forced returns and insist that returns must be voluntary.

▶ Accepting returns can be perceived as 'anti-migration' when most Africans view migration positively or rely heavily on remittances. Politicians can't be seen to facilitate forced returns, even if the trade-off is development funding from Europe.

▶ Returns are increasingly packaged into Europe's 'development' approach where aid is offered in exchange for helping reduce migration to Europe.

▶ Europe has refocused on questionable informal arrangements as formal readmission agreements have failed.

▶ A country's willingness to accept forced returns has not been shown to result in a high number of returns, nor is it a clear deterrent.

▶ Expanding lawful migration channels successfully suppresses unlawful migration. However Europe has all but abandoned these proposals.

▶ Over-emphasis on returns, at the risk of destabilising democracies, empowering questionable authorities, angering populations, exacerbating root causes and compromising human rights, is not sound migration management.

Recommendations

▶ The complexities of returns should not be overlooked in the drive for 'quick wins'. Return strategies should carefully consider their full impact.

▶ Europe should recognise that most African countries are more influenced by internal interests than by European incentives or pressure. Collaboration will succeed most in areas where these converge.

▶ Returns are only effective if they are sustainable. They will not have a deterrent effect unless returnees can meet their core needs.

▶ Return policies should consider gender. Woman migrants and returnees have distinct drivers, pathways and experiences.

▶ Return policies should consider their impact on circular migration. Policies focused on reducing migration often interrupt circular migration patterns and actually encourage migrants to stay longer.

▶ Return policies should consider whether a country is safe for returns. Generalised violence, poverty or environmental degradation are not covered under the refugee conventions. Still, forcing people to unsafe conditions could expose them to harm.

▶ All stakeholders should improve dialogue and cooperation along all stages and levels of returns until sustainable solutions are attained and can be replicated.

▶ European policymakers must recognise that their approaches could exacerbate root causes of migration if they compromise human rights, undermine democracy and empower questionable partners.

Introduction

Migrant arrivals to Europe have dropped substantially since their peak in 2015. As Europe moves away from a 'crisis' response to migration, creating efficient return policies and practices has become a central issue for European Union (EU) institutions and member states.[1] Policymakers are emphasising policies to deter arrivals, increase the rate and pace of return and conclude readmission agreements with third countries.[2] Resources previously earmarked for emergency measures have been reallocated to improving return processes.[3]

Figure 1: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Mediterranean sea and land arrivals
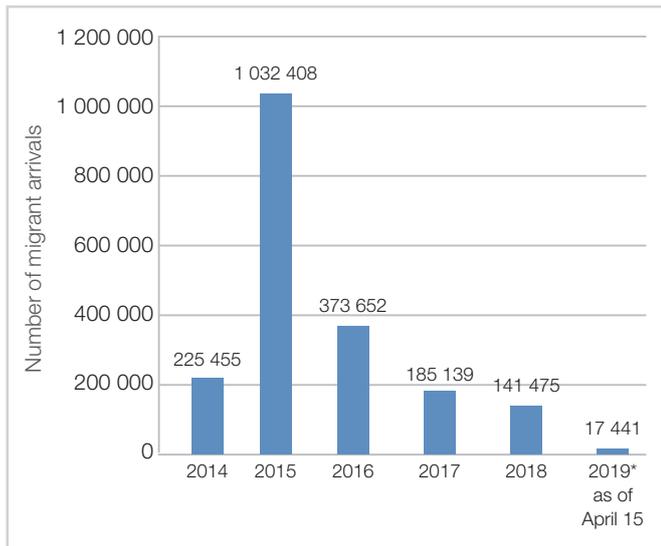
Source: UNHCR[4]

According to the European Commission (EC), every year between 400 000 and 500 000 foreign nationals are ordered to leave the EU because they entered or stayed irregularly. Forty percent of them are returned to their home country or country from which they travelled to the EU.[5]

European politicians are under pressure from parts of their constituencies to demonstrate their ability to control migration and apply law and order.[6] This includes returning migrants who don't have legal rights to remain, including those who don't qualify for asylum or who have overstayed their visas. Many people feel that a well-functioning immigration system must include decisions that consistently lead to effective returns.[7]

'The quest to end the migration crisis is a common task of all the member states and EU institutions. If some want to solve the crisis, while others want to use it, it will remain unsolvable. Today, the influx of illegal migrants to the EU is back at pre-crisis levels.' – European Council president Donald Tusk, September 2018

Politically, many individuals and groups have proved that agitating against migration is politically effective. Ring-wing populist parties have emerged and won elections based on anti-migrant agendas.

Similarly, smaller nations have successfully held larger countries and the entire European bloc to ransom over migration issues.[8] These groups gain from perceptions that migration is a 'crisis.

Given that actual migrant numbers are falling, they will probably turn attention away from arrivals and home in on other migration-related topics to remain relevant. Returns are increasingly being framed by some politicians as security and sovereignty issues and used to maintain this support base.

Returns to Africa are likely to be politicised because Europe achieves a particularly small number of effective returns to African states. In 2017, only 5% of returns were to sub-Saharan African countries.[9]

Return rates – the number of returns ordered divided by the number of actual returns – of sub-Saharan African countries (9%) are lower than overall rates out of Europe (36%) and are trending downward.[10]

This low rate reflects a lack of cooperation from African countries, practical issues related to identifying nationalities, and administrative capacities in origin countries.[11]

In recent years Europe and member states have increased pressure on Africa and African states to accept and facilitate returns through various political instruments.[12] As these fail to materialise, Europe is becoming frustrated at African states:

'Readmission of own nationals is an obligation under international law. I cannot understand

how a country can refuse to take back its nationals.' – EU migration commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos, 2018

At continental, regional and state levels, Africa has divergent priorities. Perspectives on migration in Africa as a whole are positive. Distinctions between irregular, 'illegal' and regular are less clear-cut.

Migration and returns are considered African issues first and foremost as most Africans migrate within the continent. Free migration in Africa has proved to be mostly circular and to benefit all involved, including in trade, commerce and tourism.[13]

Africa is working towards free movement regionally and continentally.[14] Strengthening measures to prevent or deter migration, or facilitating forced returns, if not managed carefully, run the risk of losing out on trade and development on the continent.

> **Free migration in Africa has proved to be mostly circular and to benefit all involved**

At the heart of the debate is the development role of migration, particularly in high-flow countries where aspirational migration contributes substantial human and financial capital at individual and state levels.[15]

In 2017, remittances to sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa were $38 billion and $53 billion respectively.[16] Accepting returns can be perceived as 'anti-migration' among constituents who view migration positively or rely heavily on remittances.

Irregular migration is also an outlet for a growing youth population who often face high levels of unemployment and political frustration.[17] Politicians can't be seen to facilitate forced returns without paying a price domestically, even if the trade-off is substantial amounts of development funding from Europe.

In December 2016, Mali was offered a $160 million deal to cooperate on identifying and expediting Malian returns from Europe. The agreement was withdrawn due to unexpected public uproar.[18] Mali's leadership had misread the public mood.[19]

The AU has also resisted forced returns and maintains that returns must be voluntary:

> 'Paragraph 73 on the voluntary return of migrants is the most important. It's a matter of human rights, we cannot force people to go back to countries where they will not be safe.' – Ebba Kalondo, spokesman for AU Commission chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat[20]

What are migrant returns?

Returns can range from voluntary to compulsory or forced. They occur individually and in mass numbers. Some returnees have full access to due process while others have been summarily deported in groups reaching hundreds of thousands.[21]

Enforcement methods include detention, torture, harassment, extortion and physical force. Many people have been returned to countries of which they're not citizens.[22] Some returnees receive a range of help while others receive nothing.[23]

Returns require cooperation from various states that often have vastly different interests. Stakeholders also have different priorities. Development actors consider remittances, immigration focuses on procedure, and law enforcement considers it a security issue. Foreign policy actors are increasingly using returns as bargaining chips in international diplomacy.[24]

These arguments are reflected in the 2018 Global Compact for Migration. One of the 23 objectives is dedicated to returns and readmissions.[25] The extent to which states are obliged to take back migrants and failed asylum seekers was a stumbling block in the negotiations.

'Destination' countries pushed for stronger wording on states' responsibilities to readmit nationals while 'origin' countries argued for language specific to voluntary returns.[26] The final text refers only to voluntary returns.[27]

From a policy perspective, the most critical distinction is between voluntary and involuntary returns. Even when all participating parties agree to participate, voluntary returns are difficult to achieve in a way that leads to sustainable reintegration in a home community.

According to the International Organization for Migration, voluntariness exists if two conditions apply:[28]

1. Freedom of choice, defined as the absence of physical or psychological pressure.

2. An informed decision, which requires the availability of timely, unbiased and reliable information on which to base the decision.

The EU defines a forced return as the compulsory return of an individual to the country of origin, transit or third country, on the basis of an administrative or judicial act.[29]

Removing unauthorised people from one country requires another country to accept them and both countries to cooperate and coordinate.[30] Countries are obliged to receive their nationals back, but it is simultaneously illegal to return someone to a country that refuses to accept them.

Many countries, including in Africa, refuse to accept forced returns of their own nationals or delay issuing travel documents to people without sufficient identification. Nationality can be complicated to prove, particularly if migrants dispute their origin.

Some migrants destroy their identification and claim no nationality as a means of avoiding forced return. In some cases, migrants genuinely don't possess identification because they never had it or lost it on their migration journey. Other migrants are stateless.[31]

Third-country returns, meaning returning a migrant to a country of which he or she is not a national, are even more controversial. These are only possible where readmission agreements exist between the sending and receiving countries or where the third-country national decides to go and will be accepted.[32]

European context

In 2018, 286 875 decisions on returns were issued and 148 121 effective returns were conducted with migrants who were not granted rights to remain in Europe. This represents just over half of the return decisions issued. Of effective returns, around 49% (72 868) were reported as voluntary and 51% forced (75 241).[33]

Return orders and return rates have remained relatively constant since 2012 despite major surges in arrivals.[34] This is due in part to prolonged legal processes that some European leaders consider problematic.[35]
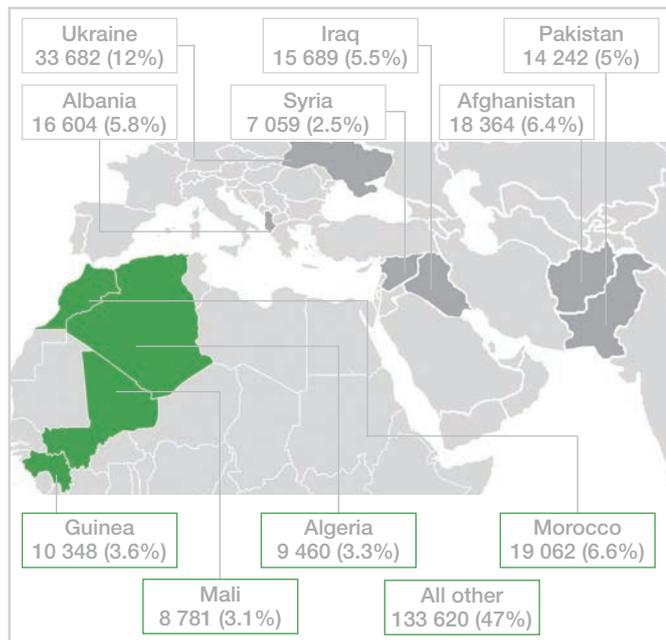
African nationals comprise a small portion of total arrivals to and returns from Europe; however, they have particularly low effective return rates. In 2017, 9 235 of 189 545 (5%) returns were to sub-Saharan African countries. Sub-Saharan African countries have only a 9% return rate compared to 36% overall and are trending downward.[36] The number of return decisions issued to West African migrants increased by 80% in 2018 to approximately 40 000; however the number of effective returns remained unchanged at only 5 200 cases.[37]

Figure 2: European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) detections and returns
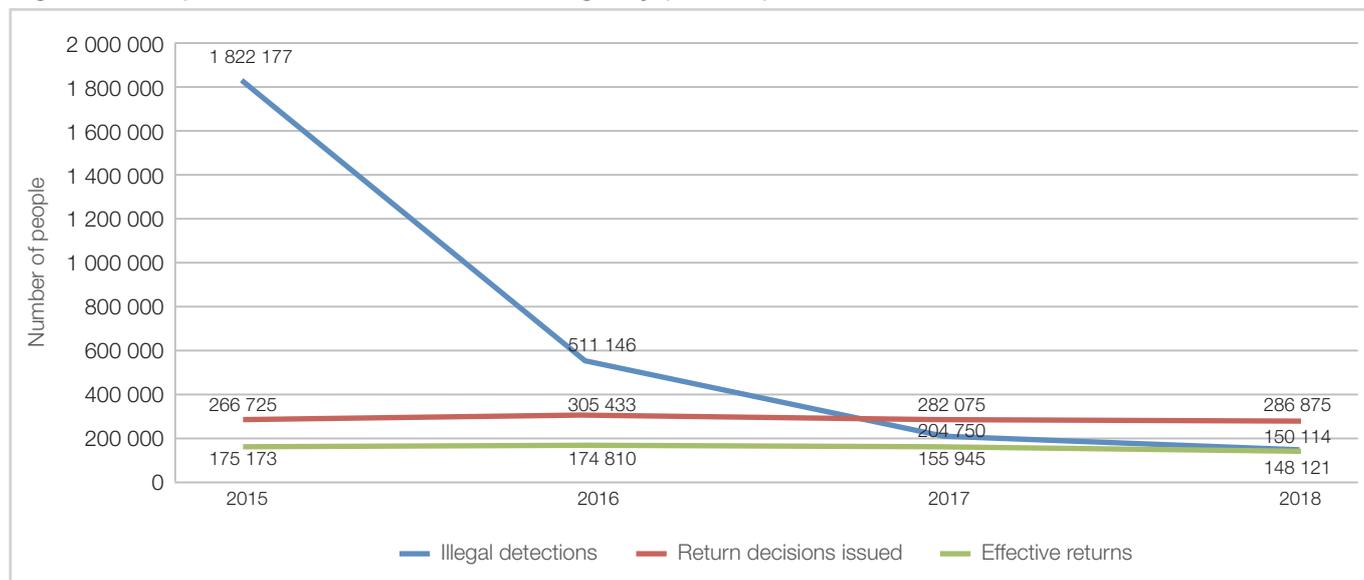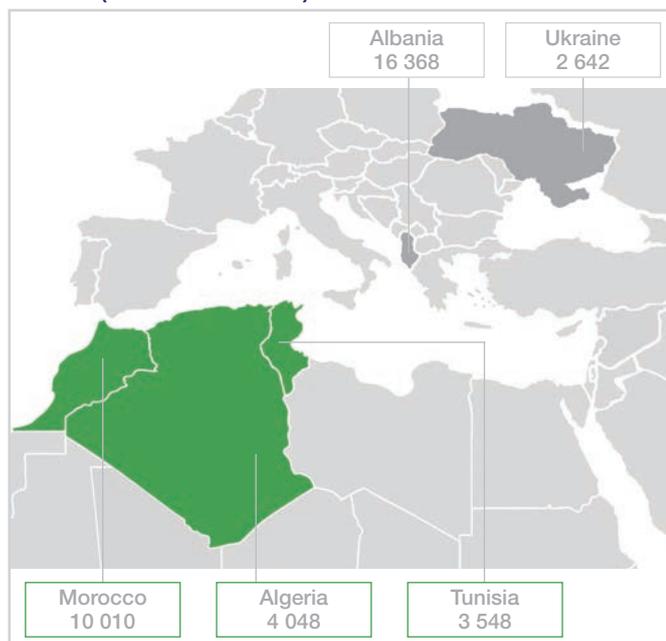

Source: Frontex[38]

Map 1: Top 10 nationalities of returns decisions issued, 2018 (% share of total)

| Ukraine 33 682 (12%) | Iraq 15 689 (5.5%) | Pakistan 14 242 (5%) |
| Albania 16 604 (5.8%) | Syria 7 059 (2.5%) | Afghanistan 18 364 (6.4%) |

| Guinea 10 348 (3.6%) | Algeria 9 460 (3.3%) | Morocco 19 062 (6.6%) |
| | Mali 8 781 (3.1%) | All other 133 620 (47%) |

Source: Frontex[39]

Among African regions, North Africans compose the highest number of returns. In 2018, Moroccans ranked second in returns decisions issued. Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian nationals rank second, third and fourth in forced returns out of Europe. No African countries feature in the top 10 voluntary return nationalities.[40]

Map 2: Top 5 nationalities of forced returns, 2018 (% share of total)

| Albania 16 368 | Ukraine 2 642 |

| Morocco 10 010 | Algeria 4 048 | Tunisia 3 548 |

Source: Frontex[41]

Europe-Africa return policies

In recent years, European migration policies towards Africa have prioritised border control, mitigating 'root causes' of migration, and returns.[42] National governments and the EU have used multiple platforms at both a bilateral and multilateral level to try to persuade African countries and the AU to cooperate on returns.[43]

Returns form part of Europe's migration approach towards Africa that is heavily focused on externalisation policies.[44] These include the highly contested 'disembarkation' platforms, to screen refugee claims before people reach Europe.[45] These have been met with strong resistance among African states and the AU.

Returns are also increasingly packaged into Europe's 'development' approach where aid and financial investment are made available on condition that countries willingly cooperate regarding migration control.[46]

Europe has reoriented its migration policies to bundle migration restrictions within development funding under the auspices that these packages will address the 'root causes' of migration and prevent flows in the long term.[47]

> Europe has reoriented its migration policies to bundle migration restrictions within development funding

However more funding is directed towards migration restriction measures, including returns, than projects with true development potential.[48] This approach is using development aid to get cooperation on immediate and short-term migration control measures.[49]

Many of the packages that have been offered ignore local and regional dynamics. Europe and its member states have engaged with questionable entities based on their ability to control migration.[50]

For example, Italy forged agreements with Libyan militia/ smugglers to stop boat departures to Italy,[51] the EU has sent 'security' funding to leaders in Sudan who stand accused of genocide and crimes against humanity,[52] and Niger – the poorest country in the world – is receiving development funds based on its willingness and ability to stem migration flows.[53]

Before 2015, Europe's migration platforms for Africa included plans to expand visa pathways as a means to achieve balanced and comprehensive migration frameworks.[54]

Expanding lawful migration channels has shown to successfully suppress unlawful migration when combined with strong enforcement measures.[55] Europe has all but abandoned these proposals under the pretence that it must first resolve issues related to returning migrants without legal permission to remain.[56]

Countries and the EU have also recognised the bargaining power of visa liberalisation schemes. Instead of using these as a migration management strategy, they are reserving them to force negotiations on returns.[57]

Sending and accepting migrants are technically country-level decisions that require bilateral agreements. Yet the issue of returns has grown substantially at a multilateral level, including appearing in negotiations for trade, development and other agreements that would typically be beyond the migration scope.[58]

In some cases differences on returns have threatened to shut down agreements or delayed the publishing of conclusions, as in the case of the 2017 AU/EU summit.[59]

A shift to informal agreements

The EU and member states have historically used readmission agreements to establish obligations and procedures related to returns. In many cases, visa liberalisation or financial incentives formed part of the agreements.[60]

To date, the EC has only achieved one formal agreement with an African country – Cape Verde in 2013. Negotiations with Morocco, Nigeria and Algeria were started but remain unfinished.[61]

Given the difficulties in achieving formal agreements, in 2016 the EC marked a 'quiet' shift and began discussing 'informal' agreements.[62]

Informal agreements are secretive and non-binding, and thus difficult to assess. They are understood as pathways for forced returns.[63] They challenge principles of democracy and transparency. They range in content but are believed to trade returns for cash incentives for governments who can't be seen to be cooperating publicly.

In 2017 and 2018 the EC established informal agreements with Guinea, Ethiopia, The Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire. Leaked documents of the Ethiopian agreement revealed a roadmap for informal returns including Ethiopian state cooperation on travel documents and reintegration efforts.[64]

Informal bilateral agreements also exist, including between Norway and Ethiopia and the United Kingdom with several African countries. Analysis of their impact on return rates has determined they have little sustainable effect. The return rates of Ethiopians from Norway in fact fell from 11% when the deal was signed to less than 9% in 2017.[65]

Transit country considerations

Accepting third-country returns is a particularly contentious issue that has been resolutely rejected by African countries.

One of Europe's most successful strategies – purely from a migrant reduction perspective – that relied on third-country returns was the 2016 'Turkey Deal'. Turkey agreed to take back non-national illegal migrants landing in Greece in exchange for cash incentives and visa liberalisation for Turks.[66] Europe has attempted to apply components of this agreement with African states without success.[67]

Nations that experience high flows of transit migrants argue that they already shoulder more than their 'fair' share and are full to capacity. They claim that readmitting transit migrants who passed through would increase the burden on already restricted resources. Some transit countries have further argued that the proposed processing/return centres will act as pull factors for migrants to their countries.[68]

Returning third-country nationals to transit nations does not sustainably resolve any issues; it merely passes the issues back down the migration chain. If these countries accept forced returns of foreigners, it is because the migrants are unable or unwilling to be returned to their own countries. The transit countries then face the same return problems.

As gatekeepers to the Mediterranean, North African countries are under substantial pressure to implement externalisation measures, including returns. They all

reject these. While the politics and nuances of these countries vary substantially, accepting third-country returns is universally untenable to their citizens and politicians. Politicians cannot accept third-country returns without facing public backlash, even if offered substantial incentives.

The November 2017 media revelation of an active slave trade in Libya has been the epicentre of the returns issue. The urgency of facilitating safe and sustainable returns out of Libya has been one of the only consensus issues that have resulted high-level cooperation on returns.[69]

'Two weeks of hand-wringing about slave auctions in Libya have been followed by two days of announcements designed to maintain the pretence of humanitarian concern, while keeping Europe's primary aim – the closure of the central Mediterranean route – intact.' – John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's director for Europe, 30 November 2017

It has driven the issue to the top of the international agenda, highlighted the complexities of sustainable returns, and revealed systemic inconsistencies on the matter.

Serious questions have arisen about whether returns are occurring voluntarily or by force. Many reports have emerged of repatriations being carried out forcefully[70] and even to the wrong countries.[71] Libya has expressed frustration about other African states refusing to take their nationals back.

This situation also exposed Europe's role in trapping migrants in Libya. European leaders were aware of the well-documented abuses occurring against sub-Saharan migrants in Libya long before the November 2017 viral *CNN* video.[72] Yet European programmes that cooperated with Libyan authorities to prevent departures played a key role in exposing migrants to abuses.[73]

Europe defended their decisions on the basis that the alternative was 'to just accept the impossibility to govern the migration flux and hand the human smugglers the keys to the European democracies'.[74]

Recommendations

Effective and humane return policies are a necessary component of a comprehensive migration policy platform. However it is important to appreciate how complicated the full process is. The complexities of returns cannot be overlooked in the drive for 'quick wins'. This will backfire in many ways.

States need to carefully consider the desired impacts of return policies and weigh these against the real and prospective costs. They need to strongly consider the effectiveness of policies, who and what they empower and whether their impacts will be sustainable. They should also recognise that most African countries are more influenced by internal regional interests than by European incentives or pressure. Collaboration will succeed most in areas where these converge.

1. Returns are only effective if they are sustainable

Even when all parties agree to returns, successful reintegration is difficult to achieve and requires multiple actors. Readmission and reintegration fail regularly, resulting in hardship, violence and even remigration.

Sustainable reintegration requires a holistic and needs-based approach. Each migrant and every community has different needs including economic, social and psychosocial elements across individual, community and structural levels.[75]

Beyond removing someone from a destination country, returns are intended to act as a deterrent to future migrants. Forced unassisted returns mean a loss of investment without achieving any migration benefits.

Returns without reintegration prospects will not deter future migrants unless returnees are able to meet their core needs, access basic facilities including housing and healthcare, find livelihoods and reintegrate into their families and communities.[76]

2. Returns require resources

Countries receiving returns must have the capacity and willingness to successfully reintegrate returnees in order for them to be sustainable. Capacity to absorb returnees mimics the capacity required to absorb migrants. Countries struggling to deal with migrant flows are unlikely to have the capacity and resources

necessary to effectively accept and integrate returnees. Pressuring states struggling to manage migration flows to accept high flows of returnees, particularly third-country nationals, is unlikely to be effective.

3. Return policies must consider gender

Woman migrants and returnees have distinct migration and return drivers, pathways and experiences. Evidence indicates that the family situation of returned migrant women is a key factor in sustainable reintegration.[77]

They are also subjected to greater risks of violence and trafficking throughout the migration journey, including in returns. A gendered perspective is required for all components of the migration chain, including in returns and readmissions packages.

4. Restrictive policies block circular migration

Policies focused on reducing inward migration often ignore the fact that they also interrupt circular migration patterns and in fact encourage migrants to stay longer. Restricting entry has proven effective at stemming inward flows, but prolongs migration periods.

Returns without reintegration prospects will not deter future migrants

Irregular migrants are less willing or likely to return home voluntarily if they feel they can't do so safely and easily and could lose their ability to return. Instead, restrictive migration policies have been found to encourage more permanent migration that includes more family members.[78]

5. Consider whether countries are safe

Most people migrate for mixed reasons, seeking both security and opportunity, and not just for aspiration. Generalised violence, poverty or environmental degradation are among the issues not covered under the refugee conventions. People who do not meet the narrow definition of refugee may still be subjected to danger or hardship.[79]

This consideration should apply to countries of origin and transit countries, where there is evidence of migrants returning to hardship and being exposed to danger.[80]

6. Improve dialogue and cooperation

Dialogue and cooperation must take place among all stake-holders and role players at all stages and levels of returns until sustainable solutions are found and can be replicated.

Government and non-government, local, international, regional, national and subnational levels must work together to ensure sustainable and successful returns.

Particularly in countries or regions with weak state structures or where they are known to abuse or neglect foreign nationals, special care must be taken to understand the political landscape. Capacity building must occur in areas where weaknesses exist.

7. Improve data collection

Currently no data is available to indicate when migrants are issued with return decisions and when they are effected. Also one person could be issued with return decisions from multiple countries, making that person seem like multiple people.

Improved data collection about the length of processes and the reasons that returns are not implemented are particularly important.

8. Migration policies should avoid exacerbating root causes of migration

Europe's migration platform has resulted in power shifts across Africa, based on countries' – or individuals' – abilities to control migration to Europe. Many leaders are using these positions to consolidate their power.[81]

This has many ramifications that Europe should be cognisant of. Beyond compromising principles of human rights and undermining democracy, empowering 'profiteers' of migration runs a high risk of increasing political instability and frustration among nationals. Political frustration is a key motivating factor for migration.

Importantly, a country's willingness to accept forced returns has not shown to result in a high number of returns. It is similarly difficult to ascertain their effectiveness as a deterrent.

Over-emphasis on returns, at the risk of destabilising democracies, empowering questionable authorities, angering populations, exacerbating root causes and compromising human rights, is not sound migration management. Returns should be handled carefully and with full consideration of their impact.

Notes

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Policy Briefs provide concise analysis to inform current debates and decision making. Key findings or recommendations are listed on the inside cover page, and infographics allow busy readers to quickly grasp the main points. This Policy Brief forms part of an ISS special project on migration issues in North Africa, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Acknowledgements