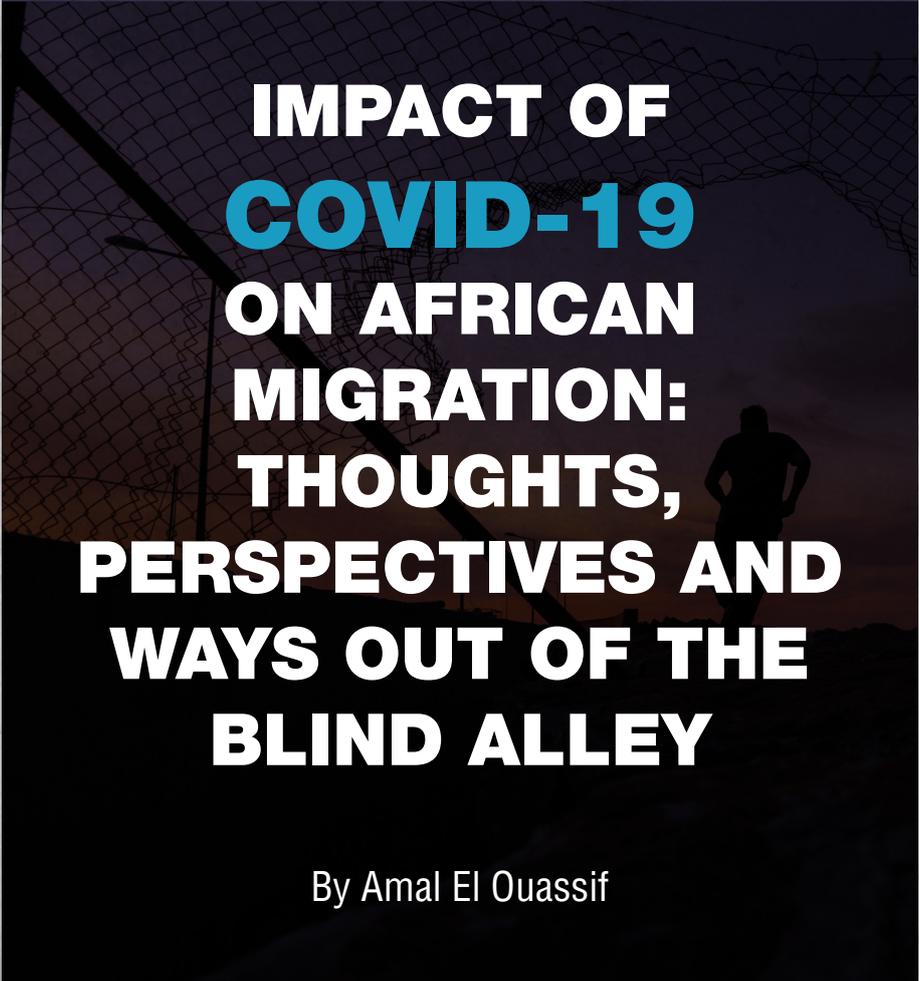




POLICY BRIEF

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IMPACT OF **COVID-19** ON AFRICAN MIGRATION: THOUGHTS, PERSPECTIVES AND WAYS OUT OF THE BLIND ALLEY

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Impact of COVID-19 on African Migration: Thoughts, Perspectives and Ways Out of the Blind Alley

Amal El Ouassif

Abstract

Africa has not been spared from the economic and political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Acting as a catalyst for decreased job opportunities at home and increased foreign-born unemployment rates in host economies, COVID-19 will most likely affect the overall economic conditions of migrants and reinforce the root causes of irregular mobility. On the political side, narratives that feed the fear of ‘outsiders’ can be easy to disseminate in times of crisis when the economy slows and inward-looking social and economic policies appear to be the safest. Escaping the blind alley will require coordinated policy approaches. First, immediate protection for migrants and asylum seekers at the closed borders of countries should be provided. Then long-term policies to tackle the social and economic vulnerabilities in these countries should be developed.

Although it is still too early to assess the economic costs of the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Labour Organization expects a significant impact on the labour market across the world. ILO forecasts a 6.7% decline in working hours in the second quarter of 2020, which is equivalent to 195 million full-time workers. Although these forecasts are highly uncertain, they indicate a substantial loss of job opportunities, particularly in the manufacturing and services sectors. These effects will be seen in all countries regardless of their economic performance, and their consequences are likely to be more devastating for fragile developing and low-income countries. The latter are prone to underemployment because an important share of informal working and self-employment has been directly hit by restrictions and social distancing imposed by the coronavirus pandemic.

COVID-19 as a catalyst for decreased job opportunities in origin countries and increased foreign-born unemployment rate in host economies

Without adequate social policies, the crisis will deepen unemployment and fragility, two important factors that feed the root causes of irregular migration.

Table 1: ILO Estimates of Workers at risk by sector

Economic sector	Current impact of crisis on economic output	Baseline employment situation (global estimates for 2020 prior to COVID-19)			
		Level of employment (000s)	Share in global employment (%)	Wage ratio (av. monthly sector earnings/av. total earnings)	Share of women (%)
Education	Low	176560	5.3	1.23	61.8
Human health and social work activities	Low	136244	4.1	1.14	70.4
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	Low	144241	4.3	1.35	31.5
Utilities	Low	26589	0.8	1.07	18.8
Agriculture; forestry and fishing	Low-Medium*	880373	26.5	0.72	37.1
Construction	Medium	257041	7.7	1.03	7.3
Financial and insurance activities	Medium	52237	1.6	1.72	47.1
Mining and quarrying	Medium	21714	0.7	1.46	15.1
Arts, entertainment and recreation, and other services	Medium-high*	179857	5.4	0.69	57.2
Transport; storage and communication	Medium-high*	204217	6.1	1.19	14.3
Accommodation and food services	High	143661	4.3	0.71	54.1

Real estate; business and administrative activities	High	156878	4.7	0.97	38.2
Manufacturing	High	463091	13.9	0.95	38.7
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	High	481951	14.5	0.86	43.6

* denotes sectors that include subsectors that have been affected in different ways

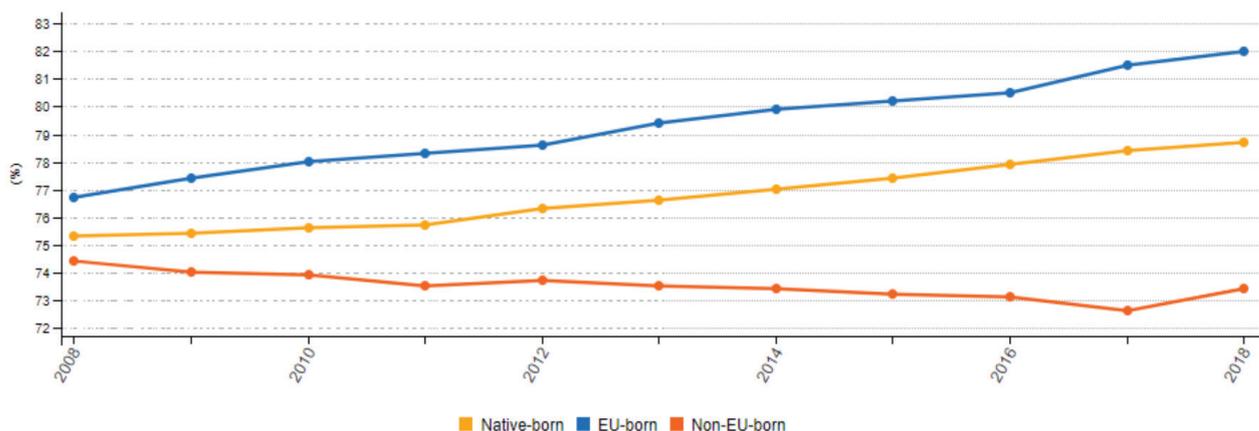
Source: International Labor Organization, ILO Monitor 2nd edition: COVID-19 and the world of work Updated estimates and analysis

These trends will be observed not only in the origin countries of migrants, but also in receiving countries, where migrants are usually vulnerable. The foreign-born unemployment rate highlights the vulnerability of migrants working abroad, particularly in moments of crisis. Defined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development as “the share of unemployed foreign-born persons aged 15-64 in the foreign-born labour force (the sum of employed and unemployed foreign-born) of that same age”¹, the foreign-born unemployment rate is high in Europe, the main destination for African migration. The analysis of the gap between the unemployment rate for the EU native-born population and migrant labor from 2008 to 2018 reveals the vulnerability of migrants to external economic shocks. Eurostat figures show that in 2008 the gap was relatively small, but started to widen in the years that followed the financial and economic crisis of 2008, particularly among foreigners not born in the EU. In 2013, this gap was estimated to be 10.1%, and in 2018 the average unemployment rate among the EU-born population was 6.1%, while the rate for persons born outside the EU was 12.2%. Many factors lie behind this gap, including language barriers, discrimination, skills mismatches, and uneven access to employment and decent housing (39% of third-country nationals (or 5.7 million people) live in relative poverty, more than twice the rate (17%) for EU nationals)².

1 The statistical population is composed of individuals aged 15 to 74 (in Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Iceland, Norway: 16 to 74 years); without work during the reference week; available to start work within the next two weeks (or have already found a job to start within the next three months); and actively having sought employment at some time during the last four weeks.

2 European Commission, Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion/inclusion of non EU migrants.

Figure 2: Development of activity rates for population aged 20-64, EU28, 2008-2018



Source: Eurostat, Migrant, integration, statistics labor market indicators, Unemployment.

On a separate note, African countries that are dependent on commodity markets will also see their economies impacted. Heavily-indebted least-developed countries that rely on the sale of raw materials are likely to suffer from weak exports, due to a stronger US dollar, with investors likely to become more risk-averse, seeking to place their money in safe havens. Furthermore, the OECD is forecasting a global slowdown in economic activity. For instance, European countries are expected to adopt restrictive measures that will result in reduced manufacturing activity. As a consequence, foreign direct investment flows are expected to fall by an estimated 5% to 15%, according to the United Nations projections, the biggest forecast drop since the global financial crisis (Segal and Gerstal, 2020). Such a drop will have consequences for African economies. In recent years, many African countries have attracted FDI from Europe and the United States. Large economies including Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, and Morocco saw FDI increase by 38% in 2018, thanks to sizeable investments in the finance and automotive sectors³. If the UN forecasts become reality, African economies will have tough times ahead. The aftermath of this crisis will be critical because spillover effects will touch all sectors, even those that are typically resilient to external shocks, such as services oriented towards national demand, which have suffered from the social distancing measures and confinement. The tourism, transport, and aviation sectors will need a major boost to be able to preserve their activity and the jobs they provide.

To mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic, the ILO recommends international coordinated action similar to that which followed the global financial crisis of 2008-09, in addition to policies that governments should undertake to preserve jobs and wages. Most of these policies will require courageous and costly fiscal policies, along with adequate social protection packages. In this endeavor, African countries will need to mobilize significant human and financial resources, which are lacking in the least-developed countries.

³ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Foreign direct investment to Africa defies global slump, rises 11%.

COVID-19: A Strong Argument to Feed Populist and Anti-migrants Discourses

In the minds of a large share of population, the current pandemic is associated with the freedom of movement, which has allowed a virus that emerged in China to spread globally and claim many lives, as in Italy or Iran. This association directly feeds the ‘fear of outsiders’ and xenophobia. Often emotional and totally irrational, this fear of outsiders has in past crises created victims among refugees and migrants, by, for example restricting the mobility of the nationals of certain countries in the aftermath of terror attacks⁴. Psychology suggests that it could be within the instinct of people to fear and distrust others who belong to a different country, religion or culture. It is important to not underestimate the role of populist discourses in feeding this fear and widening the gap between the ‘us’ and ‘them’. One of the consequences of this fear is to dehumanize⁵ the ‘outsider’, who is perceived as a source of threat, and is considered to have less human qualities and deserve less attention/care. In the case of refugees and migrants, this could translate into limited access to job opportunities and social protection, or simply a perception that they are unlawfully benefiting from the wealth of host countries. The latter point is interesting in the case of African migrants currently residing in Europe. Some of the European countries severely hit by the pandemic host large populations of migrants from Africa, particularly North Africa in the cases of Italy and Spain. While there is no obvious or proved link between the health crisis in these countries and the large size of the migrant population, we can expect the raising of voices blaming the worsening of the health situation on pressure from migrants. All these arguments can be easy to promote in times of crisis, when the economy is slowing and inward-looking social and economic policies appear to be the safest.

Another striking challenge is protection. As soon as the pandemic spread in Europe, many countries sought to close their borders, leaving migrants at the gates of Europe deprived of basic protection. The example of Hungary is striking in this sense, as the government closed borders, including the transit camps, the only place where refugees could make asylum requests. Greece is in the same situation, with the government suspending the registration of asylum applications. In other countries, governments are under pressure from extreme political parties. In Italy, the prime minister was called on to resign, on the basis that the spread of the pandemic was being enabled by humanitarian ships that reach the Italian shores⁶. Voices of far-right parties in France, Spain, and Germany have called for borders to close and the EU Schengen agreement to be suspended to contain the spread of the disease.

More broadly, the coronavirus pandemic has put a strain on mobility within the European Union. Long prized as one of the great successes of European integration, the Schengen area is now frozen, following the closure of borders. Despite its temporary nature, this closure will inevitably have consequences for mobility both within and outside the EU.

4 Brian Resnick, Fear of refugees and immigrants is emotional. That's what makes it so powerful, Vox.

5 Brian Resnick, National Journal, How Politics Breaks Our Brains, and How We Can Put Them Back Together, The Atlantic.

6 “Allowing migrants to land from Africa, where the presence of the virus was confirmed, is irresponsible,” extract from Mateo Salvini, The Guardian.

Within this area, the abolition of internal borders has been made possible through the strengthening of external border control mechanisms and the introduction of a visa policy, leading to a ‘fortress Europe’ accessible only to selected categories of visitors. In the past, mobility decisions within the EU have affected African migration. For example, until 1991, Moroccan nationals could travel to Spain visa-free, before the latter signed the Schengen Agreement. More recently, in 2015, talks were started on revising the Schengen Borders Code to deal with ‘security threats’ from outside the EU, which cannot be dissociated from the migration crisis of 2015 and the perception of the terrorist threat. The current health crisis feeds populist narratives linking danger to the ‘foreigner’ and the newcomer. A tightening of Schengen visa requirements for African nationals can be expected, despite the fact that the EU has put in place a long-awaited new Schengen Visa Code, which aims at facilitating visa requirements for regular travelers. The code entered into force in February 2020, and its survival will depend on the policy choices made by the EU.

Recommendations to Limit the Effects of the COVID-19 crisis on African Migrants

Immediate protection for migrants and asylum seekers at the closed borders of countries.

Migrants stuck at the external borders of countries should be provided with adequate resources to prevent the spread of the pandemic. Particular attention should be paid to early detection of infected people and their treatment. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) affirms that three quarters of refugees and migrants around the world are hosted in developing countries where health infrastructure can be very limited. Hence, specific funds should aim at providing detection kits and health equipment to the relevant structures in host countries. Humanitarian workers should also be allowed to continue their missions with migrants and refugees in optimal conditions, through providing them with necessary resources. The general living conditions in centers should be improved and migrants should have better access to sanitation and hygiene products. IOM has pointed out that many irregular migrants and asylum seekers might hesitate to seek help if they have COVID-19 symptoms because they fear interception or detention by the authorities in host countries.

Review of Development Aid Priorities for Origin Countries

Africa has long been criticized for receiving international development aid, while not developing enough. The coronavirus pandemic is yet another occasion on which to point out the dysfunction of this mechanism as a tool to treat the root causes of migration. There is a great need for development aid to be rethought. African countries should be involved in determining their priority needs and urgent areas that need support. The old schemes that reflect the priorities of donor countries should be re-examined in the light of the African contexts and the pressing need for basic services. African governments are to be held accountable for their spending. In general, the top-down approach should be balanced by the inclusion of relevant non-state actors that can contribute to more

effective targeting of populations in need. Morocco is an interesting example of the importance of African countries' ownership of their development agenda. It is a middle-income country that has so far been able to deal satisfactorily with the pandemic. The authorities were quick to put in place confinement measures and, most importantly, a special fund to mitigate the economic and social effects of the pandemic, including direct support for vulnerable households. This same fund will benefit from an EU grant of 450 million euros to support Morocco's response to the crisis. This is one good illustration of how external support can serve specific priority areas in receiving countries.

Initiate a Constructive Dialogue on Relevant Reforms

The pandemic has shown the severe lack of adequate social policies capable of detecting the needs of vulnerable populations and mitigating the effects of the unforeseen circumstances in many origin countries. The latter should prioritize adequate social and economic policies to react to emergencies. The support of donor countries is important in this regard. There is a pressing need to start a high-quality dialogue between donors and receiving countries on how central and delocalized governance can be improved. A detailed mapping of the social composition of societies, along with adequate healthcare and housing support for populations in need, should be done. The pandemic has led to a confinement that has proved to have severe effects on self-employed workers and those in the informal sector. The lack of alternatives has pushed people to practice working activities outdoors, although the risks associated with this behavior are significant and the long-term costs high for the government and workers themselves. It is recommended that future strategies and action plans include direct components on institutional dialogue, which aims at sharing good practices in the implementation of relevant social policies.

Support for Research and Development in African Countries

COVID-19 is an occasion for all countries to ask questions about their health systems and their research and development abilities. The international closing of borders has made it difficult for importing countries to meet their needs for basic medical equipment such as hygienic masks and respirators. This points to major shortcomings in national health sectors and a crucial need to support the efforts of less-developed countries to update their health systems and ensure autonomy with regard to primary needs. Coronavirus is far from being the last epidemic to threaten human lives. Hence, all countries must be able to face potential future health crises.

Counter the Populist Narrative

Populist discourses feed fear and this should be countered by the production of a positive evidence-based narrative that highlights the proved benefits of regular and orderly migration. The pandemic has shown that to confront a threat of this size, all efforts should be united. Furthermore, analysts suggest that one of the factors leading to high fatality rates from COVID-19 is directly linked to demographics. The most striking example is Italy, which has the oldest population in Europe, and has had exceptionally high levels of mortality. In general, mortality rates are higher among older people. The latter are also the most prone to aggravating factors for COVID-19, including chronic disease and diabetes. Therefore, the future of humanity will depend on demographically and socio-economically balanced societies, a balance that can be reached through

well-conceived and regular migration.

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