A European migration agenda that delivers for people

Oxfam analysis, background and agenda for EU action on asylum, migration and development

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Today, roughly 26 million refugees live outside their countries of origin, about 80% of them in neighbouring countries in the developing world. Yet, the arrival of 1.7 million refugees and other migrants in the EU between 2015 and 2019 generated a wide change to European migration and asylum policies, putting them at the centre of political debate.

The European Union and the Member States’ governments have the responsibility to manage migration in a fair manner that addresses the legitimate needs of migrants, including refugees, as well as the concerns of their own citizens. European migration policies must be based in international and European law and be based on facts and European values. Europe’s strength is not in turning its gaze from the people that need safety and support – it is about reaching out to people in need, saving lives, and indicating a path forward.

Migration is not a threat to be stopped, it is a complex phenomenon that can be managed for the good of all. Governments can and should design migration policies that protect people in danger and benefit communities in countries of destination and origin. If managed correctly, human mobility can contribute to achieving sustainable development in Europe and beyond and promote a more equal society for all.

What is the state of play for EU migration policies?

Since 2015, the EU has focussed many of its policies on stopping irregular migration at any cost. This approach has put short-term wins over strategies that work in the long term, limiting political space to prevent human rights violations.

In countries of first arrival to the EU, especially in Greece and in Italy where the EU runs ‘hotspots’ refugees camps with national authorities, asylum seekers have to wait for months and sometimes years on end without access to basic facilities and to the assistance of doctors or lawyers. The EU-Turkey deal of 2016 dictated that all migrants arriving from Turkey to Greece should be kept on the Aegean islands in order for the EU to keep the option of returning them to Turkey. As a result, at times, more than 30,000 people have been stranded on the Aegean islands, crammed into the EU reception centres – the ‘hotspots’ – without even a bed to sleep in. Efforts to find alternative solutions for asylum seekers on the Greek mainland or in other member states are often met with lack of political will.

The political pressure to stop irregular migration is also impacting the EU’s engagement with third countries and its wider diplomatic standing. In recent years, the EU has put migration at the heart of its diplomatic engagement with countries in the Middle East and in Africa. These discussions have been focused on returns agreements and support for border management policies. This focus reduces the space for EU diplomats to push governments on issues such as democratisation, human rights and civic space. It also makes the EU’s voice weaker when it comes to the global responsibility to protect the rights of refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants. Simply put, when the EU diplomats need the cooperation of governments to improve their control over borders and returns, they cannot criticise them for their human rights policies.
Over the past years, the EU has increased its cooperation on security, border control and organised crime with governments that do not respect human rights and are not signatories to international agreements on protecting the rights of refugees. The EU’s cooperation with the Libyan coastguard, for example, has been offered as a replacement for European search and rescue efforts. However, it results in people being intercepted at sea and returned to Libyan detention centres, where they are held in conditions that disregard the most basic human rights and suffer abuse from human traffickers.

Furthermore, the political pressure to stop migration has impacted not only people who are actually on their way to Europe, but all other people who are travelling along the same routes. Hence, it prevents regional and circular migration that is crucial for development in the region. Also, many European policies are designed and implemented without enough consideration of the humanitarian impact, of the importance of migration for livelihood and, on occasions, without considering implications of increasing the presence of security forces in fragile regions.

**What can the EU do to improve conditions in hotspots?**

EU member states must agree to share responsibility for hosting refugees more fairly, in the spirit of solidarity. In the short term, it is up to governments to agree on a temporary responsibility-sharing mechanism between a “coalition of the willing”, with the support of the European Commission. In the longer term, the EU should reform the Dublin Regulation, in line with the position already agreed by the European Parliament’s LIBE Committee in 2017.

The EU must also do more to improve the daily lives of asylum seekers trapped in EU ‘hotspots’, notably by urgently securing funding for the deployment of additional expert staff – doctors, psychologists, child psychologists and cultural mediators. This would help to ensure that all people seeking asylum receive medical and psychosocial assessment upon arrival. The EU should also ensure that enough lawyers are available to provide free legal assistance to asylum seekers on the islands – through the hiring of state-funded lawyers and through the funding of legal aid actors and NGOs.

**How can aid be used to support those forcibly displaced by conflict or disasters?**

Effective development cooperation reduces poverty and inequality, it contributes to ending conflicts, and it improves livelihoods. There is also a lot that aid can do to improve the situation for people affected by forced displacement, from addressing urgent humanitarian needs to long-term support programmes. Aid can facilitate the safe mobility of people who are fleeing conflict or crisis, and it can support the communities that host displaced people.

To make sure that aid addresses the causes of forced displacement, all stakeholders should adopt a holistic approach. They should aim at ending poverty, inequality, violent conflict and rights abuses; they should act on climate change and address gender aspects; they should focus not only on the people who are displaced but all those affected, including people who are left behind.

**How can migration be a tool in the fight against poverty?**

Development goes hand-in-hand with mobility. For many people it is crucial that they can engage in trade and labour across borders, because it allows them to generate income for themselves, their families and communities. Mobility across borders contributes to innovation, economic growth and human development. If managed correctly, it can benefit the labour markets of receiving countries as well as communities of origin through remittances and new skills of those who return after a period abroad.

The EU’s policy of strengthening border control in Africa ignores this critical role that regional migration plays on economic development. In West Africa, for example, intra-regional migration within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) zone is vital for people to be able to work and trade across borders. The importance of regional mobility in Africa is demonstrated by the fact that 80% of migration in Africa takes place within the continent.
Oxfam’s recommendations

1. **Support life-saving search and rescue operations.** The EU and its member states should support search and rescue efforts in the Mediterranean Sea and allow vessels to disembark people who have been rescued at the nearest port of safety. Attempting to prevent the life-saving operations of commercial vessels and NGOs is a dangerous approach that puts lives at risk and undermines citizens’ trust in their governments to resolve the situation when those even fail on the basics.

2. **Protect asylum seekers in Europe.** Member states should share more fairly the responsibility for hosting people in need of international protection. They should allocate adequate resources to ensure that all people seeking asylum are hosted in decent accommodation, have adequate food, receive medical support, and can seek legal assistance. The aim must be that people fleeing war, violence and persecution has a chance to rebuild their lives in Europe and integrate into our societies.

3. **End international agreements that violate human rights.** European agreements with third countries should promote European objectives and values, including achieving peace and stability, inclusive and sustainable development, state-building and democracy, the rule of law, protection of human rights and the principles of international law. Support for border management policies must aim to increase the security and protection for individuals and ensure that migration management programmes do not increase risks, abuses, or the vulnerability of migrants.

4. **Development cooperation must keep its purpose of eradicating poverty, reducing inequality, and meeting humanitarian needs.** It should assist people in need, and its effectiveness should be measured only in achieving development goals. Development aid should not be used to “tackle migration” and its goal should not be reducing cross-border movement.

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