



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 2 June 2020
(OR. en)

8490/20

LIMITE

**JAI 454
RELEX 389
ASIM 28
COAFR 148
MAMA 67**

NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Delegations

Subject: Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the EU's migration partnership with African countries: current response and prospects for future cooperation

Delegations will find in the Annex the above-mentioned note, which will be discussed during the informal videoconference of the members of the High-Level Working Group on Asylum and Migration on 12 June 2020.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the EU's migration partnership with African countries: current response and prospects for future cooperation

Since the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented global public health emergency in all of the EU Member States and in countries all around the world. As a result, a wide range of lockdown/emergency measures and mobility restrictions have been introduced by governments to contain the spread of the virus.

Besides their profound impact on the lives of people around the globe, the pandemic and emergency measures and restrictions have a significant impact on all aspects of migration, including visa, resettlement and return policies.

In the Joint Communication on the Global EU response to COVID-19 of 8 April 2020, the Commission stressed that *'the pandemic will have a serious impact on all aspects of life including aggravation of humanitarian needs. Its effects will be most acutely felt by populations already affected by humanitarian crises and conflict, such as migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons, as well as those in vulnerable situations such as women, children, elderly and disabled people and minorities'*.

In the medium to long term, the pandemic is bound to have a major impact on already fragile economies, inevitably leading to a drop in national GDP. In African countries of origin, transit and destination, the expected economic downturn is likely to influence sectors where large numbers of migrants are employed, such as agriculture and construction, and those in precarious jobs, especially in the informal sector.

Against this background, the EU response must encompass the humanitarian, migratory, health, social and economic consequences of the crisis.

The gradual lifting of containment measures may also lead to an upsurge in smuggling of migrants and human trafficking, resulting in an increase in irregular arrivals to the EU. In order to mitigate these risks, the EU must continue its constructive dialogue with, targeted support to and cooperation with third countries of origin and transit in Africa, including as concerns anti-smuggling efforts and border management.

Furthermore, it is necessary to assess the broader impact of COVID-19 on migratory movements (intra-African migration, internal displacement, flows to EU countries), notably following the lifting of current restrictive measures. Frontex's *'Risk analysis for 2020'* points out: *'{..}the effects on whole regions of the globe without proper governance, adequate healthcare systems or an appropriate economic arsenal to deploy against the pandemic are entirely unclear. Some third countries' governments may be unable to maintain order and the outbreak of internal and inter-state conflict could occur, potentially creating new displaced populations or irregular migration, possibly also moving towards Europe'*.

In order to have a clear picture of the repercussions of the pandemic, two possible push factors for migratory and refugee movements should be monitored: socio-economic factors and possible political destabilisation as well as growing insecurity and conflicts. At the same time, in Europe and worldwide the pull factors from the labour market may evolve due to the general economic slowdown (decreased demand in some sectors and increased demand in others). In parallel, the EU should continue working with African partners on combating people smuggling, managing migration, tackling refugee-related challenges and addressing the root causes of irregular migration flows.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruption in the support provided to some third countries as well as in the implementation of resettlement and assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes.

Other relevant support programmes have also been halted, due to the current difficulties experienced by EU partners on the ground (notably international organisations and NGOs) in gaining access and reaching those in need.

The consequences of emergency measures and restrictions are likely to be even more severe in African countries hosting a large number of refugees and internally displaced persons, affecting their living conditions and their access to essential healthcare services. The EU should play an important role in re-establishing these services.

The situation is particularly worrying in Libya, with the ongoing military conflict and changing patterns in smuggling activities. Challenges related to providing support for vulnerable categories of people have also been recognised in other North African countries. There has also been an increase in activity on the Central Mediterranean route, with departures from Libya and Tunisia, and a spike in arrivals via the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands, although overall numbers on that route remain low, with just over 2 000 migrants between 1 January and 15 May 2020. On the other hand, since the beginning of the pandemic the Western African route has seen a decrease in arrivals (31.7 % drop from 1 January to 15 May as compared to the same period in 2019).

In Tunisia and Morocco, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are facing loss of livelihoods and obstacles to their freedom of movement and access to basic services. Since the beginning of the pandemic the Western Mediterranean route also saw an increase in arrivals, with migrants departing from the Western Sahara region. However, arrivals from Morocco to the EU decreased by 53 % in the first quarter of 2020, thanks to effective cooperation between the EU, Spain and Morocco.

In its broader response to COVID-19 (including both EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) and European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) funds), the Commission has earmarked a total of EUR 1.2 billion for ongoing re-allocation to existing/planned new programmes in North Africa. Most notably, the EUTF is developing a new fast-track COVID-19 emergency response facility to cover emergency needs in North African countries, focusing on the most vulnerable populations.

Against the current background of COVID-19, migration and mobility is one of the five key EU partnerships with Africa, outlined in the Joint Communication '*Towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa*'. The Communication proposes a balanced, coherent and comprehensive approach to migration and mobility, guided by the principles of solidarity, partnership and shared responsibility and based on respect for human rights and international law.

The comprehensive strategy needs to take into account the current context of COVID-19.

In the short term, migration and mobility will continue to be limited due to travel restrictions and stricter border controls. People in need, living in compact settings, with almost no access to healthcare, are also particularly vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic itself, with a possibility for further deterioration of their situation. Therefore, the protection of those in need, such as refugees, internally displaced persons and other vulnerable displaced persons should remain a joint priority.

In the medium and longer term and subject to the economic, health and security consequences, the outcome of the COVID-19 crisis is likely to shape new migration and mobility dynamics both from and within the African continent.

For the EU, pan-African and regional cooperation and partnerships with Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and the Horn of Africa remain crucial in this context, aiming at adequately addressing migration and mobility, among other relevant sectors.

In the context of available financial assistance, one of the key mechanisms of EU assistance is the EUTF, the main objectives of which are to foster stability and contribute to better migration management as well as to address the root causes of destabilisation, forced displacement and irregular migration. Within the EUTF programmes, adjustments have been made in order to continue operations (including protection, return and reintegration), with the implementation of humanitarian corridors to organise returns.

Recently-endorsed Commission Communication ‘COVID-19: Guidance on the implementation of the relevant EU provisions in the area of asylum and return procedures and on resettlement’ should be applied to the extent possible.

It might be useful, in the current context, to also discuss and examine already applied and future adjustments to EUTF programmes to better meet the evolving needs on the ground.

Another point worth discussing is the EUR 20 billion ‘Team Europe’ package to support partner countries in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, which places special emphasis on children, women, the elderly and disabled people, as well as migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons and their respective host communities.

Given the wide geographical scope of this paper and the divergent needs of African countries, Member States are invited to focus on countries and regions in Africa which are of particular importance in the context of migration and where they recognise pressing needs to re-launch the implementation of established cooperation frameworks.

In view of the above considerations, Member States are asked to express their views on the following:

1. The EU Strategy for Africa outlines a general framework for partnership, including a balanced, coherent and comprehensive approach in the area of mobility and migration. Migration and mobility will also be discussed at the next EU-AU Summit. Given the current exceptional circumstances, to which areas of migration policies with Africa should the High-Level Working Group give priority in its upcoming discussions?
2. What kind of adaptations are needed to EU funds and programmes (particularly to the EUTF North of Africa window) in the context of the COVID-19 crisis? Should more support be allocated to emergency needs, such as healthcare services, and to regions hosting refugees and internally displaced persons in precarious situations, etc.? To what extent can the ‘Team Europe’ support package help address needs in Africa?