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POLICY BRIEF

# THE MIGRATION DILEMMA:

## Europe and Africa's New Compact—A Realist Pathway Beyond Fortress Europe



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*The issue of migration between Europe and Africa is not just a humanitarian or social dilemma, but a strategic challenge that will shape the twenty-first century. At its core, it reflects the collision of powerful forces—migration, climate change, human development, energy resources, rare commodities, and demographic pressures—each with significant geopolitical implications. Among these, migration, climate change, and human development stand out as critical issues that exacerbate and influence one another. Despite the interconnectedness of these issues, the policy responses from Europe and Africa remain fragmented, uncoordinated, and driven by narrow, short-term interests.*

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Europe faces serious internal pressures, including an ageing population, waning competitiveness, and unsustainable social security expenditures. Its economic stagnation increases its need for young workers, but uncontrolled migration creates security risks and internal political strife. Africa, meanwhile, faces a youth bulge in an economic landscape unable to generate sufficient opportunities for its growing population, leading to outward migration, mainly toward Europe. This migration, far from being random, reflects historical ties rooted in colonialism and persistent economic inequalities, now amplified by climate change, displacing millions and further destabilizing the continent.

Migration must be understood in terms of national interest and security. Africa's demographic surge presents both an opportunity and a threat to Europe. For Europe, maintaining stability and control over its borders while addressing its demographic and economic challenges is paramount. For African nations, creating conditions that retain human capital and reduce the drivers of forced migration is equally vital to their sovereignty and stability.

The question is not whether Europe and Africa should form a new partnership, but how they can align their interests. Rather than idealistic appeals for shared prosperity, the relationship must be based on pragmatic cooperation that serves the self-interests of both continents. Europe must invest in Africa's infrastructure, energy, and development to secure its own borders and reduce future migration pressure. Africa must focus on harnessing its demographic advantage and building economic resilience, recognizing that unchecked migration undermines its long-term stability.

In this context, Europe's 'fortress' approach is bound to fail or, in the best of scenarios, will not succeed in isolation. It must be thought through and paired with strategic, interest-driven engagement with Africa in order to address the root causes of migration in a way that protects the sovereignty and security of both regions. Only through such hard-nosed, realist policy coordination can Europe and Africa manage this defining challenge.

## **A TRIPLE CHALLENGE AND A NEW COMPACT: MIGRATION, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

At the heart of the migration dilemma is a growing mismatch between Europe's demographic realities and Africa's development potential. Europe's population is ageing rapidly: by 2050, one in three Europeans will be over the age of 65, a reality that puts immense strain on labor markets, economic productivity, and social security systems. Meanwhile, Africa's population is booming, projected to double by 2050, with over 60% of its population under the age of 25. This demographic contrast underscores the triple challenge: migration, climate change, and human development.

### **Migration: Changing Patterns and Drivers**

Migration between Africa and Europe has traditionally been driven by economic disparities, political conflicts, and historical links between former colonies and European states. However, climate change is now amplifying these flows. The International Organization

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for Migration (IOM) estimates that climate-related displacement could affect up to 85 million people in sub-Saharan Africa by 2050, as rising temperatures and extreme weather events devastate livelihoods. Many of those displaced by climate change will seek refuge in Europe, adding to the pressure on an already-strained migration system.

A notable example is the Sahel region, which in addition to political turmoil and violence, has experienced prolonged droughts and desertification, forcing communities to abandon their homes in search of more fertile land. In coastal West Africa, rising sea levels are eroding coastlines and destroying agricultural fields, further fueling migration. The lack of viable economic alternatives in these regions exacerbates poverty, pushing people toward Europe as a perceived solution to their hardship. Europe's response to these challenges has largely been reactive. It has centered on short-term measures including border policing, security, and control, rather than engaging with the deeper, more complex root causes of migration. This approach has led to a cycle of crisis management, with policies emphasizing deterrence over long-term solutions.

Thus, instead of fostering sustainable partnerships that address the drivers of migration—such as economic inequality, political instability, and the impact of climate change—Europe has concentrated on containing the immediate flow of migrants. There has been a noticeable lack of creative, forward-thinking solutions that could focus on long-term human development, investment in African economies, or the creation of safe and legal migration pathways. By prioritizing enforcement over engagement, Europe risks missing opportunities to build resilient migration systems that benefit both continents. This limited view fails to acknowledge migration as a dynamic, ongoing process, intertwined with global development and demographic change.

## Climate Change: The Underlying Driver

Africa is disproportionately affected by climate change, even though it has contributed the least to global carbon emissions. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Africa is the continent most vulnerable to climate change impacts, given its reliance on agriculture and natural resources. Climate-induced disruptions to food security, water availability, and energy systems are leading to increased displacement and instability. Africa faces an alarming risk of forced and mass migration because of the growing impacts of climate change, particularly desertification, coastal erosion, droughts, and the loss of livelihoods. The continent's vulnerability stems from its heavy reliance on agriculture and natural resources, both of which are highly sensitive to climate fluctuations. As climate change intensifies, many African communities are experiencing rapid environmental degradation that threatens their ability to survive in their traditional homes.

One of the most significant threats comes from desertification, which is expanding at an alarming rate across the Sahel region and beyond. As fertile lands turn into deserts, agricultural productivity plummets, forcing millions of people to seek new livelihoods elsewhere. In areas where water sources dry up because of prolonged droughts, once-thriving agricultural communities are being left with little choice but to abandon their homes in search of more stable environments. This undermining of food security, coupled with the loss of reliable water supplies, is a recipe for large-scale displacement.

Additionally, coastal erosion is threatening Africa's coastal cities and villages. Rising sea levels, more frequent and severe storms, and the degradation of coastal ecosystems are displacing thousands of people who depend on coastal fishing, tourism, and other maritime

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activities. These communities are often left with no viable alternatives, leading to increased migration pressures. Many of these migrants are drawn to Europe, where they hope to find better economic opportunities, creating unsustainable situations in North Africa and a crisis at European borders.

The cascading effects of climate change on livelihoods are further compounded by increasing political instability and conflict over dwindling resources. As people are forced to move from one region to another in search of survival, competition over land and water resources often intensifies, fueling violence and insecurity. This, in turn, accelerates migration, as people flee not only from environmental degradation but also from escalating conflicts.

It is estimated that millions of Africans may be displaced by climate-related factors in the coming decades, with many seeking to migrate to Europe. The sheer magnitude of this migration will strain European asylum systems and pose complex humanitarian, political, and security challenges. Without significant interventions, both in terms of climate adaptation measures in Africa and comprehensive migration policies in Europe, the consequences of this crisis could be severe, destabilizing regions and pushing vulnerable populations into even greater hardship.

As Europe navigates its climate commitments under the Paris Agreement, it cannot afford to overlook the devastating environmental crises beyond its borders that demand its urgent and meaningful intervention, particularly in Africa. It is not just an opportunity to stave off a trend of growing and soon to be irrepressible migration, but a moral obligation for Europe to take greater responsibility in supporting Africa in building climate resilience. Without decisive action, Europe's inaction in addressing the root causes and global consequences of climate change will only deepen the inequalities it claims to combat. Europe must demonstrate leadership not just within its own borders but globally, in the context of its historical and present contributions to the climate crisis demanding accountability.

## Human Development: Africa's Youthful Demographic Dividend

Africa's young population is often seen as both a challenge and an opportunity. If harnessed effectively, it could drive economic growth and development. However, if youth unemployment and underemployment persist, the continent risks greater instability and increased migration flows. According to the World Bank, over 12 million young Africans enter the labor market annually, but only 3 million formal jobs are created. The mismatch between job creation and the growing workforce fuels migration, as young people seek better opportunities abroad.

Europe's role in supporting Africa's human capital development is crucial, but it must go beyond rhetoric and promises. While initiatives such as the **EU-Africa Partnership on Job Creation and Investment in Youth**, launched in 2017, represent positive steps, they have fallen short in delivering substantial results. European leaders have repeatedly acknowledged the importance of fostering education, vocational training, and entrepreneurship in Africa, yet concrete action and sustained investment often lag behind.

In a notable address, then German Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasized in 2018 that Europe has a "*fundamental interest*" in addressing Africa's challenges to stem migration. Her call for deeper cooperation with African nations, however, has not translated into large-

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scale job creation or educational reforms. The political will to execute these commitments has been inconsistent, particularly in terms of the alignment of resources and policies with realities on the ground.

Similarly, French President Emmanuel Macron, during the 2017 France-Africa Summit, called a “*new partnership*” centered on Africa’s young people, stressing Europe’s responsibility to provide alternatives to migration through enhanced opportunities in Africa. Yet many of these proclamations have failed to materialize into comprehensive, long-term funding necessary to scale-up effective programs such as the EU-Africa Partnership.

## A NEW COMPACT

To address the migration dilemma effectively, Europe and Africa need a new compact—one that moves beyond the narrow focus of migration control and encompasses broader development goals. This compact would require Europe to invest in Africa’s long-term development, particularly in areas that can create jobs and improve livelihoods. This is not a generous gesture toward Africa; rather, it stems from political priorities and Europe’s own self-interest.

## Ageing Europe and the Crisis of Competitiveness

For Europe, migration is not simply a security issue but an economic one. The continent’s ageing population presents profound challenges for its long-term competitiveness and the sustainability of its social welfare systems. With fewer workers contributing to pension schemes and a growing number of retirees drawing benefits, Europe’s social security systems are under unprecedented strain. In countries such as Germany and Italy, the fertility rate is well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman, leading to shrinking workforces.

## The Demographic Time Bomb

Europe’s demographic time bomb is well-documented. According to Eurostat, the working-age population in Europe will shrink by nearly 50 million people by 2050, while the number of people aged 65 and over will increase by 50%. This shift will significantly affect the labor market, with fewer workers available to support a growing elderly population. Countries such as Italy, Spain, and Greece are already facing these demographic pressures, with shrinking populations and declining birth rates.

## The Economic Consequences

The economic consequences of Europe’s demographic decline are far-reaching. An ageing workforce hampers productivity, innovation, and economic growth, while rising healthcare and pension costs divert resources from critical investments in infrastructure and technology. The European Commission has warned that without significant labor market reforms, Europe risks falling behind emerging economies in Asia and Africa, where younger populations and more dynamic markets are driving growth.

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## SELECTIVE MIGRATION: A STRATEGIC APPROACH

Europe's ageing population presents a significant opportunity to reframe migration policy in a way that benefits both continents. Rather than clinging to rigid border control measures, Europe can develop a more **selective migration strategy**, one that allows for the movement of both skilled and semi-skilled labor between Africa and Europe. This strategy should not be seen as merely a means of meeting labor shortages, but as part of a broader economic and developmental agenda.

One proposed solution to Europe's demographic crisis is to encourage selective migration from Africa. Europe's need for labor, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, and construction, aligns with Africa's surplus of young workers. However, migration policies must be structured to ensure that they benefit both Europe and Africa. The current model of selective migration, which prioritizes highly skilled professionals, often results in brain drain from African countries, depriving them of much-needed talent.

**Temporary migration programs** that allow African workers to gain skills and experience in Europe before returning home to contribute to their local economies could be expanded. Programs such as Germany's 'Triple Win' initiative, which recruits health workers from countries including Tunisia and Morocco, offer a glimpse of how mutually beneficial migration policies can work in practice. Migrants receive higher wages and career development opportunities, while contributing to their home economies through remittances and the transfer of skills upon their return. This initiative needs improvement as, despite its narrative, it triggers a brain-drain phenomenon that needs to be mitigated by a dual compensation: that due to the workers (doctors, engineers...) and that due to the country of origin, to offset the heavy costs of education and training of workers who migrate. Only then would such an arrangement become mutually beneficial.

These schemes should be broadened to include other sectors facing shortages, such as construction, agriculture, and hospitality. The key is to ensure that these programs are **win-win**—providing Europe with much-needed labor while preventing the depletion of Africa's workforce through brain drain.

Though somewhat controversial, Europe should focus on enhanced **circular migration** policies, where migrants are encouraged to return to their home countries after gaining valuable skills and experience. To ensure that circular migration benefits both migrants and the countries involved, several key measures could be recommended. First, **strengthening legal protections** for circular migrants is essential. Host countries should enforce labor standards that ensure fair wages, decent working conditions, and access to social services, including healthcare and education. Establishing bilateral agreements between home and host countries can help manage migration flows and safeguard migrant rights.

Second, **facilitating skill development** for migrants would allow them to contribute more effectively to their home countries when they return. Governments and organizations should invest in training programs that equip migrants with skills that are in demand both abroad and in their home economies. Lastly, **creating pathways for family support** is important to mitigate the social disruptions caused by circular migration. Programs that allow migrants to stay connected with their families and communities can help reduce the emotional toll of prolonged separation. By addressing these areas, circular migration can

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become a more sustainable and mutually beneficial practice.

## Addressing Anti-Migration Sentiment by Speaking the Truth

The rise of populism and anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe poses a significant challenge to crafting more open migration policies. Right-wing parties have capitalized on fears around migration, framing it as a threat to national security, culture, and economic stability. **Public discourse** around migration needs to shift from one of fear to one of pragmatic opportunity.

European leaders must engage in a **frank conversation** with their electorates about the demographic realities facing the continent. Europe's ageing population and shrinking labor force will necessitate greater migration, particularly from Africa, to maintain economic stability and growth. Rather than ceding ground to populists, European policymakers should frame migration as a **necessary and strategic tool** for addressing these demographic challenges.

This requires not only a **change in rhetoric** but also policies that demonstrate the benefits of migration. For instance, programs that highlight the contributions of African migrants to local economies and communities can help combat xenophobic narratives. By investing in the **integration** of migrants and ensuring that they have the support necessary to succeed in Europe, governments can reduce the friction between native populations and new arrivals.

## The Role of North Africa: A Buffer Zone or a Partner?

North African countries including **Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya** have increasingly become buffer zones in Europe's migration strategy, tasked with preventing African migrants from reaching European shores. These countries have received controversial funding from the European Union to bolster border control and manage migrant flows. Several ethical and practical concerns have been raised.

First, by outsourcing its migration management to North Africa, Europe risks creating **inhumane conditions** for migrants who are stuck in transit. Reports of abuse, exploitation, and unsafe conditions in migrant camps in Libya, in particular, have drawn widespread condemnation. Moreover, this strategy does little to address the root causes of migration and risks entrenching authoritarian regimes in North Africa by providing them with the financial resources to suppress dissent.

Europe's current approach to migration, often framed as a matter of security and border control, fails to address the structural factors driving migration from Africa. Policies such as the proposed 'North Africa buffer zone', which seeks to contain migrants in countries like Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya, may alleviate immediate pressures on European borders, but do little to address the root causes of migration.

Rather than treating North Africa as a **migrant containment zone**, Europe should seek to forge deeper economic partnerships with these countries. North Africa can play a crucial role as a **gateway between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa**, facilitating trade, investment, and mobility. The EU's **New Agenda for the Mediterranean** sets a positive



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tone for such a partnership, focusing on creating sustainable economic growth, jobs, and stability in the region. Instead of externalizing its migration problem, Europe must confront the demographic, economic, and environmental challenges that drive migration.

## Toward a Strategic and Realist Approach to Migration

The migration challenge between Europe and Africa is not diminishing, and from a realist perspective, it must be acknowledged that if policies are not updated, immigration can operate as a zero-sum game. The interests of nations are paramount, and each must safeguard its own vital concerns. As climate change intensifies, economic disparities widen, and demographic pressures persist, the need for a pragmatic and interest-driven approach to migration is more urgent than ever. Europe's current strategy of border control and deterrence, while addressing immediate concerns, is not a long-term solution that serves the strategic interests of Europe or Africa.

To tackle this reality, Africa and Europe must align their vital interests and form a new compact grounded in the acknowledgment that migration affects the stability and security of both regions. Such a compact must prioritize national interests while seeking common ground, addressing the root causes of migration through targeted investments in Africa's infrastructure, education, and technological capacity. These investments must be designed not as charity but as tools that serve the interests of both Africa and Europe, fostering stability and reducing the incentives for uncontrolled migration.

The demographic realities present clear strategic opportunities. Europe's ageing population and Africa's youthful workforce represent an area in which mutual interests could converge, but only if structured migration pathways are carefully negotiated to ensure they serve the needs of both continents. By focusing on an equal balance of power and safeguarding national security and economic interests, Europe and Africa can recalibrate their approaches to migration in a way that mitigates risks and maximizes benefits.

This approach demands clear-eyed, realist leadership that recognizes the limits of idealism. Migration must be managed through policies that reinforce the sovereignty and stability of all states involved. If Europe and Africa can strategically align their interests, the migration issue can shift from being a point of conflict to one of managed coexistence. However, this will require an unwavering commitment to national self-interest and a shared understanding that only through cooperation based on realism can both continents secure their futures.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Ferid Belhaj is the former World Bank Vice President for the Middle East and North Africa. He also served as the Chief of Staff of the President of the World Bank Group and held various positions at the Bank including Director for the Mashreq countries, Director for the Pacific department and Special representative to the United Nations.

## ABOUT THE POLICY CENTER FOR THE NEW SOUTH

The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

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