

Reflections on the Africa-Europe Valletta Summit on Migration and Mobility

Was the recent Valletta Summit successful in ensuring that African perspectives are no longer marginalised on issues such as migration and mobility? Toni Haastrup analyses the outcome.

This post is part of our series **African Perspectives on Migration** looking at the theme of regular migration.

On 11-12 November 2015, the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU) and other key countries met in Valletta, Malta to discuss and attempt to alleviate the humanitarian crisis confronting immigrants into Europe. The **Valletta Summit** was an opportunity to deepen cooperation between Africa and Europe and especially between their respective regional institutions on the issue of migration and mobility. In Valletta, the negotiators rhetorically proceeded on the **basis of an existing contemporary Africa-EU cooperation**. The new relationship is founded on the commitment to reorient Africa's relationship with Europe so that African agency is core, and African perspectives are no longer marginalised in the practice of international relations and global policymaking. To effect this however, tired and problematic tropes of Africans as helpless victims would need to be retired. Additionally, policymakers on both sides but especially Europe ought to critically reflect on how narratives about African migrants position them. Importantly, African migrants must be positioned as able agents in the policy construction process and in resolving the current human insecurity.



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However, this has not been the gains from the recent Summit. Although it yielded **a new declaratory statement**, the efforts made have not been convincing as a significant attempt to prevent the loss of lives or accord dignity to those who make their way to Europe. Prior to the Summit, there was already a schism in the perspectives of European and African representatives, which silenced the nuance needed to tackle this current challenge. Whereas the European representatives' end game is to stop Africans and those who use Africa as a route into Europe from coming over, or sending them back regardless of conditions that await them through **readmission agreements**, African elites prioritised being treated as equals in Africa-EU negotiating processes. The African contingent campaigned for expanded legal opportunities for Africans, especially in education through scholarships and training. However, ordinary Africans are only **too**

aware of the tediousness of obtaining visas and the expenses of it through existing legal channels. These two positions are seemingly irreconcilable, but more importantly, they do not leave room for migrants' perspectives in the ongoing discourses and the eventual policy outcomes. It seems unlikely that the initiatives proposed as seen in the joint declaration, added to those already enacted can ensure that the voices of those who are insecure are being heard and their security needs met.

Prior to the Summit, a joint statement of African and European civil society organisations called for different priorities to be included within the negotiations. Their recommendation was that the outcome of Valletta needed to be people-centred, holistic, and consider the ongoing insecurity of the migrants outside Europe, trying to get in, and those already in Europe. Further, they made the case that the so-called economic migrant ought to be acknowledged and protected. This is in response to an emerging narrative within recent popular discourses on migration that privileges the victimised refugee over the proscribed economic migrant. This privileging creates a hierarchy that may be based in a certain interpretation of law but not necessarily in need or vulnerability. The civil society statement also noted the need for a gender-sensitive approach, meaning a consideration of the gendered implications of any new proposed migration and mobility framework. This has so far been absent from the official narratives of refugee insecurity and absent from the current proposals. Yet, it is essential even as reports come in of women and children experiencing sexual-based violence in refugee camps while officials relegate this as a non-priority in dealing with the current crisis.

In the ongoing, parallel, narratives, the European side is especially quick to call on brain drain as further justification for enacting exclusionary policy approaches to its migration regime. This is politicking. It is often the case that the educated and young migrants are preferable within European societies especially as they acculturate. Further, the 'fear' of brain drain is relegated in official narratives when recruiting health care professionals to support Europe's ageing population. It is thus a cynical ploy that suggests a narrative of care, even while European countries contribute to undermining the reasons why these 'brains' should want to stay in their countries through unfettered neoliberal policies, give support to corrupt governments and easy compromises on human rights and especially gender specific rights. The preventative to brain drain is supporting transparency, democracy, the rule of law, human rights and especially gender rights in sending countries and regions beyond rhetorical commitments. The answer is certainly not sending people back to places that haunt them and is the source of their daily insecurity and this seems to be the main outcome of Valletta. European elites have been inconsistent in their rhetoric of care, and have been rather paternalistic. The EU's comprehensive approach which on paper is a fantastic idea has not followed through here. The EU's prior support to Libya in the quest to deter immigrants, especially from sub-Saharan Africa not only fueled racism, but also ensured the deprivation of human rights and thus, insecurity for migrants. There has been limited reflexivity on the impact of the narratives of immigration perpetuated by the EU. The African side for its part side-steps the fact that the insecurity from which people are fleeing from in places like South Sudan or Burundi implicates the same elites negotiating on the continent's behalf.

On the whole, elites or institutional representatives are happy to make deals at the expense of ordinary people, yet discarding the promise of a people-centred approach to peace and security.

As with their European counterparts, it is worth considering that Africans too deserve the right to find security in their everyday lives. The language of exclusion must change to find substantive common ground so that Valletta is not just another instance of summitry with no substance and real losers. The EU would do well to remember the historical exclusionary context of its engagement with Africa and seek remedies by building flexibility into its approach towards Africans. Listening, considering and enacting African representatives preferences, including those of civil society is essential. Continued support for African institutions that engenders further regional integration and a commitment to human rights practices is further key to preserving lives. Proposed militarised responses cannot be the response to tackling the insecurity of Africans borne of the so-called migration crisis.

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