African Migration, Global Inequalities, and Human Rights: Connecting the Dots

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The concerns of destination countries and the framing of migration as a problem have long dominated public debate on international migration, and to a lesser extent, policy analysis and scholarly research. Anti-migrant sentiment, leading to restrictive legislation, official abuses against immigrants, and in extreme cases xenophobic violence, is widespread in countries as diverse as South Africa, Libya, Italy, Switzerland, and the United States. Migrants are widely blamed for crime, for "taking our jobs," and for threatening national identity. Empirical evidence to the contrary has had relatively little impact on public opinion.

At the same time, there has been increasing attention in recent years to the impact of migration on the development of migrants' countries of origin, with emphasis on the potential contributions of remittances, efforts to counter the "brain drain" of skilled professionals, and the role of the diaspora in investment and "co-development."

Migrants' rights organisations, particularly in Western Europe, have taken the lead in highlighting the need for protection against abuses of the human rights of migrants themselves. There is also increasing scholarly attention to the topic, as well as multilateral institutional attention by, for example, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Migrants and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. But it is still true that the rights of migrants themselves are most often marginalized in official discussions between migrant-receiving and migrant-sending countries.

In 2009, the UNDP Human Development Report called for "win-win-win" approaches to migration policy that would provide benefits for receiving countries, sending countries, and migrants. Such scenarios will have little chance of success unless steps are also taken to address fundamental issues of global inequality so that both those who stay and those who move have access to fundamental human rights. The growing phenomenon of irregular migration, and more generally of "problem" migration that leads to conflict, does not result only from specific national policies. It also derives from rising inequality within and between nations, combined with the technological changes that make migration a conceivable option for larger and larger numbers. Thus trends in migration do not only point to problems or opportunities for development; they also signal fundamental issues

facing both those who move and those who do not.

This essay highlights the relationships between different migration issues and the broader context of global inequalities. It "connects the dots" rather than exploring any one issue in depth. It is intended to stimulate further debate and research that can contribute to re-framing migration not as a technical issue for migration specialists, but as one of the fundamental issues that must be addressed in order to bring about a more just global order.

While African refugees, numbering some 2.8 million at the end of 2009, are prominent in the international image of African migrants, they constitute less than 10% of all African-born migrants living outside their country of birth. The majority of African migrants, like the majority of migrants from other world regions, do not fit the definition of refugees fleeing violence or political persecution; rather, they are seeking to escape economic hardship and find better living conditions. Much of that migration is indeed "forced," but the force involved is that of economic inequality between countries and regions.

This paper first reviews African migration by region and then traces frameworks for understanding migration, particularly the links between migration and global inequalities. This sets the context for exploring the specific issues of migration and development and migration and human rights. The paper concludes with examples of migrants' rights organizing, observations on framing advocacy agendas, and an annex suggesting the implications of migration for expanding development goals and measures.

In North Africa, the majority of migrants go to Europe or the Middle East. In Africa's other regions, most migrants move to countries within the African continent, with smaller proportions moving to Europe, North America, the Middle East, or other regions. In West Africa, the movement is largely within the region, from inland to the coast. In Southern Africa, migrants flow predominantly to South Africa. In Central and East Africa, the flows vary markedly by country, depending on geography and on the history of colonial and linguistic ties.

In considering migration and development, the dominant themes of research and debate have been remittances and the flow of skilled labour (brain drain/ gain). There has been more attention in recent years to the broader roles of the diaspora population, but the complexity of diaspora relationships remains one of the major areas that needs further attention.

In practice, protection of the rights of migrants, including both refugees and other migrants, falls far short of that already agreed in international law. Although the 1990 Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers has been ratified by only 44 states, including no major destination country, multiple international human rights agreements require respect for the rights of all people, regardless of migrant status. The failure to respect these universal human rights, and particularly the rights of irregular migrants, is reinforced by anti-immigrant public opinion, by right-wing political mobilisation, and by the practices of governments in their management of migration systems.

Any effective defence of migrants' human rights will require greater organization by migrants themselves, as well as coalitions with other allies committed to justice and human rights.

As illustration, the essay includes brief mentions of four cases of migration-related activism in different contexts: the Sans-Papiers in France, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration in California, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and the Migrants' Rights Network in the United Kingdom.

A final section lays out summary observations about advocacy related to migrants' rights in destination and transit countries, to immigration "reform" and "managed migration," and to migration and global human development.

An annex proposes possible additions to measures of progress based on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), stressing (1) measures of global inequality and inequality between countries involved in migration systems, (2) measures that might make the MDG goal 8 of "partnership" less vague, and (3) measures for countries of origin on policies related to emigration and relationships with their diaspora populations.