



Avoiding the Sandstorm in the Sahel: A Reflection on Security, Migration and Development

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The Sahel is a crucial region for policy-making at the European and international level. A security and strategic cornerstone for European powers since colonization and a key area in terms of development challenges, today the Sahel has gained new relevance due to the so-called “migration crisis”. New policy tools implemented by the European Union, such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, target this region, but could deepen policy contradictions between securitization and development cooperation. A longer-term perspective is greatly needed to tackle extreme poverty and to create local economic opportunity. In order to explore the interconnection between the different policy areas of migration, development, security and peace in the region, the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), and the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) came together in Rome on 20 February 2018 to present the volume *The Security-Migration-Development Nexus Revised: A Perspective from the Sahel*.



A direct connection between development and migration?

A study on the revised nexus among security, migration and development resonates within a public debate recently dominated by the idea of a “migration crisis”. According to the conventional narrative, Europe has been inundated by a “tsunami of migrants” from the African continent. According to **Bernardo Venturi** (Researcher, IAI), this is not the case: Europe does not face an unprecedented crisis, but it does have to deal with different flows that have developed in the last ten years. Migration is above all a structural and intra-African phenomenon.

At the same time, the Sahel is crucial not just from a migration point of view. **Ernst Stetter** (Secretary General, FEPS) spoke of why Africa as a whole does matter, independently from the hot topic of migration: a strong demographic surge on the continent, decisive economic growth, various climate



challenges and geographical proximity with Europe. An integrated approach on different policy areas is thus strongly needed.



Furthermore, one of the main findings of the research, supported by a growing body of scientific studies, is that there is no direct and clear connection between better living conditions and a dramatic decrease in the number of migrants, particularly in the first phases of development when, counter-intuitively, a surge in migration flows may occur. Analysis of recent

years shows, for example, how countries like Niger and Burkina Faso, among the lowest ranked in the Human Development Index, are not the main countries of origin for migrants. Instead, the major flows originate from countries like Senegal and Nigeria, where complex social and political difficulties persist. Migration policies adopted by the European Union do not fully consider this apparent paradox, thereby endangering their own success. On the contrary, policies focused on border securitization, aimed at stopping rather than managing mobility, could limit development opportunities in Africa and foster irregular migration towards Europe.

The perils of securitization

Increasingly focusing resources and political will on border control risks politicizing the nexus between security, migration and development. While these fields of action are surely intertwined, development cooperation should not be aimed solely at security promotion. In this perspective, the relationship between Europe and Africa has entered a new historical phase, recalled Venturi: a phase of securitization. But the original goal of EU development cooperation is the eradication of poverty, not the securitization of borders.

This contradiction is embodied by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), launched in 2015, which aims at eradicating the root causes of migration in countries of origin and transit, including in the Sahel and in the Lake Chad region. **Giulia De Ponte** (Policy Coordinator, Italian Network of International NGOs) denounced a distorted use of development funding in projects enhancing customs checks and other measures under the “better migration management” formula. Furthermore, the



Fund's resources are geographically oriented along the migratory routes towards Europe, at the same time identifying young men as first targets. These choices contradict the universal goal of eradicating extreme poverty, which should guide European policies.

The contradictions of the EUTF are further deepened by a widespread lack of preliminary analysis concerning real needs on the ground, and by a limited attention to the respect of human rights. For example Niger, a key partner of the EU in the region, has approved a new national strategy against irregular migration, following pressures from Europeans, mostly disregarding any political dialogue on respecting human rights. In this way, conditionality has been introduced by the EU in its relationship with the African country, as exposed also by the bilateral Migration Partnership signed between the EU and Niger. Among projects financed by the EUTF, the "AJUSEN" project¹ is the starkest example of conditioned funding. The agreement on returns in 2016 constitutes another sign of a changing relationship, influenced to an even greater extent by the migration issue.

If these policies have indeed reduced the number of people reaching Europe, they have also driven migrants to more dangerous channels, while activities linked to human mobility have been pushed toward irregular routes. At the same time, this new political approach to migration and development endangers local peace-building efforts, such as actions put in place by Mali and Chad, which are incentivized to react to the requests of European donors.

Migration as a phenomenon has surely many repercussions at the local level: looking at the migratory history of Sahel, **Roberto Forin** (Research Coordinator, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Vienna) underlined how migration has been a relevant source of revenues for various local populations and how policies implemented during the last years have increasingly impacted on local relations of power. This is highlighted by the cases of Tuareg and Tebu populations, directly involved in recent negotiations with the Italian government to assure a more controlled Southern Libyan border. Libya offers another case of evident local repercussions of international migration policies: starting in 2000, the government led by Muammar Gaddafi introduced more restrictive policies, under European influence. The outcome was an impressive growth in irregular migration: in the space of a few years, 1.5 million Sub-Saharan African residents in Libya were rendered irregular migrants. At the same time, even if migration in the Sahel remains an historic constant with some consolidated migratory axes and hubs (Khartoum, Agadez), social transformations occurring in the last 50 years at the local level, such as urbanization in Northern



Africa and demographic pressures in many regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, have accrued a structural dimension.

A broader and long-term perspective

This structural dimension of the migration phenomenon requires an even deeper understanding of the nexus with security and development. In this perspective, **Elena Masi** (Project Officer, Italian Agency for Development Cooperation) recalled the new Italian law on development cooperation which commenced implementation in 2015. The law constitutes a novel instrument to tackle development causes of migration, by enhancing the involvement of migrant communities through migration policies and development cooperation. Currently, the Italian Agency on Development Cooperation operates on the root causes of migration in the Sahel region by addressing individual choices of migrants, often disregarded. In this context, it recognizes the vital importance of creating local economic opportunity. To achieve a real individual empowerment, more information campaigns are needed and a roadmap on regular migration for development must be envisaged.

A broader approach should also consider other policy areas, such as agriculture and trade. For agriculture, Italy has invested in initiatives that value linkages between rural and urban areas, involving also the private sector. On this matter, development cooperation finds itself at a crossroads: either looking for innovative and inclusive policies, or remaining stuck inside a sterile academic debate on the role of the private sector in cooperation. The same goes for the link between development and security: it is crucial to understand the distorted effects of military interventions in the Sahel, as security crises in the region have deep social causes.



The need for an evidence-based analysis

The complexities highlighted so far show that an evidence-based analysis on the nexus is paramount, particularly in the Sahel, which has become the most important laboratory for these policy

developments. **Bashair Ahmed** (Executive Director, Shabaka Social Enterprise) stressed the importance of contextualizing recent political and social developments in the region, considering for example that the current critical situation in Niger is due also to conflicts in Libya. The consequences are particularly dire for Sub-Saharan African migrants stranded in the conflict, because they are denied any real mobility opportunity.

Contextualization and a broader analysis are also needed in order to understand that Europe is facing mixed migration flows. Migrants' personal status could change during their journey towards Libya. Consequently, it may not be possible to draw a clear distinction between asylum seekers and mixed flows of economic migrants. This could become a consolidated policy challenge that Europe should have increased readiness to tackle. Moreover, there is the issue of environmental refugees, whose personal situation is given even less attention by the international community.



For all these reasons, a deeper understanding of the nexus among development, security and migration is mandatory. As **Vassilis Ntousas** (Policy Advisor, FEPS) stated in his final remarks, the risk is that migration will obscure other crucial issues in the relations between Africa and Europe. Accordingly, evidence-based analysis will become increasingly central in the days ahead, to improve both policy-making and public debate.