Addressing the Climate–Migration Nexus in the UN–AU Partnership

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Executive summary

This policy briefing examines issues around climate change and migration in the renewed UN–AU partnership. It notes that climate change and migration are particularly problematic for any sustainable development efforts in Africa. Despite the adoption of the Joint UN–AU Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security in 2017 and the subsequent finalisation of the AU–UN Framework on Implementation of Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030 barely a year later, the two organisations still lack a common position on how best to respond to the challenges of climate change and human mobility in Africa. To ensure an effective partnership in these two areas, the AU and the UN need to engage more closely and in a coherent manner.

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Introduction

In April 2017, the UN and AU through their respective chief executives countersigned the Joint UN–AU Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security.[1] This development forms the basis for closer and multi-level collaboration between the two bodies. Beyond the focus on peace and security, which hitherto dominated activities in the relationship but have now become more complex and intricately linked to other global issues, the renewed partnership seeks to consider non-conventional and emerging threats to global security. These include climate change, good governance, human rights, migration and terrorism.

Of these priorities, climate change and migration have recently been recognised as two critical challenges facing the entire world. While African migration is at the centre of the refugee crisis within and outside the continent,[2] climate change poses an existential threat not only to this generation[3] but also to future generations,[4] with significant intergenerational implications for Africa's large youthful population. The characterisation of Africa as a continent more vulnerable to climate change given its high exposure and low adaptive capacity further exacerbates the situation. In addition, climate change and migration are politically sensitive issues with relatively deep and complex connections. Although not the only or, even worse, the main determinant of migration, environmental stress does induce human mobility.[5] This climate–migration nexus has been confirmed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change[6] in its recent reports, which make extensive references to extreme weather events as potential climate drivers of human migration. The forced migration of thousands of people by tropical cyclones Idai and Kenneth in Mozambique in 2019 was a clear example.

Beyond a peace and security partnership

Prior to the decision to move the UN–AU partnership away from just a focus on peace and security matters, climate change and migration were part of formal discussions in the agendas of the two bodies. Over the years, UN specialised agencies such as UN Environment (UNEP), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and

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1   UN–AU Annual Conference, "United Nations–African Union Joint Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security", April 19, 2017, https://unoau.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/signed_joint_framework.pdf.
2   Sulaiman Momodu, "Africa Most Affected by Refugee Crisis", *Africa Renewal* (December 2016 – March 2017).
3   UN Climate Change, *Climate Action and Support Trends 2019* (Bonn: UN Climate Change Secretariat, 2019), https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Climate_Action_Support_Trends_2019.pdf.
4   Marc Davidson, "Wrongful Harm to Future Generations: The Case of Climate Change", *Environmental Values* 17, no. 4 (2008): 471–488.
5   Marie-Laurence Flahaux and Hein De Haas, "African Migration: Trends, Patterns, Drivers", *Comparative Migration Studies* 4, no. 1 (2016): 1–25.
6   Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*, https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/; IPCC, *Special Report: Climate Change and Land*, https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/; IPCC, *Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5 °C*, https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/download/.

the World Meteorological Organization have focused attention on environmental phenomena, including climate change. Similarly, the International Organization for Migration and UN High Commissioner for Refugees have dedicated approaches to migration and refugee issues respectively. At the regional level, the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment sets the continental agenda and priorities related to the environment. The high-level gathering is essential in collective decision-making about climate change in Africa and, indeed, works closely with the AU and the UN (through UNEP). The efforts of the AU Commission to address migration on the continent through programmes such as the Initiative Against Trafficking and the Joint Labour Migration Programme are equally worthy of note.

Recently, debates about the climate–migration linkage have increasingly been considered in formal UN climate summits, particularly the annual Conference of Parties (COP) meetings. For instance, climate change migration formed part of the conversations at COP24 in Katowice in 2018. The meeting not only endorsed key recommendations by the Task Force on Displacement (TFD)[7] but also welcomed the decision to extend the work of the TFD. In the new mandate, the TFD was saddled with the responsibility of providing guidance to the Executive Committee (Excom) of the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) for the implementation of the TFD workplan within the UNFCCC. The TFD recommendations and the initial workplan came about a few days ahead of the adoption of the UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) in December 2018. The GCM represents the first-ever UN global agreement on a common approach to international migration. At COP25, the WIM Excom chose to organise a side event as part of the efforts to build support for the implementation of phase two of the workplan at country level. It is worth mentioning that COP25 had a specific focus on the linkages between oceans and climate change (Blue COP) – a topic of utmost relevance to migration dimensions – and support for small island developing states that are being threatened by rising sea levels and the attendant forced relocation.[8]

In recognising the need for closer and broader cooperation, the UN and the AU authoritatively committed to a common framework – the Joint UN–AU Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security. This occurred against the background of a mutual understanding that the continued relevance of the partnership depends on enhanced collaboration in all important aspects. Besides, agitations were rife at the time concerning the supranational-regional operational structure, which highlights the asymmetrical standing of the UN–AU partnership and, therefore, calls attention to the urgency to effect necessary transformations.

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7   The TFD was established as part of the WIM Excom under the Paris Agreement to address loss and damage associated with climate change impacts.
8   Environmental Migration, "Human Mobility at COP 25", https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/human-mobility-cop25.

Barely a year afterwards (in January 2018), the two bodies finalised the AU–UN Framework on Implementation of Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030.[9] Under the arrangement, it is expected that both agendas, including alignment with the Paris Agreement – a worldwide climate deal concluded in 2015 – will be mainstreamed and integrated into the national planning frameworks of individual African countries and, in effect, contribute positively to people-centred and planet-sensitive structural transformation in Africa. Goal 13 – 'Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts' – of the UN's Agenda 2030 is specifically dedicated to climate action. Similarly, the AU's Agenda 2063 indicates regional commitment to accelerate actions on climate change and the environment through the implementation of the Programme on Climate Action in Africa.

Clearly, climate change is a significant issue in both agendas. Even so, the two bodies lack a common position on climate action. As a marginal contributor to global carbon emissions and, ironically, a core victim of climate change's adverse impacts, Africa is especially disposed towards adaptation interventions. The AU (as a coordinated continental voice) minced no words in stating this regional position on climate change in its Agenda 2063. At the same time, reducing emissions in line with the Paris Agreement remains the top priority of the UN and its specialised agency, the UNFCCC. Furthermore, while Agenda 2030 treats climate change in the context of sustainable development, Agenda 2063 puts greater emphasis on its environmental imperative. The priority that climate change adaptation receives in Africa depends on the circumstances, capacity and position of individual AU member countries. Many African states do not include climate change in their top development priorities. Other issues, such as socioeconomic development, poverty eradication and addressing inequality, take precedence, even though the situation is slowly changing as the onset of extreme climatic events impacts livelihoods and poverty.

The case of migration is much worse. Agenda 2030 makes no specific mention of migration as part of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, despite its recognition of international migration as a multidimensional reality of major relevance to the development of countries of origin, transit and destination. Human migration is, at best, subsumed as one of the planned activities under Goal 10 – 'Reduce inequality within and among countries'. Likewise, the framers of Agenda 2063 gave no specific recognition to migration nor highlighted any specific action plan to address it, although some of the issues mentioned in the agenda concern migration one way or the other. For instance, the documented determination and call to action to eradicate poverty in Africa in the coming decades,[10] if followed through, may help address the concern over poor socioeconomic conditions being responsible for the mass migration of Africans to other parts of the world, particularly across the Mediterranean Sea to destinations in Europe and Scandinavia. Still, such a cursory approach to migration on a continent generally depicted as being on the move[11] is deficient in terms of the low importance attached to the subject.

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9   UN Economic Commission for Africa, "AU–UN Framework on Implementation of Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030", January 27, 2018, https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/au-un-implementation-framework-for-a2063-and-a2030_web_en.pdf.
10   AU Commission, "Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want", https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-03_popular_version.pdf.
11   Flahaux and De Haas, "African Migration".

While Africa is indeed notable for mass migration (both regular and irregular), African migration remains overwhelmingly intra-continental. For example, Côte d'Ivoire and, lately, South Africa rank as two prominent destinations for intra-African migrants. Movement of African people is therefore not directed largely towards Europe and other continents outside Africa, as widely insinuated.[12] In addition, migration is not peculiar to Africa and Africans. The increasing wave of Indian migration into Africa – to countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania and Mauritius – and the substantial migration of the Chinese labour force to support China's interest and investments in Africa,[13] as well as the well-known Lebanese migration into different parts of the continent, are worthy of note.

The same understanding of individual African countries with differing circumstances, priorities and capacity to respond to climate and migration challenges is driving the agenda of the AU. South Africa and Ethiopia, in particular, have shown leadership in shaping the AU agendas on these two issues. The recently developed Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018–2030)[14] identifies climate change as one of the major push factors responsible for migration and mobility on the continent. However, it is yet to be seen how and when the fundamentals of this regional framework might be fused as part of the essential thematic areas in the joint implementation framework on sustainable development.

A climate and migration partnership: Prospect and concerns

Climate change and migration are two major sustainable development issues in Africa. Tangible progress has been made in tackling climate change over the years. Notable examples are the 'ecosystem-based adaptation for food security' projects in the Zambezi River Basin (Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique); the Climate and Clean Air Coalition to support countries in reducing short-lived climate pollutants; and the UN Support Plan for the Sahel to scale up efforts to accelerate prosperity and sustainable development in the region. Also worth mentioning is the launch of the Africa Dialogue Series, particularly the high-level workshop on climate-related security risks and mediation held in Nairobi in May 2019. The meeting emphasised the urgent need to implement comprehensive adaptation and mitigation measures aimed at combating climate change in Africa.

These modest efforts need to be consummated through a joint climate position in line with the Paris mitigation ambition and the recently agreed UN transformative initiatives on

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12   Flahaux and De Haas, "African Migration".

13   Dawn Nagar and Charles Mutasa, eds., *Africa and the World: Bilateral and Multilateral International Diplomacy* (Chaim: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 433–453.

14   AUC, "Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018–2030)", https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/35956-doc-2018_mpfa_english_version.pdf.

global climate action.[15] Similarly, actualising a common migration agenda must happen soon.

Experience from the UN and AU's previous engagement on peace and security indicates some challenges. Key among them is concern about the unequal status of the two organisations – the UN as a supranational authority/senior partner and the AU as a continental force/junior partner. Interestingly, the two bodies are now engaging in major efforts to address some of these concerns. For instance, the scope of activities involving representatives of the two bodies has recently been expanded.

Conclusion

The renewed UN–AU partnership offers a unique opportunity for collaborative synergies to address climate change and migration in Africa. Prioritising these two phenomena in the renewed partnership is a necessity, and increasingly compelling. The two bodies need to engage more closely and develop a common position in response to the climate and migration challenges facing Africa. Climate change and migration should form part of the essential thematic areas in the AU–UN Framework on Implementation of Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030. Political leadership with strong will and commitment to mutually agreed priorities and implementation plans concerning climate change migration must be identified. Lastly, collaboration in all important aspects, including joint financing, should be optimised.

Recommendations

- Prioritise the climate and migration agenda in the renewed UN–AU partnership with a view to align the positions of the two bodies and strengthen their respective capabilities to effectively address the challenges of climate change and migration in Africa.

- Review the AU–UN Framework on Implementation of Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030 by incorporating climate change and migration into the essential thematic areas of the development framework.

- Ensure political leadership with strong will and commitment so that climate change and migration priorities are mainstreamed and integrated into the national planning frameworks of individual AU member countries.

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15   UN, "Report of the Secretary-General on the 2019 Climate Action Summit and the Way Forward in 2020", December 11, 2019, https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/assets/pdf/cas_report_11_dec.pdf.

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Cover image

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (R) greets South Africa's President Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa at the United Nations in New York on 25 September 2018. (Angela Weiss/AFP via Getty Images)

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