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Pathways Towards Coordinated African Migration Governance: The African Regional Organisations' Role

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Interview with Takyiwaa Manuh

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„Migration governance is a question of political will“

How would you characterize migration in Africa?

It is a common image that most young people in Africa are leaving the continent to go to Europe. Indeed only about 20% of all migrants in Europe actually come from Africa. The bulk of African migration is within Africa and also within the Regional Economic Communities (RECs). In the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for instance, we find that almost 70% of migration is constituted by nationals of member states. This is also the case in the East African Community (EAC) and in Central Africa. It is only in North Africa where the majority of migrants are leaving the region. Most of the RECs have attempted to establish free movement regimes, with ECOWAS being the most advanced as it is the oldest REC. There, free movement has been long established: there is an ECOWAS passport, which allows nationals of the 15 member states to move around freely.

How is labour migration governed in Africa?

Labour migration has been an important livelihood strategy in Africa for a considerable period of time. In recent years, labour migration has become even more important as employment possibilities within countries have failed to keep up with the growing population. Regional economic integration and of course continental integration have been a long cherished aspiration of Africans. However, the mobility regimes for labour have not taken root as strongly as many countries would wish. One challenge for regional economic integration is that the member states can override the decisions of the RECs. This leads the fact that member states often try to implement restrictive national policies. Often this is because they have their own problems employing their citizens.

At the same time it is clear that labour migrants can contribute a lot to the economies within their countries and regions. However, the business case for labour migrants has not been made strongly enough; one motivation might be to counter xenophobic reactions. This business case needs to be made by the private sector, not only the government. Additionally, there is of course a need for more education and public awareness of nationals to understand the contributions migrants make. They don't see that migrants usually only occupy skilled jobs when there is a shortage in employees or that low-skilled jobs migrants take on are mostly the ones national citizens do not even want to do.

What is the aim of the Joint Labour Migration Programme for Africa (JLMP)?

The JLMP is an initiative launched by the African Union Commission (AUC), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). As its title implies, it deals with the governance of labour migration for better regional integration and development. Despite the very widespread labour mobility in Africa, there is a data gap, a resource gap and also a governance gap. And even though there are many policies, often they are not very harmonized. Further, they are not properly understood and therefore ultimately, they do not work either in the interest of the migrants themselves or that of the member states. There are about 203 AU protocols and conventions, many of them dealing with migration. So it is an ambitious proposition of the JLMP trying to harmonize all these frameworks and protocols.

In the first phase, which will be the first four years, our main aim will be to fill in the data gap as unfortunately most of the statistics available around Africa are weak. For the result of the skills shortage to become a skills market, it is important to know where the shortages actually are. Another element of the programme is the establishment of the right to social protection for migrants. National systems of social protection have to be strong in order to extend them to migrants. If a country does not have a strong social protection system for its own citizens, it is unlikely to be able to extend this to migrants.

What are your policy recommendations to the RECs to implement the JLMP?

Clearly, there is a need for dialogue around these issues among the RECs and with the different partners involved, whether it's employees, employers, governments, citizen organizations or trade unions. Also, there is a need for the implementation of the different protocols that have been signed. Of course it is easy to sign a protocol; the hard part about it is implementation. Therefore, there needs to be support for specific implementation and capacity building for the RECs. It is at a later phase that member states will come in.

A gap in implementation can also be seen when it comes to visa openness. ECOWAS has established the free movement of people and the ECOWAS passport. But only 55% of African countries have these visa free entry regimes, so clearly there is a necessity to broaden this. This is important because before you can even decide if you are going somewhere to work, you should be able to explore what is possible on the ground. Therefore, I think labour mobility can only work after free movement and mobility have been achieved. Overall, I think that a policy framework is very important to make all these protocols a reality and I think that the RECs have a big role to play in this regard. Of course, however, there is the question of political will. As long as countries can override the decisions of the RECs, it will be very difficult for these regimes to operate.