

Future of the AU-EU Partnership on Migration and Mobility in light of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction – Setting the Scene

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Webinar, 9 July 2020

Excellencies; Ladies and Gentlemen; our viewers on both continents and around the world,

I am pleased and honoured to welcome our distinguished speakers. We very much appreciate that you found the time to discuss such an important issue as the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on migration and mobility in Africa; but also the implications of this crisis on the future of AU-EU partnership in these important areas for cooperation. Before we start with the panel, I would like to introduce briefly the theme of our webinar.

Since the end of February when the first case was reported in Algeria, all countries of the African continent have been affected by the COVID-19. According to the Africa Centre for the Disease Control and Prevention, as of 7 July 2020, almost 500,000 people have been infected with COVID-19 in Africa, which unfortunately led to more than 11,000 fatalities up to today.

The fear of a wide spread of the Coronavirus has led, as in other parts of the world, to border closures, lockdowns and restrictions in all the African countries.

COVID-19 and the subsequent travel restrictions and lockdowns have negatively affected a large number of migrants in Africa: tens of thousands of them, often abandoned by migrant smugglers, got trapped or stranded in their destination or transit countries. As a result, they end up under most precarious conditions. Others could not return home, also because assisted return programmes could not operate anymore. There are also those irregular migrants who lost their jobs and small income due to confinement. COVID-19 has also triggered large-scale spontaneous and forced returns, which not only lead to vulnerabilities of the population concerned but also carry the potential for inter-state tensions.

The spread of COVID-19 and the subsequent restrictions also impact on aid delivery and threaten the livelihoods of more than 26 million refugees and IDPs in Africa. In addition, the global suspension of refugee resettlements has severe consequences on the functioning of the Emergency Transit Mechanisms in Niger and Rwanda.

These are just a few signs giving a forewarning of how the COVID-19 and its subsequent effects may aggravate vulnerabilities migrants and refugees as well as their family members and host communities. The expected economic downturn and decrease in remittances will only make things worse. Therefore, without proper policy response, the future migration and refugee crises are almost certain. This will badly hurt the continent where mobility plays a crucial role not only as a livelihood strategy but also as a source of growth and prosperity. It is

actually an irony of history that the year which was supposed to become a turning point in the implementation of the continental free trade area and in the process of ratifying the AU Free Movement Protocol, is becoming a symbol of immobility.

2020 was also meant to be a year when the EU-AU partnership would take further boost, especially after coming into office of a new European Commission whose President's first official visit took place in Addis Ababa. The participation of a high number of European Commissioners in the February AU-EU College-to-College meeting was another symbolic sign that the EU meant it serious with intensifying its partnership with the AU and its Member States. The vision of bringing this partnership to new heights was set by the European Commission in its March Communication "Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa". In this communication, the European Commission sees the AU-EU relations built on five partnerships. And one of these should be a Partnership on Migration and Mobility, covering the cooperation on addressing the challenges of forced displacement, irregular migration, return, readmission and reintegration as well as cooperation on legal migration. This vision was supposed to be discussed and refined at the 2020 AU-EU Ministerial and AU-EU Summit; however, the COVID-19 crisis has already triggered the postponement of the AU-EU Ministerial and holding of the AU-EU summit is linked with further uncertainties. More importantly, it is still not entirely clear how the COVID-19 crisis will affect the migration and mobility partnership between AU-EU. It is very important to note here that one of the aims of the EU's Global Response to the COVID-19 from April 2020, is to focus on the most vulnerable people in Africa, including migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons and their host communities. This is certainly the right step into the right direction. At the same time, this might also give a sign about the direction in which the AU-EU migration and mobility partnership might be headed in the years to come if the COVID-19 continues to generate further vulnerabilities on the side of migrants, refugees and their host communities.

Against the above background, it is of great importance to discuss the key issues relating to the effects of COVID-19 on migration, mobility and displacement in Africa as well as its possible impact on the future of AU-EU partnership on migration and mobility. I hope that today's webinar will make a good contribution to these discussions and wish all of you an interesting and insightful event.