

The Euro-African migration conference: Africa sells out to Europe

By Gregor Noll,
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In Rabat, Morocco, fifty-eight European and African states met on 10-11 July 2006 for a unique conference – [the Euro-African Ministerial Conference on Migration and Development](#) [1]. Its conclusions, especially the "Rabat plan of action" that trades African cooperation in helping to restrict migration in return for European development assistance, have been widely welcomed. But the real story of Rabat is of failure and misunderstanding, as I shall explain.

The reason for such an exercise in integrated, intercontinental diplomacy is evident. In the first half of 2006, some 9,000 undocumented migrants have arrived at the shores of Spain's Canary Islands after perilous crossings in small boats – more than the number for the whole of 2005. A week before the conference began, two Africans died after falling off the six-metre fence at the Spanish enclave of Melilla, part of the [external border](#) [2] of the European Union. In autumn 2005, five Africans died – allegedly shot by Moroccan border police – when trying to cross the fence of the Ceuta enclave along the coast. It happens that the European Union is funding part of Morocco's border-control effort.

A significant part of the [plan of action](#) [3] agreed at Rabat focuses on repressive measures: one item is a comprehensive reinforcement of border control by air, naval and police forces (African included); another concerns "readmission agreements" between target, transit and source countries, so as to facilitate return of undocumented Africans; a third deals with enhanced registration of African migrants.

But other measures envisaged by the plan appear to be more on the persuasive side. They include boosting development assistance to African economies, so as to pre-empt the need for migration; improving access to higher education for Africans (in both Africa and Europe); and a proposal to introduce temporary migrant-labour schemes for Africans wishing to work in Europe. The Europeans have promised to give €18 billion (\$22.7 billion) to support its African partners in the coming [seven-year period](#) [4].

[Gregor Noll](#) [5] is professor of international law at Lund University, Sweden. He has published extensively on refugee law and human-rights law, and has recently concluded a multi-annual research project on evidentiary assessment in refugee law.

Also by Gregor Noll in openDemocracy, as part of our "[people flow](#) [6]" debate:

"[Visions of the exceptional](#) [6]"
(27 June 2003)

The Rabat context

What happened in Rabat? Swedish migration minister Barbro Holmberg [7] claimed that it was an "historic event", as she pointed out that Africans and Europeans had for the first time assembled to discuss migration and development in conjunction [8]. Others regard it as a good thing that European and African governments join hands to stop human smuggling and to create employment opportunities in northern and sub-Saharan Africa; and that an increasingly militarised migration control [8] is acceptable if it eliminates the need for migration by encouraging development.

But the background of the Rabat conference suggests a different interpretation. During the 1990s, governments in the global south pushed for a United Nations world conference on migration – modelled on those held on the environment, on human rights and on development. Their colleagues in the north could hardly be less interested. The south wished to link migration to development at an early stage; the north wanted to improve migration control first. As the number of arrivals at the Canary Islands, Lampedusa [9] and Malta grows exponentially, and more lives are lost at the frontiers of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla [9], the Europeans have changed their minds.

In any case, will the Rabat plan of action [10] have the intended effect of decreasing undocumented migration from Africa to Europe? Even if it were binding and implemented to the letter, my answer would be no.

The reasons for this judgment are primarily economic. Both immigrants with residence permits and undocumented migrants send part of their earnings to family members remaining in the country of origin. Altogether, these so-called "remittances" – exceeded by foreign direct investments, but greater than international aid – form the second most important [10] source of income for many states in the south.

In 1999, remittances to less developed countries amounted to \$60 billion. Such figures emphasise that emigrant-producing countries in the south would be foolish to prevent their citizens from travelling to and working in the European Union. This would entail a dramatic fall in their income. At the same time, it is politically improbable that the EU will in the foreseeable future increase aid to a level equivalent to "buying out" the value of such remittances.

The annual sum of €2.5 billion (\$3.16 billion) offered to the African participants by the Europeans in Rabat is not trivial, but is far less than would be needed for such a "buy-out". The conclusion must be that the EU and its member-states do not possess the economic muscle required to match that of the migrant networks. This fundamental fact is often forgotten in "the fight against illegal immigration". If African governments accept a deal that disadvantages their countries and peoples in financial terms, it must really be in bad faith.

A Mediterranean "Berlin wall"

The logic of this approach is that neither liberalisation nor control can regulate undocumented migration and informal labour markets out of existence.

First, liberalisation: the argument here (embodied in the Rabat plan of action) would be to allow more people to migrate in order to "dry up" undocumented migration and the informal labour market for migrants. This strategy would not succeed, for two reasons: the EU will continue to attract migrant workers for years, with consequences that would circumvent any legal framework; and the contrast between migrants' countries and the EU – in employment opportunities and the human-rights protection – will take equally long to bridge (and be far more complex and lengthy than the process of integration into the European Union of the accession countries of east-central Europe).

Migration researchers call the relationship between income adjustment and migration as "the migration hump": as long as significant differences in income persist, many people will continue to migrate (see the paper by [Hein de Haas](#) [11] for the Global Commission on International Migration ([GCIM](#) [12])). It is only when differences are evened – to a level between, say, Sweden and Poland – that the number of migrants will be reduced to a trickle; only does the migration curve flatten and is the "hump" overcome. From a political point of view, the migration hump is an obstacle to a thoroughgoing legalisation strategy, since EU citizens rightly suspect that a large, income-equalising, global migration would entail serious consequences for the material privileges they enjoy.

Also in openDemocracy on migration, Africa, and "people flow":

Ivan Briscoe, "[Dreaming of Spain: migration and Morocco](#) [12]" (27 May 2004)

Michele Wucker, "[Don't get immigration wrong – again](#) [12]" (20 June 2006)

Saskia Sassen "[Migration policy: from control to governance](#) [12]" (13 July 2006)

Second, control: the argument here is one that has been heavily pursued by the EU and its member-states. In the 1990s, programmes were launched that exchanged information and experience, invested military resources in border surveillance, and created an EU-wide border-control authority. Yet each time control increases at particular entry-points or new control techniques are implemented, the flow of migration moves to another point or smugglers and migrant networks respond with counter-strategies.

These cat-and-mouse tactics can have fatal results, and co-opting African military and security agencies in the European cause of anti-migration policy will invariably heighten the dangers.

There are geographic-political borders, and there are legal ones. During the cold war, liberal democracies insisted on the very human right that everyone should be free to leave any country, including his or her own. There were and are good reasons to insist on this. The democratic entitlement to "vote with our feet" can work even in and against dictatorships.

The Rabat conference might be remembered as the occasion when some African governments sold out this human right at the behest of Europeans, in return for conditional development assistance. As a result, the Mediterranean "Berlin wall" made of water and razor wire will persist, and proliferate in the African continent. Poverty in Africa will persist, and so will violations of human rights. The only thing that will diminish as a result is the exit options of Africans.

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