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In the EU, gaps in the debate on migration explain policy deficiencies.

What are the root causes of migration? How biased is the debate on immigration in Europe? Are European aid policies a solution or are they part of the problem?

When you consider the debate on immigration in Europe, it deals mainly with the consequences of migrations. NGOs complain about human rights violations, deaths and human suffering. Depending on the economic and political situation prevailing in their country and their ideological orientation, the European politicians see immigrants as either a potential source of cheap labour for local firms, a cause of downward pressures on local salaries or a threat to the national or European identity. This last an issue, absurd as it sounds when one considers the very low percentage non EU migrants represent in total European population, is a point on which xenophobic and populist movements have been surfing very successfully over the years.



Little is said, in the debate, on root causes of migration, one reason being probably that the discussion is essentially self-centered and dealing with what impacts most directly on European societies [see for example what is being said within the [European Parliament](#) or, more broadly for rich countries, in [OECD's work on migrations](#)]. Evidently this is a major

explanation of why European immigration policies are so biased towards stopping migrants to come to Europe, and so unrealistic and irresponsible [\[read\]](#).

Whenever *immediate* causes of migration are factored into the debate, a distinction is made between “involuntary political” refugees who were obliged to run away from their homes because their lives were threatened - and their political rights have been violated - and so-called “voluntary economic” migrants who are supposed to have “chosen” to migrate in order to improve their living. In this latter case, only rarely anything is said on what may be a strong enough reason to make people “choose” to migrate when they very well know their life will be at stake. In particular, only exceptionally is there any mention that economic migrants have seen their economic rights violated and their future threatened because, for example, their land has been grabbed [\[read\]](#) and they have been driven to migrate out of their villages.

According to this way of thinking, political refugees usually qualify as “good” migrants, and economic refugees as “bad” ones. Of course, only the blind - or, rather, those who refuse to see what is evident - will believe that this is an “obvious” and well justified distinction, even though one can reasonably argue that this perception is everything but “natural” and that it could possibly only be explained in the light of specific objectives that are not spelled out clearly. Indeed this point of view considers as acceptable migration only if it is caused by factors that can be attributed to “foul” governments (e.g. those in power in Syria, Eritrea and elsewhere), but unacceptable when causes can be relatively easily tracked back to consequences of activities by our own governments, economic actors and interests. One could perhaps go one step further in our reasoning and argue that our countries have a substantial share of responsibility in the emergence of those actual “bad” political regimes; but that may seem a little too bold for some!

In “[‘Getting to the root causes of migration’ in West Africa – whose history, framing and agency counts?](#)” published on [Globalizations](#) in 2018, Nora McKeon - whom [hungerexplained.org](#) readers already know well - reflects on the specific case of immigrants originating from West Africa. She rightly argues that the causes of their migration is “*rooted in decades of policies which have impoverished rural economies and dispossessed small-scale producers to make room for exported-oriented monocultures*” and promoted “*private sector-led modernization*”. We recently argued in another article that this orientation has become even stronger and more violent over the last fifteen years [\[read\]](#).

By accepting tacitly the dominant ‘individual human rights/market primacy’ view of the world, civil society fails to properly “*address the long-term structural causes of the agrarian malaise that underlies current forms of migration from [Sub-Saharan Africa] nor to reveal the discursive contortions that have veiled over a century of exploitation of African rural territories.*”

Failing to understand the root causes of migration in the African context is the best way to continue ever reusing the same old recipes in the area of development assistance [\[read\]](#), with the same resulting effects in terms of rural-urban migration first and - at least in part - in terms of international migration. Examples are numerous of solutions proposed by European countries that do not fit with the felt needs of the population on the ground. For instance, supporting the development of large estates on land traditionally used by rural communities is an approach that may increase production in the short term but it also degrades the natural resource base through monoculture and increases dependency on

unstable commodity markets that are in the hands of a few multinationals. Moreover, this system creates only very limited jobs for local people.

McKeon quotes the example a Senegalese leader who “*turned down a proposal from a European cooperation programme that offered to pay his village organization a certain sum for each returned migrant whom they agreed to welcome into the community accompanied by his/her individual installation project*” because he felt that the proposed approach would create conflicts in the village. He believed that “*instead, the cooperation programme should support [his] organization directly to transform agriculture in the territory. When people see there is an economy that works they will return on their own initiative*”. In other words, McKeon continues, the solution does not lie in “*EU’s mirage of ‘modern’ agrifood value chains led by European investors transforming rural young people into entrepreneurs*”, but rather in supporting the emergence of “*local, national and regional food systems*” that allow “*the wealth created to be retained and redistributed within the territorial economies*”.

Combatting the causes of emigration out of Africa is therefore not just a question of money. It is a matter of putting an end to the proliferation of programmes and policies that lead to the disempowerment of the local population through their inclusion into economic systems on which they have no control whatsoever and that promote a highly individualistic model undermining the structure of local societies.

More broadly, to address the migration issue, the global economic system has to be reengineered to stop it from being a source of continuous aggravation of world inequality, but rather allow all to live decently wherever they stay [[read](#)].

To know more :

- McKeon, N., Getting to the root causes of migration’ in West Africa – whose history, framing and agency counts?, Globalizations, 15:6, 870-885, DOI: 10.1080/14747731.2018.1503842, 2018.
- de Haas, H., European Migrations Dynamics, Drivers, and the Role of Policies, European Commission, 2018.
- Tiekstra, W., State of play in the debate on migration management in Europe: How did we get here? Clingendael Institute, The Hague, 2018.
- OECD, International Migration Outlook 2018, OECD, 2018.
- European Parliament, Migration debate: the real divide, 2015.

Earlier articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- Borders in the global economy - Control of labour, mobility of goods and capital, preservation of profits and exacerbation of inequalities, 2018.
- Privatisation of development assistance: integrating further agriculture into the world market, 2018.
- (The minimum of) What you should know about migration... 2018
- Valletta Summit on migration: 1.8 billion euros for Africa to stop Africa-to-Europe migration - Illusion or irresponsibility? 2015.