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## The International Organization for Migration in West Africa: Why Its Role is Getting More Contested

### Executive Summary

This Policy Brief elaborates on the changing role of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in West Africa. In the wake of the 'migration crisis' of 2015 and 2016, the European Union (EU) has paid increasing attention to this African region, with the IOM implementing many of the new EU-funded projects. Building upon extensive fieldwork and research interviews in Dakar, Brussels and Accra, this policy brief demonstrates that the IOM has considerably extended its activities across the region, notably in areas such as capacity building and assisted voluntary return programs. However, this upgrade has brought about several challenges. African actors have started to contest IOM activities, notably if viewed to be biased in favor of European priorities. The policy brief concludes with a range of policy recommendations on how to enhance local ownership and better balance donor and African interests.

## Introduction

West Africa has become a focal point in the efforts of European and international actors to cooperate more closely with countries of migrants' origin and transit. In 2015 and 2016, a series of migrant boat tragedies in the Mediterranean Sea and unusually high numbers of new migrants arriving irregularly on European soil stressed the European Union (EU) to the point of 'crisis' (Trauner 2016). In response, the EU started to focus more on cooperation with countries and regions beyond its immediate neighbourhood including West Africa. Mali, Nigeria, Niger, and Senegal have been among the priority countries of the EU's Partnership Framework launched in 2016. Worth about EUR 4.2 billion (as of March 2019, see European Parliament 2019), a new 'European Union Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa' (EUTF) has become an important instrument in terms of funding and development assistance in the region and elsewhere.

This Policy Brief looks at how this altered context has affected patterns of migration governance in West Africa, focusing on the role of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). The IOM is not an institution of the EU but an organisation related to the United Nations (UN).

The organisation shares an agreement of cooperation with the UN but does not have the status of a specialised UN agency, such as, for example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The EU has always been of particular relevance for the IOM given that it has been among its most important donors.<sup>1</sup> European destination countries for migrants may therefore aim to influence the policies of migrants' origin and transit countries through the IOM (Geiger 2010). At the same time, the IOM has been seen as an actor which, independently, influences the migration policies of states around the world (it has 172 member states) (Pécoud 2018).

Our contribution focuses on the role of the IOM in Ghana and Senegal, two West African democracies with differing degrees of migration cooperation with the IOM and the EU. We build upon extensive fieldwork conducted in the context of the UNU-CRIS project 'African Migration: Root Causes and Regulatory Dynamics' (AMIREG). Among others, we gathered data from a total of 87 interviews with African policy-makers and international officials in Accra, Dakar and Brussels. Our research shows that the enhanced European focus on West Africa has widened the scope of IOM activities in the region. The upgrade of the organisation's standing has brought about some challenges. It has to balance

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<sup>1</sup> The EU has been the third largest donor of earmarked contributions from 2000 -2016 (McGregor 2019).

the need to satisfy donor interests and meet their policy objectives while finding policy solutions that are adapted to the particular West African context. It risks growing contestation if West African actors perceive its activities as being biased in favor of European priorities.

## The IOM in Ghana and Senegal

The IOM Office in Senegal was established in 1998. Its officials have been focusing their efforts on the links between migration and development, counter-trafficking, assisted voluntary return and reintegration support, border management and the strengthening of government capacity building (IOM Senegal 2019). The engagement of the IOM in Ghana, where the organisation has been operational since 1987, has been similar. The organisation has been involved in a wide range of migration-related issues, ranging from resettlement, assisted voluntary returns, capacity building and combating human-trafficking to information campaigns on the risks and realities of migration (IOM Ghana 2019).

While these two IOM offices have pursued similar tasks, the migration situation in the two countries differs. Emigration and immigration are relevant issues in Ghana. An estimated 825,000 Ghanaians live abroad, and the country has the second highest rate of immigration in West Africa, with 1.85 million migrants residing in the country (Devillard, Bacchi and Noack 2015). Yet, most of

this migration takes place in a regional context, with the exception of a strong Ghanaian diaspora community in the UK, the former colonial power. In comparison, Senegal is a more important country of origin and transit for migrants heading to Europe. It has become a focal point for EU external migration cooperation, particularly since the 'Canary island crisis' of 2006, when about 30,000 migrants arrived by boat in this part of Spain.

Senegal became the beneficiary of a range of EU capacity building projects in the field of border control. France and Spain also financed development projects addressing root causes of migration. Launched in 2007, probably the most significant EU project was Operation Hera, in which Senegalese and (European) Frontex officers jointly patrolled Senegalese waters. Senegal has also signed bilateral migration agreements with France (2006 and 2008), Spain (2006 and 2007), and Italy (2008) (Maher 2016). Scholars have referred to Senegal as a model case 'for managing EurAfrican migratory flows' given that the measures have been deemed successful from a European perspective. Stricter border controls and interceptions at sea led to a sharp reduction of the number of people departing from Senegalese shores (Vives 2017). However, bilateral negotiations for an EU readmission agreement and an EU mobility partnership failed with Senegal. Senegal had a return ratio (ratio between number of removal

orders and effectuated returns in the EU) of 6% in 2016, which was low in comparison to other African countries (Bernardini 2018).

Gradually, Senegalese authorities became more aware of the relevance of the migration issue and started to formulate clearer demands towards the EU and selected member states (Van Criekinge 2009). The country increased its engagement with the IOM following the Canary Island crisis, considered as a relatively 'neutral' partner in the field of migration. Put differently, Senegal did not see the organisation to pursue the very same interests as Spain or other EU actors. Following this incident, flagship IOM projects including the Integrated Border Management initiative (2014-2016) were initiated. This program resulted in the establishment of eight new border crossing points at the Senegalese borders with Mauretania and Mali as well as the renovation of a pre-existing outpost. The IOM helped in the construction of these new facilities and in training and equipping the 250 Senegalese border guards stationed within them (IOM 2017).

The nature of cooperation with Ghana has been different, partly due to the country's geographical position and partly due to a different political approach. The country is

located further than Senegal from a migratory route to Europe. Ghana has also taken care to ensure its interactions with international actors do not lead to political or financial dependency.<sup>2</sup> Ghana has not signed a single readmission agreement with an EU member state. Prior to 2014, the country's engagement on migration issues primarily occurred on a project-by-project basis, often short-term and linked to individual aspects of migration (such as diaspora engagement). That being said, almost all the EU and EU member states' projects have been implemented by the IOM. A flagship initiative has been the Ghana Integrated Migration Management Approach (GIMMA) launched in 2014. Funded by the EU with €3 million from the European Development Fund, it was implemented by the IOM in partnership with the International Centre for Migration Policy (ICMPD) and the Ghana Immigration Service (GIS). The project led to improved border management capacities, information campaigns, a restructuring of the Migration Information Bureau and the opening of a Sunyani migration information centre. The objective of establishing a centralised national database on migration was not achieved.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is most clearly reflected by the objective of President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo to build a 'Ghana beyond aid' (Government of Ghana 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Interview IO Officials, Accra, 12.04.2018

## The IOM's role post 'migration crisis'

Following the EU's growing attention on West Africa since 2015, the role of the IOM in the region has changed. The IOM's actions have become more interconnected with the EU's agenda. This is most visible in the dynamics of the implementation of the EU Trust Fund for Africa. The IOM has collaborated on several flagship projects, both regionally and nationally. A case in point has been the joint EU-IOM initiative to foster assisted voluntary returns for migrants along the Central Mediterranean route either stranded in Libya or abandoned in the Sahara Desert (European Commission 2017). Launched in December 2016, 'protection and assistance centres' have been established in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso where migrants can find temporary shelter and agree to a voluntary humanitarian return scheme back to their place of origin. Around 15,000 individuals who were stranded in Libya took up this offer in 2017 alone. Once returned to their countries of origin, the IOM may follow up with reintegration support for individuals. The indicative budget for this program is €140 million (European Commission 2017).

In Senegal, the IOM has also taken a pro-active role in the development of the country's migration policy. It supported the drafting of a

Senegalese National Migration Policy (NMP) from 2016 to 2018.

The NMP implementation process in Ghana formally started in 2016 but has encountered delays. These migratory frameworks are meant to create an overarching and coherent framework for all aspects of migration policy covering immigration, emigration, diaspora engagement and border policy.

The EUTF and other EU funding streams have allowed the IOM to bolster its presence in West Africa and launch more migration-related projects. Yet, these opportunities have come with some side-effects. The introduction of EUTFs has led to increased levels of competition, not only among international organisations but also between domestic and international actors. The IOM increasingly competes with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for funding, with one interviewee speaking of a 'turf war' between the organisations.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Senegalese policymakers have started to contest the role of the IOM as a principal receiver of funds. According to Senegalese interviewees, it would make more sense to grant funding for the reintegration of returnees directly to state institutions and civil society actors, without co-financing international officials.<sup>5</sup> The IOM's role has been less contested in Ghana, where policy-makers referred to IOM-implemented and EU-

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<sup>4</sup> Interview IO official, Dakar, 07.03.2018.

<sup>5</sup> Interview Senegalese consultant and IO official, Dakar, 23.03.2018 and 16.02.2018.

funded projects as a form of 'corporate social responsibility'.<sup>6</sup>

The growing participation of the IOM in EU-funded projects has raised questions surrounding the political impartiality and neutrality of the organisation. A policy-maker in Senegal has referred to the IOM as a 'workforce of the EU' (authors' interview in Dakar, March 2018). It is increasingly seen as an element of the wider European effort to encourage Senegal to curb irregular migration – a policy objective that continues to attract domestic criticism.

The IOM's role may be further contested if some of its projects receive negative publicity. There is a growing awareness in the region of the dangers of crossing the Sahara and the appalling conditions that migrants face in Libyan detention camps. In particular, a CNN exclusive report exposing migrant slave auctions in Libya in October 2017 highlighted the cruelties that (West) African migrants may suffer on their way north. The documentary spurred considerable public debate across West Africa. There has hence been a growing awareness of migrant vulnerability and their need for more help - including through assisted returns. Yet, our interviews showed that the joint EU-IOM initiative for enhancing voluntary returns is contested by West-African policy actors and civil society

activists, partly because it is portrayed as an additional obstacle to complete a migratory process, and partly because the reintegration support has not lived up to the expectations of many returnees. Returnees often face social, psychological and financial difficulties accentuated by the fact that their parents or relatives have often taken out massive loans from smugglers and traffickers to finance the migratory process.<sup>7</sup> The reintegration element of the programme has reportedly consisted of sums lower than promised or has been entirely ignored (Westcott 2018). Frustrations have at times boiled over. The IOM office in The Gambia was the target of a violent attack by returned migrants (Sanna and Hunt 2018) and returnees have also demonstrated for their right of reintegration support in Dakar.<sup>8</sup>

## Outlook

West African governments have started to deal with migration-related challenges in a different way in reaction to the enhanced European attention of the region. National authorities are incentivised to develop migration policies including more stringent border and exit controls. The European Trust Fund for Africa has contributed to a mushrooming of development projects that seek to address different 'root causes of migration'. Fewer migrants manage to

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<sup>6</sup> Interview Ghana official, Accra, 17.04.2018.

<sup>7</sup> Interview Senegalese official, Dakar, 19.03.2018.

<sup>8</sup> Interview CSO, Dakar, 21.02.2018

reach European soil in an irregular manner. Migratory routes have become more dangerous and search and rescue activities are increasingly criminalised. Many people on the move get stranded, face human rights' abuses and risk their lives en route. It is in this context that the IOM has operated and upgraded its presence in the region.

It would be a misleading exaggeration to claim that the stronger EU – and IOM – focus on migration has been widely resisted or even rejected by West African governments. According to our interviewees, many authorities have also welcomed the opportunities created by more EU funding. There is also a growing awareness that African states should take more care of their citizens during a migratory process. Yet, the risk of the ongoing, externally-driven policy development is a de facto export of a particular European model of migration governance in West Africa, with the IOM acting as a major implementing agent. Ghana and Senegal already have a range of domestic migration policy objectives that are not necessarily aligned with the objectives of the IOM and/or other European and international actors (such as internal migratory processes or a need for permeable borders to cherish the relations with family members who live on both sides of the border; forcible returns remain strongly contested). The post-colonial maintenance of West African states' borders – and the sedentary

worldview that these borders suggest – has continued to be challenged in inner-African debates (e.g. Mbembe 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013).

Which policy recommendations may derive from our empirical fieldwork? The IOM may take measures to better balance donor interests with the particular context of West-African policy-making on migration:

**Enhance local ownership:**

- Hire more local and regional staff – also in senior positions;
- Cooperate with host country institutions (and NGOs) already in the stage of project-drafting;
- Increase ownership of host state institutions over projects and their funding by working early on with a more senior political level rather than hierarchically-lower civil servants;
- Adapt a horizontal approach – inter-ministerial commissions with equal ownership over a given topic area- to avoid inter-ministerial competition and fragmentation.

**Pay attention to local approaches to migration and mobility:**

- Avoid formulating projects primarily according to donor preferences and consider institutional growth of the IOM as a secondary interest;

- Consult with non-state actors that play prominent roles in migration and mobility politics – e.g. traditional and religious leaders;
- Take their understandings of migration and mobility into consideration when formulating policies;
- Assess all externally-funded projects based on their impact on human security, the local economy as well as regional and local stability. If the impact risks are projected to be negative, refrain from carrying out the project.

**Improve the functioning of the Voluntary Humanitarian Return (VHR) mechanism:**

- Voluntary return may be accompanied by projects fostering alternatives to detention, and legal safeguards for search and rescue operations;
- An independent monitoring mechanism may make sure VHRs are not a last resort for refugees to get out of Libya;
- Increase capacities to meet reintegration targets.

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