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From: Presidency
To: Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject: Migration Partnerships

Migration partnerships

Both the Commission Communication on the New EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and the most recent European Council conclusions of 9 February, underline the need for strengthened cooperation with third countries through comprehensive, tailor made and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Building on the discussion on a whole-of-government approach to meet migratory challenges at EMWP on 15 February, the Presidency would like to explore further the opportunities to discuss the concept of mutually beneficial migration partnerships to enhance cooperation envisaged in the Pact.

Several important steps have already been taken, such as the development of migration action plans and operational action fiches at the level of EMWP/MOCADEM, the Commission's initiative on Talent Partnerships, or the various political dialogues aiming at increasing cooperation on migration. However, in order to translate the commonly agreed objectives and actions into tangible results and achieve better management of migration in the long-term, there is a need for strong and comprehensive partnerships among countries of destination, origin, and transit that take into account the interests of all parties involved, while also taking into account the various limitations due to the realities on the ground. In addition, migration partnerships, to be successful, need to be embedded in broader political bilateral relations.

In light of the renewed interest in migration partnerships, both at the EU and Member States' bilateral level, several questions emerge. One being how increased coordination and synergies between cooperation at the EU and bilateral levels can be maximized and second, how balanced partnerships at the EU-level could be achieved in practice based on current structures and instruments available. The discussion paper drafted by the *Migration Policy Institute (MPI)*, seeks to address both these issues and suggests a number of priority actions in the work ahead.

The Presidency invites delegates to consider the following questions:

- How, in your view, can EU migration policy objectives be better framed in the context of comprehensive and mutually beneficial partnerships that accommodate partner countries' priorities/interests?
- How can we ensure that we embed such partnerships in broader bilateral relations to achieve maximum impact?
- Which priority actions are needed for the EU to achieve sustainable cooperation with third countries, and how should early involvement of third countries be assured?
- Based on your bilateral experiences of establishing migration partnerships, what in your view constitute key components for successful partnerships?



Opportunities for the Next Generation of Migration Partnerships

Background note prepared for the May 2nd EMWP meeting

By [REDACTED]

And [REDACTED] Migration Policy Institute (MPI)

This note does not necessarily reflect the views of the Swedish Presidency of the EU

There is broad consensus among European policymakers that migration cannot be managed within the borders of the European Union (EU) alone. Managing migration more effectively requires strong and comprehensive partnerships among countries of destination, transit, and origin, in which all actors have an incentive to be at the table. But although European policymakers have shown increasing commitment to this idea, it has remained difficult to put into practice.

Still, a window of opportunity has opened to moving towards migration partnerships that are more equitable, forward-looking, and scalable—supporting cooperation on shared global challenges rather than more short-term and narrow goals. Most recently, the February 2023 European Council concluded, *inter alia*, that there was a clear need to build “mutually beneficial partnerships” with third countries, making the most of multilateral and regional forums for cooperation, and implementing a ‘whole of government’ response on the EU side. But what is missing is a practical strategy for how to build sustainable cooperation with third countries based on mutual interests and buy-in from all parties.

EU and Member State officials are not starting from scratch. Many efforts to move towards more comprehensive partnerships have been deployed previously, yet with mixed results. There is a lot to learn from the various EU and bilateral engagements and approaches of the past decade, from the 2015 Valetta Declaration to the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, the Joint Way Forward with Afghanistan, and other bilateral agreements with Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya, among others. Some of these engagements have helped to forge more balanced relationships with third countries on migration; some have paved the way towards new legal pathways and more sustainable reintegration mechanisms for returning migrants. But some have also exposed the tradeoffs and limitations of transactional approaches and narrow cooperation.

At its core, the problem remains how to put long-term, comprehensive, joint actions into practice, paired with the right coordination mechanisms tailored to each context. Sometimes, the focus on short-term initiatives has prevented the European Union from fully leveraging its collective assets (including EU funding mechanisms) and effectively tackling areas where more coordinated action is needed (for instance, on remittances and diaspora engagements). Therefore, EU institutions and Member States could further reflect on how to work together in a way that capitalizes on these strengths and lead to building more equitable and sustainable partnerships with third countries.

In the current constellation, there is a risk of alienating countries of origin and transit if European policymakers frame migration partnerships primarily around their target of decreasing arrivals and boosting returns. Third countries typically prioritize other aspects of partnerships, including opening access to legal pathways, facilitating remittances, promoting diaspora engagements, preventing brain drain, and ensuring that migration contributes to development.¹ As such, both sides need to build on areas of mutual benefit. These could inter alia include the promotion of intra-regional migration, boosting the effects of remittances, and assistance and capacity building to third countries to establish improved, well-functioning immigration policies.²

Effective partnerships require two levels of investments to succeed. First, Europeans need to invest in increasing mutual trust with third countries—even if the gains are not immediately visible—and sustain these relationships over time, as understanding the needs and constraints of each third-country government should be the foundation of subsequent agreements. Second, Europe should enhance internal coordination and creativity to craft proposals that balance divergent interests within the European Union and Member States themselves. Without these two levels of engagement, Europeans may short-circuit each other, and these agreements will not always be able to withstand political pressure in third countries. Achieving this will also contribute to strengthening the European Union’s alliances in an environment of changing geopolitical dynamics and conflict. And it will minimize the risk of third countries instrumentalizing migration or demanding funding as a prerequisite for even basic cooperation on migration.

This background paper explores the opportunities for more balanced migration partnerships and considers priorities for action. It begins by examining the current state of play regarding EU and Member State action on migration partnerships and considers how new instruments have helped improve internal and external coherence. It analyzes opportunities for synergies and offers concrete recommendations to inform the EU’s external migration policy moving forward.

¹ As per discussions about brain drain during the Thematic Meeting on Labor Migration organized by the Rabat Process on September 7, 2022 in Malaga; about remittances during the Thematic Meeting on Remittances organized by the Rabat and Khartoum Processes on November 3 and 4, 2022 in Brussels. Of note, these objectives are also of interest to EU development actors.

² These capacity building efforts are already underway, as shown in initiatives funded under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa and other cooperation mechanisms.

The State of Play of Migration Partnerships

Compared to the contentious negotiations on the internal dimensions of the Pact, external migration policy is a field where EU institutions and Member States can achieve a relatively high degree of consensus. And there is a clear added value to a common European approach—namely in terms of being able to leverage resources, share intelligence, and ensure that migration actions do not detract from (and can even contribute to) broader European goals.

But working out a common external agenda has not always proved straightforward. Each Member State is operating within its own assemblage of bilateral migration partnerships and broader foreign policy interests, leading to disagreement on how comprehensive the EU partnerships should be (including, most critically, the extent to which they should include labor pathways). The complexity of these EU-internal negotiations sometimes constrains the scope of EU partnership agreements or leaves them watered down. Bilateral partnerships, in contrast, can sometimes be easier to get off the ground, and have the potential to be more ambitious or comprehensive in scope – though these need to be aligned with EU frameworks. In sum, while there is a clear shift towards a common approach, in some contexts, there is still debate over whether and when third-country engagements should be happening at the EU or Member State level, with benefits and drawbacks to both approaches and both type of actors.

So far, migration partnerships have served multiple objectives, including tackling smuggling and trafficking in human beings, better managing borders, increasing returns and sustainable reintegration, and supporting host countries of refugees. They can meet mutual labor needs, facilitate mobility through visa regimes, redress demographic imbalances, and contribute to third country development. It has, however, often proved challenging to advance these goals all at once. In 2020, the Pact still advocated for a comprehensive approach to international partnerships,³ including a proposal to launch Talent Partnerships with several third countries. The two Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) focusing on the Western and Central Mediterranean Routes also reflect this multi-dimensional perspective, and explicitly refer to the need for legal migration and mobility.⁴

In practice, most partnerships have a more limited remit. Both political and economic constraints have narrowed the focus of migration partnerships at both the EU and Member State levels. For example, mounting pressure to curb arrivals has meant that cooperation with third countries tends to focus on strengthening border management, fighting smuggling and trafficking in human beings, and increasing returns – which are also long-term goals for Europeans.⁵ The question is whether such objectives can be presented as the basis of partnerships if the interests of counterparts are not integrated into these arrangements from the beginning. Issue linkage or partnership linkage can also be done in various ways, either directly or on parallel tracks. Partnerships can be bundled with ‘more for more’, or ‘less for less’, but the consequences for trust and long-term effects need to be carefully considered.

³ European Commission, '[Acting together to deepen international partnerships](#)', accessed November 26, 2022.

⁴ Team Europe Initiative, '[Western Mediterranean migration route](#)', accessed November 26, 2022; Team Europe Initiative, '[Central Mediterranean migration route](#)', accessed November 26, 2022.

⁵ European Commission, '[EU action plan for the Central Mediterranean](#)', November 21, 2022.

Legal migration is an area where more European action is needed but has proven challenging to realize. The concept of Talent Partnerships can be explored to forge mutual benefits, but success hinges on early dialogue on an equal footing with partners and effective matching of offers and needs. On one hand, facilitating legal migration remains on the policy agenda of the Commission and Member States as many European governments are grappling with pressing labor needs. But on the other hand, different Member States have different political priorities and positioning on this issue. Some countries do not see migration as the principal answer to labor shortages, while others view partnerships as a means to meet some of these labor needs but are not sure how to deliver on this promise (i.e., they fear that small-scale schemes cannot deliver the needed number of qualified workers quickly and easily enough to appease employers).

The Commission has already tested some of these approaches, mainly by supporting pilot projects with Member States, through the Migration Partnership Facility or other EU funds (such as the EU Trust Fund for Africa and NDICI). Talent Partnerships aim to build on and scale-up these efforts. They could also be accompanied by investments in third country vocational education and training, diaspora engagement, and reintegration of returning migrants.⁶ On the other side, some partner countries would like speedier handling of visa requests as part of these arrangements, and they are also concerned about potential brain drain. At this stage, the delays in getting the Talent Partnerships off the ground illustrate both the challenges of reaching consensus on legal migration and specifically, articulating how and where the European Union can complement national migration policy reforms or bilateral discussions.

I. Barriers and Opportunities to Comprehensive Migration Partnerships

A. Barriers to collective action

Negotiations at the EU level are often constrained by internal disagreements that limit the scope and ambition of what can be achieved externally. For now, discussions about more comprehensive migration partnerships with countries of origin and transit have often been deprioritized or have become too sensitive to broach. A few countries are still pursuing more comprehensive engagements on their own. But for now, (mainly) as a result of the political dynamics in Europe, the only measures that can gain consensus at the EU level have primarily been around border management, anti-smuggling and anti-trafficking in human beings, and return and readmission. There are also important jurisdictional issues, since some Member States prefer to pursue national level negotiations – either because of skepticism about what can be achieved at the EU level or because they prefer to handle at the bilateral level.

The burden of internal negotiations at national level has also meant there is less political space to consider and accommodate partner countries' priorities. EU institutions and Member States often spend so long negotiating among themselves that by the time they engage with partner countries, they are presenting a near-complete project, and thus it may be too late to fully integrate the concerns of countries of origin and transit. For instance, it could not be taken as a given that partner countries are interested in the Talent Partnerships (e.g., concerns about brain drain, or that this initiative is seen as too closely linked to negotiations on readmission agreements). In addition, there is sometimes a gap between rhetoric and what is being delivered in practice. It can lead to inconsistent outcomes or a feeling that the priorities and concerns of partner countries are not being prioritized.

Going forward, EU-level migration negotiations will increasingly be shaped by the broader geopolitical lens within which European leaders operate. In other words, EU leaders also need to consider how the migration agenda impacts broader EU economic interests and foreign relations – and its position in the world – making sure these agreements do not jeopardize but instead contribute to consolidating geopolitical alliances.

⁶ Kate Hooper, [How Can Europe Deliver on the Potential of Talent Partnerships?](#) (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, December 2021)

B. How to roll out EU-coordinated external actions

The question is no longer *whether* to engage, but *how*. This requires assessing what goals can be best achieved under the EU banner and how to best coordinate among individual Member States. The benefits of collective EU action include:

- 1) Greater mobilization of resources (especially the ability to bring together larger budgets for humanitarian and development projects, including migration projects);
- 2) Greater political weight;
- 3) Enhanced coordination and coherence, as working together (or at least sharing information in a timely manner) allows to better align messages, especially when multiple negotiations are ongoing with partner countries at once; and
- 4) Opportunities for cross-fertilization and learning.

EU institutions and Member States have made steady progress working together on external policy—even as they have faced barriers putting ideas into action— and coordination has begun to mature in several ways. First, progress on regular information sharing between EU institutions and Member States has helped establish trust, a major accomplishment in such a sensitive political domain (i.e., via Action Plans, Action Fiches, Council meetings). On the programming side, the experiences of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) and other facilities have gotten European actors into the habit of working together at an operational level. The coordination mechanisms for the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – ‘Global Europe’ are also expected to address this need. Making the link between on-the-ground activities and policy discussions has, however, been a major gap, and that is one that the TEIs should aim to fill to fully leverage European development investments and achieve sustainable changes in partner countries.

Information sharing and building trust among European partners

Moving towards joint initiatives at the EU level and better linking up with bilateral partnerships require close cooperation between EU institutions and Member States. Yet, despite an agreement on a core set of objectives and the value of better coordination, Member States have sometimes proved reluctant to band together. These foreign relations touch on many other interests and come with a range of sensitivities that Member States are keen on closely managing. Besides, European governments that have managed to sign readmission agreements with third countries are protective of these hard-won deals.⁷ As such, a useful first step on the external dimension has been to share information, with the goal of building better understanding, trust, and good will among Europeans.

⁷ Especially since a formal agreement does not guarantee cooperation on return and readmission.

The Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), and Member States have also aimed to forge a better overview of their respective external engagements and exchange information through formal and informal coordination mechanisms. In Brussels, the Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration discusses the engagement of EU institutions and Member States in priority countries outside Europe. The Action Plans agreed upon for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tunisia, Niger, Nigeria, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, and Egypt have provided opportunities for sharing information about what EU services and Member States are doing, how EU budget is spent, and a regular review of joint priorities. Internal mechanisms such as the Mechanism for the Operational Coordination of the External Dimension of Migration (MOCADDEM) have laid the groundwork for common messaging when engaging with third countries. Since 2015, a number of Member States and the European Union have relied on Migration Ambassadors to manage their external engagements. These Ambassadors engage with one another, and these informal networks serve to build closer ties between all parties.

At programming level, the Commission has been hosting an informal coordination group on NDICI and migration actions, to share information about upcoming projects and coordinate with Member States on their bilateral actions. This practice has proved helpful, but also shed light on the difficulties of gathering some information in countries where the whole-of-government approach is not fully operational. In parallel to these engagements at capital level, in partner countries, EU Delegations (EUDs) have sought to better cooperate with other European actors. Some EUDs, for instance, have hosted coordination meetings with their European counterparts to share updates on programs, as well as to link up on political messaging. Among others, these sessions have helped to build relations between EUDs, European Embassies, and national development agencies.

The tradeoffs of coordinating political engagement at the EU level

While information-sharing mechanisms are essential to ensure that EU institutions and Member States know what other actors are doing and thus avoid being blindsided when engaging with third countries, these are only one side of the equation. The most critical step is being willing to take concrete external actions together—in particular to coordinate on direct political engagements. EU Delegations (EUDs), for instance, have a wealth of information and analysis about the local context, but sometimes lack the political capital that Member State Embassies can mobilize.

There have been improvements in terms of political engagement since 2015. Specifically, EU institutions and Member States have cross-fertilized learning on migration engagements and the models of partnerships. In partner countries, EUDs and Embassies of EU Member States now know their counterparts on migration and are more familiar with internal dynamics around this issue. For instance, in Senegal, the EUD and European partners have witnessed the tensions surrounding national migration governance and drawn conclusions on how to negotiate migration-related programs.⁸ Second, European partners have a better understanding of the touch points. In Africa, some even refer to the dialogue with governments as ‘mature’, as there is a good understanding of the agendas and constraints on each side.⁹ And finally, there have been some breakthroughs, like the leadership recently deployed in Nigeria by the EUD and the support of Member States, which have shown that under certain circumstances, significant progress can be achieved through joint political actions.¹⁰

⁸ Interviews with EU officials and national development agencies between January 2021 and November 2022.

⁹ Interview with an EU official, November 18, 2022.

¹⁰ Ibid.

On the programming side, the Commission can leverage humanitarian and development funding at a much larger scale than Member States and so European governments have more direct incentives to come together. Still, policymakers and practitioners sometimes have concerns about duplicating efforts and spreading diplomatic and financial resources too thinly. This is the case, for instance, in the reintegration field, where European donors fund various schemes and coordination has previously fallen short.¹¹ Besides, the volume of these European-funded programs remains limited relative to needs, placing a limit on how much goodwill they can generate.¹² European policymakers and implementing partners, from international organizations to civil society actors and national development agencies, have nonetheless gained considerable experience on how to manage these actions.

Since 2015, all these programs have also proved useful in bringing together European actors at the operational level. EU institutions and Member States have spent time agreeing on a common definition of what a ‘migration project’ consists of,¹³ and these joint efforts have helped shore up migration expertise within many national development agencies that previously lacked it.¹⁴ But during this time, they have not managed to sufficiently connect interventions with policy engagements. Against this backdrop, the Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) hold promise for overcoming such limitations, and aligning EU institutions and Member States, as well as policy engagement and programming. This was, at least, the ambition of having two initiatives focusing on the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes, and covering five thematic areas, somewhat aligned with the five Valletta Pillars.

But the TEIs face two fundamental issues. First, there are concerns that they will be limited to a mere information-sharing mechanism between the Commission and Member States on what migration programs are ongoing.¹⁵ Without clear steering on each thematic pillar, sustained political engagement with recipient countries is likely to be difficult.¹⁶ Second, the two TEIs were developed in European capitals and follow migration routes to Europe. Moving forward, partner countries need to gain a better ownership of these TEIs, starting with a better understanding of what they should achieve.

All these experiences point to the need for a whole-of-government approach and shared ownership. Ministries in charge of migration, and the ones responsible for foreign affairs, development and trade, employment and education, all need to work together on the basis of a common vision through shared tools, instruments and funding.

¹¹ Discussions at Germany’s Permanent Representation, September 21, 2022. The initiative Prottasha in Bangladesh, still shows how projects can help general good practices in terms of cooperation, IOM, ‘[Prottasha](#)’, accessed April 25, 2023.

¹² EUTF projects in Senegal, for instance, have amounted to €170 million since 2015, while for 2020 alone, Senegal received nearly €2.5 billion in remittances. European Commission, ‘[EUTF: Senegal](#)’, accessed November 28, 2022; World Bank, ‘[Personal remittances, received \(current US\\$\) – Senegal](#)’, accessed November 28, 2022.

¹³ For instance, it led to the development of the migration markers for the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe.

¹⁴ Interview national development agencies, September 21, 2022, September 30, 2022.

¹⁵ Interviews with EU and Member State officials and national development agencies between May and November 2022.

¹⁶ Interview with Member State official, November 25, 2022.

Towards a Comprehensive EU-Level External Migration Policy

While the European Union has increasingly prioritized migration partnerships, there are still pending questions around the cost-benefit calculus of EU versus bilateral action. In any case, there will always remain areas where Member States prefer to work at the national level. First, some bilateral relationships are long-standing and built on a specific shared history between countries. Second, some Member States have their own agenda on migration and priorities that may not align with all European partners. Third, bilateral negotiations may in some cases be faster and more effective, as some Member States may have more accumulated knowledge and political capital than the EEAS and EUDs.¹⁷ Still, the need to be better coordinated to better leverage knowledge, capacity, and resources – and avoid policy incoherence – is compelling. In other words, the costs of *not* working together may be steeper than the painstaking process of building coordination.

At this stage, the other pressing action item is to invest in relations with third countries and build up this side of the partnership equation. This means finding ways at EU level to support partnerships that are comprehensive, practical, mutually beneficial, and resilient. There are five key steps to moving towards more effective cooperation with third countries:

- **Give weight to partner-country priorities:** European actors need to build in the agenda of third countries from the beginning, especially in the areas of remittances and diasporas engagements. It may also be useful to connect migration partnerships with other policy areas to embed them in a richer cooperation. It is critical for governments in third countries to be able to show clear wins to their constituencies. And therefore, all these investments in building trust and buy-in will yield dividends later on. This is why the TEIs and programming should help answer common goals and make room to address new needs. Budget support and agreement on migration indicators are relevant aspects that should be taken into account in the long-term, acknowledging it requires a high level of trust on both sides.
- **Further strengthen information-sharing mechanisms at EU level,** to build better internal coherence and external action. This involves relying on the Presidency steering coordination mechanisms (e.g., MOCADDEM, EMWP), while maintaining the buy-in of other Member States (e.g., through informal on-the-side engagements) and ensuring they do not only reflect the agenda of Interior Ministries (e.g., through embedding feedback from other Ministries). Key to these efforts is agreeing on key facts (e.g., figures regarding arrivals, situational analysis) and coordination on funding, to ensure NDICI engagements and bilateral programs (e.g., NDICI informal coordination group) complement one another.
- **Pursue cooperation at the operational and political levels.** EU institutions and Member States can start small, with projects that may not have a huge operational footprint, and through regional dialogues, but nonetheless add value by creating a habit of cooperation. While European actors have managed this first step, it is critical that they translate these engagements at working level into cooperation in the political and policy domains. To do so, EUDs, Member State Embassies, and national development agencies need to build a common institutional memory and capitalize on previous pilot projects.
- **Start small by making progress on shared priorities where there is a clear ‘double win.’** Labor migration is one area where European countries and third countries can start small and work together on shared interests – and in doing so, potentially lay the groundwork for cooperation on more sensitive issues. Europe is experiencing acute labor shortages, and partnerships with third countries can help promote the circulation of talent, while tackling shared concerns on the prevention of brain drain and fair recruitment. Building momentum for

¹⁷ Even though the European Migration Liaison Officers have significantly contributed to building this knowledge base.

the Talent Partnerships and the Talent Pool could position Europe in the race for talent while address barriers to mobility.

- **Show goodwill by cultivating flexibility and responsiveness in times of crisis:** The seemingly continuous crises affecting Europe and its partners show the need for flexibility, including to accommodate the emergency needs of third countries. This responsiveness first needs to draw on a good understanding of the context and pressure points of Europe's partners. Such an approach requires regular exchanges and sufficient trust level with third countries so that they can share their concerns. And to respond to these situations, European policymakers need a toolbox of funding and other informal mechanisms to assist their partners.
