

Migration: Time to beat a new path

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Sometimes it seems as if public debates on migration are about everything but migrants and migration itself. In the United States, for example, even border control – a longstanding, bi-partisan priority – has lately been used as a bargaining chip on how to respond to Ukraine and Israel. Seeing the similarities and differences in the response to migration by a similarly developed and democratic place like Europe could help the United States to focus on its real migration challenges, and to move beyond its political stalemate.

In Europe, there has been somewhat more pragmatism when it comes to the increasing number of migrant arrivals and the uneven burden that they place on countries like Spain and Italy. After seven years of dialogue and debate, the EU's 2023 [“New Pact on Migration and Asylum”](#) is

“designed to manage and normalise migration for the long term, providing certainty, clarity and decent conditions for people arriving in the EU.” By creating more uniform rules, it hopes to improve screening, documentation, and asylum procedures as well as balancing the share of asylum applications across the union. It seeks to establish “a common approach to migration and asylum that is based on solidarity, responsibility, and respect for human rights.”

[Responsibility-sharing for large migrant and refugee flows has been an immense challenge for Europe.](#) With some exceptions, its focus in recent decades has largely been on keeping migrants from reaching its shores or, failing that, limiting their movement within Europe. The pact [significantly reduces safeguards for asylum seekers](#) and, even then, it will require significant political will and further debate to ensure the “balancing” of asylum applications across the bloc. Lively discussions about migration are frequent among Spaniards, and echo themes heard in the United States; i.e., migrants bring more crime, overuse social services, and do not integrate well. It is ironic that the [growing number of Latin Americans in Spain](#) perpetuate these stereotypes, when Latin Americans are often the targets of stereotypes in the United States. Both the United States and Europe have shared similar approaches to the population migration trends over the past few decades. These approaches tend to fall into three main categories: border enforcement, legal pathways (visa systems and [increasingly under resourced asylum processes](#)), and working to reduce the “root causes” of migration. As border enforcement and legal pathways have become lightning rods for political jockeying, the “root causes” approach has grown in prominence as a somewhat less controversial way to address migration in both regions, or simply to be used as a talking point to ease the calls for more generous asylum and immigration systems.

For nearly a decade, the EU [Emergency Trust Fund for Africa](#) has pledged a relatively modest €5 billion for work across the continent to “address the root causes of instability, forced displacement and irregular migration.” The fund seeks to increase economic opportunities and

resilience of residents in countries of origin, improve governance and conflict prevention, and establish better migration management, especially in countries of transit. The majority of irregular migrants in Spain are Latin Americans who have overstayed temporary visas. However, the recent focus has been on the [18% of irregular migrants coming from Africa](#), especially after spikes such as the [2022 mass crossing at the Spanish enclave of Melilla, which](#) resulted in dozens of deaths, and the uptick in arrivals to the Canary Islands from Africa since 2023. These spikes shed light on the delicate political and economic balance of a root causes strategy, especially one mixed with migration management as a tool. The massacre at the crossing at Melilla was due in part to relaxed enforcement by Morocco in return for a perceived slight by Spain about the independence of Western Sahara (which Morocco claims). Spain and Morocco have since [mended ties](#) and the E.U. is providing increased funding to Morocco for migration management. In the [case of Niger](#), another transit country and the [largest recipient](#) of migration management funds to date, the funds were a quid-pro-quo for a law that made it illegal to aid migrants crossing the country. When that law was repealed by the new junta after a coup last year, the flow of migrants resumed almost immediately. Recently, [Mauritania](#) was named the next big recipient of EU funding to try to slow the flow of *cayucos* traveling from its shores nearly 1,000 miles to the Canary Islands. It is open for debate whether these approaches are addressing root causes, or focus more on buying support that will attempt to impede and possibly only redirect the flow of migrants, thus creating greater risks along the journey.

The United States has pursued similar cooperation agreements with Mexico and Guatemala for [decades](#), most recently to stop or slow the caravans of Central American migrants that started in [2018](#). While continuing its cooperation with Mexico, in 2021 the US government introduced a modest \$4 billion investment in a “[Root Causes Strategy](#)” for Central America, in order to: address economic insecurity and inequality; combat corruption, strengthen democratic governance, and advance the rule of law; promote respect for human rights, labor rights, and a free press; counter and prevent violence, extortion, and other crimes perpetrated by criminal gangs, trafficking networks, and other organized criminal organizations; and combat sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence. [As of the end of FY22](#), the strategy had reportedly created nearly 100,000 thousand jobs, trained 12,000 individuals, improved farming practices for nearly 60,000, reached over 100,000 food insecure individuals, reached nearly half a million students, and worked to improve justice sector institutions.

Humanitarian and development aid should be provided, whether or not it leads to decreased international migration. A recent [evidence map](#) shows just how difficult it is to establish a causal link between efforts to address root causes and migration in tandem. As the economist [Michael Clemens and collaborators argue](#), aid for the purpose of reducing migration must meet two criteria to be successful: it must first “substantially change conditions” in countries of origin, and those conditions must cause fewer people to migrate. However, the benefits of aid are often too diffuse to make a measurable impact, and when changes are found, aid tends to increase

migration in the short term when income alone increases.¹ Clemens' review also finds that - apart from their value for their primary purposes - youth employment programs have a marginal impact on migration at best, and that there is no evidence of impact of violence prevention efforts on migration.

History tells us that the only fact that is certain is that migration will continue at some level, along some path, and from some countries, no matter the exogenous efforts to stop or reduce it. Some may never accept that fact, but migration governance in our interdependent world cannot succeed if its sole focus is to seal borders. Just what can be done so that individuals are not forced to leave their homes?

¹ Migration decreases at roughly PPP\$8,000, a target the least developed countries will not reach for 150 years given current trends. If growth were to double with development assistance, it would still take nearly 75 years.