

Continental integration – The role of free movement of labour - Klaus Schade

Recent policy initiatives on the African continent can contribute to higher economic growth and a reduction of poverty. The Single African Air Transport Market initiative (SAATM), the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) and the abolition of visa requirements for Africans are a few examples. The AfCFTA includes not only a protocol on trade in goods, but also protocols on trade in services and the free movement of labour, which are often regarded as sensitive areas. Namibia has not been one of the initial signatories, but the government indicated that Namibia is going to join these initiatives.

While major economies such as Great Britain, several other EU member countries and the USA try to close their borders for immigrants due to populist policies that already start to backfire, African countries are – at least on paper – committed to open their borders for job seekers. Emigrants trigger the fear of job losses in destination countries, rising unemployment and other social ills. However, this is most often not backed by evidence. Rwanda has been the first African country to abolish visa requirements for citizens of other African countries and has been one of the initial signatories of the SAATM initiatives. The moves have among others attracted professionals to Rwanda and created increased interest in holding international conferences in Rwanda rather than in countries with more cumbersome immigration requirements. Furthermore, the 2018 UNCTAD report on Migration for Structural Transformation in Africa has highlighted the positive impacts of intra-African migration. Not only skilled emigrants, but also unskilled and semi-skilled emigrants contribute to increased productivity in the destination country as well as to economic growth and socio-economic development. In addition, they contribute to rising tax revenue, increased demand and to economic transformation. The country of origin also benefits from, for instance, remittances and when migrants return home from new knowledge and skills, which in turn stimulates economic growth in these countries.

We could learn from these experiences and design, in close cooperation between government, trade unions, employers federations and the private sector at large, smart, forward-looking immigration policies that address some of our socio-economic challenges such as the lack of skills and lack of innovation rather than maintaining policies that preserve the status quo. Thus, Namibia could become an early mover, tap into resources of other African countries and reap the opportunities deeper continental integration offers.

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