

Elusiveness of the Desire for Free Movement in Southern Africa: a Missed Opportunity in Regional Integration

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Southern African states share deep-seated geographical historical, demographic and political experiences that at face value reinforce their commitment to regional integration. Under the auspices of the Southern African Development Coordinating Conference (SADCC), transformed to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 1992, these states have had for over a decade a stalled protocol on free movement of their citizens without much success. The desire marks a false start in what the architects of regional integration conceived for the benefit of SADC member states and their citizens. This paper seeks to analyse the elusiveness of a grand idea whose realisation has been saddled by a variety of issues. There has been persistent mistrust among the member states; economic inequality has polarised successful, buoyant and unsuccessful, depressed economies; the refugee menace has disrupted development in both sending and receiving states; and changing perspectives of labour migration since European colonialism and apartheid have influenced considerable political, economic and social change. In such a diverse and dynamic climate, it has been difficult to sell the protocol on free movement based on borrowed Western models that fail to underpin the diversity in the much-sought unity in Southern Africa. The paper calls for a comprehensive examination of all the factors in play in the free movement protocol with a view to redrafting it to suit contemporary conditions. Recent research on international migration in Southern Africa points to concerns that national governments and the citizens of countries in the sub-region have about immigration and immigrant groups. Several problems have discouraged the member states from unanimously adopting of this protocol. The problems include the disparate economic performance of the countries in the sub-region; unpredictable refugee stock and flows in the sub-region; growing xenophobia particularly in the faster developing economies; governments' obsession with redundant immigration control rather than comprehensive management; lack of harmonised national legislation and policies as well as unfounded fears and mistrust between among governments and among the general public. Other extraneous factors have stood in the path toward adoption of the protocol; these include the geographical diversity of the SADC region comprising both Southern African and non-Southern African states and the apparent antagonism between SADC and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). Lately, both the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU) and creation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) have rekindled the desire of Southern African states for the free movement protocol as they march along other African states towards pan-African solidarity. Which begs the question, what then is the way forward? The initiative requires taking a fresh look at the stalled draft protocol with a view to draw a new one that avoids replicating the European Union model, that takes on board the realities of the countries involved and that is based on information gained from recent research on international migration. The wealth of information gained on international migration in Southern Africa since the late nineties augurs well for taking this bold step.

