Immigration is a growing challenge for the EU. Conflicts, poverty, lack of opportunities and natural disasters are some of the reasons for large numbers of people making ever-more desperate efforts to reach Europe.

Global migration is rising by 3% a year, and over the coming century is set to increase. According to the EU border agency Frontex, in 2012 to 2013 the number of people trying to enter Europe by irregular means increased by 48%, soaring further in the first months of 2014. Tragic accidents in the Mediterranean, where hundreds of would-be immigrants have lost their lives at sea, have put pressure in particular on the EU’s southern Member States, including Greece and Italy, which hold the rotating EU Presidency in 2014. At the request of the Greek government, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has drawn up an opinion on European immigration policy and relations with third countries, with recommendations for action at all levels.

**European Union policy**

The EU lacks a comprehensive European immigration policy – much to the regret of the EESC, which has been demanding this for several years. But over the last decade it has gradually developed a common legal framework in areas such as long-term residency and family reunification, adopted the Blue Card for highly qualified migrants, the single permit for migrant workers and the Directive on the admission of temporary workers. Frontex was set up in 2004, followed by the Eursor border-surveillance system in 2013.

When it comes to asylum, Member States still have different policies and laws, and progress towards a unified system is too slow. The EESC has criticised the EU for a lack of solidarity. Ten countries alone process 90% of asylum requests, and it is the smaller and often poorer states like Malta, Cyprus and Greece that face the greatest pressure.

The Dublin Convention governs Member States’ asylum responsibilities, and in 2010 the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) was set up to boost cooperation. In the EESC’s opinion, the EASO should be monitoring national systems to ensure they respect refugees’ fundamental rights. The Dublin Convention should be replaced by a more inclusive system that takes account of asylum-seekers’ wishes.

**A multi-level challenge**

Immigration and asylum are complex and sensitive issues that demand wide cooperation and comprehensive EU management. Individual Member States cannot deal with these challenges by themselves. So Europe urgently needs a common immigration and asylum policy based on solidarity and harmonised legislation. Ultimately, a long-term strategy based on a co-development approach with third countries is the only way to tackle the root causes of involuntary migration.

It is vital that the human rights of migrants, legal or not, are respected at all times.

More coordination is needed at EU level to link relevant policies, ranging from asylum and external policy to employment and social inclusion. Europe should also work closely with other countries and international institutions active on immigration issues.
Action Service should take new responsibilities for migration and border management, to ensure consistency. The EESC calls for EU migration offices to be set up in countries of origin, to supply information about legal migration opportunities.

Financial assistance and development programmes for countries of origin should be based on the "positive conditionality" principle (more for more), and should address a range of issues, including assisted voluntary return, readmission policy and legal migration procedures. In the event of forced return, human rights must be respected. Collective expulsions are prohibited by EU law, and children, pregnant women and the seriously ill need special consideration.

Irregular immigration and illegal trafficking

The EU needs to fight criminal networks that traffic migrants illegally, often putting their lives at risk. Cross-border police and judicial cooperation is vital. Frontex should be developed into a European border-guard service, working with Europol and human rights organisations to combat this form of organised crime.

Countries situated on the EU's external borders need support to control illegal immigration: these are the frontiers of the entire Union. This means practical solidarity and sharing of responsibilities between Member States. Some regions receive more migrants than others, because of their geographical location, and should be able to call on financial and operational support. Asylum-seekers should be able to apply to any Member State. Europe needs more and better temporary reception centres for refugees in cooperation with third countries and the UNHCR, and the speedy processing of asylum applications. Relocation programmes within the EU should be expended and financial incentives provided for Member States adhering to it.

Europe needs immigrants

Immigrants make an important contribution to Europe's economic development and prosperity. The EU has an ageing population, so it needs legal migrants to swell the working-age population and bring new skills and energy. The EU ought to aim for a mutually-agreed immigration flow to meet the demand for labour, underpinned by respect for workers' rights, equal treatment and decent jobs.

The EESC notes with dismay the rise of anti-immigrant feeling and discrimination in some EU countries, reflected in votes for extremist parties in the recent European elections. "The link made in some politicians' speeches between immigration and crime does not reflect the reality of the situation and encourages xenophobic attitudes," says the opinion. The EU must be active in defending human rights and promoting tolerance and integration.

Further information

EESC External Relations Section:  
www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.rex-section

European Integration Forum:  

Global Approach to Migration and Mobility:  

Frontex risk analysis 2014:  

European Asylum Support Office:  
http://easo.europa.eu/

International Labour Organisation:  

International Migration Office:  
www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home.html