



RETHINKING RETURN COOPERATION AND CONDITIONALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF EU-AU MIGRATION RELATIONS

ABSTRACT

Migration governance between the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) is increasingly shaped by the politics of return and conditionality. Framed as a tool to safeguard asylum systems and manage irregular migration, return cooperation has evolved into a contentious policy area marked by ethical dilemmas, limited effectiveness and strained diplomatic relations. Despite substantial investments, enforcement rates remain low, while coercive measures, such as aid or visa conditionality, undermine trust and erode human rights safeguards. Returns to politically fragile states raise serious questions about safety, legality and sustainability, while the absence of transparent monitoring perpetuates cycles of re-migration. At the same time, African states face internal tensions over responsibility for returnees, exposing the limits of unilateral and bilateral approaches. This policy brief argues for a recalibration, shifting from coercion to cooperation, embedding rights and accountability at the core, prioritising regularisation and labour mobility pathways, and enabling sustainable reintegration as part of broader AU-EU migration dialogue.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Understanding the context	4
Key challenges and recommendations	4
Challenge 1: Ineffectiveness and waste in return infrastructure	4
Challenge 2: Conditionality undermines human rights and diplomatic relations....	5
Challenge 3: Fragmentation and absence of a migrant-centred approach.....	6
Conclusion	7
Endnotes	8
About the authors	9
About FEPS	10
About Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and European Policy Centre, Brussels	10
About Fondazione Socialismo ETS	11
About the Progressive Migration Group (PMG).....	11

Understanding the context

The EU has increasingly tied return cooperation with third countries to broader political and economic incentives, employing a "carrot-and-stick" approach to enforce return and readmission agreements. Although framed as a mechanism to maintain asylum credibility and manage irregular migration, the return policy architecture is facing mounting criticisms. Many maintain that it equates to "forced deportation" rather than a rights-based migration approach with requisite social protection mechanisms.



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In its relations with African partners, the EU often prioritises return measures over other forms of migration policy cooperation. In doing so, it overlooks the ethical concerns, practical difficulties and high costs of return policies, as well as the fact that returned migrants often attempt the migration journey again, casting doubt on the policy's sustainability. Worryingly, return policies are often grounded in bilateral agreements that are opaque, that lack effective and independent human rights monitoring

mechanisms, and that overlook migrants' perspectives. This is causing a growing disconnect between policy ambitions and on-the-ground realities, especially regarding returns to politically fragile countries with questionable human rights records. In addition, tensions are currently increasing between African countries regarding the return of their own citizens, but especially with regards to admitting citizens of other African or non-EU countries.

Nevertheless, despite criticism of the EU's approach to return cooperation, return policy remains a key component of migration cooperation as set out in the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and other regional migration governance frameworks. These include EU instruments and the AU Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA).¹

Key challenges and recommendations

Challenge 1: Ineffectiveness and waste in return infrastructure²

Despite significant investment in return cooperation policy by EU member states – for example, the €2.7 billion that Sweden invested in infrastructure for returns³ – implementation rates remain very low.⁴ Fewer than 30% of EU return decisions are enforced,⁵ and where they are enforced, many returnees travel back to Europe.⁶ The returns infrastructure therefore often becomes a sinkhole for resources, yielding neither deterrence nor sustainable reintegration. Migrants commonly arrive in Europe with debts of several thousand euros, meaning financial incentives to return are rarely effective or appealing. This raises a serious question: are we witnessing a misuse of taxpayer money in pursuit of unviable return outcomes?

Addressing Challenge 1

To address the inefficiency of returns infrastructure, member states should:

- **Conduct transparent cost-benefit analyses of return investment** to assess whether they deliver value for money.
- **Redirect funds towards community-based reintegration programmes** that are locally led and that reflect the lived realities of returnees. Additionally, invest in traditional development cooperation and state-building to increase political stability, security and economic prosperity, thereby addressing the drivers of migration.
- **Leverage existing data and evidence to inform investment decisions:** Testimonies from returnees from Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia show that without sustained support, migrants are likely to reattempt dangerous journeys.
- **Actionable step:** The EU should develop a standardised and independent monitoring and evaluation mechanism for all return-related investments. Such a mechanism should include a human-rights dimension and be linked to the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN), expanding its mandate and resources.

Challenge 2: Conditionality undermines human rights and diplomatic relations

The EU's punitive conditionality, such as its use of visa restrictions, trade leverage or aid conditionality, has damaged diplomatic relations with countries including Ethiopia and Mauritania, and further delegitimised the return framework.

Returns to countries from which individuals originally fled state persecution, for instance, challenge both the ethical and legal premises of return agreements. The notion of "safe third countries" is increasingly employed to justify the inadmissibility of asylum claims, but in practice, these policies shift the burden onto states with fewer resources, less protection and increased fragility, thereby further eroding international refugee protection norms.

Additionally, while safety in third countries is not guaranteed, neither is cooperation: Tunisia and Morocco have refused to host return hubs for third-country nationals, citing concerns about sovereignty. However, it should be noted that Tunisia and Morocco have specific border control agreements with the EU. These have been criticised by policymakers and human rights groups on the grounds of the questionable human rights track records of these countries. Therefore, EU policies often undermine safe and legal routes, increasing desperation among people seeking protection who see no alternative to irregular migration.

Addressing Challenge 2

Current conditionality undermines not only the EU's external credibility but also its internal values of human dignity and the rule of law. Instead, the EU should:

- **End the practice of labelling countries as "safe third countries"** without independent and transparent human rights assessments first being done.
- Embed **human rights benchmarks** in all migration agreements, including those tied to aid or visa facilitation, and uphold existing human rights instruments alluding to return policies, such as the 1951 Convention, and the UN, EU and AU Human Rights Charters.

- **Cease legally non-binding bilateral deals that lack parliamentary oversight** or fail to include provisions for returnees' welfare.
- **Consider evidence-informed regularisation:** The draft French immigration law includes provisions for regularisation.⁷ In addition to tightening the rules, it provides for undocumented workers to apply for a temporary residence and work permit – even, under certain conditions, without their employers' approval. Although not intended for mass regularisation, this specific aspect could be replicated in other places as an alternative to forced return.

Challenge 3: Fragmentation and absence of a migrant-centred approach

The EU and its member states starkly distinguish between labour migration and migration for protection purposes, which the new EU Pact further codifies. This bifurcation ignores the complex realities of mixed migration flows. In addition, the EU's migration approach often treats returns as the end of the migration cycle, overlooking the complex dynamics of reintegration outcomes, structural push factors, and individual agency. Without holistic reintegration strategies, especially on the African side returnees face repeated cycles of migration due to security concerns, unmet basic needs or lack of perspectives for the future.

Moreover, the reliance on informal arrangements with intermediaries – usually private employers or unregistered immigration agencies – compounds the opacity, lack of human rights safeguards and inefficiency of the system.⁸ In the absence of transparency and valid data, returns risk becoming both ethically and operationally unjustifiable, not just for African countries, but also for European taxpayers.

Addressing Challenge 3

The EU should champion a shift from siloed migration governance to holistic, regionally coordinated reintegration. Recommendations include:

- **Strengthen collaboration with African countries efforts** toward mobility and reintegration harmonisation, as preconditions for effective return cooperation.
- **Strengthen minilateral dialogues** (for example, EU-AU or EU-Ethiopia-Saudi Arabia) to co-design reintegration frameworks that reflect shared responsibility.
- **Empower diaspora communities**, local actors and migrant-focused civil society organisations as key reintegration stakeholders while avoiding structural power disparities and dependencies between funding entities, local actors and migrants.
- **Actionable step:** Launch a pilot programme in partnership with AU institutions, Regional Economic Communities and diaspora networks to develop reintegration models that are co-designed with returnees, focusing on livelihood, mental health and legal support.

Conclusion

Given the rapid erosion of human rights safeguards in migration governance, there is an urgent need to protect and expand progressive elements. These include :

- Strengthening efforts and spaces for **regularisation and labour mobility pathways** rather than focusing more on returns.
- Institutionalising a **mechanism that monitors the return process and reintegration, for example** in the EU Return Directive, with the aim of offering decent opportunities in their home countries.
- Creating opportunities for **evidence-based advocacy** that posit migrants as rights-holders, not burdens.

The obsession with returns has become a political trap. An innovative, rights-based, and economically sound migration policy must pivot away from coercion and move toward cooperation, sustainability, and respect for international law.



There is an urgent need for evidence-based advocacy that posits migrants as rights-holders, not burdens.



Endnotes

- 1 African Union Commission (2018) "[Executive Summary](#)". Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018 – 2030). 1st edition, May 2018.
- 2 In this context, return infrastructure refers to a wide range of resources EU member states are investing in the returns processes, including funds, policy frameworks, diplomatic currency, and more.
- 3 In 2024, Sweden launched its new strategy for global development cooperation on migration, returns and voluntary repatriation 2024–2028. The four-year strategy is worth SEK 3 billion (€2.7 billion) and focused on reducing irregular migration into Sweden and strengthening its return and repatriation infrastructure. More details are available on the [Government Offices of Sweden website](#)
- 4 The EU budgeted approximately €25 billion between 2021 and 2027 for migration, which comfortably covers returns and border management. More details are available in the article, "[EU migration budget: What's planned for 2028–2034?](#)" InfoMigrants, 21 July 2025.
- 5 European Court of Auditors (2021) "[EU readmission cooperation with third countries: relevant actions yielded limited results](#)". Special Report, 17.
- 6 Mbiyozo, A. and T. T. Abede (2020) "[Focus on migrant returns threatens AU–EU negotiations](#)". ISS Today, Institute for Security Studies, 22 October 2020.
- 7 Legifrance (2024) "[LOI n° 2024-42 du 26 janvier 2024 pour contrôler l'immigration, améliorer l'intégration \(1\)](#)". Journal Officiel de la République Française. 27 January 2024.
- 8 Angenendt, S., N. Knapp and D. Kipp (2023) "[Germany is Looking for Foreign Labour: How to make recruitment development-orientated, sustainable and fair](#)". SWP Research Paper 3, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, March 2023.

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About FEPS

The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) is the think tank of the progressive political family at EU level. Its mission is to develop innovative research, policy advice, training and debates to inspire and inform progressive politics and policies across Europe.

FEPS works in close partnership with its 77 members and other partners – including renowned universities, scholars, policymakers and activists – forging connections among stakeholders from the world of politics, academia and civil society at local, regional, national, European and global levels.

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The EU Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), with its headquarters in Brussels and activities in Brussels and Strasbourg, was opened in 1973. It participates in the European integration process, backs and accompanies the interests of the Federal Republic of Germany in Europe and contributes to shaping the external relations of the European Union. As an agency of dialogue, education and consultancy, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung thereby fulfils its special role as a 'political network organisation' for and with the various European institutions. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's European and worldwide network facilitates political, economic, social and environmental dialogue between Germany and Europe, within Europe and between Europe and the rest of the world and also at global level.



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About the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) African Migration Policy Center

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung African Migration Policy Center (FES-AMPC) in Addis Ababa, established in 2019, facilitates migration dialogue among AU member states, migration experts and civil society organisations on the African continent. Focusing on four thematic areas, FES AMPC works with African and European stakeholders on EU-Africa dialogue, climate mobility, migration and development, as well as gender and migration.

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Fondazione Socialismo ETS (Socialism Foundation ETS) was founded in Rome by a group of political activists and intellectuals led by Gennaro Acquaviva. The Foundation aims to preserve the historical memory of the collective experience of Italian socialists in the twentieth century, while simultaneously encouraging political education for younger generations and social and political research on current issues. The Foundation works closely with universities and trade unions in particular, and it publishes reflections and analyses on a variety of themes, including how Catholics integrate into Italy's progressive movement and how multireligious and multicultural Italian society is developing. Italian legislation has recognised it as a Non-Profit Organisation since 2022.



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About the Progressive Migration Group (PMG)

The Progressive Migration Group (PMG), a network of African and European migration experts established by FEPS and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, examines the complex relations between the European Union and African countries of origin and transit with the aim of proposing innovative policy recommendations for progressive forces at EU, AU and national level in the field of migration management and related policy areas. The members of the group contributed to this policy brief.



Learn more about the PMG [here](#).

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September 2025

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**REFRAMING EU-AU MIGRATION
GOVERNANCE: BRIDGING DIVERGENCE
THROUGH PRAGMATIC COLLABORATION**

ABSTRACT

Migration governance is a central concern of the partnership between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU), and yet it remains a source of tension and misalignment. While migration presents an opportunity to advance shared socio-economic priorities, diverging perspectives have hindered coherent cooperation between both blocs. The EU continues to frame migration largely through security, border control, and policies of return from Europe to Africa, overlooking the reality that most African migration occurs within the African continent and via regular channels. In contrast, the AU emphasises migration as a driver of development, regional integration and human mobility rights. The divergence in these approaches is compounded by fragmented African positions, as individual states often pursue bilateral agreements with their EU counterparts, weakening AU coherence and bargaining power. Simultaneously, EU policymaking is frequently shaped by political symbolism and anti-migrant sentiment rather than evidence, leading to misaligned priorities and missed opportunities. This Policy Brief calls for pragmatic collaboration that bridges divergences, empowers African agency, and fosters rights-based, development-oriented migration governance.



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POLICY BRIEF
September 2025

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**REVITALISING MULTILATERALISM
TO REBALANCE EU-AFRICA
MIGRATION COOPERATION**

ABSTRACT

Multilateralism is facing an acute crisis, undermined by rising nationalism, geopolitical rivalries and weakening commitments to international cooperation. This decline is starkly evident in migration governance between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU), where migration has shifted from a shared development priority to a politicised and securitised issue. The consequences are severe: weakened global conventions, humanitarian aid cuts, declining development budgets, and an erosion of trust in global frameworks such as the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Meanwhile, African stakeholders and civil society remain sidelined, reinforcing perceptions of externally imposed agendas. This Policy Brief identifies three critical challenges: the drift from shared responsibility to unilateralism, the shrinking space for African agency, and the financing crisis undermining the migration-development nexus. It argues for revitalising multilateralism through renewed commitments, inclusive governance and sustainable financing, thereby rebalancing AU-EU cooperation toward people-centred, rights-based and development-oriented migration policies that benefit both continents.



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April 2024

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RECOMMENDATIONS TO EUROPEAN AND AFRICAN LAWMAKERS

Updated November 2024

The Progressive Migration Group (PMG), a network of African and European migration experts established by FEPS and the EU Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, examines the complex relations between the European Union and African countries of origin and transit with the aim of proposing innovative policy recommendations for progressive forces at EU and national level in the field of migration management and related policy areas.

According to the PMG, the EU's current migration policy and its relations with Africa in the field of migration are overly focused on reducing irregular migration, reducing irregular migration and the associated risks for migrants is undoubtedly a legitimate and urgent goal of European and African policies, but it is neither effective nor sustainable, and it must go hand in hand with the creation of opportunities for legal migration.

The PMG believes that this approach, which also threatens to dominate the implementation of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, is insufficient to address the complex challenges of African-European migration. The PMG proposes a broader approach that places migration cooperation within the broader political context of African-European relations, which are increasingly characterised by geopolitical power shifts. Development and human rights-oriented migration cooperation between Africa and Europe is more urgent than ever. The PMG therefore recommends that three components be strengthened in future cooperation: (1) greater awareness of the development benefits of migration; (2) a migrant-centred expansion of legal migration pathways; and (3) a human rights-based approach to the ongoing EU migration reform.

**A DEVELOPMENT-ORIENTED
APPROACH TO MIGRATION**

Migration is a major driver of development and prosperity. According to the World Bank, international remittances to low- and middle-income countries worldwide reached \$665 billion in 2021 – more than direct foreign investment and far more than official development assistance to these countries. However, remittances are only one of the development benefits that migration brings. The 2020 Agenda for Sustainable Development also recognises migration as a powerful driver of sustainable development because migration benefits not only migrants and host countries, but also their communities – through social, technological and skills transfers, as well as through investment and cultural diversity. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration aligns with the 2020 Agenda by emphasising the multi-dimensional nature of migration and the need for a comprehensive approach to it that involves all policy areas. In practice, however, the development potential of migration is insufficiently exploited. This is also true of European migration policy, which focuses primarily on preventing irregular migration. The Progressive Migration Group calls for a development-oriented and rights-based approach to EU migration policy. This will foster sustainable development, reduce poverty and support families in countries of origin, recognising the crucial role migrants and diaspora communities play in the economic, cultural and social development of European societies by contributing to their diversity, resilience and prosperity.



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POLICY BRIEF
April 2024

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**GROWING REMITTANCE INDUSTRY:
FOCUS ON THE ONE BILLION PEOPLE
SUPPORTED BY MIGRANTS**

ABSTRACT

This policy brief is centred around remittances – defined by the International Monetary Fund as money migrants send home, which represents part of their income and earnings. While remittances may be in the form of either cash or goods to support their families and may be sent through various channels (such as digital services, post office and money operators), official statistics often do not entirely capture these flows and their broad scope. The official reference limits remittances to two items in the balance of payments framework: 'personal transfers and compensation of employees. Furthermore, the limited tracking and collection of remittance data among countries impacts regional and global reporting. This brief intends to discuss remittances in the broader sense, despite data limitations. It also offers recommendations to EU policymakers centred around remittances as a game changer, the need for a balanced narrative on migration and the recognition of a new Africa, which has matured in its knowledge and skills base.



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POLICY BRIEF
December 2023

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
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**DESIGNING LABOUR MIGRATION
POLICIES THAT WORK FOR THE
EU AND AFRICAN COUNTRIES**

ABSTRACT

European Union (EU) labour markets increasingly need non-EU workers to fill the labour shortages that exist at all skill levels across the EU. Yet hostile attitudes in EU countries towards immigration stand in the way of addressing domestic shortages with non-EU workers. As for Africa, labour migration to the EU can play a key role in Africa's development, provided that policies are designed with African interests in mind. African countries should therefore be equal players in designing labour migration agreements to safeguard their interests and ensure co-ownership. This policy brief, after unpacking some of these complexities of Africa-EU labour migration, provides recommendations on how to improve labour migration policy for both parties. It calls for better communication on the need for labour migration to the EU, better integration policy and labour migration agreements that are developed in the interests of African countries.



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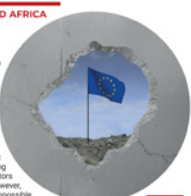
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**THE 'IRREGULAR' DISTRACTION
IN THE NEW PACT**

ENTRY POINTS FOR EUROPE AND AFRICA

ABSTRACT

In September 2020, the European Commission presented a 'New Pact on Migration and Asylum' that proposed 'a comprehensive approach' bringing together policy in the areas of migration, asylum, integration and border management, and European Union (EU) relations with third countries. The proposal consists of an intricate and complicated set of legislation that, at least in theory, should reform the EU's current asylum and migration policy, and ensure a holistic approach to migration management. According to the agreed roadmap, the European legislators should adopt the 'new Pact' by May 2024. However, the outcome of the ongoing negotiations is impossible to foresee, as EU member states' deeply conflicting interests may eventually jeopardise a final agreement. In its current form, the Pact has been criticised by many observers, who regard it, beyond the dominant rhetoric that speaks of reform, as 'old wine in a new bottle'. The Pact, in fact, insists on the existing EU strategy, focused on curtailing 'irregular migration' and on the securitisation of migration. Such a regressive approach does not comply with human rights standards and worsens migrants' vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the Pact does not take into consideration the interests and needs of the origin and transit countries it will have an impact on. This policy brief argues that only a negotiated strategy between Africa and Europe that reflects a common understanding of migration, mobility and development can eventually benefit both continents.



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