POLICY BRIEF
September 2025

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

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.

AUTHORS

LUKMON AKINTOLA
Knowledge Associate, Global Centre for Climate Mobility

STEFFEN ANGENENDT
Co-founder and Partner, Migration Experts Group

PMG
Progressive Migration Group

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Fondazione Socialismo ETS

Policy Brief published in September 2025 by

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)

European Political Foundation - Nº 4 BE 896.230.213
Avenue des Arts 46 1000 Brussels (Belgium)
www.feps-europe.eu
@FEPS_Europe

FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG (FES) EUROPEAN UNION & GLOBAL DIALOGUE | BRUSSELS OFFICE

Rue du Taciturne 38
1000 Brussels (Belgium)
www.brussels.fes.de
@FES_Europa

FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG AFRICAN MIGRATION POLICY CENTER

Yeka Subcity, Woreda 05, Block No.03, House No. 109
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
https://ampc.fes.de/index.html
X: https://twitter.com/fes_ampc

FONDAZIONE SOCIALISMO ETS

Via Santa Caterina da Siena, 57
00186 Rome (Italy)
www.fondazionesocialismo.it

This policy brief was produced with the financial support of the European Parliament. It does not represent the view of the European Parliament.

Project Coordination: Hedwig Giusto (FEPS), Julia Wild (FEPS), Tobias Beylat (FES), Susanne Stollreiter (FES), Bruck Negash Teame (FES), Abebaye Asrat (FES)

Copy editing: Francis Wade
Design: Triptyque
Cover photo: UN Photo by Rick Bajornas
Legal deposit registration number: D/2025/15396./30
ISBN number: 978-2-39076-035-1

Suggested citation
Akintola, L; Angenendt S. (2025). "Rethinking return cooperation and conditionality in the context of EU-AU migration relations". Policy Brief, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Fondazione Socialismo, Brussels.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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.

Many maintain that the return policy architecture equates to "forced deportation" rather than a rights-based migration approach with requisite social protection mechanisms.

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 infrastructure[2]

Despite significant investment in return cooperation policy by EU member states – for example, the €2.7 billion that Sweden invested in infrastructure for returns[3] – 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.

About the authors

Lukmon Akintola

Lukmon Akintola is a researcher and policy advisor with more than eight years' experience working at the intersection of climate change, human security, migration and inclusive governance. Over the years, he has conducted policy-focused research and implemented project activities across several African countries. Akintola currently serves as a Knowledge Associate at the Global Centre for Climate Mobility, where he is supporting the Africa Climate Mobility Initiative (ACMI) Deep Dive project in West Africa, Botswana, Burundi, Egypt, and Liberia. He is also a member of the coordinating team of the African Non-State Actors Platform on Migration and Development, where he serves as the focal point on climate mobility. Akintola previously worked as a program associate at Friedrich Ebert Stiftung – Nigeria, and has consulted for several international organisations, including UNICEF, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung - Geneva, European Partnership for Democracy, Save the Children and APCO Worldwide. He holds a master's degree in Politics and International Relations from Peking University, China.

Steffen Angenendt

Steffen Angenendt is a co-founder and partner at the consulting firm Migration Experts Group (MEG, www.migrationexperts.ch) in Bern. From 2006 to 2024, he was a senior fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin, where he led the Global Issues Department. From 2011 to 2013, he was seconded to the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Prior to joining SWP, Dr Angenendt led the International Migration Programme at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), where he was also editor-in-chief of the Yearbook of International Politics. He has also worked for several German Federal Government commissions. He is the author of over 250 publications on German, European, and international asylum and migration policy, and has provided advisory services to various EU and non-EU governments, as well as to numerous national and international organisations, including UNHCR, UNICEF, ICRC, IOM, ICMPD, World Bank, African Development Bank, European Commission, and the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). He has taught political science and political sociology at the Free University and Humboldt University in Berlin, as well as at the University of Vienna.

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.

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

European Political Foundation - No 4 BE 896.230.213
Avenue des Arts 46, 1000 Brussels (Belgium)
www.feps-europe.eu
@FEPS_Europe

About the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)
European Union & Global Dialogue | Brussels office

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.

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Rue du Taciturne 38
1000 Brussels (Belgium)
www.brussels.fes.de
@FES_Europa

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.

Yeka Subcity, Woreda 05, Block No.03, House No. 109
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
X: https://twitter.com/fes_ampc
https://ampc.fes.de/index.html

About Fondazione Socialismo Ets

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.

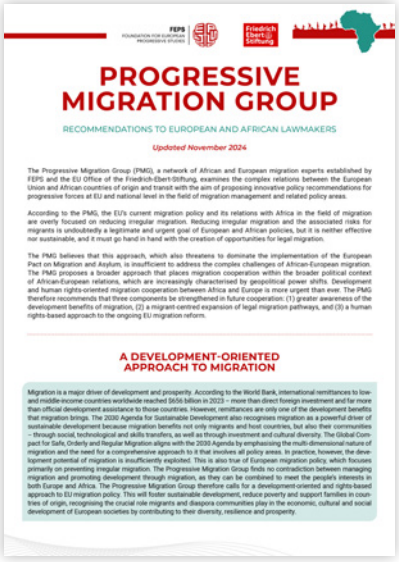
Via Santa Caterina da Siena, 57
00186 Rome (Italy)
www.fondazionesocialismo.it
www.facebook.com/FondazioneSocialismoEts

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.

ON SIMILAR TOPICS



Rethinking return cooperation and conditionality in the context of EU-AU migration relations