



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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Understanding the context

The European Union (EU) and African Union (AU) have divergent views on migration, making it a challenge to develop coherent migration governance for both blocs. Yet migration presents a unique opportunity to address shared socio-economic challenges and advance the developmental priorities for both regions. Bridging these differences would allow both unions to establish a common ground for a more pragmatic and mutually beneficial collaboration.



Even though most migration from Africa to Europe takes place through regular and legal channels, and while more than 80% of African migration happens within the African continent, the EU continues to frame its migration relations with Africa primarily through the lens of irregularity and border control."



Migration remains a central yet increasingly divisive and contentious issue in Africa–Europe relations. Even though most migration from Africa to Europe takes place through regular and legal channels, and while more than 80% of African migration happens within the African continent, the EU continues to frame its migration relations with Africa primarily through the lens of irregularity and border control.¹ The EU increasingly prioritises externalisation and returns over regularising and simplifying legal migration pathways, despite its changing demographic trends and the need for workforce enlargement.

This illustrates the discrepancy between the prevailing EU migration policies and the actual migration dynamics on the ground. The AU, by contrast, sees migration as a developmental force, closely linked to socio-economic transformation, regional integration and human mobility rights. These contrasting migration priorities between the AU and the EU signal diverging interests between the two regions and are increasingly impacting meaningful collaboration.

The current geopolitical landscape, marked by the rise of multipolarity, nationalism, and eroding multilateralism, further undermines this co-operation. The EU's shift toward securitised and restrictive migration practices contrast sharply with AU's rights-based and development-oriented vision. In this complex environment, the need to align interests and craft realistic, mutually beneficial strategies is urgent.

Key challenges and recommendations

Challenge 1: Policy and narrative mismatch between EU and AU

The EU's migration policy is increasingly shifting from a development-focused agenda to a predominantly security-driven framework, focusing on reducing irregular arrivals, bolstering returns and externalising migration control. The EU is also increasingly restricting legal migration options by rejecting a high percentage of Schengen visa applications from Africa, resulting in African applicants losing approximately €60 million in visa application fees in 2024.² These gestures contrast with the AU's emphasis on stabilising regular pathways, improving remittance flows, and leveraging migration as a catalyst for structural transformation and cross-border partnerships.

Addressing Challenge 1:

- **Focus on mutually beneficial issues** such as diaspora engagement, skills mobility and post-study work visas, which enjoy relative consensus between both blocs.
- **Improve existing migration compacts** to advance people-centred approaches. At the same time, state-to-state coordination should be enhanced, while civil society and local authorities should be empowered to ensure protection, equity, and meaningful integration.
- **Refocus EU funding and dialogue frameworks** (for example, Rabat and Khartoum Processes) on sustainable, rights-based migration programmes, not only returns and readmission.
- **Worst practice warning:** Purely bilateral migration deals focused on return (for example, between individual EU member states and African countries) have shown limited success and have often compromised human rights, social protection standards and public trust, leading to poorly managed migration.

Challenge 2: Asymmetrical power and fragmentation in AU representation

The AU is yet to have a coherent voice in its migration relations with the EU. Some African member states are continuously pursuing their national interests through engaging in bilateral agreements with the EU and individual EU member states. The diverging interests among African member states undermine the AU's migration policies agenda and diminish the continent's regional integration efforts, as evidenced in the limited ratification of the AU Free Movement Protocol. Many member states are putting their national interests ahead of the region's

migration agenda. The fragmented African positions also weaken collective bargaining power, enabling EU actors to sidestep regional frameworks in favour of bilateral deals that often reflect EU interests more than African needs.

Diverging interests among member states with regards to migration weakens the AU's institutional capacity and legitimacy in negotiations, and allows the EU to exploit divisions and push return/readmission-focused and externalisation policies.

Addressing Challenge 2:

- **Promote a coherent migration agenda and priorities** among AU member states, thereby giving the AU Commission (AUC) the legitimacy to engage meaningfully with its European counterparts in a unified, rather than fragmented, way. This coordination should involve engaging all relevant bodies within the AUC working on migration governance, AU member states, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and non-state actors, such as civil society, the private sector, city mayors and other relevant stakeholders.
- **Increase technical and financial resources** for all relevant bodies within the AUC working on migration governance to enable them to coordinate member state positions and strengthen negotiation capacity, while also embracing a pragmatic approach to the union's migration strategies.
- **Support peer learning and intra-African dialogues** (for example, through RECs) to harmonise migration priorities across member states.
- **Promote ratification of the Free Movement Protocol** by engaging high-level political leaders and addressing bureaucratic and sovereignty concerns through tailored advocacy and evidence-based dialogue.

- **Promote greater EU support for strengthening AU institutions** and RECs in Africa through supporting Africa's developmental priorities, enabling knowledge exchange, and enhancing implementation of regional frameworks.
- **Promising practice:** The Joint Labour Migration Programme (JLMP), jointly developed in 2015 by the AUC, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), offers a platform to coordinate and align national policies around a continental vision of labour mobility.

Challenge 3: EU's lack of evidence-based policymaking and disproportionate focus on Africa

Despite data showing that African migration to Europe is predominantly regular and relatively minor compared to migration from other regions, such as the Near East, Latin America, or Asia, EU debates remain overly focused on Africa, emphasising border control and anti-migrant sentiments. Migration policy decisions are increasingly shaped by political symbolism rather than facts and data, resulting in negative narratives around African migrants. This reflects rising anti-migrant sentiment and populism in Europe, despite the fact that the EU needs migrants to realise aspects of its development agenda, such as labour supply, demographic sustainability and skills exchange.

One outcome of the EU's disregard for data and evidence when it comes to African migration is that funding is misallocated and policy attention

is misdirected. In addition, the EU's disproportionate focus on Africa is causing stigmatisation of African migrants and overlooking their contributions to both host and home countries. More importantly, the EU's approach is resulting in missed opportunities to build sustainable migration systems based on actual demographic and labour market needs.

Addressing Challenge 3:

- **Invest in joint data collection and migration observatories** to provide objective statistics on African migration flows, as well as reliable empirical findings on the dynamics, driving forces and effects of migration on migrants themselves. More surveys, such as those conducted by the Mixed Migration Center, are necessary.³
- **Support EU-based messaging campaigns** with African diaspora voices, civil society organisations, trade unions, and academics to challenge distorted narratives.
- **Leverage both traditional and new media** to promote evidence- and value-based migration narratives in Europe, while also countering disinformation and anti-migrant narratives.
- **Frame African migration within broader global mobility trends**, highlighting Africa's role as both a source of, and destination for, mixed migration movements, instead of focusing on irregular movements to Europe.

Conclusion

Migration governance between the AU and EU is at a crossroads. Fragmentation of African positions, diverging political narratives, and evidence-deficient policymaking at the EU and AU level have hampered progress. However, there are still viable paths forward – particularly around labour mobility, regional integration and pragmatic cooperation.



Both the EU and AU must ensure migration policy is informed not only by data but also by principles of justice, dignity, and development.



To seize these opportunities, the AU must be empowered, including through structured and formalised coordination mechanisms between the various bodies currently addressing migration, to act as a legitimate interlocutor on behalf of its member states and RECs. The EU, meanwhile, must recommit to a genuine partnership grounded in honesty and shared benefit. Both parties must ensure migration policy is informed not only by data but also by principles of justice, dignity, and development.

Endnotes

- 1 International Organization for Migration (2020) *Africa Migration Report: Challenging the Narrative*.
- 2 Madowo, L. (2025) "Africans lost nearly \$70M to denied visas applications to Europe in 2024". *CNN*, 21 May 2025.
- 3 *Mixed Migration Center*

About the authors



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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

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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.

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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 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.



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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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**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 irregularity. At the same time, African states face internal tensions over responsibility for returns, expediting 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, enabling sustainable reintegration as part of broader EU-AU migration dialogue.



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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 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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**PROGRESSIVE
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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 those 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 the 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 2030 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 finds no contradiction between managing migration and promoting development through migration, as they can be combined to meet the people's interests in both Europe and Africa. The Progressive Migration Group therefore 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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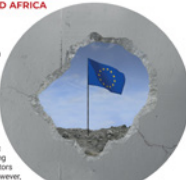
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**THE 'IRREGULAR' DISTRACTION
IN THE NEW PACT**

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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POLICY BRIEF
December 2023

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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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POLICY BRIEF
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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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**Reframing EU-AU migration governance:
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