



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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Understanding the context

The current crisis of multilateralism – reflected in the undermining of international institutions and agreements by national self-interest, geopolitical rivalries and a lack of binding commitments – poses a fundamental challenge to global governance. This is also evident in the context of cooperation between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) on migration.

Migration was once viewed as a shared challenge that required collective action. However, it has since become a highly politicised and securitised issue, weakening global cooperation and disrupting the shared values of the AU and the EU.

The crisis of multilateral cooperation has significantly eroded important international conventions designed to protect migrants in various situations. Notable examples include the 1951 Refugee Convention,¹ as well as other relevant global and regional human rights instruments, and UN fora such as the [Human Rights Council](#), the [International Migration Review Forum \(IMRF\)](#), and the [Global Forum on Migration and Development \(GFMD\)](#), all of which should underpin multilateral cooperation. Humanitarian aid cuts have intensified vulnerabilities. The loss of critical funding directly undermines protection systems, humanitarian responses and resilience-building efforts, pushing communities further into displacement and forced migration. In addition, diminishing development budgets, growing unilateralism, and distrust of global frameworks such as the [Global Compact for Migration \(GCM\)](#),² underscore the decline of multilateralism and the post-World War II rights-based world order. A key multilateral framework that is under pressure and that has long guided both the global and EU approach toward Africa are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).³

The SDGs highlight the complex and sometimes contradictory relationship between migration and development. On the one hand, migration is one of the strongest drivers of development; on the other hand, it is also a consequence of uneven development, poverty, civil unrest, conflicts, lack of job opportunities, and so on. In Africa, migration is driven by multiple structural challenges: poverty (SDG 1), gendered vulnerabilities (SDG 5), climate displacement (SDG 13), insecurity (SDG 16), growing inequalities (SDG 10), and labour dynamics (SDG 8). Meanwhile, migration into the EU is increasingly driven by skills and labour gaps within the EU, education opportunities, improved socioeconomic well-being, and demographic pressure. Yet discussions often overlook these realities. In essence, there is a need to refocus migration debates on Africa and Europe's developmental priorities, giving room to promote shared interests. Without integrating development-focused perspectives and empowering non-state actors in line with the GCM's people-centred and whole-of-society approach, multilateral efforts risk being perceived as externally imposed and misaligned with the needs of local populations.

Key challenges and recommendations

Challenge 1: The shift from shared responsibility to national egotism

The rise of nationalism and increased geopolitical rivalry poses significant threats to multilateralism, including global migration governance. Countries are increasingly restricting cross-border movements, mounting strict visa regimes and limiting regular pathways for migration. Global migration frameworks, such as the GCM, have lost traction because they

lack enforceability, perceived legitimacy, and political commitment from member states. The EU, while affirming its support for multilateralism, is redirecting its funds towards defence and security rather than development and cooperation. This funding cut signals the de-prioritisation of global development and its impacts on migration. The March 2025 EU Council Resolution reaffirmed support for the UN in principle, but it yielded no new funding commitments for development cooperation.⁴

In essence, there is a growing disconnect between rhetorical commitments and resource allocation, with migration treated more as a threat than a unique opportunity for development and structural transformation for both the EU and Africa.

Addressing Challenge 1

To counter the shift towards unilateralism, AU-EU cooperation must prioritise migration as a shared development opportunity, not a security threat. This requires:

- **Renewed financing commitments:** The EU should recommit to financing development, including through mechanisms such as the Global Gateway, ensuring that funds support mobility and local resilience rather than strengthening border externalisation.
- **Foresight tools:** Strengthening existing joint AU-EU foresight tools to enhance evidence-based projections on migration patterns and multilateral risks, helping policymakers navigate future complexities in a more aligned way.⁵
- **Leverage development cooperation to prevent forced migration and displacement:** Initiatives that combine migration management with socio-economic development – for

example, supporting youth entrepreneurship, skills-talent exchange programmes or climate adaptation – can create local alternatives to displacement while strengthening regional cooperation.

- **Bringing migration into development debates without jeopardising migrants' rights:** State and non-state actors need to start emphasising the unique role of migration in advancing both regional and national developmental priorities, especially in AU-EU migration cooperation. This means reiterating the significance of migration in achieving global SDGs, promoting climate adaptation, and enhancing shared prosperity.
- **Promising practice:** Despite criticism, the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa demonstrated how pooled resources can address root causes. A redesigned model could include civil society and diaspora more directly in decision-making.

Challenge 2: Shrinking space for African agency and civil society

African stakeholders are increasingly perceiving EU migration policies for Africa as imposed, rather than co-created.⁶ This perception breeds mistrust and limits genuine cooperation between the two regions. This is particularly notable as EU countries continue to favour bilateral negotiations with individual African countries, leaving the AU and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) marginalised. Civil society actors – key to shaping inclusive migration strategies – are similarly sidelined with very limited opportunities to engage state actors on critical migration and development issues. Without their inclusion, local perspectives are lost, particularly those of young people, women, and migrants themselves.



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This is further compounded by the growing influence of private corporations and migration intermediaries who support the recruitment of foreign labour on migration governance in Africa, and who often bypass democratic or consultative processes. While local governments and cities are rising actors in migration management, they remain poorly integrated into AU-EU cooperation frameworks, leaving out a critical voice in these complex migration relations.⁷

However, it is important to note that the fragmentation of migration governance, as well as the limited engagement of civil society, is primarily due to the lack of sustained support, access and consultative processes within African member states and the AU Commission (AUC). African institutions, including the AUC, have generally not been sufficiently open or inclusive towards civil society organisations in migration policy processes, contributing to a persistent participation gap.

Addressing Challenge 2

Rebalancing power in migration cooperation demands an explicit strategy to strengthen African leadership and civic engagement:

- **Institutional reform:** The AU should formalise mechanisms that ensure consultation over migration policymaking between its member states, civil society, private corporations, cities, youth and diaspora. Non-state actors should have advisory status in AU-EU migration dialogues.

- **Strategic bilateralism:** African states with stronger capacity (for example, Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal) can act as "norm entrepreneurs", promoting regional positions within global negotiations. Cooperation with RECs can enhance bargaining power and policy coherence.
- **Diaspora and youth engagement:** Harnessing the expertise, remittances and advocacy networks of the African diaspora can amplify policy effectiveness and local accountability. The youth, as a significant population on the move, has lived experience and insights that could meaningfully drive transformational migration engagement with the EU and other multilateral actors. Structured engagement strategies must go beyond financial remittances to include skills and knowledge transfers.
- **Promising practice:** Cities such as Accra and Dakar have piloted participatory migration governance models, integrating local communities in policy design. These could be replicated and scaled regionally.

Challenge 3: Development financing crisis and humanitarian aid cuts: The erosion of the migration- development nexus

Global development cooperation is in retreat. Major donors, including the US and EU, are slashing their aid budgets, causing uncertainty in the global development landscape. The dismantling of USAID contracts and the end of US development financing threaten to paralyse many humanitarian and development operations, which may worsen vulnerability in already fragile contexts while increasing displacement and migration (both regular and irregular) globally.

A recent global modelling study estimates that over the last two decades, USAID support has averted nearly 91 million deaths worldwide, and warns that if current cuts persist, more than 14 million excess deaths could occur by 2030.⁸ This stark projection underscores the scale of the human cost of declining aid and its destabilising effect on global mobility. Without renewed investment in the migration-development nexus, unsafe mobility will intensify, while externalisation approaches will further undermine rights. Rather than facilitating legal pathways or leveraging diaspora potential, current approaches demonise migration and may risk forcing people to either remain in deteriorating conditions or, due to a lack of alternatives, resort to irregular and dangerous routes.

Addressing Challenge 3

The withdrawal of traditional aid requires innovation in financing and governance. Examples include:

- **Localised funding models:** Redirect a portion of international funds to community-based organisations and local governments that directly support vulnerable communities. This approach has demonstrated success in the health and education sectors and can be adapted for migration.
- **Accountability mechanisms:** Monitor how development and migration funds are spent and whether they align with SDGs and human rights standards. Using a monitoring taskforce – one that comprises independent audits, civil society, EU representatives and national accountability bodies – when allocating funds to enhance transparency and accountability.
- **Strategic partnerships:** Leveraging new partnerships with ethical private actors, diaspora investment funds and philanthropic

initiatives can diversify financing while maintaining public accountability. However, regulatory safeguards must mitigate the risks of corporate capture.

- **Humanitarian safeguards:** Protect core humanitarian budgets from political bargaining on migration and ensure needs-based allocation.
- **Worst practice warning:** Top-down projects driven by donor agendas – for example, externally run border controls or repatriation centres – have historically failed due to a lack of local buy-in and sustainability. These should not be replicated.



The crisis of multilateralism is not merely procedural; it is a crisis of imagination, solidarity, and political will.



Conclusion

The crisis of multilateralism is not merely procedural; it is a crisis of imagination, solidarity and political will. Rebalancing EU-AU migration cooperation requires centring African agency, revitalising the development-migration nexus, and opening multilateralism to inclusive, people-centred and future-oriented models. The costs of inaction – intensified displacement, democratic backsliding, and lost generations – are too high to ignore. By shifting from fear to hope, from control to cooperation, and from tokenistic dialogue to meaningful partnership, both continents can build a migration regime that serves people and politics alike.

Endnotes

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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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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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**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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**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 returns, 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 EU-AU sustainable reintegration as part of broader AU-EU migration dialogue.



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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 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 2030 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 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 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 countries by contributing to their diversity, resilience and prosperity.



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POLICY BRIEF
November 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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**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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**Revitalising multilateralism to rebalance
EU-Africa migration cooperation**