



POLICY PAPER

REFRAMING MOBILITY MALI-EUROPE

LEGAL AND CIRCULAR MOBILITY, COMMUNITY-BASED REINTEGRATION, AND REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this policy paper is to propose a framework for coordinated actions on legal and circular mobility, the reintegration of returnees, and the regional governance of migration routes between Mali, its sub-region, and Europe. The paper is based on a collective intelligence workshop held in Bamako, which brought together institutional actors, migration scholars, civil society representatives, and technical and economic stakeholders to identify common migration priorities and propose operational levers. It forms part of a broader sequence of work conducted by the Spanish Institute for Migration Analysis (IEAM).

For Spain, and more broadly for Europe, recent dynamics along the Atlantic route—where Malian nationals are among the most represented groups in the Canary Islands—highlight the need to move beyond emergency management and develop structured, long-term solutions.

STRATEGIC MESSAGES

- **A collective, multi-stakeholder commitment is essential:** states, local authorities, diaspora communities, and international partners must co-design programs, pool funding, and define common indicators.
- **Successful reintegration relies on community anchoring,** economic inclusion, and local monitoring, promoting collective approaches and blended financing.
- **Legal and circular mobility should be treated as a strategic priority,** with well-structured multilateral agreements and clear, flexible procedures.
- **Strengthening regional mechanisms** (ECOWAS, AU, Alliance of Sahel States – AES, bilateral agreements) is indispensable and should become more pragmatic while protecting people with precarious or transitional migration status.
- **Inter-state coordination and local flow management** must evolve towards shared committees and indicators rooted in the field.
- **The protection of women and children** should become a major cross-cutting priority, with tailored mechanisms supported by qualitative indicators (safety, health, access to rights). Donors and diplomats are encouraged to prioritize this area to address gaps in operational responses.
- **Sustainability and the pooling of resources:** it is urgent to integrate local resources, diaspora investment, and seed funding approaches to move beyond the all-donor model and ensure the long-term viability of actions.
- **Monitoring, transparency, and continuous adaptation are key to success:** every action and program must be tracked, documented, and evaluated in order to be adjusted, scaled up, or discontinued based on measured results.

1. Introduction

1.1 Context and Rationale

The aim of this policy paper is to propose a framework for coordinated actions on legal and circular mobility, the reintegration of returnees, and the regional governance of migration routes between Mali, its sub-region, and Europe.

The paper is based on a collective intelligence workshop held at the Faculty of Legal and Political Sciences (Bamako), which brought together institutional actors, migration scholars, civil society representatives, and technical and economic stakeholders to identify common migration priorities and propose operational levers. It forms part of a broader sequence of work conducted by the Spanish Institute for Migration Analysis (IEAM), aiming to develop a shared and actionable diagnosis. The ambition is to reframe mobility frameworks based on a win-win logic, highlighting the need for an updated narrative grounded in proven experiences and a co-constructed diagnosis.

1.2 Methodology

The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule to encourage frank, open, and policy-oriented discussions. The debates converged around three key thematic areas:

- Legal and circular mobility, drawing on successful examples and examining administrative and operational bottlenecks;
- Reintegration of returnees, which is too often approached strictly on an individual basis and insufficiently embedded in community dynamics and local labor markets;
- Regional coordination and management, including return/expulsion practices with certain neighboring countries (notably Mauritania and Algeria) and uncertainties related to the exit from ECOWAS.

This inclusive and participatory approach ensures ownership by all relevant stakeholders, which is essential for the success of related policies.

2. Regional and International Migration Framework

2.1 Migration Dynamics in the Mali-Europe Space: Legal and Circular Migration

The starting point is clear: Mali is ready to engage in orderly and reciprocal migration schemes, but past experiences have suffered from uneven implementation, fragmented institutional oversight, and, above all, a lack of political will in several destination countries to publicly acknowledge their labor needs and stabilize these schemes at scale. Post-pandemic initiatives, described as “results-based agreements” were discussed with European partners, but without a clear framework or predictable visa procedures, these intentions have not had an impact at scale.

Concrete precedents nevertheless show that circular migration is feasible. Between 2009 and 2012, a small group of approximately 30 individuals was able to participate in orderly mobility between Mali and Spain, validating the principle when selection, job-to-training matching, and the stay/return schedule are well structured. A more advanced experience was conducted by Italy under the “Before You Go” program, launched in 2022 and supported by the European Union as well as the Italian Ministries of Interior and Labor. This program combines linguistic, civic, and professional preparation, leading to certificates recognized by the labor market. On 7 November 2024, a certification ceremony confirmed the scaling up of the initiative: 88 participants received 154 certifications in priority fields (agroecology, cultural mediation, and home care assistance), including modules in Italian language and occupational safety. “Before You Go” aimed to inform, train, and guide candidates toward safe employment opportunities compliant with Italian law, facilitating access to legal and professional migration pathways.

This example demonstrates that, beyond political uncertainties, an operational bridge is possible when pre-departure preparation, recognition of qualifications, and employer demand are all aligned, and it now calls for the stabilization of recruitment channels as well as post-arrival/return monitoring consistent with a circular migration logic. A government change, however, froze this bridge; its resumption only occurred after pressure from employers citing a potential need of up to 1,000,000 workers. In practical terms, the Italian scheme expanded in 2025 with a three-year “decreto flussi” (2026–2028) allocating for 497,550 work permits. This program prioritizes sectors facing labor shortages: health and care, construction, agriculture, tourism, and technical trades. In practice, this prioritization remains conditional: without formal employer requests, aligned schedules, and ready applications, activation slows down. Between the launch of a project and its full implementation, 2–3 years may still pass for a few hundred participants, which discourages engagement and undermines the credibility of legal migration pathways compared with irregular migration.

Beyond bilateral agreements, the idea of multilateral agreements (involving several EU and African countries) has emerged as a clearer approach. The key challenge is to align with sectoral needs and secure the entire cycle: pre-departure preparation, stay/work period, planned return, and genuine opportunities for round-trip mobility.

A major concern is access to visas. In practice, candidates for irregular migration rarely apply for a visa: they do not have a passport, and those who do typically belong to the political, economic, or intellectual elite. In this context, opaque procedures (unanswered emails, changing requirements, etc.) discourage legitimate applicants and increase reliance on intermediaries. Predictable, responsive, and respectful processing (providing clear information and explicit response times) would help secure regular migration pathways and reduce diplomatic tensions.

In short, legal and circular migration requires:

- **Employer demand:** significant volumes of labor in the health and care, construction, agriculture/tourism, and technical/digital sectors, through stable and efficient legal channels.
- **Stabilization of proven operational bridges**, with post-arrival/return monitoring.
- **Preference for securing the full cycle** (pre-departure → stay/work → return/round-trip).
- **Clear and flexible visa procedures** to curb fraud, reduce delays, and prevent diplomatic tensions.
- **A shift from a security-focused approach toward opportunities to remain**, and better-calibrated circular migration pathways.

2.2 Regional Instruments and Agreements (ECOWAS, AU, AES, Bilateral)

At the continental level, two instruments set the political direction. On the one hand, the African Union Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons (2018) enshrines the rights of entry, residence, and establishment, but it is not yet in force due to insufficient ratifications (only four to date, including Mali and Niger; entry into force requires 15 ratifications).

On the other hand, the Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA 2018–2030) provides states and regional economic communities with guidelines covering governance, labor migration, diaspora engagement, border management, and the fight against irregular migration. Both frameworks align with Agenda 2063 and call for convergence with economic integration initiatives (AfCFTA). For Mali, the challenge is to better align national priorities with these continental frameworks while promoting Sahelian leadership within the African Union on mobility and free movement issues.

At the sub-regional level, ECOWAS remains the historical reference for free movement: its 1979 Protocol established implementation in three phases (visa-free entry until 90 days, followed by residence, then establishment). Recent political tensions have, however, reshaped the landscape: Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso withdrew from ECOWAS and formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), formalized as a confederation in July 2024.

For the time being, ECOWAS has indicated that it will keep the door open and has called for maintaining, as far as possible, regional free movement privileges during the transition, while the AES has stated its intention to organize internal free movement. Practical implications (documents, controls, residence rights) remain to be clarified through implementing texts and field practices. The impact of Mali's withdrawal from ECOWAS is a source of uncertainty. The grace period would have ended, and the future of free movement and residence rights for Malians within the ECOWAS area remains unclear. Around 50% of the AES countries' diaspora is located in West Africa, which poses immediate status challenges, particularly in Côte d'Ivoire, where the Malian presence is significant. Added to this is the potential loss of support and programmes

funded through the ECOWAS in the area of migration. At the bilateral level, there are long-standing legal frameworks governing certain corridors. Between Mauritania and Mali, as well as between Algeria and Mali, historical agreements (1963) provide for free movement and the right of establishment, but they do not include clear operational provisions regarding returns or readmissions. Their implementation is described as uneven and, according to several accounts, largely disregarded. Their current viability is subject to differing interpretations, and local sources report that revisions are under discussion. Massive expulsions of Malians from the Mauritanian border have been reported without prior coordination or sufficient humanitarian assistance, even though the bilateral agreement provides for visa-free movement; Mali reportedly received more than 10,000 returnees in one year and often limits its support to funding the return journey to villages, due to the absence of a structured reception system.

By comparison, Senegal and Mauritania are reported to have negotiated operational mechanisms (e.g., residence cards) to regulate the presence and rights of nationals. Regarding dynamics in Mauritania, reporting suggest accounts of discrimination targeting certain communities (Haalpulaar/Halpulaar, Soninké, Wolof, Bambara), incentives linked to migration control instruments, and, over the past two years, the use of routes via Latin America by tens of thousands. Local authorities also describe an influx of Malians into transit or border towns, to the point of overwhelming fragile urban economies (too many people for small towns).

Finally, the region suffers from weak inter-state coordination in the fight against irregular migration and smugglers: there is no harmonized framework in West Africa or the Maghreb; each country acts unilaterally according to its political and financial interests, and the absence of sanction mechanisms encourages a proliferation of expulsions without consequences. These observations argue for revised operational arrangements, aligned with continental and sub-regional frameworks (ECOWAS/AES), in order to make mobility more predictable and manageable for both individuals and communities.

Overall, regional consolidation requires:

- **Updating critical bilateral agreements** through targeted modifications (security, joint service desks, complaint mechanisms, and facilitation for cross-border traders).
- **Supporting, more broadly, the African Union's efforts** for safe, orderly, and regular mobility – by promoting political coordination, convergence of frameworks, and data sharing among states and regional economic communities.
- **Clarifying the ECOWAS–AES interface for short-distance mobility** (documents, residence rights, recognition of qualifications) and establishing common guidance notes on controls and protection.
- **Measuring and documenting realities in transit towns** (flows, pressure on services, labor markets) in order to align protection, public order, and the local economy with verifiable data.

3. Key Issues and Challenges for Adapting Responses

3.1 Reintegration and Community-Based Anchoring

Migration is first and foremost rooted locally: areas of origin face significant infrastructure and service deficits, a consequence of highly centralized development around Bamako and regional capitals. In these contexts, individual support from migrants in Europe is diluted by community solidarity pressures and is insufficient to sustainably revive an economic trajectory. Departures are encouraged as a collective investment strategy, with a mandate for transfers and redistribution. Remittances partially compensate for inadequate public services (schools, wells, clinics), making generalized readmission agreements particularly sensitive.

Three operational observations emerge from reintegration programs:

1. The dispersion and lack of coordination of support dilute impact and increase transaction costs.
2. The level of individual assistance often remains symbolic—allocating ~600,000 CFA to a person who risked their life while spending 3–4 million, as in some IOM programs, covers neither the loss of capital nor social costs.
3. The absence of territorial anchoring and shared monitoring weakens outcomes and, combined with a “numbers-driven” policy prioritizing reported volumes, encourages repeated migratory returns.

Several European countries have strengthened voluntary returns. For individuals with no criminal record, voluntary and informed return based on transparent information should be prioritized over forced returns or ad hoc assistance. From a financial and programmatic perspective, a credible minimum package is required: an entry-level grant for micro-projects, complemented by community assets while ensuring that both potential migrants and non-migrants are included to avoid jealousy.

In France, the OFII funds travel and a departure allowance, followed by reintegration support. Typical pathways include starting or taking over a business, salaried employment, and training; observed ceilings reach up to €7,000 for entrepreneurial projects and ≤ €3,000 for employment or training, with disbursements made in installments based on milestones through partner organizations.

However, access remains unequal, with the average irregular migrant benefiting little: information circulates mainly among an elite (highly educated people who are familiar with the procedures) who activate the mechanisms, while the majority, held back by precariousness and bureaucratic complexity, miss out. Hence the need for proactive outreach (local mediation, multilingual information, mobile service points, partnerships with diasporas and communities).

A structural approach involves developing agricultural villages in areas of origin, designed as agro/ agro-pastoral ecosystems equipped with basic services and underpinned by legal security (land titles, irrigable land). Success requires strong local anchoring: a pilot project in northern Mali was abandoned due to a lack of social acceptability, with communities perceiving it as a retention center similar to those in Libya. The lesson is clear: co-construct with local communities and link structures to community services to avoid stigmatization and ensure sustainability.

Three structural obstacles remain: territorial insecurity (unstable land tenure, presence of armed actors, costs), legal and governance insecurity (rights, corruption, traceability), and high additional and indirect costs in certain international projects, which penalize productive activities and local monitoring.

Overall, community-based reintegration requires:

- **Specific projects at the municipal level**, with simple indicators (jobs created/maintained, income, integration) and tranche-based financing linked to verifiable milestones (deliverables, random audits, data publication).
- **Local monitoring committees** (local authorities, diaspora, private sector, technical services) to institutionalize oversight.
- **Specific protection clauses for women and minors** (safety, childcare, access to capital/training, safe mobility).
- **Systematic linkage with circular mobility pathways** (certified training, skills recognition, tailored visas) to avoid confinement in strictly local solutions.

3.2. Regional Governance, Inter-State Cooperation, and Political Will

Inter-state cooperation on returns, expulsions, and readmissions remains limited, and many bilateral agreements (e.g., Mauritania–Mali, Algeria–Mali) are either unenforced or outdated. The gap between rule adoption and implementation undermines public credibility: explicit political will is required, translated into budgets, clear mandates, and accountability mechanisms. The establishment of multi-stakeholder local committees (local authorities, diaspora, private sector, technical services) should ensure oversight of returns, shared monitoring, and a unified database with common indicators, while addressing the asymmetry in access to programs between qualified profiles and less-informed populations.

The fight against migrant smuggling should target traffickers and facilitators without criminalizing migrants, with secure referral mechanisms to protection and operational cross-border cooperation. In Mali, despite occasional arrests often followed by rapid releases, Law No. 2012-023 on combating human trafficking and related practices remains weakly enforced and poorly equipped to specifically address the illicit smuggling of migrants.

A credible adaptation requires financial investigations, corridor monitoring, and integrity mechanisms to combat corruption and dismantle networks. At the country of origin level, continuous information on the risks of irregular routes must be combined with the opening of regulated legal pathways. In Mali, this involves strengthening the Ministry of Malians Living Abroad and African Integration, creating or reinforcing regional information and guidance centers, and working with community media and local authorities. Success relies on locally anchored partnerships and structured dialogue between African and European municipalities (city-to-city cooperation, municipal service desks, social and administrative support), underpinned by explicit and funded local policies.

4. Women and Children in Migration: Blind Spots and Protection Requirements

Very little consolidated information exists on women and children traveling along migration routes, the abuses they suffer, and their trajectories before, during, and after the journey. The available literature is fragmented, often not disaggregated by sex and age, and rarely longitudinal: it relies more on narratives than on time-comparable data series. This lack of evidence makes it difficult to design interventions proportional to actual risks, estimate needs, and measure the effectiveness of responses.

Specific risks have nonetheless been well identified by practitioners: gender-based violence, sexual and economic exploitation, extortion, forced marriages, unplanned pregnancies, trauma, and school dropouts among minors, including unaccompanied or separated children. Protection needs are multiple: safe shelter, health services (including sexual and reproductive health), psychosocial support, legal assistance, educational support, and guardianship arrangements for minors. In transit cities, exposure to criminal networks and intermediaries is heightened, with massive underreporting due to fear of reprisals or lack of awareness of available remedies.

The lack of data and tailored programs exacerbates the “blind spot” in policy. Monitoring systems prioritize aggregate counts (entries, returns) at the expense of qualitative indicators on safety, health, access to rights, and the resilience of women and children. This results in an underestimation of the problem, standardized responses that fail to address essential needs, and an inability to draw robust lessons to replicate successful interventions.

To address these gaps, it is essential to:

- Integrate systematic disaggregation by sex and age into all national and regional migration databases.
- Strengthen the capacities of government and partners at the local level to document and monitor cases of migration-related vulnerability.

- Develop community partnerships with women's associations and religious leaders to prevent abuse and facilitate early detection of cases.
- Establish community-based guardianship mechanisms for unaccompanied children and locally accessible psychosocial support systems.

5. Financing and Sustainability of Migration Programs

In the context of tightening international funding and increasing needs, it is essential to diversify funding models: moving from large-scale external investments to local, mixed, and sustainable mechanisms capable of absorbing budgetary shocks while safeguarding program implementation. This does not imply eliminating donor contributions, but rebalancing the portfolio so that external funding acts as leverage and seed capital rather than permanent support.

This requires prioritizing local sustainability: projects must be able to draw on national funds, community savings, co-investment with the diaspora, and limited donor seed funding. Community savings schemes, microfinance, and local mixed funds should be strengthened. The diaspora already contributes significantly, but the focus should now be on supporting investment and collective mobilization: structuring governance, securing land tenure, ensuring traceability, and aligning incentives. Migrant returns should benefit the local community (investments, infrastructure) as much as the individual.

6. Operational Recommendations and Conclusion

- Promote legal and circular migration, facilitate dialogue between origin and destination countries, and encourage multilateral agreements.
- Support regional coordination and institutional support mechanisms.
- Direct funding toward local structures and territorial innovations, while securing investments both legally and operationally.
- Harmonize and coordinate assistance and return programs.
- Strengthen capacities and ensure access to rights for all profiles, including women and minors.

The resilience of the Sahel in the face of migration challenges will depend on the ability of policies to adapt to real needs on the ground, diversify funding models, and ensure social and territorial inclusion in the management of returns and departures. The future requires robust monitoring, documentation, proactive communication, and effective engagement of both local and international actors. Regular and transparent monitoring must accompany each action in order to measure results and adjust measures accordingly.

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