



POLICY PAPER REFORMING MOBILITY GOVERNANCE IN WEST AFRICA

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Spanish Institute for Migration Analysis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this policy paper is to propose a common framework for action to transform irregular migration into orderly mobility along the Senegal–Mali–Mauritania–Europe corridor, incorporating human dignity, economic realities and protection needs into its approach. The document is part of a series of works by the Spanish Institute for Migration Analysis (IEAM) and is the result of a ‘collective intelligence’ workshop organised in Dakar, bringing together researchers, government representatives, international and humanitarian organisations, community actors, the private sector and diasporas. The aim of the exercise was to consolidate a shared diagnosis, identify short-term areas requiring close monitoring and formulate recommendations and operational pilot projects.

The assessment comes at a time when the Atlantic route is being reactivated as the main route into the EU, with a rebound in arrivals in the Canary Islands since 2023–2024 and a diversification of profiles (young people, women, children, new countries of origin). Nevertheless, in 2025, departures from Algeria to Spain remain significantly predominant. In this changing landscape, the governance of mobility suffers less from a lack of legislation than from a lack of consistency in implementation, fragmented bilateral approaches and spillover effects that shift routes to other, sometimes more dangerous areas, without reducing the structural factors driving departures.

STRATEGIC MESSAGES

- **Strengthening sovereignty through regional coherence:** establish pragmatic coordination focused on cross-border effects in order to preserve good-neighbour relations, border economies and local stability; focus on criminal networks (not individuals) through enhanced judicial cooperation, and reduce extortion at checkpoints as a condition for effectiveness.
- **Diaspora and Community Ties as a bridge of trust:** connect diaspora associations, municipalities and community actors in areas of departure to disseminate reliable information, support mentoring and investment, strengthen local alternatives and promote sustainable returns supported by the socio-economic environment.
- **Anchoring implementation at local level:** better matching supply and demand through businesses, municipalities and decentralised services in order to match candidates’ profiles to vacancies, consular requirements and realistic pathways.
- **Make regular mobility credible and accessible:** reform consular practices (predictability, transparency, communication, reduction of delays) and reduce the space left for fraudulent intermediaries.
- **Data for realistic decisions and route anticipation:** institutionalise systematic triangulation and create a streamlined monitoring mechanism with periodic reports shared between countries in the region.

1. Introduction

1.1 Context and methodology

The purpose of this policy paper is to propose a common framework for action to transform irregular migration into orderly mobility along the Senegal-Mali-Mauritania-Europe corridor, reconciling human dignity, economic realities and protection needs. The document is based on a workshop organised at the Centre for Advanced Defence and Security Studies (CHEDS) in Dakar on 23 September, in the form of a “collective intelligence” session, under Chatham House Rules, which brought together researchers, government representatives, international and humanitarian organisations, community actors, the private sector and diasporas. The aim of this exercise was to jointly develop an updated diagnosis, identify areas requiring short-term vigilance and agree on recommendations and pilot projects for orderly and rights-based mobility.

The discussions resulted in a series of priority projects: developing legal and circular pathways (employment, recognition of skills), strengthening coordination and protection along the Senegal-Mali-Mauritania corridor (free movement, control, rights), needs and risk scenarios, increased role of local authorities and cross-border mechanisms, local prevention against trafficking networks and misinformation, and mobilisation of diasporas for investment, skills and reliable information.

The assessment comes at a time when the Atlantic route in West Africa is being reactivated as the main route into the EU, with a marked increase in arrivals in the Canary Islands since 2023-2024 and a diversification of profiles (young people, women, children, new countries of origin). With regard to the Atlantic route, departures have intensified along the coasts of Senegal and Mauritania, with Malian nationals constituting the most represented nationality. However, in 2025, departures from Algeria to Spain had a significant impact. Security adjustments in the Sahel, the restructuring of regional integration frameworks and certain operational bilateral agreements are affecting free movement, local economies and the strategies of trafficking networks.

2. Overview of the situation, recent trends and priority needs

The geography of mobility in West Africa has been redrawn. After a decade in which the central axis of the Sahel (Mali-Niger-Libya) concentrated most of the routes to the Mediterranean coast, the Atlantic route has emerged as the main route to the European Union, with a sharp increase in arrivals in the Canary Islands since 2023-2024 and a diversification of the profiles of those on the move (young people, women, children, new countries of origin).

Mauritanian sources indicate that a considerable number of Sudanese nationals, who passed through Libya and were expelled by the authorities, are now in Mauritania with the intention of leaving from the Mauritanian or Moroccan coasts.

This trajectory illustrates a change motivated by the low effectiveness of responses designed ten years ago and still in force today, despite their known effects on human rights. The Atlantic route also has a high human cost: according to data from Caminando Fronteras, a sharp increase was recorded in 2024, and between January and May 2025, 1,482 victims were recorded on the western Atlantic route, with a particularly high mortality rate among those departing from Mauritania. These figures highlight a paradoxical reality: while 2025 shows a relative decline compared to the peaks of 2023-2024, this decline appears to be only temporary, due to tighter controls, with no change in the structural factors that determine departures.

The motivations for leaving go beyond simply seeking protection. Socio-economic factors remain decisive. A significant proportion of departures is linked to the situation of young adults, particularly those aged 25 to 35, who are sometimes graduates but often underemployed or confined to the informal sector. Social pressure acts as an amplifier: leaving can be seen as proof of courage, risk-taking, the ability to “get by”, or as a collective investment for the benefit of the family. In the Senegalese context, the crisis in small-scale fishing seems to be a concrete driver of departures from fishing ports – centres such as Dionewar and Niodior – even though the perception of risk remains high.

In this context, the lack of local opportunities results not only in poverty, but also in a sense of injustice, degradation and stagnation. To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to look beyond the strictly “Africa-Europe” perspective. Intra-African movements are the main factor: professional mobility, seasonal migration, urban movements, and journeys to regional economic hubs. Routes such as Mali-Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso-Ivory Coast, or mobility towards Central Africa (Congo, Gabon) are part of long-standing patterns. Any disruption to these movements – through arbitrary controls, diplomatic tensions or inconsistent documentation requirements – has an immediate impact on border economies, markets, supply chains and social cohesion.

3. From Valletta (2015) to 2024-2025: a decade of externalisation and restructuring

The Valletta summit consolidated a Euro-African approach aimed at “regulating” migration using a combination of levers: combating trafficking networks, cooperation on returns, strengthening border controls, and addressing root causes. Indeed, the following decade saw the rise of a model in which controlling routes and reducing the arrival of irregular migrants became priority objectives, supported by financial and operational instruments.

This development has had a profound impact on West Africa: it has redefined the role of transit countries, transformed certain administrations into operational partners in control, and shifted the debate from a logic of orderly mobility to one of mobility containment. This transformation has not been neutral: it has affected diplomatic relations, perceptions of security forces, and cross-border socio-economic balances.

The period 2024-2025 shows an intensification. Important negotiations took place on the Atlantic route, with particular attention to Senegal and Mauritania. In the case of Mauritania, a migration partnership with a financial envelope of €210 million was announced in March 2024, aimed at strengthening border and migration management, combating smuggling and networks, as well as addressing security, refugee assistance, support for host communities, investment, infrastructure and job creation. The associated financial structure was presented as a combination of budgetary support, actions on migration/forced displacement, security cooperation, investment for employment and humanitarian aid. Beyond the announcement, a key aspect is its cumulative nature: this partnership is a continuation of the financial, technical and operational assistance already deployed to improve border surveillance and migration management, while supporting certain humanitarian and protection mechanisms.

This configuration has an immediate political effect: it increases pressure on a key country, reconfigures routes and creates externalities in neighbouring countries. As a result, any strictly bilateral approach becomes structurally unstable: what is “gained” in one place shifts to another, sometimes towards more dangerous trajectories.

4. Security response, adaptation of networks and persistence of the “Atlantic route”

Current trends are characterised by a strengthening of the security response in transit countries. The slight decline in departures observed recently is not a sign of a lasting reversal, but the immediate effect of a temporary strengthening of security measures. Patrols intercept some “cayucos” (boats), bring people back to shore and result in a visible slowdown in the short term. However, this effort requires significant logistical resources for transit countries and it seems unlikely that it can be sustained if the number of arrivals in Mauritania continues to increase. As soon as the pressure exerted by the Mauritanian authorities eases, the crossings resume.

Recent experience shows that criminalising certain routes makes them more dangerous without eliminating them, as networks adapt quickly. Agadez has become an important centre of operations at various times, both before and after the legislative crackdowns in 2023; after the repeal of the 2015 law criminalising irregular migration in Niger, when a sharp increase in departures was expected, Libyan and Algerian policies and the fear of being abandoned in the desert are now a factor in the shift towards the Atlantic. This demonstrates the difficulty in predicting which routes will be used and how, as there are a variety of reasons why one route may be used more than another.

The sea route retains a particular appeal, despite the agreements concluded with Senegal and Mauritania, due to the experience of the captains of ‘cayucos’, who are able to sail along the coast before heading out to sea to reach the waters near the Canary Islands in a matter of hours.

The skill of the captains, combined with socio-economic pressures, suggests that the Atlantic route will continue to be used, even if the numbers fluctuate due to controls. For example, although controls in Senegal and Mauritania have prevented boats from leaving, boat captains have extensive experience in coastal navigation and are adapting to depart from a more distant country. From Gambia or the Arguin Bank, they know where to sail along the coast, when to set sail and when to return, to the area around Cape Timiris or Cape Blanc-Nouadhibou. There, they speed up, knowing that in 48 hours they will reach the waters of the Canary Islands.

Strengthening security is often presented as an immediate response to political imperatives. However, it is characterised by three recurring limitations.

- The first limitation is sustainability. Maintaining high pressure requires considerable human, logistical and financial resources. In contexts where borders are extensive and administrative capacities uneven, pressure cannot be sustained continuously. It becomes intermittent, creating periods of apparent decline followed by recovery. This intermittency fuels volatility, which increases risks as trajectories become more unpredictable and more dependent on intermediaries.
- The second constraint is the generation of abuses. Repeated road controls, raids, detentions and document requirements can escalate into extortion, mistreatment or arbitrariness, particularly when oversight and complaint mechanisms are weak. This reality has a strategic cost: it undermines the legitimacy of institutions, fuels a sense of injustice and stokes community and diplomatic tensions.
- The third limitation is the effect on inter-state relations. When externalisation transforms a transit country into a barrier, it can trigger reciprocal reactions, political tensions, and economic disruptions, particularly when cross-border trading communities are affected by sudden administrative measures. This phenomenon undermines good neighbourliness, which is essential for regional stability.

Finally, focusing primarily on migrants rather than criminal networks creates a paradox: people become the targets of coercion, while the smuggling economy grows stronger, becomes more professional, and shifts location. An effective strategy requires the opposite approach: making smuggling riskier and less profitable, while making regular mobility more credible and accessible.

5. Lack of a position in West Africa: overlapping standards, bilateralism and fragmentation

Regional governance of mobility suffers less from a lack of legislation than from a lack of a common position and consistency in implementation. Frameworks do exist: instruments of free movement, historic bilateral agreements, good neighbourly practices, administrative agreements and established customs.

The problem lies in their overlap and uneven application, which creates a “multi-layered” regulatory environment in which formal law, administrative routines and security practice do not converge. This inconsistency is experienced on a daily basis on the roads and at borders: repeated checks, varying document requirements depending on the crossing point, wide margins for interpretation and decisions dependent on the political context of the moment. In such a system, mobility becomes less a matter of clear status and more a matter of constant negotiation with the administration and its intermediaries, which automatically leads to an increased risk of arbitrariness and extortion.

The case of Senegal illustrates how practice can stabilise good neighbourly relations even when documentation is imperfect. An unwritten but widely observed practice is not to arrest people simply for not having a residence permit, except in cases of related offences. In other words, administrative irregularity, considered in isolation, does not automatically lead to deprivation of liberty, but is treated as an administrative management issue, in a spirit of hospitality and neighbourly relations. When understood and shared, this type of practice reduces diplomatic tensions, limits arbitrariness and protects cross-border economies. When ignored, contradicted or abandoned under pressure, the effect is immediate: an increase in coercive controls, a rise in incidents and a perception of a breakdown in the regional social contract.

This point is fundamental to governance: it shows that regional coherence does not depend solely on texts, but also on administrative doctrines and harmonised practices. The challenge in building a West African position lies precisely in transforming these practices into a common orientation – both political and operational – shared in essence by the states, so that it can withstand political shocks and external pressures. Without this minimum common ground, rules become flexible tools, deployed according to the needs of the moment, and the regional space loses its predictability.

This overlap and these customs have an important strategic effect: they weaken the region's ability to speak with one voice and secure its own interests. In regions where border economies and labour mobility are vital, regulatory unpredictability destabilises markets, disrupts supply chains and fuels tensions between communities. In the medium term, and especially given the departure of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS, administrative uncertainty surrounding movement may have a higher political cost than the apparent benefits of certain control mechanisms: regional mobility is not a 'residual flow' but an economic and social pillar. Consequently, any policy that disrupts these movements without compensation mechanisms or regional coordination produces side effects: a decline in trade, identity tensions and the rise of an informal economy that is more difficult to govern.

The lack of a common position is also reflected in relations with Europe. When negotiations are conducted on a country-by-country basis, each state becomes an isolated case. This architecture encourages competition and fragmentation: programmes are designed and implemented as if each country were a closed system, whereas roads, networks, markets and cross-border communities form an interconnected whole. The more a country “closes” itself off, the more pressure is transferred to other areas; and the more cooperation is limited to bilateral agreements, the more the region's ability to collectively stabilise routes and prevent knock-on effects is weakened.

A common West African position does not mean total uniformity or an immediately harmonised comprehensive migration policy. It can begin with minimal, pragmatic and results-oriented coordination: common principles for administrative processing, mechanisms for managing diplomatic and security incidents, and consultation on the cross-border effects of control operations. Without this foundation, the region will remain structurally vulnerable to shifting migration routes, the rise of criminal networks, and the resulting bilateral tensions.

Another factor contributing to fragmentation is the ability to circumvent clauses or guidelines rejected at the political level through technical agreements. When a government explicitly rejects certain commitments in an agreement, there may still be an alternative route: signing agreements directly with the security forces (police, gendarmerie) or with operational agencies on capacity building, equipment, training, information exchange or operational support. This mechanism alters the internal balance of public decision-making: what has not been accepted at the political level may reappear in the form of technical cooperation, with identical (or more powerful) concrete effects, but with less democratic accountability. The composition of the negotiating and review delegations corresponds to the subject under discussion, so the outcome is largely predetermined.

Finally, in terms of implementation, a regular mobility programme may be “well designed” on paper, but fail in practice if it does not realistically balance supply and demand. When the selection of profiles is defined in an overly bureaucratic or centralised manner and is disconnected from the real needs on the ground, applications end up matching neither the available positions nor the consular requirements. The result is predictable: visa refusals, delays, dropouts and, ultimately, a sense of failure. Hence the need for a more realistic, less centralised and more locally-based approach, based on local assessments and the participation of stakeholders such as businesses, professional chambers, town halls and decentralised services. This approach allows selection to be aligned with actual vacancies, verifiable hiring conditions and viable career paths, which increases the satisfaction of the parties involved and enhances the credibility of the programme.

6. Europe: regular channels, visas and mobility: the realistic lever

European migration policy is developing in a context where public perception carries significant weight. The regular channel is now perceived as inaccessible to a large proportion of people likely to emigrate. The requirements in terms of documents and bank accounts, the delays and the indirect costs lead to an expectation of rejection. Restoring credibility requires a focus on movement rather than settlement. Mobility – coming, working, studying, visiting, leaving, returning – reduces the incentive to “stay at all costs” and diminishes the comparative advantage of criminal networks. It can be implemented through sectoral programmes (seasonal work, training, stays) and professional mobility schemes. The challenge is not to open up without conditions, but to make the alternative credible, understandable and accessible. For example, in October 2025, ninety-five seasonal workers left Dakar for Spain, where they will stay for nine months as part of the circular migration programme linking Senegal and Spain.

The issue of legal channels is not limited to short-term visas or seasonal programmes. It also includes university exchange and educational mobility programmes. However, a significant portion of these opportunities remains underutilised, not due to a lack of supply, but because of limited institutional absorption capacity: difficulties in preparing applications, weak administrative teams in certain universities, information asymmetries, and complex procedures. The Erasmus programme was cited as an example of widely available but insufficiently mobilised potential: a budget of around €570 million euros for sub-Saharan Africa was mentioned, with the idea of a significant increase in the future. The funds exist, but effective access to them depends on the capacity of institutions to submit applications, create partnerships, guarantee mobility and support participants. When this capacity is weak, the benefits are concentrated among a minority (often those who are already well connected) and the scheme does not produce the desired effect.

A dimension that is often overlooked is that of tourism and business mobility. Facilitating movement for cultural, sporting, commercial, or tourist purposes can help rebalance perceptions, while also generating economic benefits. In the absence of such channels, mobility becomes a privilege that is perceived as asymmetrical, and Euro-African relations become strained.

Finally, the issue of asylum cannot be separated from access to regular channels. When asylum becomes the only possible route to regular status, it is used as a fallback option, which weakens the protection system and creates administrative pathways that do not correspond to the initial intentions. Diversifying regular channels reduces this distortion.

7. Summary of operational recommendations and conclusions

- **Sovereignty through regional coherence:** The priority is to establish pragmatic coordination focused on cross-border effects. This coordination must have a concrete objective: to prevent migration control from destroying good neighbourly relations, border economies and local stability. The fight against the criminal economy must focus on networks. Without judicial cooperation, smugglers have a structural advantage: evasion by crossing borders. Finally, internal governance must incorporate control mechanisms: reducing extortion and arbitrariness at checkpoints is not a moral complement, but a condition for effectiveness. Controls that are perceived as unfair weaken the state and increase dependence on networks.
- **Rebalancing cooperation and making regular mobility accessible:** Making regular channels accessible requires reforming consular practices: predictability, transparency, communication, reducing delays and limiting the scope for fraudulent intermediaries. Sectoral mobility programmes must be scaled up to reach beyond the elites, otherwise they will remain symbolic and have no impact on irregularity. Finally, Europe must address the public messaging: a sustainable policy cannot depend on the news cycle; it must be a state policy. This means strengthening the link between the objective of controlling flows and labour needs linked to demographic and economic changes.
- **Data for realistic decisions and route anticipation:** Improving public policy does not rely on “precisely quantifying hidden flows”, but on building a sufficiently robust database to make timely decisions and corrections. To achieve this, systematic triangulation should be institutionalised: data on arrivals and rescues, local information (ports, coastal communities, transport), qualitative analysis (profiles, motivations, route changes) and operational observation rooted in origin and transit communities (early signals on departure points and network methods). The objective should be to create a streamlined monitoring mechanism with periodic reports and early warnings shared among Senegal, Mauritania and Mali, so that measures can be quickly adjusted, route changes anticipated, and priority given to effective levers (regular mobility, judicial cooperation, protection, and risk reduction) rather than reactive responses driven by perceptions or media-driven urgency.
- **Diaspora and Community Anchoring as a bridge of trust:** The diaspora can make a valuable contribution when seen as a bridge of trust between institutions and origin communities. It is recommended to establish a mechanism linking diaspora associations with municipalities and community actors in departure areas to support genuine community anchoring: reliable information on risks and regular pathways, mentorship for training and employment trajectories, and support for collective projects that reduce the social pressure to “have to leave.” The added value does not lie in abstract campaigns, but in tangible networks: supporting family decisions, strengthening local alternatives (e.g., reconversion and diversification in affected coastal communities), and facilitating returns that rely not solely on the individual, but on an environment that absorbs and values skills, preventing the return from becoming merely a pause before a new attempt.

The Atlantic route has once again become a central corridor to Europe, and its recent evolution shows a consistent trend: control measures can produce temporary declines, but they do not eliminate the underlying drivers nor hinder the adaptation of networks; instead, they shift departure points and increase vulnerability as mobility becomes more clandestine. This is why a sustainable response cannot rely on ad hoc reactions or isolated agreements, but on shared governance combining three elements: minimal regional coordination to prevent displacement and tensions between neighbours, common standards that reduce abuses and restore predictability, and credible regular/circular pathways that offer genuine alternatives (including in education and skills development). This approach is not intended to prevent mobility, which is an integral part of life in the region as elsewhere, but it can reduce mortality, contain the power of smuggling networks, and protect local stability, cross-border economies, and human dignity.

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