



POLICY PAPER

**ROUTE-BASED APPROACH
REDUCING VISIBLE FLOWS OR
REDUCING VULNERABILITIES?
*TOWARDS A COHERENT STRATEGY FOR
PROTECTION AND COMBATING CRIMINAL
ECONOMIES***

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Spanish Institute for Migration Analysis (IEAM)

Executive Summary

This Policy Paper proposes strategic guidelines aimed at reducing vulnerabilities along migration routes and undermining the criminal economies that structure them, moving beyond an approach focused solely on reducing visible flows. The aim is to promote a coherent strategy that combines the protection of migrants with the fight against mechanisms of exploitation.

This document forms part of the ongoing work of the Spanish Institute for Migration Analysis (IEAM) and is the result of a collective intelligence workshop organised in Rome jointly by the IEAM and the independent Italian research centre AMIStDeS.

The workshop brought together a wide range of key stakeholders, including representatives from United Nations agencies, European institutions, government ministries, humanitarian and civil society organisations, businesses, as well as African experts. This diversity enabled the exchange of institutional, operational and analytical perspectives on the dynamics of Euro-African migration corridors. It also helped to identify points of convergence, formulate recommendations and outline initial lines of action aimed at strengthening coherence between security, humanitarian and development policies.

The analysis in this Policy Paper is set against a backdrop in which migration routes function as an integrated regional system, structured by mixed movements, both regular and irregular. Policies based on ad hoc security controls tend to displace migration corridors, increase transit costs and shift risks to less monitored segments, without reducing the underlying economic incentives.

Added to this displacement dynamic is a growing cumulative vulnerability: as journeys are prolonged, people on the move are exposed to a progressive deterioration in their physical and mental health. Furthermore, they face coercive indebtedness to facilitation networks, as well as forms of exploitation that differ according to gender.

Furthermore, transit economies bring together a diverse range of actors – from criminal networks to certain parastatal entities – whose profitability tends to increase as security pressures intensify.

Strategic Messages

- **Reduce institutional porosity in transit zones:** strengthen the operational capacities of border crossings, establish independent internal oversight mechanisms, train officials in international protection standards, and promote targeted economic alternatives to reduce local dependence on income linked to migration facilitation.
- **Address the profitability of facilitation economies and not just visible flows:** structure coordinated financial investigations by corridor, improve the traceability of transnational payments, and identify logistical intermediaries and beneficial owners, going beyond mere interception points.

- **Ensure protective continuity along the corridors:** move beyond the perspective of a single state to cover the entire journey – from origin to destination – through accessible and secure reporting mechanisms, psychosocial support and legal assistance, as well as transnational coordination of case follow-up.
- **Integrate the structural demand for labour into the migration strategy:** align migration and labour policies, establish targeted legal mobility schemes in high-demand sectors, and collaborate with diaspora networks to provide reliable information and prevent risks, with the aim of reducing dependence on informal networks.
- **Align operational coordination with the transnational reality of the routes:** create technical platforms for information exchange and the longitudinal monitoring of corridor dynamics, involving international organisations and partner African states, to ensure ownership and the sustainability of the mechanisms deployed.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Routes as a regional system of mixed movements

Migration routes form an integrated regional system, structured by mixed movements: people with diverse statuses and motivations (refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, as well as other vulnerable groups, including a growing proportion of unaccompanied minors), who frequently combine regular and irregular segments along the journey. These movements are usually driven by interlinked factors, such as conflict, persecution, insecurity, economic crises, climate impacts, as well as lack of employment and precarious livelihoods. Migration is therefore a symptom of shortcomings in terms of protection and socio-economic opportunities in countries of origin, as well as a lack of inclusion in transit countries, and should not be interpreted as an inevitable phenomenon.

The Atlantic route and the Mediterranean corridors – central, western and eastern – constitute the main migration routes to Europe from Africa. They are fed simultaneously by several regions of origin: West Africa, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, including in particular Sudan, but also Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. Recent developments concern not so much the total number of people on the move as the composition of the flows and the risks to which migrants are exposed along the journey.

Migration routes thus function as interconnected segments, with one being able to replace another when a route becomes inaccessible or too risky. North Africa plays a central role in this integrated system: Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco are necessary for transit between the Atlantic axis and the western, central and eastern Mediterranean corridors. A change in the conditions of access, control or protection in one corridor triggers adjustments in the others. Increased local security measures shift departure points to more distant locations: journeys become longer, costs rise and risks are redistributed without disappearing. This dynamic reflects the rapid adaptability of intermediaries and networks. Furthermore, it also produces structural volatility: the variations observed often correspond to tactical reorientations within a constrained environment, rather than to a transformation of the factors determining mobility.

The discussions in Rome highlighted that the reconfiguration of routes depends as much on access frameworks as on geography. Visa policies and opportunities for regular entry via third countries can alter itineraries, opening or closing routes that were initially legal before they turn irregular when access to protection or work is blocked. Finally, the political economy of the routes is not confined to criminal networks 'external' to the state: in certain contexts, the diffuse relationship between para-state actors and criminal markets constitutes a feature of the system. This connection extends the chains of profit and shifts the focus of action: from controlling visible flows to identifying facilitation structures, complicity and financial circuits.

A strategy based exclusively on the immediate reduction of visible flows tends to produce displacement effects and increase vulnerability along the corridors.

Conversely, a route-based approach aims to reduce cumulative vulnerabilities – including those related to physical and mental health – whilst targeting criminal economies and mechanisms of exploitation, including at the destination, where the demand for precarious labour can sustain the profitability of networks. This approach requires enhanced coordination between humanitarian and security actors, and demands that public and authorities be involved in the process of the sustainable integration of migrants, the insufficient coordination of which constitutes one of the main operational gaps identified on the ground.

1.2 Methodology

This Policy Paper is based on discussions from the Rome workshop, held under the Chatham House Rule, with European and African participants: institutional representatives, national authorities, international organisations, businesses, humanitarian actors, researchers and operational partners.

The analysis is structured around two methodological principles:

- Reporting the findings as expressed without taking a position;
- Examining the dynamics along the corridors – departure, transit, arrival, return – in order to identify the mechanisms linking control, criminal economies and protection: route shifts, risk pricing, fragmentation of chains, discontinuity of protection.

Four variables discussed in Rome are integrated across the board:

- Access regimes and visa policies, as a structuring factor in the reconfiguration of routes;
- Cumulative vulnerability, including physical and mental health, as an indicator of the progressive deterioration of capacities for autonomy and integration;
- Institutional porosity at certain transit hubs, where facilitation and authorisation intersect;
- The economic and informational role of diasporas in shaping migration decisions, the circulation of resources and certain prevention mechanisms.

2. The dynamics of displacement

The shifting of routes is not merely a geographical evasion. It corresponds above all to a structured mechanism in which access policies, mixed segments and facilitation markets interact.

2.1 Visas as a segmentation variable

Visa regimes determine the structure of migration routes from the outset. Where regular access persists – however limited – it allows for an initial legal phase (entry by air, authorised transit, short-term stay). The breakdown occurs when access to work or protection becomes impossible. The migration route then shifts towards irregularity.

Conversely, the almost total closure of legal routes immediately shifts the point of entry towards longer and riskier land or sea corridors. The visa is therefore not merely a selection tool; it acts as an architectural variable in the routes.

2.2 Mixed segments and reconfiguration of routes

The journeys observed frequently combine several successive statuses (regular, tolerated, irregular). This mix explains the instability of the routes: a regulatory change in one section can shift movements to others, without reducing overall mobility. For example, in West Africa, the control measures adopted in Mauritania and Senegal limited certain departures to Spain, whilst causing them to be redirected towards Gambia and Guinea, thereby increasing the risks associated with sea crossings.

Segmentation also introduces a differentiation in migration pathways:

- Profiles that can afford an initial air segment;
- Profiles limited to exclusively land-based routes;
- Vulnerable individuals exposed to increased dependence on intermediaries;
- People in need of international protection, whose journeys are often distinct and whose vulnerability is particularly acute.

The route thus becomes a discontinuous chain of statuses and dependencies.

2.3 Risk pricing and the economics of displacement

Increased controls do not stop the flows, but alter their cost. Regulatory pressure translates into a risk premium built into facilitation services: transport, accommodation, border crossings, provision of documents. This pricing varies according to the intensity of local controls; the perceived profile of the migrant; and the distance to the point of arrival.

The rise in costs generates four effects:

- Longer journeys;
- Greater reliance on multiple intermediaries;
- Prolonged exposure to violent or exploitative environments;
- Indebtedness to facilitation networks, creating situations of dependency and vulnerability that extend far beyond the migration journey itself.

Thus, vulnerability becomes cumulative, including in health and psychological terms, as the duration of the journey lengthens.

2.4 Displacement and demand at the destination

The dynamics of displacement cannot be analysed independently of demand at the destination. The persistence of demand for labour – in agriculture, construction and domestic services – maintains the structural attractiveness of the corridors, even when formal access is restricted. This demand has a marked gender dimension: certain sectors – domestic services, the informal care economy and, in certain contexts, sexual exploitation – expose women and girls to specific forms of vulnerability and exploitation, distinct from those experienced by men.

Control makes entry more costly, whilst demand stabilises the incentive. This interaction explains why a visible reduction in arrivals in one corridor can coexist with a shift towards other segments.

Displacement as a foreseeable consequence of segmented policies

Migration routes function as an integrated system.

A tightening of security at the local level or a change in visa conditions alters incentives along the entire corridor.

Three recurring mechanisms can be observed:

- Geographical displacement of departure points;
- Increased costs;
- A redistribution of risks towards less closely monitored sections.

This displacement is not an anomaly, but a structural effect of fragmented responses.

3. Criminal economies and areas of institutional porosity

3.1 A multi-level transit economy

Economies linked to migration routes are not limited to structured criminal networks. They bring together a variety of actors: transporters, accommodation providers, document brokers, border facilitators, local militias and, in certain contexts, para-state entities that exercise control functions.

This configuration produces a multi-level transit economy, in which services are segmented and priced according to:

- The degree of control; the danger of the segment;
- The profile of the people on the move.

Increased security pressure raises the risk premium built into these services.

3.2 Institutional porosity: observable mechanisms

The discussions in Rome highlighted, in certain contexts, instances of porosity between control mechanisms and transit economies. However, this porosity stems from a fragmentation of authority; that is, the coexistence of local security actors and transit-related activities within a fragmented institutional environment. The analysis is limited to observable mechanisms:

- Informal delegation of control functions;
- Transactional tolerance;
- Overlap between protection, taxation and facilitation;
- Collection of transit-related revenue.

This is a dynamic of fragmented governance, rather than a normative characterisation.

3.3 Migration rent and the consolidation of hybrid actors

When routes shift (section II), the scarcity of certain corridors increases the value of the remaining segments. Migration rent rises in areas of concentration.

This dynamic can lead to:

- Financial stabilisation of hybrid actors;
- Investment in enhanced logistical capabilities;

- Progressive integration of legal and illegal economic segments;
- A growing ability of these actors to influence local political processes.

Migration thus becomes a component of local economic balances, rendering any strictly security-based approach insufficient if it fails to integrate the underlying economic incentives.

3.4 Financial circuits and institutional response

The discussions highlighted the need to move beyond an approach focused on the arrest of passeurs (those who facilitate the crossing).

The levers identified include:

- Traceability of transnational payments;
- Targeted judicial cooperation;
- Proportionate financial sanctions;
- Protection of victims to prevent their re-recruitment by networks;
- Mobilising diasporas as a source of information on financial circuits and facilitation networks, in conjunction with existing protection mechanisms.

Targeting financial flows and logistical investments can reduce the economic appeal of transit without causing an immediate shift to other corridors.

Why it is not enough to target the perpetrators

Arrests mainly focus on visible actors.

Financial and decision-making structures remain beyond the scope of intervention when investigations do not follow the profit chains. Trafficking economies combine local actors, intermediaries and hierarchical networks. Without acting on financial flows and institutional complicity, the system retains its capacity to adapt.

4. Cumulative vulnerability and health along the corridors

4.1 Definition: a progressive and cumulative vulnerability

The vulnerability observed along migration routes is not the result of an isolated event. It corresponds to a progressive accumulation of vulnerabilities linked to the duration of the journey, the segmentation of statuses and repeated exposure to unstable environments. Each additional segment – prolonged waiting, delayed crossing, forced displacement to a new corridor – increases the likelihood of physical, psychological and economic deterioration. Vulnerability thus becomes cumulative: it intensifies as the route lengthens. It is worth noting that this vulnerability has a marked gender dimension: women and girls are exposed to specific forms of violence and exploitation throughout the journey, in addition to the vulnerabilities common to all people on the move.

4.2 Physical health: exposure and lengthening of journeys

The lengthening of journeys, a consequence of route diversions and tighter controls, increases exposure to health risks:

- Deteriorating transport conditions;
- Specific risks associated with sea crossings – drowning, hypothermia, dehydration – among the most well-documented manifestations of deteriorating health linked to longer journeys;
- Limited access to medical care;
- Reliance on informal networks.

The risk premium (see Section II) does not merely reflect a financial cost, but also corresponds to a transfer of health risk onto people on the move. This dimension must be incorporated into policy assessments: a more tightly controlled corridor that results in longer journeys may lead to an overall deterioration in health.

4.3 Mental health: a factor in dependency and exploitation

The Rome discussions highlighted the importance of cumulative psychological impacts: prolonged uncertainty, successive disruptions, indirect violence, and debt incurred to finance the journey. Psychological vulnerability reduces the capacity to negotiate and increases dependence on intermediaries or employers at the destination.

It also influences:

- The ability to exercise one's rights, which is directly affected by people's psychological state upon arrival;
- The ability to integrate into the labour market;
- Residential stability;
- The likelihood of resorting to informal channels.

Mental health thus constitutes a structural factor in integration or marginalisation.

4.4 Interaction with transit economies

Cumulative vulnerability indirectly fuels the profitability of transit economies.

The longer the journey takes:

- The greater the financial dependence;
- The more coercive the debt becomes;
- The less capacity there is to reject exploitative conditions.

The health dimension is therefore not merely humanitarian; it influences the economic structure of the routes. This interaction highlights the need to integrate health and protection responses into a comprehensive strategy, rather than treating them as separate dimensions of operational action.

4.5 Operational implications

Integrating physical and mental health into the analysis of routes involves:

- Longitudinal monitoring of trajectories, beyond the point of arrival;
- Coordination between health, protection and integration;

- Early interventions during transit to limit the accumulation of vulnerabilities, mobilising in particular community actors present in transit zones;
- Coordination with labour policies at the destination to reduce dependence on informal circuits.

Reducing structural vulnerabilities can help limit the consolidation of facilitation economies, without relying exclusively on border control.

Cumulative vulnerability

Vulnerability builds up along the corridor. Detention, expulsion, exploitation and return all add up. The fragmentation of protection transforms mobility into a cumulative trajectory of exposure to risk. It also affects prospects for integration in destination countries, by permanently undermining people's capacity for self-reliance upon arrival.

5. Diasporas, demand in destination countries and structural levers

5.1 Diasporas: transnational economic actors

Diasporas constitute transnational networks structured by financial, informational and relational flows. However, their role as actors in Europe–Africa relations has long been overlooked, with their influence on migratory dynamics only recently being fully recognised.

Nevertheless, they influence mobility decisions through:

- The circulation of information on conditions of access;
- The sending of remittances;
- Facilitating professional or residential integration.

This function does not constitute support for migration, but rather serves to reduce uncertainty within a constrained environment.

The Rome discussions highlighted that these networks can play a stabilising role, particularly when they guide people embarking on a migration journey towards legal channels, discourage the use of irregular routes and assist with long-term integration.

5.2 Structural demand for labour

The dynamics of migration routes cannot be understood without taking into account the persistent demand for poorly regulated labour at the destination.

In certain sectors, the combination of local shortages, seasonality, low appeal to the domestic workforce and tolerance of informality maintains constant demand.

This demand acts as a structural pull factor. It stabilises the incentives for mobility even when conditions for formal access are restricted. The tightening of border controls can thus coexist with economic absorption at the final stage.

5.3 Diaspora–demand interaction

Diasporas facilitate the matching of labour supply and demand. They reduce job-search costs, guide workers towards sectoral niches and can serve as a source of information on opportunities.

When legal access to the labour market is limited, this intermediation can shift towards informal channels.

The partial formalisation of demand – through schemes for regulated or seasonal mobility – can reduce the scope for unregulated intermediaries.

5.4 Structural levers

The Rome discussions identified several key areas:

- Coordination between migration policies and labour policies;
- Targeted legal mobility schemes in high-demand sectors;
- Cooperation with diasporas on reliable information and risk prevention;
- Incentive mechanisms for recruitment at source by employers.

The aim is not to open up access indiscriminately, but to reduce dependence on the informal networks that fuel transit income.

5.5 Strategic balance

An approach focused exclusively on reducing visible flows leaves demand at the destination untouched and may reinforce informality. Conversely, incorporating the economic variable allows action to be taken on structural incentives without neglecting control requirements.

Strategic coordination and operational coordination

Strategic coordination refers to agreements and policy frameworks. Operational coordination is based on information sharing, the complementarity of interventions and harmonised implementation. When these levels are not aligned, corridor management remains fragmented.

6. Towards a coherent approach: principles for action

Managing migration routes requires simultaneous action on economic incentives, institutional weaknesses and protective continuity. These dimensions correspond to the mechanisms identified in the previous sections: corridor displacement, migration income, cumulative vulnerability and structural demand at the destination.

6.1 Targeting benefits without relaxing control

Interceptions and detentions retain a deterrent function. However, their impact remains limited when they do not target the economic chains that underpin facilitation.

The strategic priority lies with:

- Coordinated financial investigations;
- Identifying logistical and financial intermediaries;

- Tracing cross-border payments;
- Analysis of beneficial owners;
- Seizure and confiscation of assets.

Cross-border cooperation makes it possible to look beyond the points of interception and target the centres of economic decision-making. This approach shifts the focus of action towards the profitability of the system.

6.2 Stabilising transit zones and reducing porosity

Transit economies are part of territorial equilibria characterised by the fragmentation of authority and the coexistence of formal and informal activities.

Reducing institutional porosity involves:

- Strengthening the operational capacities of border crossings, including in particular infrastructure for the identification and registration of persons;
- Internal oversight mechanisms for control forces;
- Training of control officers in international protection standards, with a view to preventing practices that contravene States' obligations regarding the rights of people on the move;
- Regular audits of border crossings;
- Effective disciplinary measures;
- Clarification of chains of responsibility.

At the same time, targeted economic alternatives reduce local dependence on revenue linked to migration facilitation.

Furthermore, territorial stabilisation limits the consolidation of hybrid actors and reduces the resilience of transit economies.

6.3 Ensuring continuous protection along the corridors

The cumulative vulnerability identified above necessitates continuity in assistance mechanisms. Indeed, the risk is experienced continuously, from the country of origin to arrival. Interventions must therefore take this reality into account and move beyond the perspective of a single state: the dynamics observed in countries such as Mauritania, Algeria or Libya have direct repercussions on the central and western Mediterranean corridors, as well as on the Atlantic axis.

Support mechanisms must cover the entire corridor:

- Accessible and secure reporting mechanisms;
- Protected accommodation for those at risk;
- Psychosocial support and legal assistance;
- Transnational coordination of case monitoring.

Regional monitoring of vulnerabilities helps identify gaps in protection, particularly when route shifts lengthen journeys. Continuity of protection reduces the accumulation of risks and limits dependence on informal intermediaries.

From ad hoc control to structural management

Ad hoc monitoring primarily focuses on the visibility of flows.

Structural management focuses on:

- The economic incentives of networks;
- Local institutional weaknesses;
- Protective continuity along routes;
- Interactions with demand at the destination.

7. Operational recommendations

The following recommendations aim to address simultaneously the profitability of facilitation economies, institutional porosity and cumulative vulnerability along the corridors.

7.1 European Union and destination countries

1. Organise joint financial investigations by corridor

- Establish transnational teams dedicated to identifying payment circuits, intermediaries and beneficial owners.
- Strengthen the freezing and confiscation of assets using a 'full chain' approach, extending beyond mere points of interception.

2. Integrate access and protection variables into partnerships

Include in agreements:

- Indicators relating to accessible and secure reporting mechanisms;
- Monitoring of violence and cumulative vulnerability;
- An assessment of the gender impact of agreements, taking into account the specific forms of vulnerability and exploitation to which women and girls are exposed along the corridors;
- An assessment of the impact of visa regimes on the reconfiguration of routes;
- Coordination with sectoral labour policies in high-demand sectors.

3. Establish operational coordination by corridor

- Strengthen the migration route-based approach, with a view to improving coordination between local, institutional and international actors.
- Establish technical platforms dedicated to the exchange of information, joint analysis of population movements and the long-term monitoring of route dynamics. These platforms should bring together countries of origin and transit, local non-governmental organisations working on the ground and international organisations already present in the corridors, in particular the UNHCR and the IOM, with a view to grounding coordination in established operational capacities.

7.2 African partner states

- Clarify and harmonise legal frameworks relating to human smuggling and trafficking.
- Align national definitions with international standards and strengthen specialised financial and digital investigation capabilities.
- Integrate victim and witness protection mechanisms, an essential operational condition for the effectiveness of judicial proceedings.
- Develop standards for the sustainable integration of migrants, drawing on international aid or projects funded by actors such as the European Union.

1. Reduce vulnerabilities at checkpoints

Strengthen:

- Independent internal oversight;
- Training for officers on international standards for the protection of people on the move;
- Regular audits;
- Rotation of exposed staff;
- Effective disciplinary procedures.

2. Developing economic alternatives focused on areas of origin and transit

- Implement programmes that facilitate the transition to formal employment and reduce dependence on income linked to migration facilitation.
- Involve diaspora networks in the design and implementation of these programmes, capitalising on their knowledge of local economic dynamics.

7.3 International actors

1. Harmonise training and institutional support mechanisms

- Coordinate interventions in the areas of financial research, local governance and protection, in order to avoid duplication and ensure complementarity.

2. Support regional mechanisms for longitudinal monitoring of migration routes

Support joint data collection and analysis mechanisms that enable:

- Anticipate movements;
- Identify gaps in protection;
- Monitor indicators of cumulative vulnerability at the corridor level.

This data should be shared with African partner states, with a view to strengthening their capacity for anticipation and their ownership of the dynamics of migration routes.

7. Conclusion

Migration routes function as an integrated regional system, structured by mixed movements and successive segments, both legal and irregular. Adjustments to access or control policies at a given point lead to rapid reorientations at the corridor level.

The shifting of routes is a structural feature of fragmented approaches: any action targeting an isolated segment tends to produce reorientations rather than an overall reduction in flows. The economic incentives underpinning facilitation and demand at the destination remain intact.

The analysis highlights a chain of mechanisms:

- Visa regimes and access conditions;
- Segmentation of routes;
- The informational and economic role of diasporas in shaping migration decisions;
- Risk pricing and income consolidation;
- Cumulative vulnerability, including health-related vulnerability;
- Interaction with structural labour demand.

A sustainable strategy is based on three interlinked priorities:

- Targeting the economic profitability of facilitation networks;
- Ensuring protective continuity along the corridors in order to limit the accumulation of vulnerabilities;
- Aligning operational coordination with the transnational reality of the routes.

The credibility of cooperation depends on the ability to simultaneously address economic incentives, local governance and protection, within a coherent, stable and predictable framework co-constructed with the relevant African partner states, in order to ensure ownership and sustainability.

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