



POLICY PAPER
CREDIBLE LEGAL PATHWAYS
*BETWEEN POLITICAL PROMISE AND
ACTUAL CAPACITY: STRUCTURING
CIRCULAR MOBILITY, TERRITORIAL ROOTS
AND THE ROLE OF DIASPORAS*

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Executive Summary

This Policy Paper proposes strategic guidelines aimed at making legal migration channels more credible, effective and sustainable mechanisms for managing mobility between the European Union and its African partners. The objective is to move beyond a focus on short-term political visibility and progress towards a coherent operational framework, based on economic and territorial realities.

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 by the IEAM and the independent Italian research centre AMIStaDeS.

The workshop brought together a wide range of key stakeholders, including representatives from United Nations agencies, European institutions, ministries, humanitarian and civil society organisations, businesses, as well as African experts. This diversity of stakeholders enabled the exchange of institutional, operational and analytical perspectives on the dynamics of Euro-African mobility. It also helped to identify the structural tensions that limit the effectiveness of existing mechanisms and to outline courses of action for transforming pilot programmes into credible structural mechanisms tailored to the capacities and priorities of African partners.

The analysis in this Policy Paper is set against a backdrop marked by the paradox of legal channels: although they are politically visible, they remain structurally peripheral. Circular mobility programmes can generate positive outcomes at the individual level, but they do not significantly alter the underlying dynamics of the system. This tension stems from three persistent mismatches: the gap between the actual scale of the programmes and demographic pressure; a lack of trust in procedures, exacerbated by consular opacity; and the weak integration of these mechanisms into local strategies for training, employment and reintegration. Added to these limitations are growing demographic pressure from Africa, a European absorption capacity limited by political cycles, and financial sustainability that remains overly dependent on short-term external funding.

Strategic Messages

- **Making credibility measurable:** publish harmonised consular indicators – processing times, acceptance rates and grounds for refusal – in order to transform political announcements into verifiable commitments, reduce systemic uncertainty and limit the use of informal intermediation.
- **Ensure the social accessibility of procedures:** simplify documentary requirements, adapt financial conditions to the income levels of partner countries, and establish mechanisms for certified local administrative assistance, with the aim of correcting the access distortions that structurally steer legal channels towards candidates with greater resources, to the detriment of the profiles sought by the sectors.

- **Structure the entire cycle of circular mobility:** make all programmes subject to a coherent framework that integrates pre-departure preparation, the matching of jobs and skills, protection during the stay, and a structured return offering real prospects for reintegration, based on documented sectoral assessments and mutual recognition of qualifications.
- **Territorialise reintegration:** go beyond short-term individual schemes to integrate returns into local economic dynamics, supporting collective projects, making reintegration support schemes conditional on integration into identified sectors, and directing funding towards a multi-annual territorial investment approach.
- **Structuring the role of diasporas:** moving beyond their political invocation to create clear institutional interfaces with local authorities, securing financial instruments and aligning investment projects with territorial strategies, without thereby turning the diaspora into a substitute for public policies.
- **Ensuring financial sustainability:** moving away from the model of donor dependency by mobilising blended finance that combines national budgets, local authorities, the private sector, diasporas and specific European support, and integrating legal mobility into partner countries' employment and territorial development strategies, an essential condition for shared responsibility and long-term viability.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The paradox of legal pathways

For the past decade, legal pathways have occupied a central place in Euro-African discourse. They are presented as an alternative to irregular migration and as a tool for balanced cooperation.

These legal channels are currently embodied in the Talent Partnerships initiative, a European Union instrument designed to address labour shortages in Europe whilst establishing legal migration pathways in cooperation with third countries. The priority countries identified are Bangladesh, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Pakistan.

In Egypt, the Italian-Egyptian employment centre – known as ‘DEMO’ – offers vocational training in the tourism and hospitality sectors, preparing workers for a work placement in Italy before returning to Egypt, following a circular migration model. In Tunisia, a programme managed by the Italian office of the IOM focuses on training construction workers with a view to their integration into the Italian labour market.

These experiences attest to the viability of a collaboration model based on legality and operational cooperation, and provide a useful empirical basis for the consolidation of these initiatives.

However, their structural impact remains limited. This tension can be explained by three mismatches:

- **Firstly, scale:** the numbers involved remain marginal compared to demographic pressure and annual inflows into local labour markets;
- **Secondly, procedural credibility:** unpredictable timelines, unclear criteria and the absence of public indicators undermine confidence in the schemes;
- **Finally, territorial roots:** programmes operate in isolation, rarely coordinated with local employment, training or reintegration strategies.

Legal channels are politically visible but structurally peripheral. They generate individual successes without altering systemic balances. The issue is therefore not their existence, but their capacity to become a credible mechanism for organising mobility.

1.2 Methodology

This policy paper is based on discussions from a collective intelligence workshop organised in Rome, which brought together European and African participants: European institutions, national authorities, local administrations, economic actors and international organisations. The debates highlighted three structural tensions:

- Effective access to legal channels versus the perception of selectivity;
- Short-term European policy constraints;
- The disconnect between administrative mechanisms and economic and territorial realities.

The analysis distinguishes between three levels: procedural, economic and territorial. Its aim is to identify the conditions necessary to transform pilot projects into credible and sustainable structural levers, within a framework that is appropriate for African partners and consistent with their development priorities.

2. Procedural credibility: an indispensable foundation

The development of legal pathways is the result of a paradigm shift: it is not a question of abandoning all requirements for migration control, but of recognising migration as a structural phenomenon that an exclusively repressive approach cannot address on its own. Regularisation and legal pathways thus form part of a pragmatic governance approach, based on managing the migration phenomenon rather than denying it.

For legal pathways to become a credible alternative to irregular migration, one factor is decisive: the credibility of the access process. This rests primarily with the Member States of the European Union. Indeed, it is at the consular level that the effectiveness of political announcements is determined. As long as access to visas continues to be perceived as uncertain, opaque or socially selective, the mechanisms will not alter individual decisions. In Rome, the conclusion is clear: the problem is not the existence of the programmes, but the actual likelihood of accessing them. Credibility is not based on statements: it is measured by concrete indicators – processing times, acceptance rates, clarity of criteria – and not merely by political announcements.

2.1 Predictability and transparency

Administrative uncertainty is the main weakness. It stems from:

- The absence of guaranteed deadlines;
- Poorly explained criteria;
- Variability between consular offices.

Discretion is legitimate, but opacity is not. The absence of public indicators (average processing times, acceptance rates, aggregate reasons for refusal) fuels systemic uncertainty. This has two effects: a reduction in formal applications and the development of informal intermediaries, particularly scams. Thus, opacity creates a market. Therefore, a minimum level of harmonisation is necessary:

- Harmonised publication of consular indicators;
- Standardised clarification of grounds for refusal;
- Publicly enforceable indicative processing times.

Without these safeguards, legal channels will continue to depend on the variable reputation of consulates.

2.2 Social accessibility

The second weakness concerns actual accessibility. Administrative barriers mount up: costs, travel, complex documentation, high financial requirements. In lower-middle-income contexts, these costs result in implicit selection.

Those with financial or educational capital are better able to navigate the process. Conversely, low-skilled workers – despite being in demand across various European sectors – remain structurally disadvantaged. Thus, mobility procedures tend to benefit candidates with greater resources, even though demand in the European labour market is largely concentrated on low-skilled profiles.

This gives rise to a paradox: sectors facing labour shortages rely on irregular channels, whilst legal channels favour those with greater administrative capacity. Therefore, a credible reform entails:

- Simplifying documentation;
- Proportional financial requirements;
- Certified local administrative assistance;
- Diversification of categories in line with actual sectoral needs.

The aim is not to relax standards, but to reduce barriers to access.

Perception of refusal and transition to irregular status

In various contexts, not applying for a visa is the result of a rational calculation: when the perceived probability of acceptance is low and the cost high, the procedure is avoided. Many migrants believe their chances will be better if they enter Europe irregularly and seek regularisation within the territory. The more arbitrary the decision appears, the more credibility is eroded and the more attractive smuggling networks become by comparison. Credibility is based on measurable predictability.

3. Circular mobility: from experimentation to structuring

Circular mobility and work programmes have become the instrument generating the greatest political consensus among migration associations. It promises to meet European sectoral needs, whilst limiting permanent settlement and promoting skills transfers.

However, its capacity to produce a structural effect depends on a fundamental condition: the integrity of the complete cycle. Indeed, circular mobility should not be an isolated programme, but an architecture in itself.

3.1 The full cycle as an architecture

Circularity implies sequential coherence:

- **Pre-departure preparation:** tailored training, legal information and clarification of residence conditions are essential. Without adequate preparation, the risks of contractual breach increase;
- **Matching skills to jobs:** viability depends on a genuine alignment between certified skills, verified sectoral needs and the prior commitment of employers. Training without a contractual outcome weakens the system. Furthermore, matching must be based on the specific needs of each region;

- **Protection during the stay:** valid contracts, access to social rights and redress mechanisms are crucial. In the absence of protection, circularity becomes asymmetrical and fuels irregularity;
- **Structured return and reintegration:** the recognition of skills and the possibility of a new cycle determine the credibility of the return. Without prospects for reintegration, contractual circularity does not generate socio-economic stability.

The Spanish experience with Senegal illustrates both the limitations and the conditions for success of this framework. Launched on a small scale in 2019 (with around fifty participants), the programme faced a significant non-return rate from the outset, as almost half of the beneficiaries chose to remain in Spain upon completion of their contract. Rather than abandoning the scheme, the Spanish authorities opted for a long-term approach: continuing dialogue with the Senegalese authorities, progressively improving monitoring mechanisms and consolidating mutual trust. By 2025, the programme had reached 500 beneficiaries per year, with a return rate of 99%. This result is mainly attributed to the gradual alignment of interests and the legitimacy built up over time.

Although the framework is well-established, the challenge lies in scaling it up.

3.2 Structural limitations

Three limitations currently prevent circular mobility from becoming an instrument with large-scale structural impact.

- **Scale limitation**

In several partner countries, hundreds of thousands of young people enter the labour market each year. In Senegal, for example, some 400,000 young people enter the labour market annually, compared to an estimated 500,000 formal jobs, highlighting a limited absorption capacity.

Circular mobility programmes, meanwhile, cover a few hundred or a few thousand beneficiaries. Their impact remains primarily demonstrative rather than transformative: whilst they help reduce certain individual vulnerabilities, they do not significantly alter the underlying demographic dynamics.

- **Mismatch in timelines**

Whilst the implementation of a programme can take several years, candidates' needs are immediate. This time lag reduces the appeal of formal pathways compared to informal options.

- **Mismatch between training and the labour market**

Training without guaranteeing effective demand creates a surplus of skills with no outlet. The lack of systematic coordination between companies, training centres and public authorities limits the viability of the model.

Scale effect

Pilot programmes produce measurable results (high return rates, employer satisfaction, skills transfer).

However, three structural constraints remain:

- Limited administrative capacity;
- Internal political constraints within Member States;
- Imbalance between demographic pressure and absorption capacity.

Thus, small-scale success demonstrates viability, but does not eliminate large-scale constraints.

4. Demographic pressure and the labour market: a structural constraint

Legal channels and circular mobility are shaped by an arithmetic constraint: that of the labour markets. The Rome debates agree on this point: these mechanisms can organise part of the mobility, but they cannot replace the structural dynamics of employment and demography.

4.1 Internal imbalances

Africa's working-age population is growing rapidly. Projections indicate a rise from around 883 million potential workers in 2024 to nearly 1.6 billion in 2050. This trajectory implies a continuous increase in the number of new entrants to national labour markets.

In several African countries, hundreds of thousands of young people enter the labour market each year, whilst formal employment is growing only slowly. This pressure is particularly concentrated in major urban centres, where the concentration of educational and professional aspirations widens the gap between expectations and actual opportunities. The constraint stems from both volumes and the productive structure: the prevalence of the informal sector, low levels of industrialisation, limited productivity and security vulnerabilities reduce absorption capacity.

This results in the precariousness of local employment and a greater incentive to leave. When the gap between educational aspirations and real opportunities widens, mobility becomes an economic strategy, not a cultural choice.

4.2 Limits to Europe's absorption capacity

The European Union is facing significant ageing and a relative decline in its working-age population. This dynamic fuels persistent sectoral shortages, particularly in agriculture, healthcare, construction and certain services. However, these needs do not necessarily imply an openness commensurate with the demographic pressure from partner countries. In fact, migration decisions are influenced by:

- Internal political constraints;
- Electoral cycles;

- Complex coordination between Member States;
- A lack of coordination between labour and migration policies within the EU itself, which limits the translation of real sectoral needs into effective reception capacities;
- The priority given to visibly reducing irregular migration.

It is worth noting two structural constraints:

- The EU has real sectoral needs, but cannot absorb volumes corresponding to external demographic dynamics;
- Legal channels are a tool for organising mobility, not a mechanism for mass absorption.

Legal mobility: a partial lever

Legal mobility can:

- Reduce dependence on traffickers for some applicants;
- Address labour shortages in specific sectors;
- Improve the quality of routes;
- Help limit cumulative vulnerability by offering legal alternatives before people turn to irregular routes.

However, its impact is limited by a structural gap between population growth and Europe's absorption capacity.

Legal mobility must therefore be conceived as a qualitative management tool, not as a quantitative response to demographic pressure.

5. Reintegration and territorial roots

Reintegration is the litmus test of the coherence of migration policies. Returns are often counted as performance indicators, without this translating into a lasting improvement in trajectories.

The Rome debates have highlighted that reintegration cannot be treated as a mere administrative phase. It involves local economic dynamics and structural incentives to leave.

5.1 Limitations of individual support schemes

The predominant schemes are based on individual financial support and short-term support. Four recurring vulnerabilities can be observed:

- **Financial inadequacy**

The amounts allocated rarely cover the cost of setting up a viable business or the capital required to emigrate. Return often takes place under financial and social pressure.

- **Limited follow-up**

Support focuses on completing administrative procedures rather than on economic viability. The lack of a sectoral assessment and local coordination weakens projects.

- **Misalignment of incentives**

When the income generated falls short of expectations or the opportunities perceived abroad, remigration becomes a rational option. Thus, individual reintegration may facilitate return, but it does not alter the economic environment that lies at the root of the initial departure.

- **Social stigmatisation of return**

In some contexts, return is perceived as a failure by the community of origin, which generates psychological and social vulnerability likely to reduce reintegration capabilities and reinforce incentives for remigration. This symbolic dimension undermines the effectiveness of return schemes. Some countries and organisations therefore call for the adoption of alternative terminologies (), with the aim of mitigating this negative perception of return and limiting the sense of failure associated with these trajectories.

5.2 Need for a shift in scale: a territorial approach

The sustainability of return pathways depends on integration into the economic dynamics of the region. Collective projects (cooperatives, local platforms) enable risk to be shared and generate a multiplier effect. Integration into an economic sector – access to credit, stable opportunities, coordination with local stakeholders – is key to sustainability. A scattered reintegration does not produce structural effects.

Thus, the viability of return pathways depends on the territories' capacity for economic and social integration.

5.3 Strategic dimension

Current schemes continue to be guided by quantitative logic (number of returns). However, stabilisation requires:

- Multi-annual funding;
- Coordination between the various stakeholders;
- Sustainability indicators (income, employment).

Without a shift towards a territorial investment approach, reintegration remains a short-term management tool.

Isolated reintegration: a structural limitation

The recurring failure of individual schemes can be explained by:

- Insufficient local performance;
- The absence of an economic ecosystem;
- Persistent structural pressure.

Isolated reintegration remedies an administrative situation, but only a structured territorial strategy can alter the incentives for leaving.

6. Diasporas: a cross-cutting and strategic lever

The diaspora is often presented as a key player in co-development and orderly mobility. Indeed, it plays a role in financial transfers, the circulation of information and economic relations. However, in practice, this recognition often goes beyond its actual integration into existing mechanisms. The debates in Rome thus highlighted the gap between political recognition and operational integration. The diaspora is neither an automatic solution nor a substitute for public policies. It becomes a lever when certain institutional conditions are in place.

6.1 Mediation, information and support

In areas of origin, migration-related information circulates through informal networks and partial accounts. A structured diaspora can reduce this asymmetry:

- Clarifying the conditions for accessing legal channels;
- Describe the real limitations of the stay;
- Adjusting families' economic expectations.

Support (administrative preparation, sector-specific guidance and support for integration) increases the chances of success of these mobility processes and limits the use of informal intermediaries.

However, this role requires formalised coordination with local and consular authorities. Without an institutional interface, the impact remains fragmented.

6.2 Investment and economic integration

Remittances mainly finance consumption, and their conversion into productive capital remains limited.

Structuring investment involves:

- Secure collective savings instruments;
- Traceability mechanisms;
- Public-private co-financing;
- Specific tax incentives, with the aim of channelling a portion of remittances towards productive investment rather than mere consumption.

Local platforms bringing together the diaspora, local authorities and economic actors can play an intermediary role. Thus, the diaspora is not called upon to replace public investment, but to amplify its impact.

However, their commitment depends on local institutional quality: property security, regulatory stability and transparency are key to mobilising capital.

6.3 Limits and conditions

The diaspora is not homogeneous: it is marked by social and generational differences and exhibits varying interests and levels of commitment.

Three structural limitations should be borne in mind:

- Internal fragmentation;
- The growing generation gap;
- The attribution of excessive responsibilities to the diaspora.

The diaspora cannot compensate for the employment deficit, industrial weakness or institutional fragility. It complements an economic strategy, but does not replace it.

From rhetoric to structuring

The diaspora becomes a strategic lever when three conditions are met:

- A clear institutional interface with local authorities;
- Secure and traceable financial instruments;
- Alignment between regional projects and investment capacity.

Without these conditions, invoking them remains purely rhetorical.

7. Financial sustainability and economic alignment

The credibility of legal pathways and reintegration rests on their financial sustainability and economic coherence. As long as the mechanisms depend on short-term external funding, they will remain vulnerable to political cycles.

What is at stake is not a one-off increase in the number of people included in these programmes, but the ability to generate a dynamic that is sustainable over time.

7.1 Moving away from the 'all-donor' model

Current programmes have three limitations:

1. Dependence on donor priorities;
2. A short-term project-based approach;
3. Poor integration into national economic strategies.

This model encourages the proliferation of pilot projects without institutionalisation.

External funding must therefore act as a catalyst: reducing initial risk, testing mechanisms and attracting complementary capital. Sustainability requires blended finance combining national budgets, local authorities, the private sector, the diaspora and specific European support.

Furthermore, legal mobility and reintegration must be integrated into employment and territorial development strategies. Without local ownership, they continue to take a back seat.

7.2 Alignment with real needs

Financial coherence requires economic alignment.

Labour shortages in certain sectors in Europe justify the implementation of specific measures. However, mobility cannot be limited to responding to the needs of the European labour market, but must also be aligned with the economic priorities and employment strategies of partner countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Credible alignment entails:

- A bilateral assessment of needs, updated regularly to take account of the rapid evolution of labour markets on both sides of the partnership;
- Mutual recognition of qualifications;
- Integration into local economic sectors.

Training without verified demand weakens the system. Integration between businesses, training providers and local authorities is essential.

Thus, mobility can contribute to the development of a region, but it cannot compensate for the absence of a local economic strategy.

7.3 Strategic arbitration

Two approaches coexist:

- A limited instrument, designed to respond on an ad hoc basis to the specific needs of certain sectors, but without forming part of a long-term strategy;
- A component of a bilateral economic strategy, which integrates mobility, training, reintegration and territorial development within a coherent and predictable framework.

Sustainability depends on the choice between these two approaches. This choice involves both the European institutions and the African partner states, whose commitment and ownership are essential for the viability of the second approach.

8. Operational recommendations

The transformation of legal migration channels is based on three priorities.

Priority 1: Making credibility measurable

- Harmonised publication of consular indicators, including in particular processing times, acceptance rates and aggregate reasons for refusal.
- Standardisation of documentary requirements for sectoral programmes, in order to limit administrative uncertainties for applicants.
- Establishment of formal administrative assistance mechanisms, with a view to reducing recourse to informal or fraudulent intermediation.

Priority 2 – Structuring the full cycle

- Make any mobility programme conditional on taking into account the full cycle of mobility-return-reintegration, in order to ensure the sustainability of the schemes.
- Determine the scope of mobility based on documented sectoral assessments, grounded in labour market needs.
- Establish mechanisms for the mutual recognition of skills and qualifications.

Priority 3 – Regionalise and pool resources

- Establish regional mobility and development platforms, bringing together diaspora communities, local authorities and economic actors, led by regional development agencies and supported by European and national funding.
- Make reintegration support schemes conditional on integration into identified economic sectors, in line with the needs of local economies and territorial development strategies.
- Create mixed territorial investment funds, co-financed by the European Union, local authorities and diasporas, and managed by regional development agencies to support productive and traceable projects.

These measures entail:

- Greater coordination between the European Commission, Member States and partner territorial authorities;
- A minimum financial commitment from the partner states and the local authorities involved;
- Operational management entrusted to regional development agencies or equivalent bodies;
- An annual independent evaluation of the schemes and their economic and social impact.

Credibility depends less on new announcements than on the institutionalisation of operational mechanisms that are funded and can be evaluated over the long term.

9. Conclusion

Legal channels cannot absorb demographic pressure or correct structural imbalances in labour markets. They are no substitute for industrial policies, local job creation or regional investment.

However, they can have a strategic impact if their role is clearly defined: to organise part of the mobility, reduce the vulnerability associated with irregular pathways, and limit the comparative advantage of transit economies.

The issue, therefore, is not to increase indefinitely the number of people included in these programmes, but to ensure their coherence:

- Predictable and quantifiable access;
- Verified economic integration;
- Genuine local roots;
- Sustainable funding and shared responsibility.

Without these conditions, legal pathways will remain visible but marginal. When these conditions are met, legal pathways can help manage part of the mobility in an environment marked by long-term demographic and political pressures.

What is at stake is not making more announcements, but institutionalising what works. Credibility is not proclaimed: it is built through consistency of action and steadfast commitment.

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