POLICY PAPER

MOBILITY IN THE SAHEL

RECONFIGURATION OF MIGRATION ROUTES AND COOPERATION WITH EUROPE

Report 6/2026

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Executive summary

Migration cooperation between European states and Sahelian countries remains shaped by diverging priorities, which affect its political and operational scope. The central place of border control and readmission on the European agenda exists alongside Sahelian needs linked to internal displacement, regional mobility and reintegration. This mismatch affects the legitimacy of agreements and the ability of institutions to respond to the dynamics of territories of origin, transit and reception.

This Policy Paper analyses these tensions, drawing on discussions held during the third workshop of the Sahel–Europe Dialogue Forum, which took place in Madrid from 15 to 17 July 2026. Contributions on Mali, Niger and Libya make it possible to examine how insecurity, restrictions on movement and the fragmentation of power are transforming migration routes and protection conditions. The analysis places these transformations in their regional context, taking into account the strategies of people on the move and the interests of states and of the other actors involved along the routes.

Observations on Mali show facilitation networks adapting to controls and insecurity, alongside forms of exploitation linked to debt incurred in transit. In Libya, the fragmentation of authority limits the guarantees that migration management agreements can offer. Niger's experience, for its part, highlights the pressure that internal displacement places on the services and livelihoods of host communities. These situations call for policies to be assessed in terms of their effects on the territories concerned, and not only of the results recorded at Europe's borders.

Negotiations on return bring many of these tensions to a head. For Sahelian countries, readmission carries political and economic costs linked to their relationship with their diasporas, the weight of remittances and reintegration capacity. Its feasibility depends on conditions that go beyond identifying nationals or issuing travel documents. In areas affected by conflict and the loss of livelihoods, agreements must take into account prospects for economic integration and the capacity of local services to support returnees.

The paper proposes strengthening the territorial dimension of cooperation and giving greater weight to Sahelian priorities in funding decisions. This means building protection into route monitoring, sustaining reception and linking return to verifiable reintegration conditions. Preserving intra-regional mobility and ensuring effective access to regular pathways to Europe are also necessary to build a partnership that serves the interests of both sides.

Key messages

1. Assess the regional effects of migration control.
Shifting routes alter costs, exposure to violence and the way organised crime networks adapt and professionalise. These effects must be factored into the overall assessment of agreements.

2. Consolidate funding for host territories.
Cooperation programmes should provide local administrations and host organisations with funding that allows them to plan services and retain staff beyond the initial response. Investment must benefit both displaced people and host communities, with particular attention to shared services and economic integration opportunities.

3. Link return to reintegration conditions on the ground.
Return agreements must include an assessment of security, employment and access to services in the areas of return.

4. Sustain regional mobility and make regular pathways accessible.
Coordination between Sahelian countries and their neighbours should prioritise clear documentation, consular protection and the conditions of movement for workers and traders. Agreements with Europe must examine their effects on these forms of mobility and tie commitments to open up pathways to procedures that are accessible, predictable and linked to labour demand.

1. Introduction

Sahelian mobility is part of regional systems of work, trade and family movement whose continuity has been disrupted by deteriorating security. Forced displacement overlaps with labour trajectories, temporary stays and movements to neighbouring countries, with no single sequence leading from the place of origin to Europe. Migration decisions change along the way, depending on security conditions, available resources and opportunities to settle and find work.

This diversity has implications for the analysis of migration policy. The distinction between countries of origin, transit and destination falls short when a single territory receives displaced people, hosts workers from other countries and assists people expelled from North Africa. An intervention on one segment of a route can alter conditions of movement on others, shifting costs and responsibilities onto localities with few means to absorb them.

The third workshop of the Sahel–Europe Dialogue Forum addressed these issues through contributions from experts, policymakers, diplomats and civil society representatives from the Maghreb, the Sahel and West Africa.

2. Shifting routes and facilitation economies

The combination of insecurity and restrictions on movement is changing the conditions of access to Sahelian corridors. In northern Mali, organising a journey increasingly depends on the ability to mobilise contacts, logistical resources and information about checkpoints. This intermediary role gains economic value as opportunities for independent travel shrink and uncertainty about the route grows.

Networks are adapting through night convoys, GPS and satellite communications. These tools make it possible to coordinate journeys across areas with little network coverage and to evade surveillance. Their significance goes beyond the adoption of technology: they show intermediaries' capacity to reorganise transport in response to political and military change, while migrants themselves have far less room to alter the conditions of their journey.

The interaction with the conflict adds a specific difficulty. Similarities in certain logistical practices create a risk that convoys of travellers may be confused with movements linked to armed groups. Night-time travel and the means of communication used can make it harder for surveillance systems to identify a convoy as civilian.

Restrictions also change how costs and risks are distributed. Abandoning the usual routes for more remote tracks prolongs exposure to breakdowns, shortages and violence, and reduces the chances of receiving assistance. At the same time, the need to pay for new services or additional stages increases dependence on intermediaries. When resources run out along the way, debt may allow the journey to continue and later be used as a means of coercion.

Field observations presented on Mali document situations of forced labour and of people being held over transport debts. Although facilitating irregular movement does not in itself amount to trafficking, these practices show how logistical control can turn into exploitation. The response must distinguish between the roles of the different actors involved and identify those who profit from coercion.

Recent developments in Niger help to qualify the weight of regulation in these processes. A study by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime notes that the repeal, in November 2023, of the 2015 law that had criminalised migrant transport activities allowed some of these activities to resume openly. Departures towards Algeria and Libya increased, but they remained below pre-2015 levels, in a context still shaped by insecurity and border closures. Regulatory changes take effect within a regional environment that can either amplify or limit their reach.

The assessment of control measures should start from this relationship between regulation, conflict and the transit economy. Understanding diversions, costs and conditions of assistance makes it possible to judge whether an intervention reduces risks and costs or simply shifts them to other territories. A fall in observed transit along one corridor offers only a partial picture if developments along alternative routes are not examined.

3. Libya and the limits of cooperation amid political fragmentation

Libya concentrates several of the difficulties that run through the management of mobility between the Sahel and the Mediterranean. Its role as a transit space is combined with functions of temporary employment and longer stays, while the fragmentation of authority shapes both movement and the scope for protection. The trajectories that converge on the country also depend on decisions and conflicts beyond its borders.

Among recent changes in the context, some routes have shifted from Niger towards Algeria, via Arlit, before reaching western Libya. Links have also been noted between northern Chad, the gold-mining areas of the Tibesti, and Sebha, in Fezzan. These itineraries highlight the relationship between border restrictions and the economic activities that make it possible to finance transit. Mining areas and urban centres can become places to work or wait, altering the duration and destination of the migration project.

The distinction between transit and settlement is of particularly limited use in this context. An initially temporary stay may be prolonged by the need to gather resources, the interruption of a route or the impossibility of escaping exploitation. During that period, conditions of access to work and protection matter as much as the prospects of continuing to the coast.

The fragmentation of power directly affects the viability of cooperation agreements. An authority's formal capacity to make commitments does not guarantee effective control over all the actors involved in surveillance, detention or transport. Migration management is embedded in territorial and economic power relations that determine who can implement a decision and to whom they answer for its effects.

The report published in February 2026 by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documents widespread and systematic violations and abuses against migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in 2024 and 2025. It identifies the involvement of trafficking and smuggling networks, armed groups and state-affiliated actors, in a context of impunity.[1] Its findings reinforce the need to factor protection conditions into any assessment of cooperation with the Libyan authorities.

For European partners, identifying counterparts and monitoring the use of assistance are therefore substantive issues. Funding for control capacity must be accompanied by humanitarian access, independent oversight and review mechanisms in the event of documented abuses. Where these conditions are difficult to verify, the ability to assess the results of the support provided is also limited.

Institutional instability calls for a long-term perspective, without diverting attention from those who remain in the country. Continued assistance is part of international partners' responsibility, together with support for effective accountability mechanisms.

4. Internal displacement and reception capacity in Niger

The case of Niger places internal displacement at the centre of the migration debate. Insecurity and the loss of livelihoods are putting heavy pressure on host areas, showing how conditions after displacement influence the way trajectories unfold.

Displacement often means the interruption of farming, herding or trading activities and the loss of access to the resources that sustained the household. Arriving in a relatively safer locality reduces immediate exposure to conflict, although economic insecurity and difficulties in accessing services may persist. If these conditions continue, they can encourage onward movement towards cities or other countries. Whether this happens depends on the resources, networks and opportunities available; it is not a trajectory shared by all displaced people.

Pressure on housing, education and healthcare also affects host communities. When demand grows without an equivalent increase in resources, hosting can create tensions over distribution and erode services that were already stretched.

[1] UNSMIL and OHCHR (2026). Business as usual: Human rights violations and abuses against migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees in Libya, February. The report concerns events in 2024 and 2025. Report record in the OHCHR library.

Support for displaced people must take these effects on residents into account and strengthen shared services. Otherwise, a response focused on individual assistance risks perpetuating the conditions that hinder coexistence and economic integration.

Nutritional support and assistance with food processing must be combined with income-generating activities, training and community mediation. Bringing these actions together reflects the mutual dependence between protection, livelihoods and social cohesion. An economic initiative is unlikely to take hold if food insecurity persists or if access to local resources becomes a source of conflict.

Differences in gender, age and autonomy must be built into the design of the response. Domestic care work can reduce the time women have available for training or paid work. Older people and persons with disabilities may also struggle to reach services when these are far away or suitable transport is lacking. Situations of violence require specialised services and conditions that allow people to seek help safely. A programme's reach depends on its ability to address these barriers, and not only on the number of people it counts among its beneficiaries.

From a cooperation perspective, the challenge is to fund this response capacity beyond the initial emergency. Municipalities and host organisations need a time horizon that allows them to plan services and integration initiatives. Europe's contribution in this area should be judged by its effects on communities' living conditions.

5. Return and readmission in Euro-African cooperation

Return and readmission policies bring together some of the main tensions in Euro-African cooperation. Discussions highlighted the gap between the European priority of speeding up returns and the reservations of countries of origin, linked to sovereignty and to the economic role of diasporas. The negotiation therefore touches on a broader relationship between states, their citizens abroad and the territories that receive resources from emigration.

Difficulties in identifying nationals and issuing travel documents are part of this disagreement, but do not fully explain it. Accepting an agreement can be politically costly when cooperation is seen as focused on readmission while opportunities for regular mobility remain limited. Trust also depends on the reciprocity partners perceive in the negotiation and on the attention given to their economic and social priorities.

Reintegration raises a second difficulty: the gap between administrative return and the conditions for settling back in. Debt, loss of income and family expectations can narrow returnees' options. In conflict-affected areas, moreover, the place of origin may no longer offer security or livelihoods. Reintegration should be planned based on the area where the person can realistically settle and the opportunities available there.

This perspective makes the limits of individual support clear. Cash assistance eases arrival, but its lasting effect depends on access to markets, jobs and services. Training loses its value when it does not lead to employment; entrepreneurship is fragile when it relies on activities for which demand is insufficient. Involving local authorities, returnee associations and communities of origin can improve needs assessment and connect support with territorial development policies. To play this role, these structures need adequate resources.

The analysis of return also covers expulsions between African countries. Alarme Phone Sahara documented at least 34,236 people of various nationalities expelled from Algeria to Niger via Assamaka in 2025.[2] These movements create reception needs both for Nigerien citizens and for people expelled to a country that is not their own.

Conditions on arrival also depend on whether the movement is voluntary or forced and whether it could be prepared. These differences affect people's room for decision, the information available to them and the support they need. Assessing reintegration requires looking at subsequent access to documentation, housing and livelihoods, as well as the person's safety. Counting returns reflects the implementation of procedures; it is what happens after the transfer that shows the results of reintegration.

6. Regional mobility and the conditions for balanced cooperation

Intra-regional mobility is a central dimension of Sahelian economies and of their relations with neighbouring countries. The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), effective since 29 January 2025, raised questions about the continuity of this movement. In the statement issued on their departure, the organisation called for continued recognition, until further notice, of travel documents bearing its logo, visa-free movement, and the rights of residence and establishment of citizens of the three countries.[3] This provision sought to preserve regional ties despite the political rupture.

Discussions at the workshop pointed to the need for greater African coordination on migration. Its practical value lies in issues such as documentation, consular protection and the conditions of movement for workers and traders. Restrictions on these movements affect employment, cross-border trade and household incomes. Cooperation organised through bilateral agreements can shift costs onto neighbouring countries or hamper activities on which territories that were not involved in the negotiations depend.

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[2] Alarme Phone Sahara (2025). Assamaka, Niger: More than 34,000 people deported from Algeria to Niger in 2025, 31 December. Records at least 34,236 people of various nationalities; the organisation notes limitations in the count. Read the update.

[3] ECOWAS (2025). Press Statement on the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, 29 January; published online on 30 January. The provision cited is the one announced at the time, without assuming that the measures are applied uniformly at all border crossings. Read the statement.

In this context, the ongoing political and security realignments in the region open up new possibilities for cross-border cooperation. Strengthened coordination within the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), together with recent developments in relations between the AES countries and Algeria, could contribute to developing consultation frameworks involving the authorities of the countries concerned, particularly on mobility, border security and cross-border economic activities.

Regular pathways to Europe constitute another dimension of this broader reflection, although they address different needs and operate at different scales from intraregional mobility. Their credibility depends on effective access to procedures and on the alignment between programmes, skills and labour market demand. Documentation costs, travel requirements and uncertainty regarding processing times can exclude the very profiles these programmes seek to reach. Circular mobility also requires continuity between preparation, recruitment and reintegration. Without such coordination, the announcement of new opportunities is unlikely to translate into a predictable option for their intended beneficiaries.

Diasporas can contribute through their knowledge of markets, their professional contacts and their ties with territories of origin. Investment and the circulation of skills are essential, but difficult to put into practice when projects lack stable public counterparts or links with local strategies. Family remittances serve their own purpose of supporting households; their existence does not guarantee resources to fund services or cover the costs of a reintegration policy.

Finally, financial dependence constrains African states' capacity to pursue their own agenda. Domestic financing mechanisms therefore need to be strengthened, so as not to rely exclusively on the international community. The autonomy to set priorities requires budgetary capacity and institutional continuity, along with predictable international support. For European partners, balanced cooperation means that the agreed priorities of reception, employment and mobility receive funding with a continuity comparable to that given to migration control. The allocation of resources shows which objectives have a real chance of being sustained.

7. Strategic recommendations

The analysis sets out four priorities for cooperation between Europe and Sahelian countries. Implementing them requires agreements between national and local authorities, cooperation agencies and the organisations working along the routes and in host communities. These actors should be involved from the design stage throughout implementation and evaluation.

Factor regional effects into the assessment of migration control

Negotiations on border agreements should include an analysis of foreseeable shifts in routes and their consequences for neighbouring territories. Monitoring must track changes in transit costs, situations of people being stranded and exposure to violence, drawing on information from local organisations and actors familiar with the corridors.

This would make it possible to review measures when their effects worsen protection conditions or shift assistance needs onto localities without sufficient resources. Any information shared must preserve people's safety and the independence of humanitarian action.

Consolidate funding for host territories

Cooperation programmes should provide local administrations and host organisations with funding that allows them to plan services and retain staff beyond the initial response. Investment must benefit both displaced people and host communities, with particular attention to shared services and economic integration opportunities. The experience of several local and international NGOs provides a basis for linking nutritional support with livelihoods and community mediation. Adapting it to other contexts requires taking into account local capacities and the barriers to access faced by women, children and people with specific needs.

Make all returns conditional on verifiable conditions for territorial reintegration

The European Union should make any return to the Sahel conditional on an independent and adversarial assessment of security, housing, employment, access to services and identity documents. Readmission agreements and voluntary return programmes should include post-return monitoring, accessible complaint mechanisms and the involvement of returnee associations. No return should be supported to areas affected by conflict or territories lacking local reintegration capacity.

Sustain regional mobility and make regular pathways accessible

The European Union should ensure that its migration agreements do not undermine intraregional mobility, consular protection or cross-border economic activities in Sahelian countries and their neighbouring states. It should support documentary clarity, the recognition of qualifications, and the mobility of workers and traders, including following the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS. At the same time, it should develop accessible, predictable legal pathways aligned with labour market demand, including through talent partnerships and regulated labour mobility.

8. Conclusion

The issues discussed at the workshop show how closely the reshaping of routes, reception capacity and the conditions of return are intertwined. Intervening in one of these areas affects the others, particularly when responsibilities are shifted between territories with unequal resources and institutional capacities. Cooperation focused on border outcomes can hardly account for this interdependence.

Strengthening Sahelian participation means ensuring that Sahelian priorities shape the negotiation, funding and evaluation of agreements. Reception within the region, the continuity of labour mobility and reintegration require budgetary commitments and the institutional capacity to sustain them. This also calls for greater domestic financing efforts by African states and predictable European support.

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