

Reframing Return and Reintegration

Origin-Country Priorities and Strategies for Cooperation

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BY BERTRAND STEINER, ADÈLE APPRIOU, RAVENNA SOHST, AND CAMILLE LE COZ

Executive Summary

For destination-country policymakers, achieving strong partnerships with countries of origin on migrant returns begins with a deeper understanding of how these governments approach return and reintegration, including their priorities, capacities, and governance structures. In many countries of origin, managing the return and reintegration of nationals has become a prominent policy concern. Acute awareness of the precarious situation many migrants face on their journeys—including trafficking, exploitation, and abuse—has prompted authorities to strengthen support for their safe return. Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and reports of abuse and attacks against sub-Saharan Africans in North African countries have accelerated policy development, compelling authorities to establish procedures for emergency evacuations, reception, health screening, and social support. At the same time, pressure from the European Union and various destination countries to readmit migrants without a legal right to stay has added urgency, though such returns represent only a small share of all returnees in most origin countries.

As a result, origin-country policies and operational procedures for managing the return and reintegration of migrants have evolved in recent years. Some governments have adopted stand-alone strategies,

assigning responsibilities for these issues to specific ministries or offices, linking reintegration to state budgets, and providing a structured framework for coordination between ministries, municipalities, and international partners. Others have opted to mainstream return and reintegration matters into broader migration, employment, or social protection plans, embedding support for returnees within existing service delivery systems. Each approach has potential benefits and limitations: dedicated strategies offer clarity and accountability but may result in a parallel system of services for returnees that is vulnerable to changes in funding and political priorities, whereas mainstreamed approaches promote integrated, sustainable assistance but risk diluting attention to the specific needs of migrants.

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Beyond policy design, the governance structures through which policies are enacted have also evolved. Ministries of foreign affairs are often in the lead on returns, due to their responsibility for consular affairs, international coordination, and donor engagement. However, they typically lack the expertise and operational capacity to provide reinte-

gration services such as livelihood and psychosocial support to returning migrants in local communities. Some countries address this by placing ministries of social affairs or labour in charge of reintegration, linking support for returnees to broader employment and social protection systems. In addition, several countries have made efforts to strengthen local actors' capacity to support migrant reintegration and improve coordination via central referral points that link returnees to various government programmes and services.

Despite these advances, the path forward remains uncertain in some origin countries. In several, proposed legislation or national strategies on return, reintegration, and migration more broadly have stalled, raising questions about how to ensure policy coherence and continuity of services across the multiple actors involved in return and reintegration. At the same time, European donors are increasingly urging origin countries to take ownership of the reintegration process, including through state budget allocations. For many origin-country governments, the question is how to further develop policies and governance structures in ways that advance national priorities and that ensure continuity and quality of support for individuals who return under varied, and often precarious, circumstances.

Opportunities for origin countries to consolidate ongoing policy efforts and strengthen durable governance structures, and for international donors to support this work, include:

- ▶ **Integrating returning migrants into existing public services:** Linking reintegration to broader social and development policies can help foster public support for these investments, reduce the perception that returning migrants are receiving preferential treatment, and sustain services amid tight public budgets. Efforts should focus on improving returnees' access

to existing public services and programmes, while enhancing service quality and equipping staff (such as public employment agency staff and social workers) with expertise on the specific needs and profiles of returnees.

- ▶ **Engaging local authorities and civil society:** While national policy frameworks are essential to clarify objectives, roles, and responsibilities, service delivery largely takes place through regional and local authorities that are on the front lines of managing the social impacts of return migration. Involving these actors, and civil-society organisations, in reintegration governance and budget planning is an important part of building more effective support structures. Focusing on local service delivery can also help make services more responsive to the local context, including through engagement with communities to address stigma or other tensions.
- ▶ **Strengthening data collection and monitoring:** Robust monitoring, evaluation, and systematic data collection are needed to develop better return and reintegration practices. As part of this push, international partners should share relevant data and findings with origin-country policymakers to support evidence-based decision-making and more effective services for returnees.

Ultimately, strengthening origin countries' governance and operational models is key to ensuring that migrant returns are managed humanely and sustainably. Coherent frameworks that link national and local action, align short-term support with long-term development goals, and foster genuine cooperation between origin and destination countries can help transform return from a policy challenge into an opportunity for inclusive development.

1 Introduction

Improving the effectiveness of EU policy for returning migrants who do not have a legal right to stay is a top political priority. In March 2025, the European Commission released a new legislative proposal for a Return Regulation to address fragmentation across government services, procedural delays, and weak cooperation between Member States.¹ Such reforms are much needed to address these shortcomings, but progress also hinges on factors beyond Europe's borders. There is a fundamental need for better cooperation with origin countries on the readmission of their nationals—a recurring difficulty for the European Union.²

Achieving strong partnerships with origin countries begins with a deeper understanding of how they approach return. Factors such as heavy reliance on remittances, domestic politics, and access to visas all influence whether and how these governments engage in return cooperation with Europe.³ At the same time, returns from Europe usually account for only a small portion of overall returns to these countries, as many migrants return after time spent in other regions; for example, most migrants who return to West African countries are coming from North Africa.⁴ These movements are often driven by changes in labour demand, residency rules, and enforcement practices in those regions; can occur at short notice and with limited safeguards;⁵ and present planning and service delivery challenges that may differ from those associated with returns from Europe.⁶

Against this backdrop, origin-country governments have faced increasing pressure from European donors and their own publics to support returnees as they rebuild their lives. This may include access to housing, health care, education, labour markets, and psychosocial support, as well as efforts to foster social cohesion in communities of return.⁷ Particularly

since the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries of origin have adopted or updated migration and reintegration policies,⁸ and Western donors have funded a range of programmes to support their design and implementation, typically with the ultimate goal of having origin-country stakeholders take over the delivery and funding of these services.⁹ These efforts have, in some places, resulted in national coordination mechanisms and in expanded reception capacity and case management.

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However, many origin countries face persistent challenges in their governance of returns and reintegration. Gaps remain in interministerial cooperation, funding for local services, and alignment between national strategies, donor-funded initiatives, and the services subnational actors deliver day to day.¹⁰ These shortcomings have resulted in uneven reintegration outcomes for returnees, and in some places, social tensions. These obstacles can also hinder the development of trust and sustained engagement between origin and destination countries on return, readmission, and reintegration.

This policy brief focuses on the perspectives of governments in countries of origin and identifies opportunities to better align local service delivery, national policies, and donor support—and in doing so, to strengthen international cooperation on return, readmission, and reintegration. The study draws on an in-depth review of policy documents, national strategies, and reports on return and reintegration practices in origin countries, with case studies in Armenia, Cameroon, Ghana, Iraq, and Nigeria—countries that vary in their return, readmission, and rein-

tegration dynamics and governance. It complements these sources with 12 interviews with government officials from foreign ministries, labour departments, and local authorities in these and other origin countries (including Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Senegal, and Tunisia) and eight interviews with representatives of diaspora groups and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) involved in assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR).

Taken together, these sources of evidence are used to examine the range of objectives that countries of origin pursue with regard to return, readmission, and reintegration, focusing on voluntary return (including the return of members of a country's diaspora) and assisted voluntary return (when people who have an order to leave choose to depart without enforcement actions from destination-country authorities). Next, the brief outlines how these objectives have been translated into policies and governance structures, as well as the mechanisms through which governments and international partners interact. The final section sets out recommendations for aligning international programmes, funding, and accountability more closely with the priorities of countries of origin. The aim is threefold: to strengthen cooperation on return, readmission, and reintegration; to improve the coherence of national policies; and to advance reliable, locally anchored service delivery.

2 Key Considerations for Countries of Origin

The interests of countries of origin when it comes to migrant returns and reintegration are highly context dependent. They often reflect a blend of domestic conditions and policy imperatives as well as foreign policy considerations.

A. *Domestic priorities*

The scale and profile of returning migrants, the conditions under which return occurs, domestic politics, economic pressures, and institutional capacity can all influence an origin country's approach to return and reintegration. Once migrants have returned, attention generally focuses on helping them becoming self-reliant, sustaining social cohesion, safeguarding public health, and keeping local services functioning in the municipalities receiving the most arrivals. Some governments also link reintegration to longer-term development goals and/or to reducing the risk of repeat irregular departures.

Supporting returnees' self-reliance

A priority for origin-country governments is supporting returnees' economic reintegration and self-reliance, in order to prevent extended periods of unemployment, poverty, or dependence on families already in precarious circumstances.¹¹ Ghana's 2016 National Migration Policy, for example, commits to helping returnees rejoin the workforce, through incentives to get back to work and campaigns to raise awareness of job opportunities.¹² Similarly, in Tunisia, while no national strategy on return and reintegration exists, authorities have repeatedly stressed the need to connect returnees with employment and prevent youth from swelling the ranks of the unemployed.¹³ Where possible, national authorities seek to leverage the skills migrants acquired abroad to boost local productivity,¹⁴ particularly when those skills are in demand. In Nepal, for instance, the Reintegration Programme Directives for Returnee Migrant Workers issued by the government in 2022 reflect this approach, setting out pathways for returnees to use capital, skills, and experience gained abroad through certification, job placement, and entrepreneurship.¹⁵

Psychosocial considerations increasingly sit alongside these economic ones. Some governments

have come to recognise that untreated trauma can undermine both individual reintegration and community cohesion.¹⁶ For example, in Cameroon, representatives of the Ministry of Social Affairs report that many returnees arrive with trauma linked to violence and exploitation experienced during migration or face overwhelming stigma at home.¹⁷ Some also suffer from substance abuse, which can pose risks to public health and safety. Thus, the Cameroonian government plans to invest in psychosocial care to ensure that mental health challenges do not hinder returnees' economic reintegration and self-reliance. Specifically, authorities are exploring options to connect psychosocial care to existing community health structures.¹⁸ Ultimately, the goal is to reduce social marginalisation of returning migrants, while also easing the burden on their families and public services.

Strengthening services and social cohesion in communities of return

Managing pressure on service systems (such as health care) is another core concern for origin countries, particularly when large numbers of returnees arrive in a short period or are concentrated in specific regions. To address this, some governments integrate return and reintegration into their national and local development plans, directing investments to areas with the most returns. In Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, the government included this objective in its North Strategy (2023–25), developed with the support of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).¹⁹ The goal was to reinforce health, education, and employment services in regions where return pressures are highest.²⁰

In addition to strengthening local services, many governments now prioritise public health safeguards during the return process. This focus has especially grown since the COVID-19 pandemic,²¹ during which authorities experienced how fast public confidence in their ability to safely manage re-

turns could fray when infections were traced to people entering the country. In April 2020, for example, Guatemala linked a large share of early COVID-19 cases to U.S. deportation flights, prompting public uproar, temporary suspension of return flights, and a focus on airport protocols.²² This growing awareness of the links between human mobility and public health has led some governments to revise how they receive returning migrants, pairing symptom screenings and vaccination checks with referrals for chronic illnesses and mental health support. For instance, Nigeria has established a reception model for returnees that links initial screenings at the Lagos airport with referrals to local clinics and psychosocial triage.²³

Many origin-country governments have raised concerns that assistance directed only to returnees risks creating resentment among non-migrants.

Building and maintaining public trust also necessitate fostering social cohesion in communities of return. Many origin-country governments have raised concerns that assistance directed only to returnees risks creating resentment among non-migrants, who may see this as preferential treatment.²⁴ Some officials have even expressed concern that such programmes could unintentionally encourage people to undertake irregular journeys,²⁵ though evaluations of AVRR programmes have to date found little empirical evidence of such an effect.²⁶ To address these risks, some governments have requested that AVRR programmes be designed to benefit both returnees and broader communities. In West Africa, for instance, IOM implemented a range of community-based reintegration projects between 2016 and 2020.²⁷ However, these were short-term, small-scale projects (e.g., repairing boreholes, co-financing youth cooperatives), meaning their impact and po-

tential to foster social cohesion were by definition narrow.

Beyond financial or material support, governments also recognise the importance of managing perceptions and tensions in communities of return. Families that once relied on income from abroad may expect returnees to quickly replace lost remittances, while neighbours may mock those who come back empty-handed or suspect them of wrongdoing.²⁸ Unmanaged, these dynamics can undermine returning migrants' reintegration and even drive some to new irregular journeys.²⁹ That is why some governments have turned to community-level dialogue, reconciliation activities, and communication campaigns to defuse tensions early and build trust between returnees and their neighbours.³⁰ In El Salvador, for instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a series of communication campaigns as part of the Pact for Reintegration, to reframe returning migrants as contributors to local development (rather than as people whose migration has 'failed') and to guide families towards available services.³¹

Responding to emergencies and irregular migration pressures

On the domestic stage as well as in international forums, origin-country governments are often reluctant to be seen as facilitators of return and readmission, as this can be unpopular and trigger accusations of collusion with destination-country authorities.³² By contrast, emergency evacuations are often welcomed and broadly publicised by origin-country governments. For instance, in late 2017, widely documented abuses against migrants in Libya compelled several African governments to create initiatives to bring their nationals home and ensure their safe reception.³³ These countries also coordinated with the African Union, European Union, and UN agencies to launch a joint task force to manage evacuations and returns from Libyan detention facilities.³⁴ Similarly, in 2023, amid increasing attacks

against sub-Saharan Africans in Tunisia, several West African governments mounted emergency repatriations. Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, and Guinea, for instance, organised charter flights, sometimes with operational support from IOM, in part to reassure concerned domestic and diaspora constituencies.³⁵

Another policy area that has gained public and political attention is efforts to devise alternatives to dangerous, irregular migration journeys. As origin-country governments have sought greater ownership over reintegration priorities and funding, some have come to view it not only as support for returnees but also as a way to anchor them in communities and reduce the likelihood of repeated irregular departures. In Senegal, for example, a series of deadly crossings along the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands in 2023 and 2024 brought intense public scrutiny.³⁶ The government responded by announcing expanded training slots in technical and vocational centres, launching youth employment schemes in fishing communities, and partnering with the European Union to fund entrepreneurship and skills programmes in high-departure regions such as Saint-Louis and Thiès—initiatives presented explicitly as alternatives to irregular migration for young people.³⁷ Elsewhere, governments rarely associate reintegration assistance with prevention of such departures; instead, some link return and reintegration initiatives with conversations around regular labour migration pathways. In Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, authorities have made clear their interest in working simultaneously on regular migration routes and return.³⁸

Broader political and diplomatic considerations

Broader political objectives also shape origin-country governments' engagement in the areas of return and reintegration. For many, sovereignty is a key question. Countries of origin are increasingly challenging Western governments on the international

scene (for example, accusing them of double standards in their responses to different humanitarian and displacement crises³⁹), and some see asserting more control over returns as a way to reclaim sovereignty. In Senegal, for instance, authorities were displeased that IOM received funding for reintegration support instead of national stakeholders and argued that this led to a delay in the provision of reintegration services.⁴⁰ In The Gambia, authorities imposed a moratorium on deportation flights in 2019 following public outcry over the way previous flights were conducted. While the moratorium has since been lifted (in part due to visa sanctions imposed by the European Union), there has been ongoing domestic criticism of the government's cooperation with EU readmission demands.⁴¹

These issues have become all the more important in recent years as development actors such as Enabel in Belgium and Expertise France have expanded their work on migrant reintegration,⁴² and as IOM continues to support a wide range of AVRR activities (e.g., community-based reintegration, and the establishment of referral mechanisms to connect returnees with local services, training opportunities, and social support networks).⁴³ For countries of origin, this proliferation of actors makes coordination urgent, to ensure internationally funded and implemented programmes support national systems rather than remaining isolated projects with scattered, at times duplicative activities. This is less about re-writing AVRR projects and more about ensuring that returnees are integrated into existing state systems and that international assistance is connected up with these systems, anchoring reintegration in national institutions and budgets.

B. *External incentives and pressure points*

At the same time, external factors can influence what origin countries say and can do in the areas of

return, readmission, and reintegration. Destination countries have leveraged a mix of incentives (including aid, trade, and visa facilitation) and disincentives (visa sanctions, aid conditionality) to steer cooperation on readmissions and to influence relevant national policies and politics in countries of origin.

Some of these efforts have involved investing in reintegration assistance, meant to signal that an origin country's cooperation on returns will bring tangible support for returning nationals and the communities where they settle. On the other side of the spectrum, destination countries have increasingly relied on pressure tactics to push their counterparts into cooperation on readmission. The United States under the Trump administration, for example, has threatened tariffs and visa bans to extract concessions on return from reluctant governments.⁴⁴ In early 2025, after the Colombian government suspended incoming deportation flights, Washington threatened tariffs and sanctions unless Bogotá agreed to accept deportees, including on U.S. military aircraft.⁴⁵ President Gustavo Petro denounced the pressure as a violation of his country's sovereignty but ultimately allowed flights to resume, weighing the political cost of readmitting thousands of nationals against the risk of harming Colombia's relationship with a major trade partner and security ally. This illustrates how, for origin-country governments, cooperation on returns is often a trade-off between domestic legitimacy and economic or other diplomatic imperatives.

Although European actors have, by comparison, been more cautious in using trade as a pressure point,⁴⁶ some have been more direct in using foreign aid to compel countries of origin to cooperate. Most recently, Sweden's 2024 development cooperation strategy states that Swedish development assistance can be made conditional on countries' cooperation with readmissions (e.g., issuing travel documents).⁴⁷ At the EU level, the approach to foreign aid has also shifted. The Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe

was previously guided by a flexible ‘more-for-more’ approach (that is, more EU support for countries showing stronger progress on reforms and cooperation, including on migration), but its regulation now includes a suspension clause that gives the European Commission the power to halt funding if a partner country fails to readmit its nationals—a move from soft incentives to direct pressure.⁴⁸

Even absent immediate, full-scale consequences, the threat of aid reductions, visa restrictions, or tougher trade conditions has sometimes been enough to shift negotiating positions. For instance, based on European authorities’ assertion that The Gambia had shown weak cooperation on returns (in terms of travel document issuance and charter flight availability), the European Union gradually escalated pressure—first suspending simplified visa procedures in 2021, then in December 2022 raising the visa fee for Gambian nationals.⁴⁹ By April 2024, the European Commission reported ‘substantial and sustained improvement’ in readmission operations, and the standard visa fee was restored.⁵⁰ Notably, it is often at the consular level that such pressures are felt most acutely and that the machinery of cooperation is tested most sharply; without consular engagement, travel documents are not issued and flights do not leave, no matter what has been signed at the political level.⁵¹

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Yet carrots and sticks introduced by external actors rarely override home-front politics. There are exceptions, but they tend to be in contexts where the destination country has unrivalled leverage. In Colombia and other parts of Latin America, for instance, U.S. pressure has translated into cooperation on returns that would otherwise be politically costly. The European Union, by contrast, often struggles to

achieve the same degree of influence, as illustrated by attempts at cooperation with Morocco. Brussels has long sought a formal readmission agreement, offering financial packages, visa facilitation, and ‘advanced status’ under the European Neighbourhood Policy.⁵² Rabat, however, has resisted binding commitments, wary of domestic backlash and the perception of acting as Europe’s border guard.⁵³ Instead, it has opted for selective and informal cooperation, accepting support where it aligns with national interests, while holding back where political costs outweigh external rewards. This highlights how origin countries can at times cash in on offered incentives without conceding on the most sensitive parts of the return agenda.

In short, cooperation is a complex balancing act. Origin-country governments weigh international trade, aid, visa conditions, and goodwill against the risk of domestic backlash, diaspora anger, and fiscal strain. Where the external payoff is high, agreement on readmission frameworks may follow quickly; where governments fear the adverse impacts of a drop in remittances or social unrest, negotiations may slow to a crawl. Understanding these trade-offs is essential for any destination country hoping to make return policy stick.

3 From Projects to Policy: How Origin Countries Formalise Return and Reintegration

The domestic and external factors described above help explain *why* governments act, but it is a country’s policy architecture that shapes *how* it acts. This section looks at how abstract policy objectives are given substance, either through stand-alone return and reintegration strategies or by integrating relevant measures into employment, health, and social

protection systems. It also examines design choices that can determine policy durability.

A. *Catalysts for policy formulation*

For decades, most countries of origin have not had formal policies on assisted return, readmission, and reintegration. But as the issue has risen on the political agenda in destination countries, it has in origin countries as well, and more governments have taken steps to formalise their approaches. Different factors can help explain why policy formulation has advanced, including donor support and crisis situations that have heightened the need for dedicated frameworks.

In some regions, external support and funding have provided the initial push for policy engagement on return and reintegration issues. This type of shift could be seen in Africa after the adoption of the Joint Valletta Action Plan in 2015.⁵⁴ The action plan established return and reintegration as an important common objective for European and African leaders, and led to the launch of a 350-million-euro programme, the EU–IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration, across 21 countries.⁵⁵ In addition to expanding assisted return from North Africa, the programme provided technical assistance for origin countries drafting national policy frameworks. For instance, in Nigeria, work undertaken through the EU–IOM Joint Initiative supported the government’s review of the National Migration Policy, building on the 2015 policy’s provisions on return, readmission, and reintegration and contributing to the revision process that culminated in a new draft validated in 2025.⁵⁶ The programme also strengthened coordination and data systems within the country, creating a foundation that domestic resources alone could not have sustained. And by linking reintegration explicitly to formal policy and operational instruments, these changes helped ele-

vate the issue from one addressed with project-level support to a focus of national policy commitments.⁵⁷ Similarly, in Ethiopia, the EU–IOM Joint Initiative supported the government in revising its National Reintegration Directive (65/2018) and the National Migration Policy. The programme also supported the country’s development of a National Directive on the National Referral Mechanism for vulnerable migrants.⁵⁸

Moments of crisis can also be powerful triggers for policy change. In 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic sparked sudden, large-scale return movements, including from the Arab Gulf to Asia and from Europe to Africa, forcing governments to manage mass repatriations.⁵⁹ Health screenings and quarantine protocols had to be developed and implemented at airports and border crossings, while concerns about returning migrants’ access to jobs and social protection systems pushed reintegration higher on domestic agendas.⁶⁰ Several governments responded by updating policy frameworks or launching new initiatives, often with international donor backing. In the Philippines, the sudden return of hundreds of thousands of overseas workers during the pandemic led the country’s Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) to expand its reintegration portfolio. Emergency livelihood grants were complemented with training, enterprise start-up packages, and targeted psychosocial services for returnees facing stigma or family tensions. OWWA also worked with the Department of Labor and Employment to integrate return support more explicitly into the national labour migration strategy, linking it to broader employment and social protection schemes.⁶¹ This marked a shift from ad hoc assistance to a more institutionalised approach to reintegration.

Finally, local initiatives have sometimes paved the way for national policy frameworks. In Iraq, for instance, reintegration pilot projects in the Kurdistan Region preceded wider policy consolidation. Regional authorities, confronted with significant num-

bers of returnees from Europe and neighbouring countries, experimented with case management and referral pathways to local health and employment services.⁶² These experiences informed national debates and are now reflected in Iraq's first National Plan to Promote Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, launched on 27 August 2025, illustrating how subnational actors can drive innovation in return and reintegration governance that national authorities may later take up.⁶³

B. *Stand-alone versus integrated policy approaches*

Across countries of origin, return and reintegration policies take a variety of forms. Some governments have chosen to adopt stand-alone strategies on return, readmission, and reintegration, with dedicated mandates and coordination structures. Others have opted to mainstream these issues into broader frameworks, such as national migration policies, employment strategies, or social protection plans. Each approach has trade-offs: dedicated strategies bring clarity and visibility but can risk isolation from other relevant agendas, while mainstreaming can promote inclusion of these issues within core state services but risks diluting responsibility for them and obscuring the unique challenges faced by returnees.

Stand-alone strategies generally focus explicitly on return and reintegration, assign responsibility for these issues to specific government entities, and link migrant-focused supports to other state services. In Kosovo, for instance, the Strategy for Sustainable Reintegration of Repatriated Persons (2018–22) established a state-run reintegration scheme and assigned responsibility for it to the Department for Reintegration of Repatriated Persons and Integration of Foreigners (part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs), with municipalities handling case management at the local level.⁶⁴ The framework covers reception of returnees upon their arrival and emergency aid, while also setting out longer-term measures (e.g.,

wage subsidies and business start-up grants) to be delivered through mainstream systems such as civil registration offices, public health services, centres for social work, and public employment services, rather than as stand-alone projects.⁶⁵ Critically, reintegration measures are included in the state budget—they have had a dedicated line since 2010, with 1.38 million euros allocated in 2023⁶⁶—and government regulations have set fixed procedures for them. NGOs and donors complement the state scheme.⁶⁷ For governments, the advantages of this kind of approach are greater control and predictability: roles are spelled out, responsibilities sit with permanent institutions, and programmes can be tied to budget lines rather than external projects. The trade-off is that system-building requires political consensus and fiscal commitment up front.

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For governments that have moved to integrate return and reintegration considerations into mainstream systems, the logic is often twofold: a belief that closely linking reintegration with public services (such as employment, health, education, and social protection) will provide more consistent support, and a desire to present support for returnees as just one facet of serving the population as a whole, not special treatment.⁶⁸ Ghana is one example of a country that has taken this approach. Rather than creating a dedicated reintegration policy, the government has woven return into migration and development planning. The national implementa-

tion plan for the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration lays out actions on labour migration, reintegration, and policy coherence, with ministries sharing tasks across portfolios.⁶⁹ Complementing this, the country's Diaspora Engagement Policy, which was adopted in 2023, connects issues such as skills transfer, investment, and reintegration to national development strategies.⁷⁰ The policy is implemented via labour market services, guidance on the recognition of degrees and other credentials earned abroad, and counselling and enterprise support, often in collaboration with the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations. This model, by anchoring return and reintegration in public systems that already exist and are funded within regular budgets, has the advantages of providing support for returnees that may be more sustainable and coherent across ministries. However, strong interministerial coordination is needed to avoid gaps and overlaps, and services must have the flexibility to adapt to meet returnees' needs.⁷¹

In countries of origin where the requisite political will, funding, or other conditions are absent, return and reintegration may not be the focus of either a distinct, formal strategy or systematic integration into national frameworks. Still, some such countries are developing and implementing tools to begin to address these issues, such as standard operating procedures and referral mechanisms. Cameroon, for instance, has worked with EU and UN partners to strengthen its reception and referral practices.⁷² This approach offers flexibility while national institutions are still being consolidated, but it also risks fragmentation if project cycles are short or if domestic budgets remain too thin to sustain services once donor funding ends.

Compared to one-off projects, both stand-alone and mainstreamed approaches mark a move towards more durable policy and service structures. In principle, either could provide a workable framework. In practice, the best model often depends on the

political and institutional context. A stand-alone strategy must have enough political capital to gain approval from a country's ministers or parliament, plus the capacity to mobilise cross-government action. Embedding reintegration into broader policy areas and systems may be easier to achieve, especially if similar things have been done before and if sufficient budgets are already available in relevant policy fields, such as employment, social protection, and health care. In practice, the choice often reflects pragmatic considerations: where authority sits, how policies are usually made, and where funding can most effectively be anchored.⁷³

4 The Governance of Return and Reintegration

In many countries of origin, the implementation of return, readmission, and reintegration policies takes place within emerging governance structures⁷⁴ and may at times be carried out through ad hoc or de facto arrangements.⁷⁵ Increasingly, however, governments are designating lead institutions, determining how responsibilities are divided between ministries, subnational authorities, and other actors. Along with the existence and contents of a policy framework, these institutional choices play a major role in how a country's return and reintegration measures function.

A. *Institutional arrangements and their implications*

The institutional structures within which policies are embedded influence how they are coordinated and resourced, as well as which objectives are prioritised. Ministries of foreign affairs are often central actors in the return process, given their mandate to confirm the identity of a country's nationals and to issue the

documents needed for travel.⁷⁶ Their international presence also facilitates coordination with consular networks and destination-country authorities. For instance, the Cameroonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in touch with authorities in EU Member States to assist with identification, via its consulates or dedicated identification missions.⁷⁷

Unlike return, there often is no single institution with a clear mandate over reintegration, as it spans multiple policy domains such as housing, employment, and mental health. In some cases, the emphasis placed on reintegration by European actors may encourage origin-country ministries or offices to seek out responsibility for this issue, especially if donor funding is available to support reintegration efforts.⁷⁸ In Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Guinea, and Senegal, ministries of foreign affairs have taken on growing responsibility for reintegration. In Senegal, for instance, the ministry is positioning its local reintegration offices as a central tool for reintegration assistance (see Box 2).

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Yet, ministries of foreign affairs are not necessarily well-suited to implementing reintegration activities. They often lack expertise in case management and other relevant domains (such as providing livelihood and psychosocial support), and because their focus is primarily on external affairs, they generally do not have decentralised offices spread throughout their own country.⁷⁹ This gap in geographic coverage is a challenge that two EU-funded interventions in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea seek to address. In Côte d'Ivoire, Enabel, Expertise France, and IOM plan to pilot activities in three regions, providing support to local services while taking steps to ensure inclusive, context-sensitive reintegration approaches.⁸⁰ These international actors are working with the country's

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while also liaising with other relevant ministries and local authorities. This is a critical starting point, given Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials alone are not equipped to deliver these services.

Some countries have taken a different approach, assigning responsibility for reintegration matters to their social affairs or labour ministries. This embeds reintegration support within existing social protection and employment services, to which returnees can be referred. In Tunisia, for instance, reintegration is formally coordinated by the Ministry of Social Affairs through three public agencies.⁸¹ The Office for Tunisians Abroad has a designated role in supporting returnees, relying on a network of social attachés posted in consulates, regional delegations, and reception offices at entry points to connect with Tunisians returning to the country.⁸² Complementary bodies such as the General Committee for Social Promotion and the national employment agency facilitate returnees' access to social protection and employment services. These three agencies have developed considerable expertise on reintegration matters, through training and other capacity-building efforts supported by international actors.⁸³

This approach can come with challenges, however, especially if reintegration matters were previously overseen by a different entity. In Armenia, for example, responsibility for reintegration was recently transitioned from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs⁸⁴—a shift that has embedded reintegration in a ministry with expertise in social and employment services, but also presented certain challenges.⁸⁵ While international efforts had previously been made to strengthen the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' capacity to manage the reintegration of returning migrants, staff at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs had to develop this capacity themselves, without a formal internal handover.⁸⁶ International efforts, led by the International Centre for Migration Policy Develop-

ment, have now been redirected, but this transition has nonetheless resulted in a need to fund the same type of technical assistance twice. The domestic nature of social affairs and labour ministries, while an asset in service provision, can also pose challenges. In Tunisia, for instance, the three agencies involved are not in direct contact with destination-country authorities, and the Ministry of Social Affairs has at times taken different positions on certain issues to those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁸⁷ Over the years, this has led to repeated deadlocks and delays in making cooperation on return and reintegration work.

BOX 1

Dedicated task forces as a response to return in emergency situations

Ad hoc coordination bodies or task forces are occasionally set up to manage return and reintegration, particularly in response to acute crises or large-scale movements. These entities are primarily operational in nature and coordinate closely with civil society, local authorities, and international partners to deliver services and facilitate returning migrants' reintegration.

For example, in 2014, following mass expulsions of nationals of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) from the neighbouring Republic of the Congo, the DRC government established an ad hoc coordination mechanism to manage the crisis. This temporary platform was set up to assess the immediate needs of returnees and provide basic assistance wherever possible. Although the arrangement was effective in quickly mobilising relevant actors, identifying urgent needs, and collecting data, its temporary and resource-limited nature constrained its ability to support long-term reintegration.

This case illustrates both the utility of such bodies for responding to urgent return situations and the gaps that often exist between immediate crisis management and sustainable reintegration capacity.

Source: African Union, *Étude sur les programmes de retour, de réadmission et de réintégration en Afrique* (Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2021).

B. Linkages between national and subnational bodies

While centralised leadership defines the overall policy direction and provides strategic oversight, the success of reintegration policies also depends on how they are implemented on the ground. Reintegration is ultimately a local process, requiring returnees to re-establish livelihoods and social connections within specific communities. Supporting this process thus involves translating national priorities into locally adapted activities, highlighting the importance of operational models that link central authorities with subnational government bodies.

Some governments, recognising the limitations of highly centralised systems, have adopted localised approaches that seek to balance central oversight with subnational implementation to better address the needs of returnees in different communities. In some cases, national agencies have set up small offices or deployed representatives at the regional or municipal level to facilitate the adaptation of policies to local realities while keeping them under central authority (see Box 2).

Other approaches place the governance of reintegration under the authority of regional or other subnational institutions, which assume primary responsibility for designing and implementing support measures. In Nigeria, subnational offices in states such as Edo coordinate with local communities, civil society, and traditional authorities to tailor reintegration support to reflect local areas' migration and return dynamics (e.g., trafficking, economic migration) and associated needs. The Edo State Task Force Against Human Trafficking was established in 2017 by the government of Edo State to fight against human trafficking, irregular migration, and the stigma associated with return.⁸⁸ The task force includes representatives of security agencies, NGOs, and religious and traditional institutions. Such

BOX 2**National priorities meet local realities in Senegal**

The Reception, Orientation, and Follow-up Offices (Bureaux d'Accueil, d'Orientation et de Suivi, or BAOS) offer insight into how Senegal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has sought to expand its local presence and mandate over reintegration. Established in 1987, the role of the BAOS has broadened over time. Under the EU-funded Governance of Migration and Development project (2018–23), the BAOS were expanded to all 14 of the country's regions and the Dakar airport. These offices, which are housed within Senegal's regional development agencies, act as an operational arm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs inside of Senegal, for example helping the government pre-select candidates for the Spanish–Senegalese circular labour migration scheme and acting as a referral point for returning migrants.

Despite this expansion, the BAOS face important constraints, including limited staffing and budgets. As a result, they remain partly dependent on donor funding to provide services to returnees and other groups. Following the end of the EU-funded Governance of Migration and Development project in 2023, staffing levels were reduced, leaving most offices with only one staff member. Balancing their varied priorities (e.g., circular labour migration, returnee referrals, and diaspora investment) may prove difficult with this limited capacity.

Nevertheless, the Senegalese Ministry of Foreign Affairs is determined to strengthen the role of the BAOS. As part of the 2025 reorganisation of the ministry, a dedicated division has been established to oversee the BAOS. In addition, the BAOS are expected to benefit from a new round of EU funding, aimed at consolidating their role as central referral points to connect returnees with various services and programmes.

Sources: Author interview with Amath Diop, BAOS Programme Manager, Directorate for Senegalese Abroad, 9 September 2025; author interview with Moussa Ndour, Manager of the Dakar BAOS, 10 September 2025; *Le Quotidien*, 'Territorialisation de la gouvernance migratoire : Repenser l'administration des Baos', *Le Quotidien*, 23 June 2023; Melissa Mouthaan, 'Unpacking Domestic Preferences in the Policy—"Receiving" State: The EU's Migration Cooperation with Senegal and Ghana', *Comparative Migration Studies* 7, no. 35 (2019).

approaches can improve the local relevance of services, but they often face challenges related to limited staffing, resources, and coordination with central authorities that can restrict their effectiveness and sustainability.

5 Conclusion

The issues of return, readmission, and reintegration—long top priorities for European destination countries—have over the past decade risen higher on the agendas of countries of origin as well. This shift reflects a mix of factors. Destination countries have tried to incentivise and shape the development of return and reintegration policies in these countries, including by using trade, aid, and visa conditions as leverage. Yet such external pressures can at

times backfire, and other forces have also spurred change, including concerns over the dire conditions sub-Saharan African migrants face in some North African countries and public health imperatives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

International efforts to support origin-country governments in strengthening their policy frameworks, initially through IOM and increasingly through development agencies, have yielded some progress towards more coherent, institutionalised approaches to return and reintegration. The resulting policies have taken diverse forms. Some are stand-alone documents that outline objectives and institutional structures—a focused vision, but one that risks remaining disconnected from broader public policies and national development strategies. A more promising approach in many contexts is bringing re-

integration considerations into mainstream service delivery systems; this model can help connect returnees to longer-term forms of assistance and avoid the perception that they are receiving support not available to others, but its effectiveness can be lessened if these services are not well-developed or not equipped to meet the specific needs of returnees.

Governance questions have prompted similarly varied responses. While ministries of foreign affairs often take the lead on return and readmission, they are typically not equipped to provide reintegration-relevant services themselves and thus must coordinate carefully with others. Placing ministries of social affairs or labour in charge of reintegration can help ensure coherence between this issue and broader service systems. In either scenario, connecting national policies with local authorities is crucial to address the immediate, locally specific challenges faced by returnees and the communities in which they settle. Moving forward, the challenge lies in balancing the integration of services into existing structures with the need to provide tailored support for returnees.

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At this crossroad, with new policies emerging in countries of origin and governance structures evolving around them, this is a time of both momentum and constraints. Among donor countries, many are facing pressure to deliver on AVRR commitments amid tighter budgets to support this work. Nevertheless, some new development funding has been made available, and development actors such as Enabel and Expertise France are taking a more active

role in this space. Recommendations for the field include:

- ▶ **Keep dialogue alive despite the political and social constraints shaping cooperation on returns.** While there is relatively broad support in many origin countries for assisted voluntary return from transit countries and during emergencies, given the dire circumstances many migrants face in such situations, returns from Europe are more politically sensitive. Even when implemented through assisted return programmes, they are often unpopular, as many families depend on remittances from relatives abroad. European countries have in recent years shown a tendency to try to achieve change through pressure on countries of origin, or by bypassing them through return hubs. Such moves can occasionally yield results, but they can also backfire and often only brings short-term gains.
- ▶ **Situate returns from Europe within broader migration dynamics.** Return migration to African countries, for example, includes returns of mixed migration (of asylum seekers and other migrants) from transit countries in North Africa, returns of migrant workers from Arab Gulf countries, and government-led initiatives to encourage diaspora returns and investments. As such, returns from Europe represent only a small share of these movements, and even assisted returns from transit countries are likely few compared to the overall number of spontaneous, unassisted returns. For development actors, efforts to strengthen return and reintegration governance frameworks should be grounded in a clear understanding of how diverse these movements are, how they intersect, and

how programmes for particular groups of returnees fit within wider migration and development agendas.

► **Focus on shared priorities to make the impact of donor support more sustainable.**

Funding from international donors can help origin countries build important return and reintegration capacities, but when these efforts are primarily driven by donor priorities, their impact may last only as long as the funded projects. And in some cases, they can create competition between institutions that undermines governance structures. Ensuring that cooperation builds on origin countries' national priorities and institutional mandates is essential to avoiding these outcomes. For instance, rather than promoting reintegration as a stand-alone policy goal, initiatives may be more impactful if they focus on areas where origin- and destination-country interests overlap, such as expanding vocational training opportunities or strengthening mental health support, and then ensure that returnees have access to these measures.

- **Tailor policy solutions and governance structures to the country context.** National policies on return and reintegration can help clarify responsibilities, encourage coordination, and provide stability. However, legislative proposals have stalled in some origin countries, particularly when return is politically sensitive, and technical or less formalised arrangements (such as interministerial protocols or operational guidelines) may offer a way to nonetheless strengthen coordination and institutional capacity. Governance structures are also context dependant. While responsibility for return and readmission lie naturally within foreign ministries, reintegration matters

could be located within several different ministries (including foreign affairs, labour, or social affairs). As development actors seek to support services for returning migrants, attention should be paid to the relative capacities and mandates of different ministries, to avoid duplication of efforts and draw on their respective strengths.

- **Strengthen links with local authorities and civil society involved in migrant reintegration.** National policies and strategies provide important guidance, but much of the day-to-day service delivery happens at the regional or municipal level. However, national coordination mechanisms sometimes lack links to these front-line service providers, despite their important role in managing the immediate social and economic impacts of return and related tensions (such as community views of returnees as 'failures'). Engaging these actors more closely in reintegration governance and budget planning can improve the effectiveness and local relevance of service delivery.
- **Create opportunities for origin-country policymakers to learn from one another.** Peer support can be useful as different countries work to refine their approaches to return and reintegration, and as some of those approaches prove more effective than others. Dialogue initiatives, such as the Regional Cooperation on Migration Policy through which African countries come together to discuss their national priorities and vision for return and reintegration, are specifically designed to foster these exchanges. They may, among other things, facilitate knowledge-sharing ahead of major conferences and enable peer-learning visits.

► **Improve data collection and use.** Reliable data, while essential at both the policymaking and operation levels, can be scarce in many countries of origin, as can robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. Weak M&E has been a long-standing issue for many AVRR projects, and even when international actors or donor countries conduct evaluations, the findings are rarely shared with countries of origin. There may be legitimate concerns that prevent this information-sharing in certain contexts (such as concern for the protection of returnees), but in other cases, this lack of

transparency hinders the improvement of AVRR practices.

Cooperation between origin and destination countries on return and reintegration remains a work in progress. Strengthening these relationships will depend on sustained dialogue and a deeper understanding of each country's priorities, capacities, and governance structures. Many origin countries have taken important steps to develop or reinforce their national policies and institutional capacities. Building on this momentum is an opportunity to improve outcomes for both returning migrants and the communities to which they return.

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About the Authors



BERTRAND STEINER

Bertrand Steiner is a Research Assistant at the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe), focusing on areas including the European Union's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, refugee integration, irregular migration, and return and reintegration strategies. Before joining MPI Europe, he worked at Open Access Now in Brussels, at the French national asylum court, as a photojournalist, and conducted conflicts of interest research for the UK-based nongovernmental organisation Asylos.

Mr. Steiner has a master of public international law (cum laude) from the University of Groningen, with a focus on humanitarian law, human rights law, and refugee law. He also holds a bachelor of law and a bachelor of modern state theory (both with distinctions) from the University of Paris 2 Panthéon-Assas.



ADÈLE APPRIOU

Adèle Appriou is a Research Intern with MPI Europe, where she primarily focuses on return and reintegration as well as irregular migration. She previously interned with the Danish Refugee Council's Global Protection Unit and worked with the prefecture of the French department of Ille-et-Vilaine on refugee reception and integration policies.

Ms. Appriou holds a master's degree in peace, humanitarian action, and development from Sciences Po Lille, where she specialised in EU–Africa cooperation on migration, protection, and the humanitarian–development nexus.



RAVENNA SOHST

Ravenna Sohst is a Policy Analyst at MPI Europe, where she conducts research and policy analysis on the links between development and migration, labour mobility, return migration and reintegration, and remittances. Previously, she worked with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Global Migration Data Analysis Centre and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Dr. Sohst holds a PhD from the University of Luxembourg, an MSc from the United Nations MERIT University/Maastricht University in public policy and human development, and a BA in political science from the University of Freiburg and the Institut d'Études Politiques d'Aix-en-Provence.



CAMILLE LE COZ

Camille Le Coz is Director of MPI Europe, where she focuses on EU migration policies. Her expertise spans areas such as return and reintegration, refugee protection and development, climate mobility, and labour migration. Ms. Le Coz has advised policy-makers, development agencies, and multilateral development banks on addressing these migration challenges. She also teaches at Sciences Po Paris.

Previously, Ms. Le Coz was a Project Director for Altai Consulting based in Kenya and Afghanistan, where she managed research projects for institutions such as the European Union, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and IOM. She holds a dual master's degree in international relations from Sciences Po Paris and the London School of Economics. She also holds a bachelor's degree from Sciences Po Paris.

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Residence Palace, 155 Rue de la Loi, 3rd Floor, 1040 Brussels
+32 (0) 2235 2113