



POLICY PAPER

**ATLANTIC ROUTE, SAHEL, AND
CANARY ISLANDS**

*FROM CURBING DEPARTURES TO PROACTIVE
MIGRATION GOVERNANCE
REDUCING VULNERABILITIES, COMBATING
CRIMINAL ECONOMIES, AND MAKING LEGAL
ALTERNATIVES CREDIBLE*

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Spanish Institute for Migration Analysis (IEAM), in partnership
with the Government of the Canary Islands



Executive Summary

This Policy Paper proposes strategic and operational guidelines to strengthen the coherence of public responses to the migration dynamics linking the Sahel, West Africa, and the Canary Islands. It is based on discussions from a collective intelligence workshop held in Gran Canaria, which brought together institutional representatives, security forces, international organizations, humanitarian actors, civil society organizations, researchers, European and African representatives, as well as experts on migration routes, protection, organized crime, and development cooperation.

The shared assessment is clear: the Atlantic route cannot be understood or managed as a strictly maritime phenomenon, nor as a crisis exclusive to the Canary Islands, Spain, or Europe. It is the visible manifestation of a much broader regional system shaped by conflicts, insecurity, socioeconomic transformations, the aspirations of young people, family dynamics, diaspora networks, visa policies, security cooperation, informal economies, and illicit facilitation mechanisms.

The discussions emphasized that the recent decline in visible arrivals in the Canary Islands does not necessarily signify a reduction in migratory pressure. Several participants described a situation of containment, suspension, and some displacement rather than a structural transformation. Departures from certain historical departure points have been limited by the tightening of controls in Senegal and Mauritania, but the push factors persist. Routes are shifting toward more southerly areas, particularly The Gambia, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau, while some prospective migrants remain in limbo in mining, agricultural, urban, or border areas.

This reconfiguration carries a greater risk: when public policies focus exclusively on reducing visible flows, they can shift migration routes, increase travel costs, reinforce dependence on intermediaries, and heighten the vulnerability of people on the move. The experience of Niger, mentioned on several occasions, illustrates this mechanism: the criminalization of irregular migration in countries of origin and transit does not necessarily stop migration flows, but rather makes them more clandestine, less visible, and more dangerous.

The role of criminal economies and facilitation networks was one of the central themes of the workshop. The discussions highlighted a growing professionalization of certain segments of the system: reduced waiting times, the use of closed WhatsApp groups, payments in installments, increasing reliance on mobile money, the fragmentation of fuel purchases, transfers from small boats to larger vessels, differentiation between migrant profiles and facilitator profiles, as well as diversification in the nationalities, women, and minors present on certain routes. This professionalization does not always imply the existence of hierarchical criminal structures comparable to classic mafias. Rather, it reflects the rapid adaptation of a facilitation ecosystem to a more risky control environment.

The Malian case occupies a central place in this analysis. Migration from Mali cannot be reduced to an individual or economic decision. It is rooted in family, community, and historical dynamics. The deterioration of security, internal displacement, the loss of means of subsistence, difficult returns, social pressure, and poor local prospects create a situation in which leaving may seem like a rational choice, even when it is dangerous. For many young people, the choice is no longer between safety and risk, but between two uncertainties: staying with no prospects or leaving despite the danger. It is worth noting that the dynamics of conflict in Mali—with the southern regions of Kayes and Sikasso increasingly affected by GSIM operations—mean that historically traditional migration hubs are under growing pressure from the conflict.

The Policy Paper therefore advocates an integrated approach: a sustainable strategy must simultaneously reduce the profitability of criminal economies, ensure continuous protection along migration corridors, strengthen opportunities for legal and circular mobility, invest in training and employment at the local level, involve families and diasporas, specifically protect women and minors, and anticipate the unintended consequences of migration agreements. The Canary Islands can play a strategic role in this framework. Situated on the front lines of the Atlantic route, they possess valuable operational, institutional, and humanitarian experience. Their geographic and political position enables them to serve as a platform for dialogue, foresight, decentralized cooperation, and knowledge-building among Europe, Spain, and West Africa.

Strategic Messages

1. Shift from reducing visible migration flows to reducing the dangers faced by people on the move.

A decrease in arrivals does not necessarily mean a decrease in departures, migration demand, or risk. The goal is not to identify supposed “root causes,” but rather to construct a more comprehensive and holistic assessment that allows us to anticipate and mitigate the unintended effects of containment policies, and to rebuild, to the extent possible, safeguards for those who decide to leave despite everything. Indicators must incorporate interceptions, disappearances, route shifts, costs, violence, the profiles of people on the move, and cumulative vulnerabilities.

2. Target the profitability of criminal economies rather than migrants themselves.

Available evidence suggests that, to date, criminal justice approaches in Senegal and other countries have been indiscriminate, dragging low-level actors, migrants, and others with very limited ties to the facilitation ecosystem into the judicial system. The criminal justice response must, on the contrary, prioritize organizers, financial intermediaries, logistics networks, and those responsible for the most dangerous forms of facilitation, rather than focusing solely on the visible or peripheral figures involved in the crossing.

3. Build the capacity to anticipate trends by corridor.

Migration routes function as an integrated regional system. Changes in price, payment methods, departure points, profiles, digital messages, the presence of women or minors, and violence among networks must be analyzed as early warning indicators signaling transformations in the facilitation ecosystem, along with changes in the harms associated with those transformations.

4. Make regular mobility credible, accessible, and reciprocal.

Legal channels cannot be merely symbolic. Visas, circular mobility, vocational training, academic mobility, and tourism and professional mobility must be predictable, understandable, and linked to the real needs of the territories of origin and destination.

5. Rebalance migration cooperation around territorial development, protection, and trust.

Partnerships must move beyond a logic of containment. They must support local governments, regional economies, families, diasporas, training, reintegration, local governance, and the fight against corruption.

6. Strengthen the Canary Islands' involvement in national and European migration management processes.

The Canary Islands should not be limited to the role of a receiving territory or observer. Their front-line operational and humanitarian experience must translate into a stable presence in the national and European decision-making forums where migration policy is defined: coordination mechanisms with the central government, participation in the European Union's migration dialogues with third countries, and their representation in the forums where agreements that directly affect the Atlantic route are negotiated.

1. Introduction

1.1 A Strategic Moment for the Canary Islands, Spain, Europe, and West Africa

The Canary Islands are on the front lines of Europe's southern border. However, the migration phenomenon reaching the archipelago does not begin in the Atlantic Ocean. It takes shape much earlier: within families, in local communities, in local economies, in conflict zones, on social media, through cooperation mechanisms, in visions of success, and within African regional mobility systems.

The Atlantic route to the Canary Islands remains one of the most dangerous migration routes in the world. Yet it remains relatively unknown in much of Europe. Those who take this route are usually fully aware of the risk. But when viable alternatives are lacking, the danger ceases to act as a deterrent: it becomes a cost that some people feel they must bear.

This reality places the Canary Islands in a unique position. What happens in the Canary Islands is not merely a Canarian challenge; it is a European and African issue. It concerns the governance of mobility, cooperation with countries of origin and transit, the protection of vulnerable people, the fight against criminal networks, development policies, migration diplomacy, and the collective capacity to anticipate changes in migration routes.

The workshop organized in Gran Canaria fits into this context. Its objective was to move beyond fragmented responses and develop a shared assessment among institutional, operational, humanitarian, academic, and African stakeholders. The aim was not merely to facilitate a discussion, but to gather analytical and operational insights capable of informing a more coherent public policy.

1.2 Methodology

This Policy Paper is based on the discussions from a collective intelligence workshop held under Chatham House rules. The ideas are therefore presented without individual attribution, in order to preserve the participants' freedom of expression.

The workshop brought together a diverse group of stakeholders: the Government of the Canary Islands, European representatives, representatives of state law enforcement agencies, the United Nations system, humanitarian organizations, NGOs, civil society, academia, experts on the Sahel, African representatives, field actors, specialists in organized crime – including the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) – and analysts of migration routes.

The format adopted sought to bring together four types of knowledge:

- Institutional and diplomatic knowledge;
- The operational experience of law enforcement agencies and protection actors;
- On-the-ground experience from countries of origin and transit;
- academic and strategic analysis of migration dynamics.

The analysis is structured around three principles:

- **Analytical fidelity:** capturing the points of convergence, tensions, and points of debate expressed during the workshop, without attributing specific statements to individuals.
- **Systemic perspective:** understanding the Atlantic route as a segment of a regional mobility system connecting West Africa, the Sahel, the Maghreb, the Atlantic, and Europe.
- **Operational focus:** transforming the findings into useful recommendations for European, Spanish, Canarian, African, and international institutions.

2. The Atlantic Route as a Regional Mobility System

2.1 A Visible Route, but Largely Intra-African Mobility

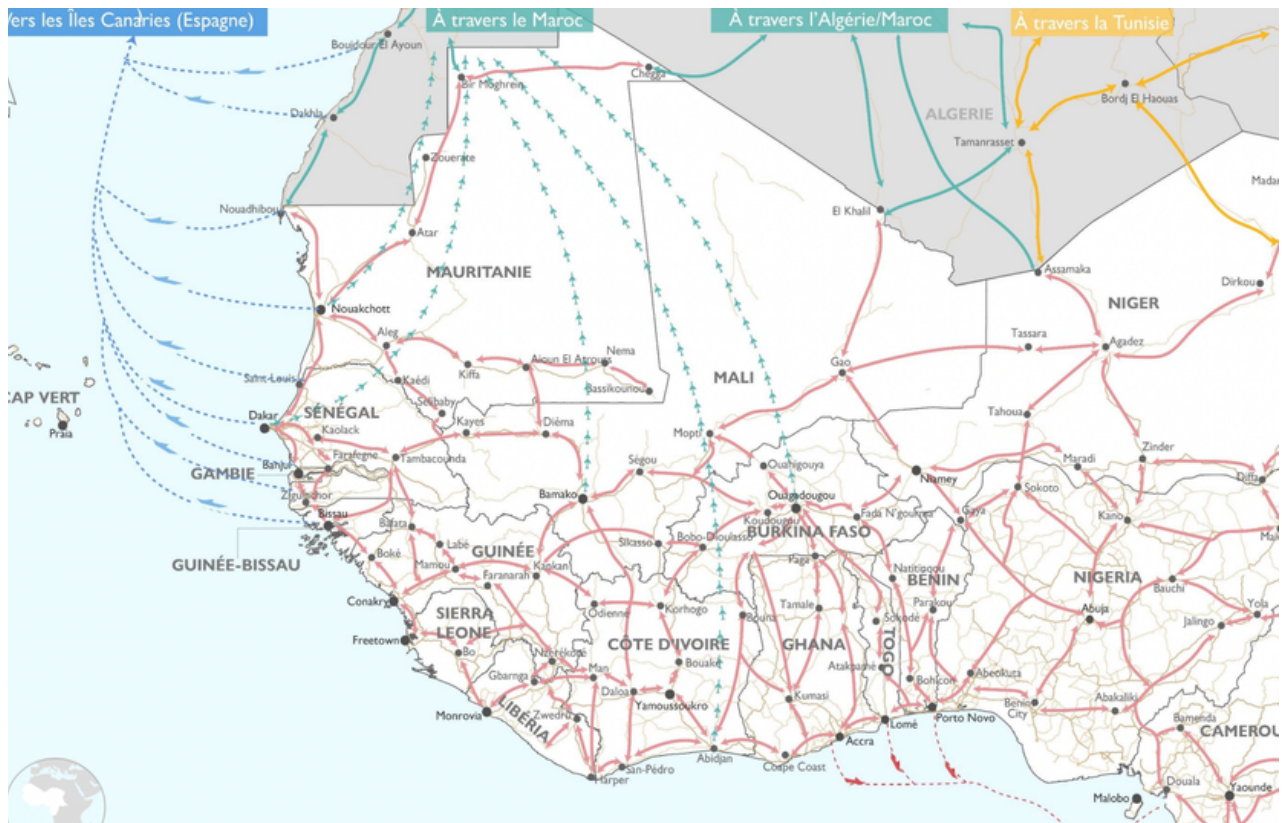
One of the key lessons from the workshop is the need to move beyond a Eurocentric interpretation of African mobility. Movements from West Africa and the Sahel are not primarily directed toward Europe. Most mobility is intra-African: seasonal movements, labor migration, migration to cities, movement to mining, agricultural, or commercial areas, movements to neighboring countries, refugee trajectories, and internal displacement.

The route to the Canary Islands is, therefore, only one part of a much broader system. This clarification is essential. If Europe focuses only on what reaches its borders, it runs the risk of misunderstanding the underlying dynamics that shape mobility in the region.

Some countries often labeled as “transit countries” are also countries of destination, settlement, work, and circular mobility. Mauritania, Niger, and Libya were mentioned in this regard. Before its collapse, Libya served as a temporary workplace for many Africans: people would go there, work, and then return home. When conditions there deteriorated, some of this mobility was redirected toward more dangerous routes.

The same logic applies to Mauritania and Niger. Treating them solely as transit barriers can have counterproductive effects: expelling or pushing into precarious situations people who could have worked there, moved about legally, or built a regional trajectory may drive them toward riskier maritime routes.

A map of the main migration corridors illustrates this systemic logic, highlighting the main departure points, the Saharan routes, and the secondary corridors of the Atlantic route — particularly the Mali-Mauritania-Senegal corridor — as well as emerging routes toward The Gambia, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau.



International Organization for Migration (IOM), November 2025. Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) – West and Central Africa: Regional Mobility Mapping (June 2025).

2.2 Containment, Suspension, and Invisibilization

The discussions converged on a central idea: the Atlantic route appears today to be more contained than resolved. The decline in recorded arrivals in the Canary Islands does not mean that migratory demand has disappeared. A growing proportion of departures is being intercepted near the coasts of West Africa, before reaching European waters, meaning these cases are never counted in the “arrival figures” — an indicator that is often used in an overly simplistic manner as a measure of migratory movement. The decline in arrivals may therefore reflect increased interceptions, prolonged waiting periods in certain territories, a shift toward other departure points, or the growing invisibility of these routes.

The term “market on hold” helps describe this situation. **Although many networks have been weakened, they have not necessarily been dismantled. Those seeking to leave do not disappear. The economic, security, family, and symbolic factors remain. Those seeking to leave do not disappear. The economic, security, family, and symbolic factors remain. But the ecosystem waits, reorganizes, or shifts.**

Several indications support this interpretation:

- Pass prices do not appear to have dropped significantly;
- Some smuggling networks remain active, but are shifting their operations;
- There are people waiting in mining, agricultural, urban, or border areas;
- Migration pressure remains evident through the number of people intercepted;
- routes are shifting toward less-monitored areas;
- Some nationalities traditionally associated with the Atlantic route are gaining a growing presence on other migration routes, especially the Western Mediterranean route*;
- The number of deaths and failed crossings appears to have increased, against a backdrop of a shortage of experienced captains, which further underscores the limitations of arrival figures as a reliable indicator of the phenomenon’s true scale;
- Certain nationalities prominent on the Atlantic route are becoming increasingly visible on other migration routes, particularly the Western Mediterranean route.

An important point of debate concerns the distinction between invisibility and suspension. Both dynamics can coexist. Some migration flows may indeed be reduced in the short term by controls; others may simply become less visible to European authorities. This distinction highlights the limitations of an analysis of migration dynamics based primarily on “arrival figures,” which does not always capture thwarted departures, reorganized movements, or trajectories that fall outside the scope of monitoring mechanisms.

2.3 The Shift in Routes as a Structural Effect of Fragmented Policies

The experience of Niger has served as a cautionary tale. Beginning in 2015, the strengthening of European cooperation and the criminalization of certain forms of mobility transformed the Saharan routes. The previously well-known, visible, and relatively organized routes shifted toward clandestine paths – further from towns, less accessible to aid, and more exposed to armed groups, bandits, and abuses.

*There will be a notable increase in the number of Malians and Guineans arriving in mainland Spain from Morocco or Algeria in 2025 and 2026. Migration flows across the western Mediterranean remain at levels well below those previously recorded on the Atlantic route, although the trend is pointing upward.

The result was not the disappearance of migration, but its shift to clandestine channels. People continued to move, but under more dangerous conditions. Informal and criminal networks gained prominence, precisely because regular or tolerated routes were becoming increasingly difficult to use.

This pattern may repeat itself along the Atlantic route. As controls are tightened in Mauritania and northern Senegal, departure points may shift toward The Gambia, Guinea, or Guinea-Bissau. Longer journeys emerge, involving riskier crossings and greater reliance on intermediaries.

In summary: the shifting of routes

- Migration routes function as an integrated system.
- Closing or tightening controls on one segment alters the incentives along the entire corridor.
- Recurring effects include: geographic displacement, increased costs, longer journeys, and the transfer of risks to people on the move.

3. Mali, the Sahel, and Family Dynamics of Mobility

3.1 Mali as a Key Country for Understanding the Atlantic Route

Mali has played a central role in these exchanges. Migration from Mali stems from a combination of structural and situational factors: insecurity, internal displacement, poverty, food crises, loss of livelihoods, family pressures, migration history, and deteriorating economic prospects.

In the northern, central, and southern regions of the country, the presence of armed groups such as the GSIM (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims), linked to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and organizations affiliated with Daesh has profoundly transformed local dynamics. These groups control certain rural areas, impose taxation systems on populations and economic activities, and are responsible for numerous instances of forced displacement. The artisanal gold mining economy (MAPE: Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining) is also a central issue of territorial control and financing, contributing to the intensification of conflicts. Beyond its role in financing the conflict, MAPE is also a key economic livelihood for many communities, and its sites often serve as stopovers along migration routes themselves, where prospective migrants work temporarily to raise the funds needed to finance their departure.

These dynamics are accompanied by a widespread weakening of social and economic infrastructure: school closures, the destruction or abandonment of rural markets, and the collapse of agricultural and commercial activities. Families thus abandon their villages, lose their homes, their land, or their sources of income, and are displaced first to urban centers—Gao, Timbuktu, Ménaka, Bamako — and then, in some cases, to neighboring countries such as Mauritania, Senegal, Algeria, Niger, or Ivory Coast.

The available figures provide a sense of the magnitude of internal displacement and vulnerability in Mali. According to recent data from UNHCR and the DTM/IOM, the country has more than 414,000 internally displaced persons, in addition to more than 153,000 internal returnees over the past three years and nearly 88,800 former refugees who have returned. Compounding these dynamics is a severely deteriorating humanitarian situation: in 2026, 5.1 million people in Mali are in need of humanitarian assistance, while the WFP estimates that 1.6 million face acute food insecurity. Participants also highlighted Mali's significance along migration routes to Europe: on the Western Atlantic route to the Canary Islands, Malians accounted for 17.4% of arrivals as of April 30, 2026, placing them among the top nationalities recorded on this route. In 2024, this proportion was even higher: Malian nationals accounted for nearly 29% of the arrivals recorded on the western Atlantic route to the Canary Islands, with 13,530 arrivals, confirming the significant weight of migration flows from Mali on this route to Europe.

The Atlantic route is therefore not always the starting point of migration. It can become the final stage in a chain of vulnerabilities.

3.2 Migration as a Family and Community Decision

In various contexts across West Africa, migration is not strictly an individual decision. It is typically a family and community decision. A family may sell assets, mobilize resources, take on debt, or collectively organize a young person's departure. That young person then becomes a bearer of hope, a potential source of financial support, and a symbol of anticipated success.

This dimension is essential to understanding why people continue to leave despite the risks. The young person who leaves carries not only their own aspirations but also the investment and expectations of their family. This also explains the difficulty of returning. Returning without having succeeded can be experienced as a social failure – not only for the individual but for the entire family that supported them.

Social media and the diaspora amplify this dynamic. They spread images of success, stories of opportunity, and visible signs of social advancement. But they often obscure administrative precariousness, debt, discrimination, working conditions, loneliness, or deportations.

3.3 The Choice Between Two Uncertainties

One of the most powerful messages from the workshop can be summarized as follows: for many young people, the choice is no longer between safety and danger, but between two forms of uncertainty.

On the one hand, there is the uncertainty of staying in a place where employment, security, education, and future prospects are scarce. On the other, there is the uncertainty of a dangerous, costly, and potentially deadly journey. In this context, migration can appear to be a rational risk.

This observation compels us to rethink deterrence policies. Telling young people that the journey is dangerous is not enough. Many already know this. **For the risk to serve as a deterrent again, there must be a credible alternative:** employment, training, legal mobility, local security, access to services, social recognition, and the possibility of building a future without leaving.

4. Criminal Economies, Facilitation Networks, and Warning Signs

4.1 A Gradual Professionalization of Networks

The discussions highlighted a transformation in certain segments of the facilitation networks. Security pressure increases the risks for traffickers, captains, and intermediaries. In this context, less organized actors may disappear or withdraw, while the most resilient ones become more professional.

This professionalization should not be confused with the existence of large, centralized mafia-like structures. In many cases, actors still view themselves as fishermen, transporters, or local facilitators. However, the system as a whole is becoming more efficient, more clandestine, and more coordinated.

The indicators under discussion include:

- Reduced waiting times at departure points;
- The organization of nearly immediate departures;
- Transfers from small boats to larger vessels;
- Ticket systems or payment in installments;
- Closed WhatsApp groups to organize departures;
- Frequent changes of phone numbers;
- Fragmented fuel purchases;
- Use of mobile money;
- Less visibility of gatherings prior to departure;
- A growing distinction between migrants, facilitators, captains, and coordinators.

This evolution makes public intervention more difficult. Networks adapt, relocate, fragment tasks, and reduce their exposure.

4.2 Prices, Payments, and Digital Networks as Strategic Indicators

The price of the journey is a key indicator. If migratory demand were truly declining, prices would tend to fall. The fact that prices remain stable suggests that demand remains strong, even if visible departures are temporarily curtailed.

The method of payment is also strategic. The use of mobile money services, installment payments, and cross-border transfers opens avenues for financial investigation. Following the money can help identify coordinators, intermediaries, financial beneficiaries, and reinvestment channels.

Social media platforms are another key arena. Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube play an increasingly important role in shaping migration aspirations by disseminating success stories, downplaying risks, and contributing to the formation of a transnational migration narrative. They are also used to provide information on routes, identify departure points, connect prospective migrants with facilitators, and access various forms of assistance.

Beyond the preparation phase, digital tools play an operational role throughout the entire migration journey. The smartphone becomes a central tool for tracking itineraries, receiving real-time information, connecting with mutual aid networks, and, in some cases, receiving or transferring money via mobile money services. It thus constitutes an essential infrastructure of contemporary mobility.

The messages circulating on these platforms – often in local languages or Arabic – as well as price fluctuations, accounts of crossing conditions, and information on departure points, must be integrated into early warning systems.

Indicators to Monitor

Cost of the crossing; payment methods; use of mobile money; presence of women and minors; new departure points; profiles of smugglers; waiting times; digital messages; violence against migrants; violence among networks; levels of indebtedness; interceptions; disappearances; forced or voluntary returns.

4.3 Distinguishing Roles in the Facilitation Ecosystem

Not all individuals arrested as “traffickers” occupy the same position in the cross-border economy. Some may be central organizers; others, captains, recruiters, financial intermediaries, transporters, fishermen, members of coastal communities, or peripheral actors.

An effective criminal policy must distinguish these roles. If prosecutions focus solely on the visible figures, the financial and decision-making chains remain intact. The response must target the system’s profitability, its coordinators, and the practices that cause the most harm.

Particular attention must be paid to aggravated forms of facilitation: overloaded vessels, boats in poor condition, insufficient fuel, inadequate engines, lack of safety equipment, or organized departures under manifestly lethal conditions. By addressing these factors, public policies can help gradually change how the facilitation market operates, reducing the profitability of the most dangerous practices.

4.4 Do Not Destroy Local Economies Without Providing Alternatives

Another key issue concerns local economies. In many regions, the formal and informal economies are closely intertwined. Transportation, fishing, hospitality, food service, logistics, repair services, artisanal mining, and cross-border trade may be connected, directly or indirectly, to migration.

Criminalizing or abruptly shutting down these activities without providing alternatives can have the opposite effect of what is intended: it can lead to the precariousness of communities, a shift toward illicit economies, increased resentment, and the strengthening of criminal networks. The example of Agadez was cited: when activities linked to mobility are criminalized without a solid economic transition plan, entire families and communities lose their sources of income. The same logic applies to artisanal fishing, informal gold mining, and certain border services.

The response, therefore, should not be solely repressive. It must include gradual formalization, harm reduction, economic diversification, and realistic alternatives.

5. Protection, Gender, Children, and Return

5.1 Information as a Tool for Protection

Awareness campaigns focused solely on the dangers of migration routes have limited effectiveness. Many people are already aware of the risks. **The problem is not a lack of information about the dangers, but a lack of credible alternatives.**

Information must therefore be viewed as a tool for protection, not as deterrent propaganda. It must be reliable, specific, contextualized, and conveyed by trusted sources: former migrants, community leaders, teachers, religious authorities, local stakeholders, diaspora associations, and organizations on the ground.

This information should address the real risks, but also cover rights, possibilities for legal residence in transit countries, training options, protection mechanisms, risks of exploitation, administrative procedures, and existing alternatives.

5.2 Decoupling Humanitarian Aid from Return

The discussions highlighted the risk of making humanitarian aid conditional on voluntary return. When aid is only accessible if a person agrees to return, their protection options are limited.

In some transit countries, particularly in West Africa, some people may have the right to move about, reside, or work, but lack the information or support necessary to exercise those rights. Humanitarian aid should be able to support various pathways: return, local integration, protection, regular mobility, or temporary stabilization.

5.3 Migrant Women: A Specific Vulnerability

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of women and girls among certain groups of new arrivals, a trend identified as a cause for concern. Women and girls are exposed to specific forms of violence and exploitation during their journey and after their arrival.

The risks mentioned are not limited to sexual exploitation. Forced marriages, dependence on a man who has already arrived, domestic exploitation, gender-based violence, trafficking, and situations of family coercion must be included in the analysis.

Determining the age of young women can also be more complex than in the case of men, which poses challenges regarding the protection of minors. Reception, assessment, guidance, and follow-up mechanisms must therefore incorporate a more robust gender-sensitive approach.

5.4 Migrant Children: Do Not Confuse Physical Absence with Family Absence

The situation of migrant children and adolescents — whether accompanied or unaccompanied — was a major concern. The Canary Islands' protection system is under considerable strain, particularly due to the number of minors in its care.

However, the terminology and categories used need to be reviewed. Many minors labeled “unaccompanied” actually have family members they can turn to: parents, uncles and aunts, siblings, or members of the community. Physical separation does not necessarily imply abandonment. In certain contexts of conflict or extreme poverty, the family may view the child's departure as a protective measure.

This reality does not diminish the responsibility of host states to provide protection. On the contrary, it requires involving families in the assessment, support, and — where possible and desirable — in long-term solutions.

Documentation for children and young adults was identified as an essential best practice. Access to documents, legal status, education, and the labor market can radically transform life trajectories and reduce exclusion.

5.5 Return as a Social Moment, Not Merely an Administrative Procedure

Return should not be viewed as a logistical or administrative process. It is an extremely sensitive human, familial, and social moment.

Returnees may come back in debt, traumatized, ashamed, or perceived as failures. **When the family has invested in the departure, an unsuccessful return can be difficult to accept. This may explain why some families oppose return, even when the migrant is homeless or in a vulnerable situation in Europe.**

Return and reintegration programs must therefore combine:

- Financial support;
- Psychosocial support;
- Family mediation;
- Community integration;
- Diversification of income-generating activities;
- Long-term follow-up;
- Involvement of local communities and the diaspora.

An individual reintegration project may fail if all the family's pressure falls on that one person. Diversifying sources of income — for example, by combining professional work with farming — can improve the sustainability of the return.

6. Cooperation, Territorial Development, and Regular Mobility

6.1 A focus on security is necessary, but it does not reduce the factors driving emigration

Security forces play an important role in preventing dangerous departures, combating smuggling networks, and coordinating rescue operations. Police cooperation — involving the Civil Guard, the National Police, intelligence agencies, joint investigations, and collaboration with countries of origin and transit — is indispensable. The Spanish case offers particularly relevant examples along the Atlantic route: in Senegal, Spain has for years maintained an operational deployment of the Civil Guard and National Police that works with Senegalese forces on joint patrols, maritime and land surveillance, information sharing, and technical support. According to the Ministry of the Interior, cooperation with Senegal led to more than 5,100 interceptions and 126 vessels seized in 2025, as well as a sharp reduction in departures from the Senegalese coast toward the Canary Islands. Mauritania is another key example, given its role in managing the Atlantic route and combating human trafficking syndicates — a partnership recognized by the Spanish Ministry of the Interior as crucial for security and migration.

However, security measures do not address the root causes. They may temporarily contain a route, dismantle certain networks, or prevent immediate departures. But they do not create jobs, reduce family pressures, stabilize regions, or facilitate legal mobility.

A sustainable strategy must, therefore, integrate security, development, protection, governance, and legal mobility.

6.2 Localizing Cooperation

Development cooperation must be more locally focused. Needs are not abstract. In some communities, the priority may be training in the installation and maintenance of solar panels. In other places, irrigation, plumbing, electricity, construction, agriculture, food processing, hospitality, or tourism may be more relevant.

Projects must be based on the real needs of the regions and the local private sector. Training young people without career prospects leads to frustration. In contrast, programs developed in partnership with businesses, local governments, professional associations, and decentralized agencies can create credible career paths.

Cooperation must also avoid projects conceived from the outside, using standardized solutions. Local actors do not always ask for more money; they often ask for skills, technical partners, support, and recognition of their priorities.

The Government of the Canary Islands is already promoting several decentralized cooperation initiatives that illustrate this territorial approach and can serve as a basis for its expansion.

Balón de la Esperanza uses sports as a tool for integration and to raise awareness about the risks of irregular migration among young people in West Africa. Tierra Firme supports agricultural and community development projects in the areas of origin of migration flows to the Canary Islands. These initiatives, though still limited in scale, demonstrate the kind of grassroots cooperation that could be strengthened and replicated in other territories along the corridor.

6.3 Circular Mobility: An Alternative, but Not a Utilitarian Tool

Circular mobility can be a credible alternative when it allows people to work, receive training, return home, leave again, and maintain regular ties between territories. It can reduce the pressure toward irregular migration if people know they will be able to move legally.

However, this mobility should not be conceived solely in terms of the needs of the European labor market. If it is perceived as a mechanism for bringing in workers for a few months and then sending them back, it risks being viewed as instrumental by African partners.

Balanced circular mobility must include:

- Preparation before departure;
- Clear information on rights and obligations;
- Support during the stay;
- Recognition of skills;
- The possibility of a meaningful return;
- Links to local development;
- Benefits for individuals, families, countries of origin, and destination countries.

6.4 Visas, Asylum, and the Credibility of Legal Channels

Legal pathways sometimes exist on paper but remain difficult to use. Visa procedures are often lengthy, costly, and uncertain. Even highly qualified individuals, such as academics invited to events, may face significant difficulties in obtaining a visa.

This situation sends a very strong message to the public: **legal migration is perceived as inaccessible**. When regular channels seem closed off, informal networks become more attractive.

The credibility of these alternatives therefore depends on reforming consular practices: transparency, shorter processing times, better communication, tracking of applications, combating fraudulent intermediaries, and opening up pathways tailored to economic, academic, family, and professional realities.

7. Regional Governance and Unintended Consequences

7.1 The Limits of Bilateralism

Bilateral agreements can produce quick results, but they are not enough to stabilize a regional system. When one country tightens its controls, the pressure may shift to another. A local improvement can thus create a regional problem.

The Atlantic route must be viewed as an interconnected corridor: Mali, Senegal, Mauritania, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Morocco, Algeria, Niger, and Europe interact directly or indirectly. Strictly bilateral policies risk ignoring these interdependencies.

A minimum level of regional coordination is necessary to anticipate shifts in migration routes, avoid diplomatic tensions, protect border economies, and preserve good neighborly relations.

7.2 Negative Externalities of Migration Agreements

Migration control agreements can produce unintended consequences: diplomatic tensions, contested deportations, deterioration of inter-community relations, closure of economic activities, increased corruption, a rise in undocumented migration, or a shift toward more dangerous routes. The tensions linked to deportations from Mauritania to Mali were cited as an example.

A decision intended to address migratory pressure toward Europe can affect African regional relations. Every migration agreement should therefore undergo a regional impact assessment and adhere to a “do no harm” principle.

The “do no harm” principle applied to migration policies

Before implementing an agreement or a control program, it is important to assess its potential effects on migration routes, local economies, diplomatic relations, border communities, corruption, criminal networks, and the protection of individuals.

7.3 Combating Corruption and Border Governance

Corruption is a structural element of many dynamics of irregular mobility. Informal checkpoints, arbitrary payments, inconsistent documentation requirements, and extortion practices undermine the legitimacy of states and reinforce dependence on intermediaries.

Cooperation on border management cannot, therefore, be limited to providing equipment, databases, or technical training. It must include:

- Independent internal oversight;
- Complaint mechanisms;
- Periodic audits;
- Rotation of at-risk personnel;
- Effective disciplinary sanctions;
- Training on the rights of people on the move;
- Clarification of chains of responsibility.

8. Operational Recommendations

The following recommendations are ranked according to three criteria: priority (degree of urgency in relation to the assessment), expected impact (magnitude of the effects on the identified vulnerabilities), and time frame (short, medium, or long term).

Priority 1 – Building the capacity to anticipate developments along the Atlantic route

Priority: high | Expected impact: high | Feasibility: short to medium term

Create an early warning mechanism for each corridor.

This mechanism should monitor departure points, prices, payment methods, individual profiles, acts of violence, digital communications, interceptions, disappearances, secondary routes, and changes in nationality.

Engage institutional actors and on-the-ground actors.

Security data must be cross-referenced with data from international organizations, local NGOs, migrant associations, diaspora groups, universities, coastal communities, and humanitarian actors.

Use the Canary Islands as a platform for strategic analysis.

Given their geographic location and experience, the Canary Islands can become a hub for knowledge production, coordination, and foresight between Europe and West Africa.

Priority 2 – Reduce the profitability of smuggling networks

Priority: high | Expected impact: high | Feasibility: medium term

Conduct transnational financial investigations.

Investigations should track payment flows, including mobile money, split payments, beneficial owners, logistical reinvestments, and intermediaries.

Distinguish the roles within the networks.

Criminal policies must differentiate between organizers, captains, recruiters, transporters, fishermen, financial intermediaries, and peripheral actors.

Prioritize tackling the most dangerous practices.

Sanctions should focus on actors responsible for departures under lethal conditions: overloading, vessels in poor condition, insufficient fuel, lack of engines, or lack of minimum safety standards.

Monitor digital recruitment spaces.

Public and semi-closed platforms must be analyzed as spaces for recruitment, disinformation, price-setting, and route modification.

Priority 3 – Localize cooperation and reintegration

Priority: medium | Expected impact: medium to high | Feasibility: medium to long term

Fund training programs aligned with local needs.

Priority sectors should be identified locally: solar energy, irrigation, agriculture, construction, plumbing, electricity, tourism, hospitality, and food processing.

Involve the private sector from the program design stage.

Training must address real job opportunities. Local businesses must participate in defining job profiles, internships, and job placement.

View reintegration as a family- and community-centered process.

Return programs should include family mediation, psychosocial support, economic diversification, and long-term follow-up.

Mobilize the diaspora as a bridge of trust.

The diaspora can support the provision of reliable information, mentoring, productive investment, skills transfer, and support for returnees.

Priority 4 – Strengthen regional coherence

Priority: medium | Expected impact: medium | Feasibility: long term

Place bilateral agreements within a regional context.

Each agreement should be evaluated based on its effects on neighboring countries, alternative routes, border economies, and diplomatic relations.

Include a clause to assess unintended consequences.

Indicators should be included regarding route displacement, security, corruption, community tensions, and humanitarian risks.

Support governance of regional freedom of movement.

African states and international partners must reduce arbitrary practices at borders, clarify rights of movement, and strengthen mechanisms for reporting extortion.

Priority 5 – Strengthen protection along the corridors

Priority: high | Expected impact: high | Feasibility: short term

Develop reliable, non-coercive information points.

These facilities should be managed by trusted actors, particularly local civil society, former migrants, the diaspora, community leaders, teachers, and religious authorities.

Decouple humanitarian aid from return.

Aid should not be limited to people who agree to voluntary return. It must also support local integration, temporary stabilization, protection, and access to rights.

Establish specific monitoring mechanisms for women and girls.

These mechanisms must address the risks of trafficking, forced marriage, domestic exploitation, sexual exploitation, gender-based violence, and economic dependence.

Rethink the reception of minors alongside their families.

Protection systems must recognize that many minors have family members they can turn to and that leaving may be interpreted by the family as a protection strategy.

Priority 6 – Make regular mobility a credible alternative

Priority: medium to high | Expected impact: high, but delayed | Feasibility: medium to long term

Reform visa practices.

Procedures must become more predictable, transparent, expedited, and understandable, in order to reduce reliance on informal networks.

Develop balanced circular mobility programs.

These programs should include training, support, a meaningful return process, recognition of skills, and benefits for regions of origin.

Strengthen academic, professional, cultural, and business mobility.

Mobility should not be limited to seasonal work. University, business, sports, cultural, and tourism exchanges can help rebalance Euro-African relations.

9. Conclusion

The Atlantic route to the Canary Islands is not an isolated anomaly. It is the visible manifestation of a regional mobility system shaped by insecurity, social aspirations, informal economies, family dynamics, European policies, criminal networks, and the limitations of regular migration channels.

Policies focused solely on reducing visible arrivals may produce immediate results, but they do not address the root causes. They can shift routes, increase risks, empower intermediaries, and obscure vulnerabilities.

A sustainable strategy must shift its scale and focus. It is not just a matter of reducing migration flows, but of reducing vulnerabilities, making routes less deadly, diminishing the profitability of criminal economies, strengthening local alternatives, making regular migration credible, and grounding cooperation in trust.

The Canary Islands can play a central role in this transformation. Their experience on the front lines, their proximity to West Africa, their capacity for dialogue, and their commitment to decentralized cooperation make them a strategic actor in shifting from a reactive approach to a proactive one.

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