

EU–Africa Migration Compacts and the Coloniality of Border Governance: A Critical Analysis of Externalization Practices

Oluyemi Opeoluwa Adisa (PhD), Ibidapo, Busayo Blessing, Adam Halima Abdulsalam

Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Achievers University, Owo,
Ondo State, Nigeria.

Postgraduate Candidate, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Achievers University,
Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria.

Postgraduate Candidate, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Achievers University,
Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria.

Abstract

This study critically examines the European Union's (EU) externalization of border controls into African territories, situating the analysis within the broader context of EU–Africa migration compacts. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study draws primarily on secondary sources, including policy documents, scholarly literature, official reports, and recent case studies. Using postcolonial theory as the analytical lens, it interrogates the historical continuities, power asymmetries, and neocolonial dynamics underpinning contemporary EU migration governance. The analysis reveals how policies framed as cooperative security and development partnerships frequently undermine African sovereignty, reinforce dependency, and shift humanitarian responsibilities onto resource-constrained African states. The study also explores the potential of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and inclusive talent partnerships as alternative frameworks for more equitable migration governance. However, it finds that without substantive policy reform particularly the dismantling of conditionalities, the reframing of skill definitions, and the centralization of African priorities such initiatives risk reproducing the very asymmetries they are intended to address. The paper concludes by advocating for the operationalization of genuinely reciprocal, development-oriented migration frameworks that balance security imperatives with human rights protections and shared responsibility.

Keywords: EU–Africa Migration Compacts, Externalization of Border Controls, Postcolonial Theory, Global Compact for Migration, Talent Partnerships, Migration Governance

Introduction

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) was designed to foster enhanced collaboration among sovereign states, establishing a cooperative platform to govern migration effectively. Yet, the European Union's policy of externalizing its border control mechanisms into African territories disrupts the fundamental spirit of such global governance frameworks. By pushing control functions outward, the EU not only undermines the GCM's emphasis on multilateral partnership grounded in mutual respect but also distorts the dynamics of Africa–EU relationships, which ideally should be premised on equal engagement and shared responsibility (EU-RENEW, 2024). In practice, this externalization means that African nations are tasked with enforcing stringent migration controls on behalf of the EU, a role that encroaches upon their political autonomy. By effectively circumscribing movement within African states at Europe's behest, such policies threaten the sovereignty of African governments and shift the burden onto them, while deflecting criticism of restrictive migration governance back onto the continent. This not only

dilutes Africa's position within the global migration discourse but also casts the continent as an obstacle to progress in international migration cooperation (EU-RENEW, 2024).

A telling illustration of this dynamic is the 2023 memorandum between the EU and Tunisia, often described as a "migrant deal." Under this agreement, Tunisia agreed to curb migration flows across the Mediterranean, receiving development assistance in return. While intended as bilateral cooperation, the arrangement effectively subordinates Tunisia's migration agenda to external priorities, restricting its capacity to pursue national or regional strategies centered on mobility, economic development, or diaspora engagement (Strik, 2024; Statewatch, 2024). Such externalization practices also have profound human rights implications. In Tunisia's case, sharply reduced arrivals to Italy have come at the expense of vulnerable migrants who endure deteriorating conditions, forced evictions, and in some cases, deaths sparking petitions to international bodies and raising alarms about complicity in humanitarian harm (Le Monde via Reuters, 2024; TIMEP, 2025). The EU's externalization of border control to African countries bends global migration governance toward a coerced model of collaboration, eroding the apparatus of sovereign equality and distorting multilateral ideals. The GCM's normative premise of joint stewardship is undercut when European powers outsource migration management to African states under conditional arrangements. This process undermines African agency, compromises local migration governance, and strains the integrity of cooperative global frameworks.

This research seeks to critically assess the multifaceted landscape of EU migration governance, highlighting especially the external dimension of migration policy. Even though there is no universally accepted definition of the EU's external migration policy, for clarity in this context we refer to it as the collection of strategies aimed at managing migration activities beyond the Union's borders. This includes extraterritorial migration instruments such as the relocation of border responsibilities to regions like the Sahel, restrictive border enforcement measures, bilateral return and readmission agreements, Mobility Partnerships, and external aid programmes whether these are exchanged for migration control or designed to mitigate perceived "root causes" of migration (Niemann, 2023). While earlier stages of EU migration policy placed greater emphasis on internal governance, over time the external facet has emerged as a critical and increasingly dynamic pillar. Indeed, the asylum surge of 2015–2016 acted as a catalyst for this shift, spurring the enlargement of external migration tools. More recently, the Russian-Ukraine war triggered the largest wave of migration in Europe since World War II, further underscoring the salience of external migration considerations and accelerating the push toward embedding migration within broader EU foreign policy frameworks (EEAS, 2025; Niemann, 2023). Moreover, we conceptualise EU migration governance as encompassing not only formal policy instruments, but also the unintended or indirect effects that these policies exert particularly through informal mechanisms of influence. For instance, countries may adjust their own migration strategies in response to EU initiatives, either aligning with them or pushing back, which illustrates how the EU's reach extends beyond explicitly codified instruments (EEAS, 2025). Such informal influence may shape migration outcomes indirectly and does not necessarily translate into concrete shifts in migratory flows to the EU.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory offers a valuable lens for examining how the legacies of colonialism continue to shape global governance structures, particularly in the realm of migration management. In the case of the European Union's (EU) externalization of border controls into African territories, this perspective reveals how historical inequalities and imbalances of power continue to influence contemporary policy frameworks. The EU's strategy, which shifts responsibility for migration control beyond its borders and onto African states, cannot be fully understood without acknowledging its roots in Europe's imperial history. Centuries of colonial expansion, resource extraction, and the imposition of administrative systems on African societies established patterns of domination that persist in today's political and economic relations. While contemporary externalization policies are framed in the language of "cooperation" and "mutual benefit," they frequently reproduce hierarchical arrangements reminiscent of the colonial period, reinforcing

dependency and constraining the capacity of African states to exercise independent agency in migration governance (Hoffmann, 2023; Moreno-Lax, 2024).

The intellectual foundations of postcolonial theory, advanced by scholars such as Said, Spivak, and Bhabha, underscore that colonialism's influence did not vanish with political independence. Instead, its legacy endures through entrenched material inequalities, the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems, and governance structures that privilege the political and economic interests of former colonial powers (Castles et al., 2024). A central idea in this regard is the "coloniality of power," a term that describes how global hierarchies established under colonialism remain embedded in contemporary economic and political arrangements, continuing to advantage the Global North over the Global South (Quijano, 2000; Olivier et al., 2025). Similarly, the concept of neo-colonialism captures the indirect yet pervasive influence that former colonial powers maintain through financial leverage, political influence, and the imposition of conditionalities in aid or trade agreements (Nkrumah, 1965; Adepoju, 2024). Another crucial dimension is the role of discourse and representation in legitimizing unequal power structures. As Said's analysis of Orientalism suggests, narratives about Africa and Africans often portraying them in terms of instability, security threats, or developmental shortcomings serve to justify external intervention and control (Said, 1978; Zanker & Altrogge, 2022). In the EU–Africa migration context, such discursive framing positions African states as passive recipients of European "capacity building" rather than as equal partners in shaping migration governance. This reinforces a dynamic where European security priorities dominate the agenda, marginalizing African-led strategies and perspectives (Bergmann & Freyburg, 2023). When viewed through this postcolonial lens, EU externalization policies are not neutral technical solutions but rather contemporary manifestations of a historical pattern in which the structural and discursive legacies of colonialism continue to shape the parameters of African sovereignty and agency in migration management.

From this perspective, the EU's externalization of border controls into Africa can be seen as an extension of historical structures of domination, adapted to fit the context of twenty-first-century migration politics. While framed as cooperative agreements designed to enhance security, stability, and development, these arrangements frequently embed asymmetrical power relations in their design and implementation. Financial and technical assistance packages offered by the EU often come with explicit or implicit conditions that align African migration governance systems with European priorities, regardless of whether these priorities reflect local realities or long-term development goals (Carrera & Cortinovia, 2024; Guild, 2023). This conditionality mirrors earlier colonial practices in which economic and political dependency was maintained through control over resources and decision-making structures, albeit now rearticulated through the language of "partnership" and "capacity building" (Hoffmann, 2023). The consequences of such arrangements go beyond institutional dependency. By outsourcing migration control to African states, the EU not only shifts the logistical and political burden of managing migration flows but also distances itself from the direct human rights implications of restrictive border measures. Migrants intercepted or detained in African transit states often face conditions that fall short of international legal standards, including overcrowded detention centres, inadequate access to legal protection, and exposure to abuse (Amnesty International, 2023; Moreno-Lax, 2024). Yet, because these actions take place outside EU territory, European institutions are able to maintain a formal distance from the resulting violations, effectively delegating the moral and legal responsibilities for migrant welfare to states with fewer resources and weaker institutional safeguards. This outsourcing of accountability reflects a structural imbalance in which African states bear the brunt of policy enforcement while the EU retains control over the policy framework itself.

In discursive terms, postcolonial theory helps reveal how EU–Africa migration compacts are framed in ways that obscure the unequal nature of the relationship. The frequent portrayal of African migration as a "crisis" or "threat" to European stability legitimizes the imposition of securitized migration policies, even when empirical evidence suggests that the majority of African migration is intra-continental (Adepoju, 2024; Adebajo, 2024; Oluyemi, 2024). This crisis narrative enables the EU to justify exceptional measures such as the criminalization of long-standing mobility patterns within regions like the Sahel while positioning itself as a provider of stability and order. In reality, such measures can disrupt local economies, exacerbate social tensions, and undermine existing regional agreements such as the ECOWAS Protocol on Freedom of

Movement (Zanker & Altrogge, 2022; Idrissa, 2024). Ultimately, the application of postcolonial theory to the EU's externalization agenda underscores the need to critically interrogate claims of mutual benefit in migration governance. It draws attention to how the structural and ideological legacies of colonialism shape not only the form but also the substance of policy interventions, often in ways that prioritize the security and economic interests of Europe over the developmental and sovereignty concerns of African states. This perspective challenges policymakers and scholars to rethink what genuine partnership means in the context of migration governance, advocating for frameworks that dismantle rather than perpetuate the asymmetrical power relations inherited from the colonial past (Castles et al., 2024; Olivier et al., 2025).

The Evolution of EU External Migration Policies

Since the landmark Tampere European Council summit of 1999, both internal and external migration policies of the European Union have undergone substantial transformation. What began as a primarily inward-facing approach has been increasingly outward-looking. Indeed, the EU's external migration agenda is anchored in foundational frameworks such as the 2005 Global Approach to Migration and Mobility, later complemented by the European Agenda on Migration introduced in 2015, both of which aimed to extend cooperation beyond EU borders (Tamas, 2019; Niemann, 2023). The perception of a refugee crisis in the mid-2010s served as a catalyst for the rapid proliferation of external migration tools. A diverse array of bilateral mechanisms emerged, including readmission agreements, Mobility Partnerships, Common Agendas for Migration and Mobility, and the notable EU–Turkey deal. Meanwhile, regional initiatives such as the Rabat Process and Khartoum Process gained traction, alongside intercontinental frameworks like the Africa–EU Partnership on Migration, Mobility and Employment (Tamas, 2019; ICMPD, 2024). Equally transformative was the tragic rise in Mediterranean migrant fatalities around 2015, which spurred the adoption of several high-impact instruments. These included the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF Africa), the Lebanon and Jordan Compacts, cooperation agreements between the EU and Libya on border control, and the deployment of CSDP missions aimed at monitoring migration in the Mediterranean. In parallel, Frontex's mandate and resources were significantly expanded. Collectively, these crisis-driven developments provided a political opening often called a “policy window” for implementing measures that, under different circumstances, would likely have been too contentious (ICMPD, 2024; European Court of Auditors via The Guardian, 2024).

In the wake of escalating migration pressures, the European Union (EU) increasingly integrated migration control measures into broader aspects of its foreign policy framework. A significant development occurred in 2015 when the Council (2015a) agreed to broaden the mandate of the EU Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) Sahel Niger to include direct support for Nigerien authorities in efforts to curb irregular migration. EUCAP Sahel Niger operates under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and was originally tasked with training national police and military forces to combat organized crime and terrorism (Bergmann & Freyburg, 2023; Lavenex & Zaiotti, 2024). Following this expanded mandate, the mission established an operational outpost in Agadez, a strategic transit hub for migrants from West Africa on route to Libya and, ultimately, Europe (Hoffmann, 2023; Zanker & Altrogge, 2022). This shift in focus toward preventing migration through Agadez triggered significant policy consequences within Niger. Most notably, it led to the enactment of domestic legislation criminalizing virtually all forms of migration, including movements by Nigerien citizens and nationals from other Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) member states despite these individuals' legal rights to free movement within the region (Tubiana et al., 2018; Idrissa, 2024). Critics argue that such measures fail to account for long-standing nomadic and seasonal migration patterns that are deeply embedded in the socio-economic fabric of the Sahel (Harmon, 2023; Raineri & Rossi, 2024). Moreover, the criminalization of cross-border movement has severely disrupted livelihoods in Agadez, particularly for those who previously relied on the transportation sector for income (Molenaar et al., 2022; Hoffmann, 2023). Analysts warn that these economic disruptions risk exacerbating social tensions and instability in an already fragile region, thereby undermining one of EUCAP Sahel Niger's stated objectives: promoting regional stability (Bergmann & Freyburg, 2023; Idrissa, 2024).

In parallel, the Council (2015b) initiated another major intervention: the launch of the EU naval operation against human smugglers and traffickers in the Mediterranean, officially known as EUNAVFOR Med and later renamed Operation Sophia. The mission was designed to conduct surveillance, gather intelligence, and dismantle smuggling and trafficking networks by intercepting and seizing vessels suspected of facilitating irregular migration (Carrera & Cortinovis, 2024; Guild, 2023). Structurally, the operation drew heavily on the operational model of earlier Italian-led search and rescue initiatives in the Mediterranean (Cusumano & Pattison, 2023). However, while its humanitarian objectives were initially emphasized, subsequent evaluations have noted a growing emphasis on border control and deterrence (Moreno-Lax, 2024; Carrera & Cortinovis, 2024), raising debates about the balance between security imperatives and the protection of migrant rights under international law (Guild, 2023; Lavenex & Zaiotti, 2024).

Policy Instruments and Mechanisms of Externalization

The European Union's (EU) strategy of migration externalization rests upon a sophisticated web of legal, institutional, and operational mechanisms that extend well beyond its own borders. These instruments are designed to embed migration control within a broader framework of security cooperation and development assistance, thereby enabling the EU to shape migration flows at their points of origin and transit rather than solely at its own frontiers (Carrera & Cortinovis, 2024). Among the most prominent formal tools are Mobility Partnerships and Common Agendas for Migration and Mobility, which serve as diplomatic frameworks to facilitate cooperation with third countries on migration governance. These arrangements often combine technical support, financial assistance, and policy dialogue with binding commitments to enhance border management, improve identity documentation systems, and enforce return and readmission obligations for migrants deemed to be in the EU irregularly (Cassarino & Lavenex, 2023).

A cornerstone of this externalization architecture is the use of bilateral readmission agreements, which establish legal pathways for the return of nationals and, in some cases, third-country migrants who transited through partner states. While such agreements are framed as instruments of "shared responsibility," they are frequently negotiated under conditions of significant asymmetry, with the EU wielding substantial political and economic leverage to secure compliance (Hoffmann, 2023). Since the early 2000s, the European Union (EU) has actively pursued return and readmission agreements with a wide range of third countries as part of its broader migration management strategy. These agreements aim to facilitate the repatriation of individuals who do not have legal authorization to remain in EU member states. To date, the EU has concluded binding agreements with jurisdictions such as Hong Kong (2004), Macao (2004), Sri Lanka (2004), Albania (2006), Russia (2007), Ukraine (2008), North Macedonia (2008), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2008), Serbia (2008), Moldova (2008), Pakistan (2010), Georgia (2011), Armenia (2014), Azerbaijan (2014), Turkey (2014), Cape Verde (2014), and Belarus (2020) (European Commission, 2021). In addition to these formal arrangements, the EU has also entered into non-binding, politically negotiated frameworks with countries including Afghanistan, Guinea, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, The Gambia, and Côte d'Ivoire. Beyond EU-level agreements, individual member states have frequently negotiated their own bilateral arrangements. Notable examples include Italy's cooperation agreements with Libya (Tasch, 2015) and Spain's long-standing readmission accord with Morocco (Cassarino, 2007). The EU has also engaged in multilateral arrangements, the most prominent being the EU–Turkey Statement of 2016. Under this arrangement, migrants arriving in the EU via Turkey were to be returned, with the EU pledging €6 billion in funding to support refugees in Turkey. In exchange, the EU committed to resettling an equivalent number of Syrian refugees directly from Turkey. While politically significant, this statement lacked formal legal status under EU law, functioning instead as an intergovernmental arrangement between member states and Turkey. Crucially, it bypassed institutional oversight by both the European Parliament and the European Court of Justice, leading scholars to characterise it as a form of strategic venue shopping, whereby EU member states circumvent formal policymaking channels to avoid potential vetoes from liberal institutional actors (Slominski & Trauner, 2018; Carrera et al., 2023). Readmission agreements are frequently negotiated in exchange for financial assistance, development aid, or other forms of political and technical support. Many such arrangements are embedded within broader Mobility Partnerships, which are designed to facilitate legal migration

opportunities alongside return measures. However, despite persistent EU efforts particularly since the migration crisis of 2015, securing readmission agreements with countries in Northern and Western Africa has proven difficult. These states often resist such accords due to strong concerns over sovereignty and domestic political sensitivities (Wolff, 2014; Zardo & Loschi, 2020). As many are significant migrant-sending countries, remittances from diaspora communities in Europe constitute a vital source of income, making public support for repatriation measures minimal (Reslow & Vink, 2014; Adepoju, 2024). Furthermore, in parts of North Africa, governments have shown little willingness to accept the return of Sub-Saharan African migrants who merely transited through their territory on their way to Europe, viewing such obligations as an undue burden (Wolf, 2014; Lavenex & Zanker, 2023).

Parallel to these legal mechanisms, the EU deploys substantial financial resources through initiatives such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF Africa). Officially, this fund is intended to address what the EU categorizes as the “root causes” of irregular migration such as poverty, instability, and lack of employment opportunities. However, critics argue that its project portfolio often reflects European security priorities more than the development agendas articulated by African governments or regional institutions (Castles et al., 2024; Idrissa, 2024). The practice of linking migration policies with development aid is not a new feature of European Union (EU) policy but has its roots at least as far back as 2005. During that period, Spain faced a notable surge in maritime arrivals, with migrants arriving by boat to the Canary Islands and attempting to enter through the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. In the latter case, Spanish authorities employed forceful measures to block entry, which drew considerable international criticism. In response, EU member states began advocating for a closer alignment between migration control measures and development cooperation, framing development aid as a key incentive often described as the most effective “carrot” that could be offered to countries of origin and transit to encourage compliance with migration management goals (Lavenex & Kunz, 2008; Van Crielinge, 2024). This approach meant that cooperation on migration increasingly became a prerequisite for accessing EU development assistance. However, this conditionality generated frustration among recipient countries and often resulted in limited compliance with the EU’s migration objectives (Betts & Milner, 2006; Adepoju, 2024). The onset of the 2015–2016 migration crisis significantly intensified this strategy, marking a new phase in the integration of migration management into EU external relations. One prominent outcome of this shift was the establishment of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF Africa) in November 2015.

The EUTF Africa was designed to address the so-called “root causes” of instability, forced displacement, and irregular migration while simultaneously enhancing migration management across the African continent. With a financial allocation of approximately €4.9 billion, the fund has supported 251 projects implemented across 26 African countries. These initiatives fall under three main regional frameworks; Sahel and Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa, and North Africa and pursue four overarching objectives: promoting economic growth and job creation, strengthening community resilience, improving migration management in countries of origin, transit, and destination, and enhancing governance while reducing conflict, forced displacement, and irregular migration (European Commission, 2022a; Andersson & Andersson, 2023). Unlike earlier policy instruments, which often used development aid as a conditional tool for securing migration cooperation, the EUTF Africa adopts a more preventive approach. It seeks to curb migration pressures by targeting development support toward job creation, livelihood enhancement, and economic opportunities in key countries. Nevertheless, scholars have questioned the effectiveness of this model, noting that migration is influenced by a complex interplay of economic, political, social, and environmental factors that extend beyond the creation of employment opportunities alone (Nyberg Sørensen et al., 2003; Zaun & Nantermoz, 2021; Lavenex & Zanker, 2023). Consequently, without addressing these broader structural drivers such as governance deficits, conflict, and inequality, the fund’s capacity to significantly reduce irregular migration flows remains uncertain.

Security-oriented interventions form another critical dimension of the externalization toolkit. Notably, the EU has expanded the mandate of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in Africa to explicitly include migration control objectives. A key example is EUCAP Sahel Niger, which was initially established to enhance the capacity of Nigerien security forces to combat terrorism and organized crime.

Over time, its remit expanded to include direct migration management activities, including the establishment of an operational base in Agadez, a strategic crossroads for West African migrants on route to Libya and Europe (Bergmann & Freyburg, 2023). This shift effectively embedded European migration governance priorities into Niger's internal security policy, with significant implications for local economies and long-standing patterns of intra-African mobility (Idrissa, 2024). Beyond sub-Saharan Africa, the EU has formalized extensive cooperation with key North African states including Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia to reinforce border policing capacities and limit irregular sea crossings into Europe. These arrangements frequently involve the transfer of equipment, training for border enforcement personnel, and intelligence sharing, all designed to enable partner states to intercept and deter migrant departures before they reach European waters (Moreno-Lax, 2024). The June 2023 EU–Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding is emblematic of this approach, committing €1 billion in aid, with €105 million specifically allocated to migration management activities such as border surveillance, anti-smuggling operations, and reception facilities (European Commission, 2023). While formally framed as a strategic partnership encompassing economic development, energy cooperation, and democratic governance, the scale of funding directed toward migration control reveals the centrality of deterrence in the EU's externalization agenda (Amnesty International, 2023). Critics have underscored that such agreements often take place with regimes whose human rights records are questionable, raising serious ethical and legal concerns (Guild, 2023). In the Tunisian case, for instance, the agreement was finalized amid widely reported abuses against sub-Saharan African migrants, including forced evictions, racial violence, and abandonment in remote border areas without adequate food, water, or medical care (Amnesty International, 2023; Le Monde via Reuters, 2024). These developments illustrate a broader pattern in which the EU, by outsourcing enforcement responsibilities to partner states, effectively distances itself from direct accountability for human rights violations while continuing to influence migration outcomes far beyond its own territory (Carrera & Cortinovis, 2024).

The EU's Migratory Policies of Externalization in Africa

The European Union's (EU) externalization policies have profoundly shaped migration governance and mobility patterns in Africa, employing a multidimensional approach that spans migration management, anti-human trafficking initiatives, and strengthened border security measures. The overarching aim has been to curb irregular migration flows toward Europe (Cassarino & Lavenex, 2023). Within this framework, the EU has pursued trade and economic cooperation through instruments such as Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with individual African states. However, critics argue that these agreements risk undermining the ambitions of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), a landmark trade initiative launched in 2018 with the objective of creating the world's largest single market by dismantling trade barriers and promoting the free movement of goods, services, and people across its 54 signatory states (Adebajo, 2024; Anyanwu, 2023). In parallel, the EU has sought closer security and counterterrorism cooperation with African partners, framing such collaboration as essential to mitigating irregular migration and enhancing regional stability in the face of evolving transnational threats (Bergmann & Freyburg, 2023). Central to this strategy has been the tightening of border control regimes, both through direct EU-led interventions and by building the migration management capacities of African states. These initiatives have included intensified border surveillance, bilateral migration control agreements, and targeted funding to bolster the policing and monitoring capabilities of transit and origin countries, particularly in North Africa (Lavenex & Zaiotti, 2024).

Notably, the EU has entered into a series of formal arrangements with North African states aimed at fortifying their border control infrastructure. While presented as capacity-building measures, such arrangements have attracted considerable criticism from human rights advocates due to persistent reports of abuse, arbitrary detention, and substandard living conditions endured by migrants in these countries (Moreno-Lax, 2024; Amnesty International, 2023). EU-supported detention facilities, often plagued by overcrowding and inadequate sanitation, have been condemned for systemic violations of migrants' fundamental rights (Guild, 2023). The emphasis on preemptively stopping irregular migration has, according

to critics, undermined the EU's commitments under international refugee and human rights law, as the securitization of borders often takes precedence over humanitarian protection (Carrera & Cortinovia, 2024). This externalization approach has also been criticized for enabling the EU to evade its moral and legal obligations by outsourcing migration control responsibilities to states with problematic human rights records (Hoffmann, 2023). Such practices raise serious ethical concerns about the prioritization of security objectives over the dignity, safety, and rights of migrants. A recent example is the June 2023 Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and Tunisia, which pledged €1 billion (approximately USD 1.07 billion) as part of a broader effort to curb irregular migration to Europe (European Commission, 2023). Tunisia, while navigating its post-revolution democratic transition, faces acute socio-economic challenges, including high youth unemployment and entrenched inequalities (Ben Yahia, 2024). Although the EU has framed its engagement with Tunisia as promoting democratic governance, economic development, and counter-radicalization, observers contend that migration deterrence remains the dominant policy driver (Zanker & Altrogge, 2022). The EU-Tunisia partnership, while framed in the language of cooperation and mutual benefit, is primarily designed to advance the EU's migration control agenda in North Africa. The agreement allocates significant financial resources toward curbing irregular migration, with €105 million earmarked for migration management substantially more than the €10 million designated for student exchange initiatives and €65 million for school modernization (European Commission, 2023). While such measures are officially justified as contributing to Tunisia's economic stability and security, they raise serious human rights concerns, particularly in light of recent incidents in which hundreds of migrants, predominantly Black Africans, were subjected to violence by Tunisian security forces shortly before the deal's finalization (Amnesty International, 2023; Moreno-Lax, 2024). Tunisia's lack of a comprehensive legal framework for the protection of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees exacerbates these concerns, prompting questions about the ethical implications of the EU's reliance on external partners with limited safeguards for vulnerable populations.

From a policy perspective, the EU's externalization strategy has yielded measurable reductions in irregular migration flows from West Africa to Europe by tightening border controls and fostering closer cooperation with African governments. These efforts have made irregular sea crossings more difficult and, in turn, have reduced the number of dangerous journeys toward European shores (Carrera & Cortinovia, 2024). However, the unintended consequences of such policies have been profound. By outsourcing border management to African transit and origin states many of which are already struggling with political fragility and limited resources, the EU has shifted the burden of enforcement onto partners ill-equipped to manage the resulting pressures. This has led to documented instances of human rights violations, including mass deportations, arbitrary detention, and physical abuse of migrants, as well as the exploitation of vulnerable individuals by corrupt officials or criminal networks (Guild, 2023; Zanker & Altrogge, 2022). Moreover, as legal migration pathways have narrowed, many would-be migrants have turned to smugglers and more clandestine, dangerous routes to reach Europe. The EU's externalization agenda has also clashed with African regional integration frameworks, most notably the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Freedom of Movement, which grants citizens the right to travel and reside in other member states for up to 90 days. The imposition of EU-driven border control measures has, in practice, curtailed these rights, undermining both the spirit and function of the protocol (Adebajo, 2024). The drivers of irregular migration from Africa are structural challenges such as poor governance, widespread poverty, unemployment, and limited economic opportunity remain largely unaddressed within the EU's externalization approach (Bergmann & Freyburg, 2023). As long as these root causes persist, migration pressures are unlikely to subside, with many migrants instead adapting by developing more sophisticated strategies to bypass restrictions, often at greater personal risk and financial cost. African states' responses to EU externalization policies have varied: while some transit and origin countries have actively engaged with the EU receiving financial and technical assistance in exchange for implementing strict migration control measures, this cooperation has raised concerns about the erosion of sovereignty and the Europeanization of African migration governance systems (Cassarino & Lavenex, 2023).

Shared Responsibility and Equal Partnership: The Global Compact for Migration

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) offers a potentially constructive framework for fostering a more balanced and equitable approach to migration governance within the Africa–EU partnership. At its core, the GCM promotes the principles of safe, regular, and orderly migration that benefits all stakeholders, while encouraging collaborative decision-making between states on an equal footing (United Nations, 2018; Wickramasekara, 2023). By advancing the idea of shared responsibility, it seeks to address critical global migration challenges through cooperation that recognizes the sovereignty, agency, and mutual interests of all parties involved. Integrating the principles of the GCM into Africa–EU migration dialogues in practical and context-sensitive ways could provide a foundation for rebalancing the partnership, mitigating the negative impacts of the EU’s border externalization policies, and fostering fairer, rights-based migration governance (Adepoju, 2024; Lavenex & Zanker, 2023). However, any attempt to apply the GCM as a guiding instrument in Africa–EU relations must be rooted in a reframing of the compact to reflect African migration realities and governance priorities. Critics have argued that, despite its inclusive rhetoric, the GCM remains influenced by Western-centric perspectives that implicitly privilege the interests of the Global North over those of the Global South (Mbaye & Bakewell, 2024). This critique underscores the need for deliberate and strategic engagement by both African and European actors to ensure that the GCM’s principles are operationalized in ways that address Africa’s socio-economic and political contexts, as well as the continent’s own development and mobility objectives. Such intentional reframing would require the EU to move beyond a primarily security-driven agenda, while African states would need to engage proactively in shaping and asserting migration governance frameworks that reflect their own priorities and aspirations.

Encouragingly, the outcomes of the sixth Africa–EU Summit signal some appetite for this recalibration. The summit emphasized the shared goal of renewing and strengthening the partnership to achieve a more reciprocal and balanced relationship. It also acknowledged the importance of adopting a holistic approach to migration and mobility, one that addresses not only border management but also the interconnected economic, political, social, and environmental drivers of migration (African Union & European Union, 2022). This recognition is critical, as sustainable migration governance requires addressing the complex and multi-layered nature of migration challenges, which vary across regions, are shaped by diverse national interests, and are influenced by broader cross-cutting issues such as trade, climate change, and human rights protection (Bergmann & Freyburg, 2023). Nevertheless, the persistence of fragmented bilateral migration agreements between individual African states and the EU continues to weaken African agency in collective negotiations and facilitates the EU’s ability to advance its externalization agenda. The absence of a coherent, continent-wide framework for engagement has created conditions in which national governments negotiate in isolation, often under asymmetric bargaining power dynamics that favor the EU (Cassarino & Lavenex, 2023). To counter this, the African Union (AU) could play a more assertive role in developing, harmonizing, and enforcing continental standards on migration-related agreements. Such a coordinated approach would promote uniformity, strengthen African states’ commitment to regional initiatives, and help safeguard national sovereignty while reinforcing Africa’s common positions in migration governance forums. By adopting a unified continental stance, African states could better negotiate the terms of migration partnerships with the EU, ensuring that agreements genuinely reflect shared interests rather than primarily serving European security priorities. This strengthened agency would contribute to the broader goal of establishing an equal partnership, underpinned by the principles of mutual respect, reciprocity, and joint responsibility. Ultimately, embedding GCM principles reframed to address Africa’s specific contexts into Africa–EU migration cooperation could serve as a pivotal step toward dismantling the structural imbalances that currently define the partnership, replacing them with a more equitable and development-oriented governance framework.

Expanding Talent Partnerships: Towards Inclusive and Equitable EU–Africa Migration Pathways

Fostering talent partnerships represents a critical avenue for establishing equitable and mutually advantageous migration frameworks between African states and the European Union (EU). By strategically

leveraging the skills, expertise, and entrepreneurial potential of individuals across both continents, such partnerships have the capacity to rebalance current asymmetries in EU–Africa migration relations. Beyond addressing immediate labor market demands, these initiatives can stimulate sustainable economic growth, create meaningful employment opportunities, strengthen educational systems, and advance skills development in African states. In doing so, they offer a proactive approach to poverty alleviation while simultaneously enabling safe, legal, and structured migration channels for individuals whose skills can make tangible contributions to European economies. Importantly, such channels reduce reliance on dangerous, irregular migration routes that expose migrants to exploitation, human rights violations, and life-threatening risks (Adepoju, 2024; Lavenex & Zanker, 2023).

Global precedents underscore the potential of skills-based migration models. For instance, bilateral arrangements such as the Morocco–Belgium and Philippines–United Kingdom skills partnerships have demonstrated the feasibility of aligning workforce needs in destination countries with available talent pools in sending countries (OECD, 2023). Drawing on these examples, the EU and African states can design migration partnerships that are not only economically beneficial but also socially sustainable, ensuring that both sending and receiving societies share in the long-term gains. A notable initiative in this space was the Migration of African Talents through Capacity Building and Hiring (MATCH) program, a 39-month EU-funded project implemented between 2020 and 2023. MATCH aimed to connect “skilled” workers from Nigeria and Senegal with private sector companies in Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. The program incorporated pre-departure training in interview preparation, soft skills development, and workplace integration, designed to enhance participants’ employability in competitive labor markets. Of the 657 applications received, 378 candidates were shortlisted for 118 vacancies across 29 hiring companies, with 121 candidates advancing to the final recruitment stage. However, despite these initial successes, only eight individuals were ultimately employed in European companies (European Commission, 2023). While the MATCH initiative demonstrated the EU’s commitment to promoting legal migration pathways, its limited recruitment rate highlighted structural challenges. Chief among these were the restrictive selection criteria used by employers, which significantly narrowed the pool of eligible candidates, as well as mismatches between the skills on offer and the specific demands of hiring companies (Guild & Grant, 2024). These shortcomings suggest that, for talent partnerships to achieve their full potential, there must be greater alignment between training programs and market needs, more flexible recruitment standards, and stronger engagement from employers willing to invest in on-boarding and upskilling. Addressing these issues would not only improve recruitment outcomes but also ensure that talent partnerships serve as a credible and scalable alternative to asymmetrical migration agreements that disproportionately favor destination countries.

The prevailing distinction between what constitutes “high-skilled” versus “low-skilled” or “unskilled” labour warrants critical reconsideration within the framework of migration policy and talent partnership programs. Conventional definitions, often anchored in formal education credentials, advanced certifications, or white-collar professional experience, exclude a substantial proportion of individuals whose expertise lies in blue-collar sectors such as agriculture, construction, transportation, manufacturing, and maintenance. These occupational categories require extensive technical proficiency, physical competence, problem-solving skills, and years of experiential knowledge, all of which are indispensable to the functioning of modern economies (Anderson & Ruhs, 2024; Piper & Withers, 2023). The high demand for labor in these sectors across Europe particularly in light of aging populations, labor shortages, and post-pandemic recovery efforts demonstrates that such skills are not only valuable but critical to economic resilience. Limiting talent partnerships to individuals with formal qualifications inherently narrows their scope and undermines their potential to address irregular migration dynamics effectively. Many of those who embark on dangerous, unauthorized migration routes lack the resources, social networks, and institutional access required to meet rigid “high-skilled” criteria. Consequently, they remain excluded from legal migration channels, even though their skills could meet genuine labor market needs in destination countries (ILO, 2023). By expanding the definition of “high-skilled” to encompass a wider range of occupational competencies, talent partnership programs could more equitably benefit vulnerable migrants, offering them safe and structured

migration opportunities while also addressing systemic labor shortages in Europe (Olivier et al., 2025). Such an inclusive redefinition would not only create pathways for individuals at risk of taking irregular migration routes but would also contribute to greater social equity within migration governance. Furthermore, recognizing the economic and social contributions of workers in traditionally undervalued sectors could help counter stigmatizing narratives that frame migration solely through the lens of security and control. This shift aligns with emerging policy recommendations advocating for labor migration frameworks that balance market needs with humanitarian considerations, ensuring that mobility opportunities are accessible to a more diverse pool of applicants (Castles et al., 2024). Ultimately, expanding talent partnerships to embrace a broader skills spectrum represents a pragmatic and ethically grounded strategy for managing migration in a way that benefits both migrants and host societies.

Conclusion

The analysis of EU–Africa migration compacts and the broader framework of migration externalization reveals a deeply entrenched pattern in which European migration governance priorities continue to shape and often dominate the mobility agendas of African states. Although framed in the language of partnership, capacity building, and mutual benefit, these arrangements frequently embed asymmetrical power relations that mirror the structural legacies of colonialism. By shifting migration control functions beyond its territorial borders, the EU has effectively reconfigured African states as frontline enforcers of its security-oriented migration policies. This approach not only limits African sovereignty in migration governance but also displaces the humanitarian and legal responsibilities for migrant protection onto states that often lack the institutional capacity and resources to meet international human rights standards. Postcolonial theory helps illuminate how these dynamics are sustained by both material and discursive continuities from the colonial era. Financial incentives, conditional development assistance, and securitized policy frameworks maintain dependency structures, while persistent narratives of Africa as a source of instability and irregular migration legitimize restrictive measures. The EU’s reliance on bilateral agreements, readmission frameworks, and security missions demonstrates a preference for flexible, often opaque governance arrangements that bypass more transparent multilateral oversight. Such mechanisms may yield short-term reductions in irregular arrivals but also produce significant unintended consequences including the disruption of intra-African mobility, the criminalization of long-standing migration patterns, and the exacerbation of human rights violations in transit and origin countries.

The European Union’s engagement with alternative policy models, most notably the introduction of talent partnerships, presents a potential avenue for cultivating a more balanced, mutually beneficial, and ethically grounded framework for migration cooperation with African states. These initiatives, in principle, hold promise for moving beyond the restrictive and security-driven approaches that have long characterized the EU’s externalization strategy. By creating structured and legal migration pathways, talent partnerships could address labor shortages in Europe while simultaneously fostering skills development, employment opportunities, and economic growth in African countries. However, in practice, such programs remain narrow in scope and are frequently constrained by restrictive eligibility criteria, most prominently, the emphasis on a rigid and often Eurocentric definition of “high-skilled” labor. This definition typically privileges formal educational attainment, advanced certifications, and white-collar professions, thereby excluding a significant proportion of potential migrants whose skills in sectors such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and transport are equally indispensable to both African and European economies. The exclusion of these workers not only limits the developmental impact of such programs but also undermines their potential to serve as viable alternatives to irregular migration.

A truly transformative migration partnership would require a broader and more inclusive understanding of skill, one that recognizes and values a diverse range of competencies and experiences, including those acquired outside formal academic settings. Moreover, it would demand a genuine commitment to co-creating migration policies with African governments, civil society actors, and migrant communities, ensuring that African priorities and developmental objectives are central to the design and implementation process. Without this shift, talent partnerships risk functioning as largely symbolic measures, policy

instruments that appear progressive on the surface but ultimately reproduce the same asymmetries and limitations embedded in the EU's broader migration governance architecture. For the EU to bring its migration policies into alignment with the principles articulated in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and with the broader ideals of equitable international cooperation, a fundamental recalibration of its externalization strategy is required. Such a recalibration would necessitate dismantling the structural dependencies and discursive frameworks that perpetuate neocolonial power relations, embedding genuine reciprocity into migration agreements, and elevating the protection of human rights to the same level of priority as border security. In this way, the EU could begin to move beyond the coloniality that currently underpins much of its migration governance and establish a foundation for sustainable, ethical, and development-oriented cooperation. This is not only a moral imperative grounded in principles of justice and equality, but also a pragmatic necessity effective and durable migration management depends on policy frameworks that serve the long-term economic, social, and humanitarian interests of both Africa and Europe.

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