



Challenges in EU-African Migration Cooperation: West African Perspectives on Forced Return

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- Improving cooperation on the return and readmission of West African migrants has been central for the EU in recent years, yet return numbers remain low.
- In West Africa, the issue of return, and in particular forced return, remains highly sensitive. Cooperating with EU member states on forced return may hurt the domestic legitimacy of governments in countries like the Gambia, Nigeria, Niger, and Senegal.
- While cooperation on return may help to attract development funds, governments and citizens fear a loss of remittances in the case of large-scale returns.
- Migration cooperation with the EU has led to competition and conflicts over mandates between government institutions and reduced local ownership of migration governance.
- Better cooperation on return depends on the EU expanding opportunities for legal migration to Europe, as highlighted by the Valetta action plan. Otherwise, cooperation would remain biased toward restrictive policies, which will only become more contested in the long run.

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The Political Economy of West African Migration Governance

This policy brief draws upon a series of expert meetings and interviews carried out within the framework of the WAMiG project. The project explores how migration governance instruments and institutions are made and implemented, the stakes and stake holders involved or excluded and the societal discourse that surrounds these interests. The qualitative study focuses on four case studies – the Gambia, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal.

WAMiG is an independent research project conducted by the Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institute as part of the Mercator Dialogue on Asylum and Migration (MEDAM). The WAMiG project focuses on the African perspective and its implications for European policy making. WAMiG and MEDAM policy recommendations may therefore differ slightly.

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² An earlier draft of this policy brief was inadvertently released under the title “Passing the buck: The ‘hot potato’ of forced returns from Europe to West Africa”.

Introduction: A European agenda in West Africa

Improving cooperation on the return and readmission of migrants has been a key element of the EU's response to the so-called 2015 migration crisis, which also includes concerted efforts to foster (forced) returns to West African states.³

The adoption of a common approach to return has been tied to the development of the Schengen zone from the beginning. In 1992, the European Council signed a Declaration on Principles Governing External Aspects of Migration Policy, putting an emphasis on EU return agreements with countries of origin and transit. The 1999 Tampere summit marked the beginning of the Common European Asylum System and affirmed its commitment to ensuring the “rapid return of failed asylum seekers” (*Migration News* 1999). Article 13 of the 2000 Cotonou Agreement—the treaty on the European Development Fund signed by the EU and the African, Caribbean, and Pacific Group of States—sets out the signatory states’ commitment to accept the return and readmission of any nationals “illegally present on the territory of the other region ... at that Member State’s request and without *further formalities*” (emphasis added). The EU’s first common framework on migration cooperation with third countries, the 2005 Global Approach to Migration (GAM), included return requirements. The GAM became the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM) in 2011 and emphasized the signing of Common Agendas on Migration and Mobility, which were not binding and did not necessarily include return.⁴

In 2015, primarily through the European Agenda on Migration and its subsequent New Partnership Framework on Migration with Third Countries, the development approach of ‘more for more’ and ‘less for less’ (i.e., in the more or less positive incentives for cooperation on migration/return matters) was strengthened by linking new policy areas to return commitments. Further, it shifted the geographical area to West Africa—with four out of five priority countries for migration cooperation being in the region.⁵ Moreover, the New Partnership Framework states that “the paramount priority is to achieve fast and operational returns, and not necessarily formal readmission agreements.”⁶ Indeed, joint statements, memorandums, and other informal agreements have increasingly replaced the formal return agreements that the EU had previously aspired to (see also Cassarino and Giuffré 2017; Slagter 2019).

³ The 2019 *MEDAM Assessment Report* argues that the integrity of the EU asylum system even depends on effective procedures for the return and readmission by their countries of origin of non-EU citizens who have no right to remain in the EU (MEDAM 2019).

⁴ Though the link between return as a way to achieve the goal of preventing and combatting irregular migration is made explicit in for example the EU-Ethiopia Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility (Zanker 2019, 11).

⁵ These include Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal; the fifth priority country is Ethiopia.

⁶ European Commission, Communication on Establishing a New Partnership Framework with Third Countries under the European Agenda on Migration, COM (2016) 385 final, Strasbourg, 7.6.2016.

Two types of returns are *politically relevant* in current West African-European relations in response to the European priorities as outlined above:⁷ transit return and forced return from Europe. First, **transit return** refers to the assisted ‘voluntary’ return of migrants to their countries of origin while still in West Africa or sometimes—but not always—within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region. This type of return has been strengthened through the EU Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa program—an EU-International Organization for Migration (IOM) Joint Initiative on Migrant Protection and Reintegration launched in 2016, through which voluntary return is carried out.⁸ The joint initiative covers the transportation of migrants back to their countries of origin, an extended reception period to receive medical check-ups, and information on support opportunities upon arrival. The subsequent reintegration component offers in-kind assistance; which migrants can apply for if interested. Transit return is voluntary in the sense that migrants give their consent to be returned. However, in some contexts, such as Niger, access to shelter and other forms of assistance in IOM-run transit centers is conditional upon agreeing to “voluntarily” return (see Morales 2019). Most of these transit returnees come from Libya and Niger, but there are also returns from Mali, Morocco, and Algeria. While assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) and voluntary humanitarian return are legitimized on humanitarian grounds, their funding might also stem from their potential to curb irregular migration to Europe. This would also explain why such returns are linked with reintegration assistance, which is supposed to increase incentives to stay in the countries of origin.

Second, and politically most divisive, are **forced returns** from Europe.⁹ Often referred to as “deportations” or “removal” (IOM 2019), these returns follow an order to leave after refusal of admission or termination of permission to remain. Forced returns may be operated on scheduled or non-scheduled flights, organized by a destination country, or coordinated by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG).¹⁰ Such returns must be carried out in cooperation with the countries of origin, which, in the case of returnees who have no identification documents, may issue travel documents and provide support on arrival. The numbers of forced returns are low, especially as shown in the ratio of those returned to how many received an order to leave (see figure 1). The primary reason for the low number of

⁷ Other types of returns include those from diasporas (e.g., Hammond 2015) and the return of Americans and Caribbeans to their West African origins after slavery (Arhin-Sam 2019). Assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programs are also in place in many European countries, which cover the cost and administration of travel and vary regarding their (financial or non-financial) reintegration support options.

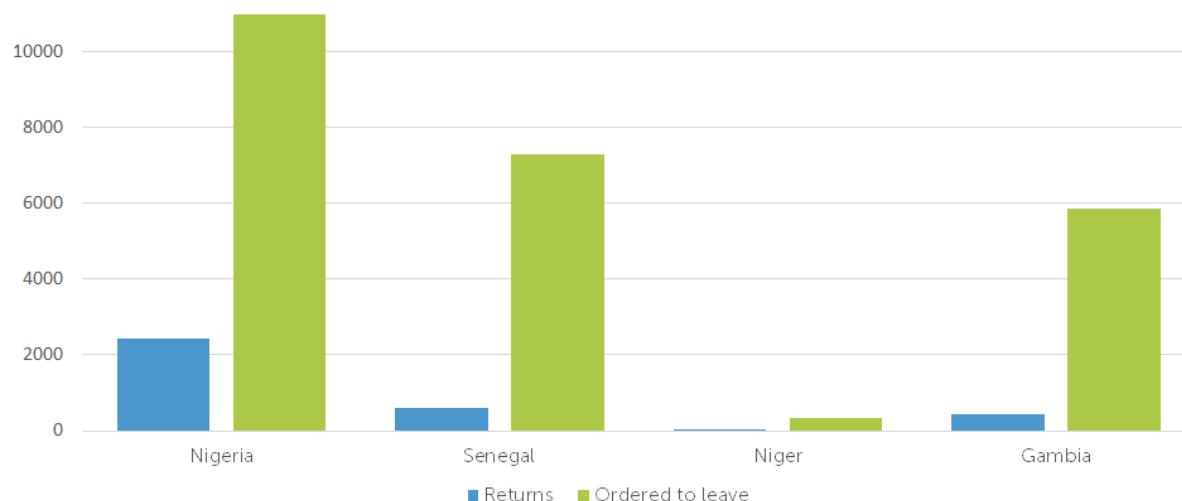
⁸ Return from Libya is largely referred to as voluntary humanitarian return and comes under the umbrella of AVRR, though in some cases these returns have also been referred to simply as AVRR. Voluntary humanitarian returns are different from the evacuation program run by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees under the Emergency Transit Mechanism, for refugees from Libya to Niger and most recently Rwanda (see Jegen and Zanker 2019b).

⁹ We do not discuss forced returns from the US and other world regions, although this is of course highly relevant from the perspective of the origin countries.

¹⁰ FRONTEX is the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, tasked to control the borders of the Schengen Area by the EU. Since 2005, it has been responsible for coordinating border control efforts by the member states. Since 2016, the agency has seen a successive expansion of its mandate, including its involvement in return management. FRONTEX does not, however, coordinate all flights and therefore cannot give conclusive numbers on returns (personal communication with the press office, September 2019).

returns is attributed to a lack of willingness to cooperate by countries of origin. In response to the low return ratios, the EU has focused on incentives for cooperation on return, informalisation of return agreements, and a geographical focus on West Africa.

Figure 1:
Returns compared with orders to leave from the EU, 2018



Source: Eurostat.

The relatively low return rates, which largely continue to be the case despite the push from the EU to enforce return, highlight the fact that returns are highly controversial politically. Returns are the ‘hot potato’ when it comes to cooperating on migration (interview with a civil society actor in the Gambia, June 2017). The return topic is by no means a new one and AVRR programs as well as forced returns have received considerable attention by scholars (e.g., Coutin 2015; Black and Gent 2006). Fewer studies have considered the political impact of returns in countries of origin, focusing more generally on the development contributions of highly skilled returnees and their reintegration (Cassarino 2016), though exceptions do exist (Turner 2008; Sinatti 2015; Zanker and Altrogge 2019). Moreover, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Adam et al. 2019; Mouthaan 2019; Uzelac 2019), few studies have considered the political ramifications of return for West African countries. In the following analysis we look at the political role of return and the tradeoff between remittances and ‘migratory rent’, as well as the effects of cooperation on return.

Our findings are based on our research project, the **Political Economy of West African Migration Governance**, which endeavors to analyze the political dimension of migration governance and its multiple stakeholders on the basis of four qualitative case studies in the Gambia, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. All four countries are major source, destination, and transit countries, and the latter three are priority countries under the New Partnership Framework. We interviewed 112 policy makers, politicians, civil society activists, and academic experts, reviewed our findings with country experts, and discussed and debated

them at dissemination events in Accra, Abuja, Banjul, Niamey, and Dakar between July and November 2019.

The political role of return

Generally, in all four case study countries, migration as such is not a politically salient issue per se. Rather, it is seen as a common feature of everyday life, as in the words of one Nigerien development worker: “*La migration, c’est une tradition, c’est une mode de vie.*”¹¹ This might be linked to the continued importance of remittances for both personal and national development prospects (see below section on remittance or ‘migratory rent’).

However, migration on the whole and irregular migration in particular is becoming more politicized through the EU-led approach toward ‘managing’ migration. Despite the fact that the most common form of migration in West Africa is regional migration (e.g., Awumbila et al. 2014) and this is safeguarded through ECOWAS free-movement protocols, measures governing irregular migration have increasingly been adopted and gained political salience in the four countries (e.g., Jegen and Zanker 2019a). Return or readmission is a central element of these measures.

Three components dominate the political response to return. First, transit return is the least controversial, motivated by a humanitarian response, especially when related to the conditions in Libya. Second, cooperation on return is partially employed strategically by the four countries, though not obviously in accordance with the incentive strategy put in place by the European Agenda on Migration and New Partnership Framework post-2015. Third, return—and in particular forced return—remains a highly sensitive issue, and European incentives need to be weighed up with domestic legitimacy.¹²

On the first point, the release of the 2017 CNN video of the gross mistreatment of migrants in Libya led to many governments being in favor of transit returns as a humanitarian measure. In 2018, for example, the Nigerian government repatriated nearly 5,000 migrants from Libya, in addition to the returns under the IOM Joint Initiative (Arhin-Sam and Zanker 2019). The Nigerian government is relatively tolerant and accepting toward the return of stranded Nigerians from Libya and other transit countries like Mali and Niger, and respondents considered it a way to fulfill their responsibilities toward Nigerian citizens. A humanitarian discourse on transit return is also widely accepted among Senegalese policy makers. For instance, the joint Senegalese-EBCG Operation Hera was adopted in 2006 and intercepts boats *on their way* to the Canary Islands. While human rights groups have raised concerns about human rights violations (see for example Wriedt and Reinhardt 2017), the Senegalese government employs a humanitarian narrative to legitimize the joint operation.

¹¹ Translation: “Migration is a tradition, it is a way of life,” according to a Nigerien working for an EU member state initiative on development cooperation (Interview, Niamey, March 2019).

¹² For brevity, we do not go into each case in detail to exemplify each point but describe respective examples instead.

On the second point, to some degree states successfully leverage European interest in return. For example, Niger cooperates as a transit return partner with the EU in a variety of ways, in part linked to advantages to the government, including regime stability, state building, and development, although the state also makes a case for the humanitarian protection of migrants crossing the desert (Jegen and Zanker 2019a). Yet for the most part, strategic buy-in into return operations is not necessarily linked to the incentives put in place after 2015 and the New Partnership Framework. Senegalese cooperation with the EBCG is one example of strategic collaboration with the EU on return that is considered “successful” by European actors (Vives 2017). Still, most cooperation is on a bilateral basis. Taking the latter, Senegal signed bilateral return agreements with France and Spain in 2009. Nigeria also has several bilateral repatriation agreements, notably with Ireland (2001), Spain (2002), the United Kingdom (2004), and Italy (2002) as well as Switzerland (2010). With a delicate balance of material and financial ‘gains’ and political losses, bilateral cooperation is much easier to pursue (see also Chou and Gibert 2012).

Lastly, forced return is extremely contentious among domestic audiences, which makes any cooperation strategically difficult. In Senegal, the return issue was politicized in this year’s election, with election narratives explicitly stating that cooperation on forced return would not be strengthened (see also Adam et al. 2019). This can be traced to much earlier European attention on return cooperation. Following the so-called Canary Island crisis in 2006, the EU started negotiations on an EU-Senegalese Mobility Partnership in 2008, but talks were indefinitely suspended by 2009.

This contrasts with Nigeria, where during elections happening around the same time the issue of return was not discussed in political campaigns, at least not at a federal level. Nonetheless, even there the government is far more reluctant to cooperate on forced rather than transit return. The main interest of the Nigerian government in migration is to attract remittances and diaspora investments for national development and growth. The dilemma therefore is that if Nigeria agrees with the EU on the return of Nigerians, like in the case of the Gambia or Senegal, it could reduce the inflows of remittances and investment. As one civil society actor put it, “bringing many Nigerians back without anything to offer them may lead to a social crisis, a rise in crime, and a social breakdown and sense of the *government siding with the EU*” (emphasis added; interview with a civil society actor in Abuja, 11 April 2019). It comes as little surprise that any further negotiations in concluding a readmission agreement between Nigeria and the EU have so far been unsuccessful, despite the country signing a Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility with the EU in 2015.

The issue of return is particularly contested and volatile in the Gambia. In 2018 alone, 5,525 Gambians had their asylum claims rejected by EU member states in a final decision. Owing to the large number of Gambians migrating to the EU since 2014, the generally low chances of positive asylum decisions, and the expectation of positive developments under a new political regime, there is a political urge on the part of EU member states like Germany to return a large number of Gambians in the near future (Altrogge 2019). In March 2019, in a surprise move, the Gambian government imposed a moratorium on any further deportation

flights from the EU. Forced returns were blocked in a standoff that continued for months, until October 2019. Prior to that, the Gambian government had signaled some willingness to cooperate with the EU on return. For a few previous months, starting in November 2018, there had been an increase in deportations based on a non-binding ‘good practice’ agreement on return between the EU and the Gambian government. Deportation flights allegedly failing to keep up the good practice on return were followed by public outcries and a protest after a particularly contested flight in February 2019, all of which were likely to have contributed to the moratorium.¹³ In order to balance its domestic interests with international incentives, the Gambian government has applied a strategy of silence: negating any involvement in (formal) return agreements affecting Gambian citizens and staying silent on the moratorium, allowing it to buy time with international partners while sending a symbolic message to the domestic audience that it takes their concerns seriously.

Remittances or ‘migratory rent’?

The reasons for the political discord surrounding return in countries of origin are related to their interest in upholding a right to migrate, the often-violent procedures of forced removal, and the mixed outcomes of reintegration governance. Still, there is another fundamental issue—namely that of personal remittances. If we weigh these up with the considerable development projects put into place in the post-2015 period and with the idea of tackling the ‘root causes’ of migration by encouraging development in the country, the political calculation by governments on return becomes even more complex.

Considering the impact of remittances on the one hand, migration constitutes an important process in a globalized world, with high poverty-reduction potential for developing countries (e.g., Clemens 2014), for example through remittances contributing to household income. Nigeria is the largest net remittance-recipient country in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2017, the country received US\$22 billion in official remittances, representing 5.9 percent of Nigeria’s GDP (World Bank 2019). The importance of remittances is even more striking when compared with official development assistance, where at times it is almost equal. Take the Gambia: remittances amounted to US\$228 million in 2017, nearly the same as official development assistance which stood at US\$269 million (World Bank 2019; see also figure 2 below).

This explains why governments are interested in engaging diaspora communities both economically and increasingly also politically, which is especially so in Nigeria as well as Senegal. Cooperation on return could be costly, undermining political support from diaspora communities and undercutting possible remittances (see also Moutaah 2019). Indeed, remittances not only come from the highly skilled abroad, but also from those traveling irregularly. In the Gambia, by far the greatest share of remittances is sent from Spain (World

¹³ Though the Gambian partners had already informed their European partners of the moratorium earlier (Altrogge and Zanker 2019).

Bank 2017), where most Gambian migrants arrived irregularly. Thus, remittances arising from irregular migration make up an important economic factor for many households in the Gambia, as in Nigeria and Senegal. This accounts for the reluctance of governments to support return, on behalf of both their domestic audiences and their economies.

On the other hand, all four countries have gained in development funds since 2015 due to the European approach. The Valetta summit in 2015—bringing together European and African heads of states for the first summit solely dedicated to the topic of migration—saw the launch of the EUTF, mostly funded through the EU’s development budget. EUTF projects have drawn considerable criticism for reorienting development funding away from a needs-based perspective toward the political interests of donor countries, lacking transparency in funding allocation, and prioritizing control-oriented approaches to migration over creating legal pathways (e.g., Oxfam 2017). At the same time, EUTF-funded projects have been an important incentive for non-EU countries to enter into cooperation with European member states. At the very least, these projects are implicitly linked to the issue of return. An implementing partner, speaking of the difficulties in setting up a biometric database within the framework of civil registries in a project funded by the EUTF, commented on the suspicion of Senegalese authorities that this project will have *“toute cette question insidieuses qui ne sont pas déclarés, qui sont suspectés par les autorités sénégalaises”* in relation to return.¹⁴

Table 1:**Overview of EUTF projects, September 2019**

	Nigeria	Senegal	Niger	The Gambia
Total value of EUTF projects (€)	128,523,633	107,803,200	253,000,000	37,900,000
Number of EUTF projects	8	10	12	3
EUTF as a share of GDP (%)	0.005	0.49	3.01	2.57
Volume of EUTF funding in relation to the population size (per million) (€)	0.040842428	0.630743073	0.534689115	1.315730612

Source: Figures for the EUTF are from the European Commission (<https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/sahel-lake-chad>); GDP stems from the World Bank (2019).

Note: EUTF = EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa.

Niger has been the largest benefactor of the four case study countries, with 12 projects to the tune €253 million, making up 3 percent of GDP (see table 1). If we account for population size, the EUTF is also especially significant in the Gambia, at €1.3 per million inhabitants compared with €0.4 per million inhabitants in Nigeria. This ratio is reflected in the high degree of societal attention that EUTF-funded projects receive by young Gambians, with one

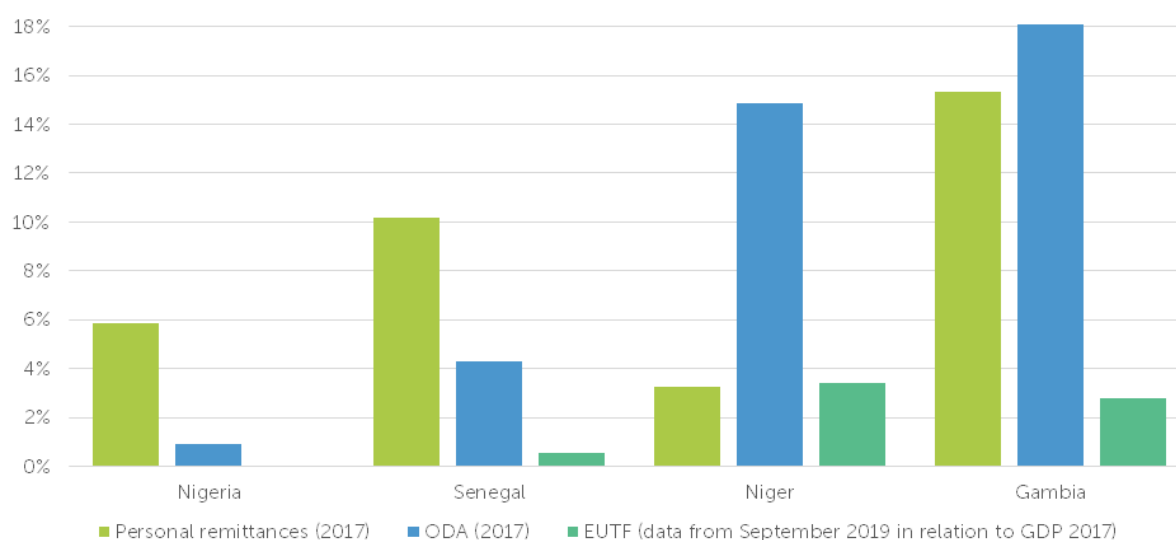
¹⁴ Translation: “all these insidious issues that are not declared, which are suspected by the Senegalese authorities” (Interview, Dakar, 29 July 2019).

particular project making up a very visible element of the new government’s youth empowerment agenda, which is a central pillar of its reforms.

Development aid for migration-related purposes makes it lucrative for governments to cooperate with the EU (see also Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen 2012). Aid includes institution building, training, technical support, and policy development. Moreover, EUTF projects, which are not the only but the most important source of migration-related development funds, can help on an individual level. For instance, these funds can improve the employability of potential or returning migrants, albeit the latter may only (temporarily) delay the challenges of economic (re)integration if it is not linked to more structural reforms in the education sector or the labor market (see also Kveder and Flahaux 2013). More importantly, the focus on EUTF projects also masks the hampering economic conditions at the household level due to declining (new) remittances.

In some cases, including Senegal and Nigeria, personal remittances still far outweigh the EUTF funds as well as overall official development assistance in terms of the percentage they contribute to GDP. This may also explain why countries like Nigeria have been so reluctant to cooperate with the EU on return: the EUTF funds make up 0.005 percent of GDP and remittances 5.9 percent (see figure 2).

Figure 2:
Different income sources as a percentage of GDP



Source: World Bank 2019

Notes: EUTF = EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa; ODA = Net official development assistance consists of disbursements of loans made on concessional terms and grants by official agencies of the members of the Development Assistance Committee, by multilateral institutions, and by non-DAC countries to promote economic development and welfare in countries and territories in the DAC list of ODA recipients.

This chart is only illustrative, with the figures for personal remittances and ODA from 2017 and the EUTF from 2019. The EUTF funding volumes are what have been promised; funds paid out would be part of the corresponding ODA.

Consequently, the domestic costs of mass returns would no doubt be very high. This stands in contrast to Niger, where the EUTF projects are more or less on a par with personal remittances in terms of the percentage of GDP (3.4 versus 3.3 percent). In the Gambia, it is notable that whilst official development assistance and personal remittances make up similar amounts of the GDP in terms of percentage – 18.1 percent versus 15.1 percent – the development assistance more than doubled in 2017. In 2016, development assistance only made up 6 percent of the GDP (and remittances 14.3 percent, see World Bank 2019). This highlights the importance of development assistance for the new Gambian government, increasingly competing with the high levels of remittances in the country and explains the competing domestic and external pressures they face.

Effects of cooperation on return

Even if the potential loss of remittances constitutes a smaller risk for countries like Niger, the agenda of offering incentives for cooperation on return has overall negative effects and does not seem to actually improve cooperation on return as the low ratios show. There are three consequences of cooperation on migration generally and on return in particular: it increases internal competition and conflict over mandates, reduces local ownership of migration governance, and can stoke suspicions among the population of backroom deals.

First, there has been an increase in internal competition and conflict over mandates. This is detrimental to institutions that are already functioning at relatively low capacity. It can lead to inefficient dual structures and further administrative backlogs. In both Niger and the Gambia, we see higher-level offices attempting to take on the migration mandate. In the Gambia, the Office of the Prime Minister is set to develop a central coordinating role that previously did not exist. In Niger, where the Office of the Prime Minister has expressed interest in taking over the mandate of migration, a stakeholder from the Ministry of the Interior stated that guarding its leadership of the migration mandate “*c’est un combat toujours*.”¹⁵ Second, in Senegal, conflicts over mandates have caused backlogs in reintegration assistance. Ministerial actors objected to the fact that the IOM had received funding for reintegration support and not national stakeholders. Similar issues can also be seen in stalling or delayed adoption of projects for comprehensive, migration-governance frameworks in Niger and the Gambia, which are under-prioritized compared with the irregular migration agenda (Jegen and Zanker 2019a). Third, the development projects and controversy over return continue to foment rumors and tension. Thus, taking the example of the Gambia, ‘the million-dollar question’ remains whether the government has signed a repatriation agreement on forced return with European countries in exchange for development funds (interview with an activist in Serrekunda, 16 May 2019). These rumors have been rife in the Gambia since the beginning of

¹⁵ Translation: “It is always a struggle” (Interview, Niamey, 29 March 2019).

the new government in 2017, which marked the launch of much European development support. The rumors' persistence highlights the divisive nature of the new development projects on the one hand, and returns on the other, linked with the perception by many that development funds do not benefit society but only the political elite (as opposed to personal remittances).

Outlook

In the course of attempting to create a common migration agenda, it is the question of return that is the tipping point in many instances of West African-EU negotiations. The (negative and positive) incentive structure, reinforced from 2015 onwards, has not yet impacted *official* cooperation on (forced) return. With the exception of Niger,¹⁶ return cooperation either predates this change (Senegal), is only very tentative (the Gambia), or barely existing (Nigeria). Political domestic calculations are highly pertinent, including the great importance of remittances, which returns would potentially offset. With the more-for-more approach thus far showing few benefits, further disincentives are only likely to worsen the already tense relations between the two areas.

The continued preference for bilateral deals and progressive informalisation therefore plays into the hands of both sides. For countries of origin, it enables them to downplay the matter of return to the local population (reducing the visibility), and consequently makes cooperation on return less domestically contentious. For the time being, the number of returns has not really increased in the four case study countries—the return ratios are minimal—yet the repercussions of the current strategy are high. This is because growing competition to gain from migratory rent and a lack of ownership of migration-governance frameworks are accompanied by rumors, fears, and dissension, with a social backlash only adding to distrust toward the EU in first place.

And these repercussions over the way migration cooperation is currently implemented come even before we get to the question of the impacts of reintegration management. Extensive technical delays in providing transit returnees with IOM reintegration assistance led to a backlog of waiting, suspicious returnees in the Gambia, Nigeria, and Senegal, causing tension and even violence.¹⁷ While the potential for conflict due to an overburdened system for transit-return management has passed, with the IOM retroactively extending reintegration assistance to the earlier returnees, the general potential for political destabilization due to problematic (or lack of) reintegration has not. This is not least due to the unequal treatment of different types of returns (for example along the lines of return voluntariness), let alone

¹⁶ And the fact that Niger is seen as 'successful' in cooperation with the EU (by the Commission) is likely to at least partially be linked to the less politically sensitive topic of transit returns, rather than forced returns from the EU (see Jegen forthcoming).

¹⁷ In October 2017, a group of returnees violently expressed their frustration by throwing stones at the IOM office in the Gambia.

compared with the general population, and to the continued question of whether reintegration assistance can actually be effective.

For the time being, reintegration programs are scarcely available for forcefully returned individuals, with little interest among European states to improve this.¹⁸ In fact, doing so would increase the costs of deportation even more and fundamentally undermine the incentives for taking up AVRR programs offered to rejected asylum seekers to avoid the need for costly deportation. Even in the case of functioning reintegration programs, their effects on individuals and the countries as a whole still need to be seen. But with few plausible options for legal migration, many returnees may choose to restart their journey (on the lack of institutional preparedness in Ghana to reintegrate returnees leading to re-emigration, see Kandilige and Adiku 2019). This means that even if transit return is domestically more viable for humanitarian reasons, this does not resolve the challenges of reintegration management (or migration aspirations for that matter) within the countries.

Returning to the progressive informalisation as well as the different procedures and programs for the various groups of returnees, the lack of transparency creates fundamental distrust and is likely to continue to increase the political debate surrounding return.¹⁹ Taken out of the context of parliamentary oversight and public scrutiny, domestic audiences can only fear the worst. This could give rise to a potentially explosive situation, with more demonstrations or violent skirmishes.

Our **policy recommendations** are as follows:

1. The EU, its member states, and West African partners should make their readmission agreements much more transparent. Keeping them informal and off the public radar only risks further derailing public legitimacy in the long run.
2. A holistic approach to migration governance must include measures to foster legal migration, as highlighted by the Valetta action plan. Without serious commitments to the establishment of legal pathways, cooperation between West African and European actors will remain biased toward restrictive policies, which in the long term will only be more contested.
3. African cooperation partners should clearly state their positions and more openly communicate what they need in order to actually accommodate returns. Discussions and policy developments based on the needs of returnees should also include the views of returnees, their families and communities, and the civil society sector.

¹⁸ Forced returnees can receive reintegration assistance through the IOM after their return through a Post-Arrival Reintegration Assistance program, which includes the same in-kind support as for transit returnees.

¹⁹ There has been no official communication by the New Partnership Framework since 2017. A request to see the Good Practice Agreement between the Gambia and the EU was rejected on the grounds that "disclosure would reveal to other negotiating partners the strategic approach in the implementation of the EU's mandate, thus weakening its negotiation position, complicating further developments of the ongoing readmission mechanisms and even compromising further similar agreements" (personal communication with the authors, Directorate-General Communication and Information, 17 September 2019).

4. Member states conducting returns, EU organizations like the EBCG, and international organizations like the IOM should make more of an effort to streamline the assorted programs for different types of returns. If unavoidable, those implementing return programs should communicate transparently and openly about the differences among various groups and their reasons. Failing to do so may generate grievances, confusion, and frictions among the population, including those who have not migrated.
5. West African approaches to migration governance need to be developed according to local interests, needs, and contexts. The EU, as a major donor (especially through the EUTF), should refrain from setting incentives for a certain type of approach. Otherwise, migration governance in West Africa will remain unsustainable, risk fragmentation, and increase interinstitutional competition.

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