Rabat Process Knowledge Paper
Government of Nigeria's Chair of the Rabat Process

ABUJA KNOWLEDGE PAPER ON SUSTAINABLE REINTEGRATION

Partnering for sustainable reintegration:
advancing national reintegration systems
led by countries of origin

January 2026

Acknowledgements
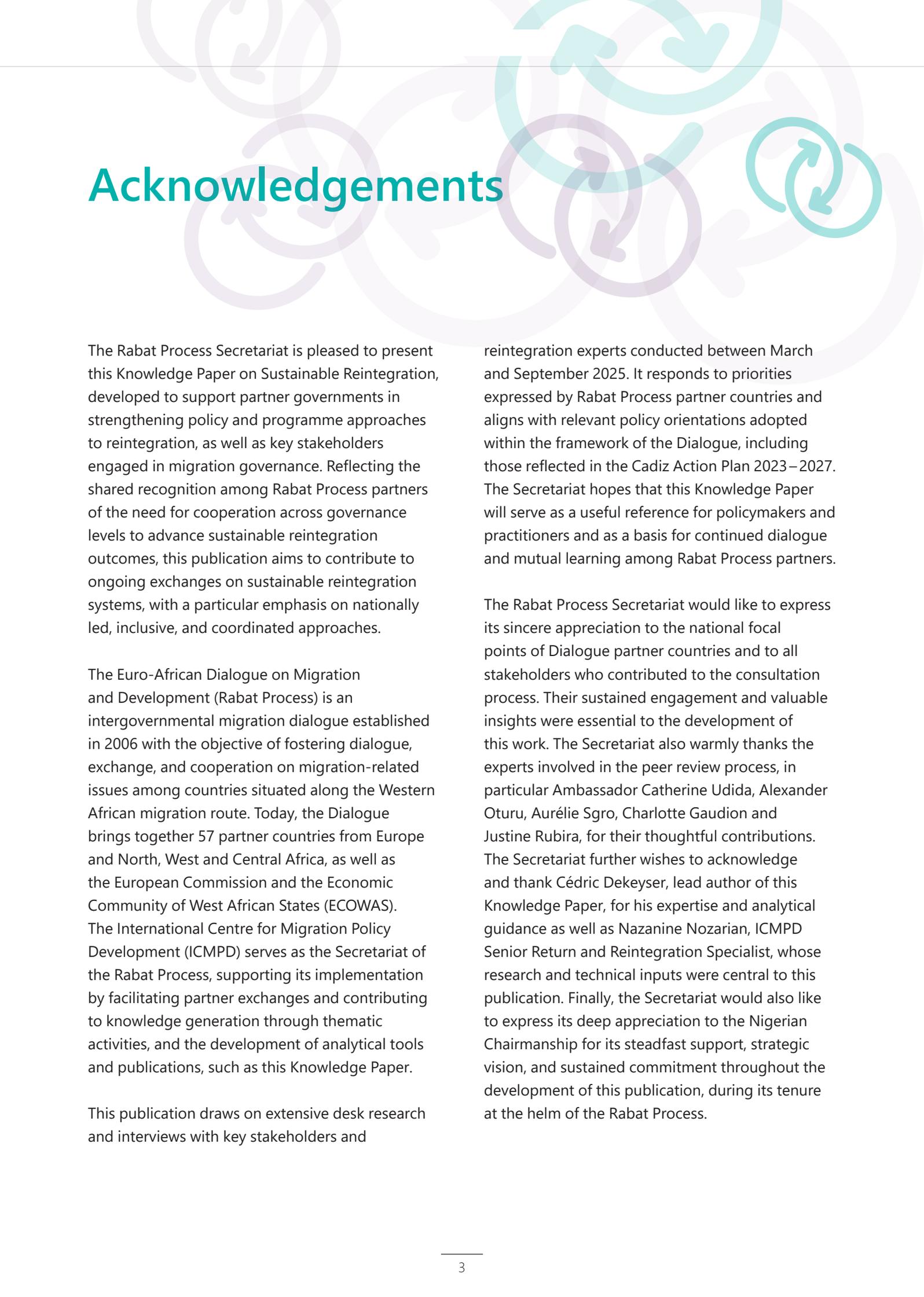
The Rabat Process Secretariat is pleased to present this Knowledge Paper on Sustainable Reintegration, developed to support partner governments in strengthening policy and programme approaches to reintegration, as well as key stakeholders engaged in migration governance. Reflecting the shared recognition among Rabat Process partners of the need for cooperation across governance levels to advance sustainable reintegration outcomes, this publication aims to contribute to ongoing exchanges on sustainable reintegration systems, with a particular emphasis on nationally led, inclusive, and coordinated approaches.

The Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development (Rabat Process) is an intergovernmental migration dialogue established in 2006 with the objective of fostering dialogue, exchange, and cooperation on migration-related issues among countries situated along the Western African migration route. Today, the Dialogue brings together 57 partner countries from Europe and North, West and Central Africa, as well as the European Commission and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) serves as the Secretariat of the Rabat Process, supporting its implementation by facilitating partner exchanges and contributing to knowledge generation through thematic activities, and the development of analytical tools and publications, such as this Knowledge Paper.

This publication draws on extensive desk research and interviews with key stakeholders and reintegration experts conducted between March and September 2025. It responds to priorities expressed by Rabat Process partner countries and aligns with relevant policy orientations adopted within the framework of the Dialogue, including those reflected in the Cadiz Action Plan 2023–2027. The Secretariat hopes that this Knowledge Paper will serve as a useful reference for policymakers and practitioners and as a basis for continued dialogue and mutual learning among Rabat Process partners.

Acronyms

AU	African Union
AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
BAOS	Bureaux d'accueil, d'orientation et de suivi des Sénégalais de l'extérieur et des migrants (Reception, Counselling and Follow-up Offices) (Senegal)
CoO	Country of Origin
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DG HOME	Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs
DG INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
DG MENA	Directorate-General for the Middle East and North Africa
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
EUMS	European Union Member State
EUTF	European Union Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IO	International Organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MDAs	Ministries, Departments and Agencies
MEAL	Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning
MPRR	Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration Programme
NCFRMI	National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons (Nigeria)
NCM	National Coordination Mechanism on Migration (The Gambia)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
OTE	Office des Tunisiens à l'Etranger (Office for Tunisians Abroad)
RRR	Return, readmission and reintegration
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
TWG	Technical Working Group on Migration and Development (Nigeria)

Contents

Foreword

by the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI)

The *Abuja Knowledge Paper on Sustainable Reintegration – Partnering for Sustainable Reintegration: Advancing National Reintegration Systems Led by Countries of Origin* represents an important contribution under Nigeria's Chairmanship of the Rabat Process. It reflects our aspiration to strengthen migration governance through cooperation, knowledge exchange, and evidence-based policymaking.

It is worthy of note, that at a time when migration dynamics are becoming increasingly complex, the need for sustainable reintegration systems that are nationally led and globally supported has never been more urgent. This publication provides a timely and balanced analysis of the diverse perspectives surrounding country-of-origin-led approaches to reintegration. It highlights both the opportunities and the challenges of developing structures that are inclusive, coordinated, and responsive to the realities of returning migrants and their communities.

The *Abuja Knowledge Paper* builds on the voices and experiences of stakeholders across Africa and Europe, including governments, practitioners, experts, and partners, whose engagement enriches our understanding of what effective and sustainable reintegration entails. It is intended not as a conclusion but as a foundation from which future dialogue, research, and collaboration can grow.

As Chair of the Rabat Process for the period 2025 – 2026, Nigeria is honoured to contribute to this evolving conversation and to emphasise the importance of partnerships that place countries of origin at the heart of reintegration planning and implementation. The insights contained in this publication highlight that reintegration succeeds best when it is nationally owned, evidence-driven, and supported by collective effort.

I extend sincere appreciation to the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), the Rabat Process Secretariat, our co-chairs, partner governments, and all technical experts whose professionalism and commitment made this work possible.

It is our desire that this publication would serve as both a reference and an invitation to continue learning, collaborating and innovating for reintegration systems that are humane, sustainable, and inclusive.

Dr. Tijani Aliyu Ahmed
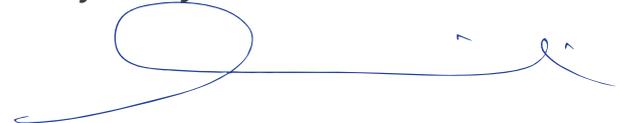
**Honourable Federal Commissioner,
National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI)**
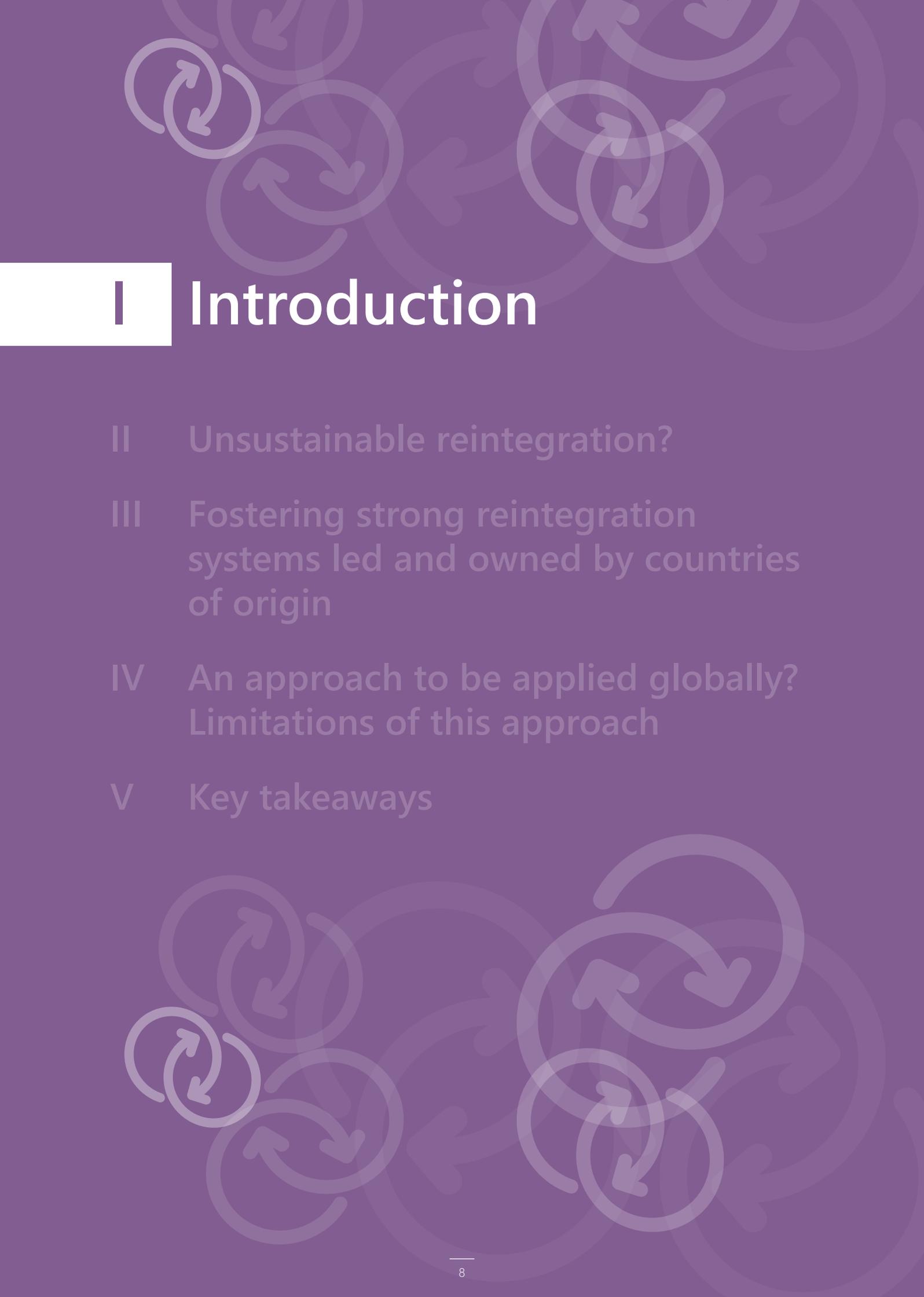
I Introduction

1   Context

Significance of return and reintegration for destination, transit and origin countries

Migrant return has long been and will remain a priority for countries of destination in the Rabat Process region, particularly in Europe and North Africa, in their efforts to address irregular migration. While there is international consensus that return and readmission are foundational components of a comprehensive migration management system,[1] European countries and EU institutions consider the return of irregular migrants and failed asylum seekers as an essential instrument for addressing irregular migration and as a key element in broader deterrence strategies. A paramount objective of the EU is to ensure more effective and efficient returns.[2] Over the years, the EU developed policies and tools to support this objective, including the 2008 Directive on Returns,[3] the 2021 EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration,[4] and the March 2025 European Commission proposal for a Regulation establishing a common system for returns.[5] Returns have also increasingly been prioritised in many countries of transit and destination in North Africa and along the main migration routes in the Sahel, where governments have faced mounting pressure to manage mixed migration flows. This has led to increasing investments in return mechanisms and operations aimed at strengthening migrant protection and reducing irregular onward movement.

Reintegration assistance has been considered by several countries of transit and destination (including EU Member States) a key component of assisted voluntary returns, serving as an incentive to encourage the uptake of voluntary returns, a means to enhance the acceptability of returns for countries of origin, a humane measure to assist individuals (particularly those in vulnerable situations), and a means to support development in areas of origin and contribute to addressing the root causes of migration.

● European partner countries

● African partner countries

● Observer countries

Many countries of origin have historically placed greater emphasis on the return of highly skilled migrants, remittances and diaspora's investments, than on the reintegration of irregular migrants and failed asylum seekers. This stance largely evolved in the last decade, most notably as of 2017 as many countries of origin in West and Central Africa were faced with large return flows from Libya and Niger.[6] The phenomenon of return became more firmly established in the public consciousness in countries of origin, with media outlets regularly reporting on return flights and the issue gaining traction in political discourse. Several governments adopted a welcoming narrative towards migrants who had experienced difficult journeys and recognised the need to support their citizens. A 'national responsibility narrative', holding governments in countries of origin accountable for reintegration support, also emerged more prominently.[7]

Several countries of origin in Central, North and West Africa have started establishing policies and mechanisms to support the reintegration of returning migrants. National institutions from countries of also became more involved in coordinating and providing assistance to returning migrants, primarily through enhanced participation in the reception of returnees but also increasingly through facilitating access to national services and programmes to returnees.[8] While this involvement has largely occurred through return and reintegration programmes managed by third parties (international organisations and NGOs), some countries of origin have gone further by establishing national programmes to support the return and reintegration of their nationals.

The EU has largely supported countries of origin in strengthening national ownership of reintegration mechanisms. Its support in this area has evolved over the last decade. Since 2016, the EU has funded a growing number of reintegration programmes increasingly distinct from, or less directly related to voluntary return programmes, across the world, and in particular in Africa.[9] While they often work in parallel with voluntary return initiatives, they have taken on a more independent role in addressing the needs of migrants upon return (rather than being intended as an incentive to return). These programmes have shifted away from a purely individual-focused approach, moving instead towards a development-oriented model that addresses reintegration at the individual, community and structural levels. Within this framework, they have increasingly supported the capacity-building of national institutions and organisations. Their scope has also expanded to consider the various dimensions – economic, social and psychosocial – of reintegration. Recently, the EU has accelerated its efforts towards the development of national reintegration mechanisms in countries of origin by supporting a series of programmes focused more specifically on building or strengthening reintegration systems in countries of origin, especially through support to reintegration governance mechanisms and strengthening of public services and referral mechanisms.

These evolutions have significantly modified the way reintegration programmes are developed and implemented and how assistance is delivered. They have contributed to better addressing returnees' needs and have increasingly considered countries of origin' priorities and capacities. Yet, there is still a significant gap in ensuring a long-term approach to reintegration and sustainability of reintegration outcomes and service provision. This context provides the point of departure for this Paper.

Inter-regional dialogues on return and reintegration

In light of the significance of these issues for countries of destination, transit and origin, return and reintegration have become prominent agenda items in migration dialogues between Europe and Africa, including the Rabat Process and the Khartoum Process.[10] Area 5 of the Rabat Process' Cádiz Action Plan 2023 – 2027[11] focuses on return, readmission and reintegration. Specifically, Objective 10 of the Plan calls for Dialogue partners to work together to encourage programmes aimed at ensuring safe return, including from transit countries of origin, and the sustainable reintegration of migrants, with respect for their human rights and dignity.[12]

During a Thematic Meeting on Voluntary Return and Reintegration held in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in April 2023, Rabat Process partner countries agreed on 'the need to adopt comprehensive migration governance in the framework of a solidary partnership approach and shared responsibility', with return and reintegration being essential pillars of a comprehensive migration policy. They also recalled that 'coordinated actions between host countries, countries of transit and countries of origin should be put in place to ensure the protection and human rights of migrants in the framework of voluntary return and reintegration policies and programmes'. They discussed 'the importance of ownership of voluntary return and reintegration processes by partner countries', and the necessity 'to strengthen the links between reintegration and socio-economic development programmes in the countries of return' and 'to integrate reintegration into national sectoral plans', 'to comprehensively address the vulnerabilities of returning migrants' and 'achieve sustainable and locally rooted reintegration'.[13]

2　The present knowledge paper

Objective

In the context of discussions on the future of reintegration programmes, the Government of Nigeria has identified sustainable reintegration as a priority for its Chairmanship of the Rabat Process in 2025 – 2026. It decided to develop the present knowledge product to take stock of the evolutions in this field (including the development of more partnership-based approaches but also the multiplication or fragmentation of programmes and approaches and the expected reduction in reintegration funding), inform the current debate on reintegration and support efforts to enhance the sustainability of migrant reintegration. This paper aims to serve as a key reference document to promote continued dialogue and engagement on return and reintegration.

After examining the concept of sustainable reintegration and some of the obstacles to achieving it at individual and structural levels, the paper focuses on the importance of countries of origin's governance and ownership of national reintegration structures and mechanisms in enhancing reintegration sustainability. Drawing on the experiences of Rabat Process partner countries, it analyses the conditions required to develop national reintegration systems led and owned by countries of origin. It then explores how external actors can support this process and considers the limitations of this approach. Finally, it offers policy and programme recommendations to policymakers and practitioners in countries of destination, transit, and origin.

Methodology

This Paper targets a wide audience of policymakers and practitioners from governments, international organisations (IOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), the private sector, academia and other stakeholders in return and reintegration.

While grounded in the experience of Rabat Process partner countries, the paper's analysis and conclusions are largely relevant in global contexts.

The development process involved an extensive desk review covering policy and operational documents produced by governments of countries of origin and destination, donors, international organisations, research institutions and think tanks, and a wide-ranging consultation [14] with policymakers and practitioners from Rabat Process partner governments, regional institutions, international organisations, and think tanks and research institutions. [15] It also involved field research in Nigeria, [16] where a large range of stakeholders were met in Abuja and Lagos for more in-depth discussions, and site visits were conducted. The list of entities consulted is available in the Annex.

1   What does sustainable reintegration look like?

The sustainability of reintegration is one of the most frequently questioned and discussed issues in return and reintegration forums. Although it is not consistently supported by monitoring and evaluation data, the idea that reintegration is not sustainable – at both individual and systemic [17] levels – is relatively widespread among migration and development policymakers and practitioners. [18]

There is no widely accepted definition of reintegration sustainability, which adds to the inconsistency surrounding the idea that reintegration is not sustainable. The most diffused definition of sustainable reintegration is the one proposed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), that states that *'reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re) migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity.'* [19]

The majority of informants consulted to develop this paper suggested definitions of sustainability that were relatively similar. [20] They emphasised the importance of not only economic factors, but also of social and psychosocial factors, as well as the possibility of returnees to have control over and make decisions on their lives, as essential elements of a sustainable reintegration.

> *Being reintegrated sustainably means being in control, being in charge of one's own life and decisions. It means being able to conduct a life where you may not have everything, but you are able to take care of the most important things, and you can make informed decisions on employment, on migrating, and so forth.**

> *For us, sustainable reintegration doesn't mean that the returnee needs to stay in a specific place, but that he is leading an independent life, be that in the country of origin or through other migration options.**

Despite relatively wide agreement on the above elements, some return and reintegration stakeholders in the Rabat Process partner countries prioritise the stabilisation of returnees in their country of origin as an indicator of the sustainability of reintegration.

> *[While] sustainability may mean for one party that the person is economically, socially and psychologically stabilised so that whenever he may take the decision to migrate again, he uses regular pathways, for others it means that migrants don't migrate again.**

The above definitions and criteria focus on individual reintegration factors. However, since the sustainability of systemic factors such as services, programmes and processes, also affect individual reintegration outcomes, it is also important to consider the sustainability of such systems.[21] Although defining sustainable reintegration systems is beyond the scope of this paper, key informants who were consulted during its development emphasised the importance of systems (including structures, processes, and provided services) remaining functional even in the absence of specific projects or other external support.

> *For organisations, sustainability means that processes are in place that empower returnees, integrate them in the society, and that these processes live beyond programmes duration.**

> *When EU's or IOM's programmes stop, the State must be able to continue to provide assistance.**

2 Challenges and obstacles to sustainable reintegration

Regardless of whether or not reintegration of migrants is overall sustainable,[22] it is indisputable that several challenges affect the sustainability of this process at individual and systemic levels. Some of the most prominent ones are described below, acknowledging that there are significant interlinkages between the challenges identified at individual and systemic levels.

Challenges affecting the sustainability of individuals' reintegration outcomes

Insufficient resources for reintegration assistance in the framework of AVRR schemes and reintegration programmes

In most cases, returnees receiving reintegration assistance do so in the framework of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes and reintegration initiatives. The value of reintegration assistance provided under these projects varies largely. While there is no evidence of an adequate amount to ensure reintegration sustainability, many projects offer individual reintegration grants that are barely enough to help returnees 'get back on their feet' and cannot significantly support them in the long term. These amounts – which are usually fix – are often insufficient to support the establishment of robust microbusinesses, and the situation worsens when returnees have additional needs, for example relating to health or housing.

Resources for reintegration assistance outside of AVRR and reintegration projects are usually limited, as described further below.

Time constraints and mismatch between projects' assistance timeframe and reintegration process

AVRR and reintegration projects have a limited timeframe, usually with a limited period for reintegration assistance and typically over 6 to 12 months. Projects with relatively short timeframes cannot guarantee sufficient follow-up periods during which returnees can receive assistance according to their evolving needs.

Lack of access to or insufficient support by public services or national programmes

Public services and national programmes (for instance social protection, employment programmes, entrepreneurship support) could constitute important support options for returnees or provide them with support after project-based assistance ends. However, in several countries the accessibility of such services is limited or they may be of inadequate quality or scope (e.g. limited social protection system). They are also often not adapted to the specific needs of returnees (e.g., returnees may need to generate an income quickly after return while services and programmes often have fixed timelines and delivery cycles that may not be responsive enough.

Insufficient adaptation of assistance to returnees' multiple needs and to the return environment

Until very recently, AVRR and reintegration programmes have often been criticised for placing too much emphasis on economic reintegration (and in particular on the setting up of microbusinesses) and not giving enough attention to returnees' reintegration in their direct environment, including their family and community. In particular, combating stigma and supporting family acceptance and the re-establishment of returnees' social networks are key to sustainable reintegration and should be primary considerations of reintegration assistance (that do not come with a cost). [23]

Mismatch between economic assistance and economic contexts

The economic support provided under AVRR and reintegration projects does not always align with the return contexts. For instance, returnees may opt to receive microbusiness support even in areas with very limited economic vitality, or select microbusinesses in sectors that are already saturated.

Returnees' employment has proven to be a particularly challenging issue. A few projects have successfully facilitated the reintegration of returnees into the workforce, albeit with limited scope. Training courses provided through reintegration projects do not necessarily focus on sectors and skills in demand. While private sector engagement is increasing in several countries, it remains too limited to support large-scale employment for returnees. [24]

More broadly, many countries of origin are marked by unemployment and economic challenges or instability. These issues go well beyond what reintegration assistance and programmes can address but they obviously affect returnees' reintegration process and sustainability.

Substantial discrepancy between returnees eligible for assistance and overall return flows

Importantly, the aforementioned considerations affect the reintegration of migrants who do have access to reintegration assistance, typically following their assisted voluntary return (although

in certain instances, migrants returning on their own or through forced returns can also benefit from such assistance). However, many migrants returning on their own or through return schemes that do not include a reintegration component, do not have access to any specific reintegration assistance.[25] Consequently, a majority of returning migrants is effectively excluded from receiving assistance.[26]

> *There are currently many gaps: only a small fraction of returnees receive assistance, and nothing is being done for those who return without assistance. We need to move towards more inclusive systems that do not discriminate between those who have returned through [AVRR] programmes and those who have returned by their own means, and do not create tension with those who have not left.**

Challenges affecting the sustainability of reintegration services and programmes

Limited resources allocated for reintegration by countries of origin

In contexts where national budgets are limited and/or marked by economic, development or humanitarian challenges, governments may face competing priorities. Some countries of origin are reluctant to consider specific services for returnees, which can create silos and tension with local communities. As a result, governments may allocate limited resources to reintegration. Yet, some countries of origin have made resources available by allocating staff to coordinate or

provide assistance, and by including returnees in government-funded programmes. In a few cases, governments have also provided reintegration allowances or small grants to support migrants upon their return. However, very few countries of origin have earmarked a budget for reintegration in their annual planning (see below). This prevents them from becoming autonomous and makes them dependant on external support. This brings its own set of challenges, which are described in the next paragraphs.

A short term, fragmented and uncontextualised external support

In many countries of origin, reintegration assistance is primarily delivered through specific programmes or local services substantially funded by external donors. This makes countries of origin largely reliant on external funding for reintegration assistance. Even when countries of origin coordinate reintegration assistance and develop their own plans and strategies, their reliance on external support implies that the parameters of this assistance continue to depend on donor funding.

A project logic that is short-term in nature. Programmes have limited durations and there is a lack of predictability of funding and programme parameters beyond those that are ongoing. As a result, the provision of reintegration services for returnees by local actors also often follows a project logic affecting their continuity.

> *When you give an individual reintegration package to a returnee or when you staff a centre through project-based funding, the question in terms of sustainability is whether they will be maintained at the end of the project.**

> *Coordination between certain projects and ministerial work can be strengthened, as some initiatives operate on a standalone and time-bound basis, while ministries engage in continuous policy and strategy development. Greater alignment and collaboration would help ensure that projects effectively complement national efforts and facilitate a smoother transition when externally funded initiatives conclude.**

Limited alignment of external programmes with countries of origin' needs and priorities. Reintegration programmes have long been designed without adequate consultation and coordination with the authorities of countries of origin. This resulted in a lack of consideration for the specificities of the countries of origin and in a lack of alignment of reintegration programmes with countries of origin' policies, programmes and needs (including with local development plans, employment strategies and programmes, etc.).

While consultations between donors and countries of origin are much more consistently conducted during the design phase of programmes, and, overall, dialogue is improving, donors have continued to balance the needs and priorities of countries of origin with their own policy priorities, and thus to focus on migration flows and policies of their interest. As a result, there has been a significant focus in EU-funded reintegration programmes on beneficiaries returning from Europe as well as on those returning voluntarily from transit countries along the main migration routes leading to Europe. By focusing exclusively on migrants returning through migration management actions (dedicated voluntary return programmes and forced return), while large portions of migrants

return through other modalities,[27] they often fail to respond to countries of origin' need to address a larger scale phenomenon (i.e. the reintegration needs of all returning nationals, regardless of return modalities).

A fragmentation of programmes and approaches. Furthermore, the resources, parameters and approaches of programmes vary over time and according to donor priorities and organisations implementing the programmes, including when they concern the same countries of origin. This results in a fragmentation of programmes that complexifies the reintegration landscape in countries of origin.

As noted in the 'Context' section, a variety of programmes using different approaches are currently being implemented simultaneously in Rabat Process partner countries of origin, funded by internal affairs, migration, and development stakeholders [28] (see the box below for an illustration from Nigeria). Some of these programmes, typically linked to assisted voluntary return schemes, adopt an individual approach and provide individual reintegration grants or 'packages' (intended as incentives for returns) to returnees. Others adopt a more development-oriented approach, supporting individual returnees but also their communities and the capacities of reintegration stakeholders in countries of origin. Lastly, some programmes do not provide direct assistance to individuals but concentrate on strengthening the capacities of national institutions and organisations to govern and manage reintegration and on improving public services essential for sustainable reintegration (e.g., employment services, social protection programmes). These different approaches exist simultaneously within the same countries of origin, contributing to a complex reintegration landscape.

Ongoing and recent reintegration projects in Nigeria [29]

The Prospect project implemented by ICMPD and funded by the EU (DG HOME) through the Return and Reintegration Facility, supports the strengthening the reintegration governance framework by operationalising the existing network structure of Nigeria and EU stakeholders, supporting the organisation of multi-stakeholders meeting and developing capacity building activities.

The Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration Programme for Sub-Saharan Africa (MPRR-SSA) funded by the EU (DG INTPA) and implemented by IOM across 16 countries in West, Central and East Africa including Nigeria, aims to support the psychosocial, social and economic reintegration of migrants voluntarily returned from countries of transit on the Atlantic/Western mediterranean and Central mediterranean routes. Under its precedent programme, the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant protection and Reintegration, IOM supported the Government of Nigeria developing its reintegration system, including through the development of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on reintegration.

GIZ's Centre for Migration and Development, funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), provides advice and support to returning migrants on how to re-enter society economically and socially, including help with finding jobs, starting businesses, and accessing further education or training.

The EU Reintegration Programme (EURP), funded by the EU and implemented by Frontex, in Nigeria through its reintegration partner IRARA, supports the individual reintegration of migrants returning from the participating EU Member States and Schengen Associated Countries.

The RECONNECT project implemented by ActionAid and funded by GIZ, provides different services (including vocational training, startup kits, mentorship, and access to services like healthcare and legal aid) to vulnerable groups including returning migrants and internally displaced persons. The project's capacity building component strengthens CSOs and Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) in migration management and service delivery.

The Assisting the Reintegration of Returnees through Integrated Vocational and Entrepreneurship Support (ARRIVES) project, co-implemented by Social Impact, IRARA and International Trade Center and funded by the European Union (Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund - AMIF) and the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), supports Nigerian migrants returning from Germany in their economic reintegration through self-employment or job placement.

The Youth Empowerment and Reintegration Project (YERP), implemented by ICMPD and funded by the Government of Denmark, is an action research initiative designed to address the reintegration of returnees and unemployment of rural youths through climate smart and sustainable agricultural opportunities in Oyo State.

The Enhanced Reintegration Support for Survivors of Trafficking Project, implemented by IOM and funded by the U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, aims to equip survivors of human trafficking with business development knowledge and tools.

The Employment and Reintegration in Nigeria project, implemented by the International Labour Organization and funded by GIZ, aimed to strengthen stakeholder capacity to provide advisory and support services related to employment and income generation for returnees. It ended in April 2023.

3   Building on national reintegration systems to foster sustainability

Adopting a development-oriented approach to reintegration,[30] and in particular developing national reintegration systems led and owned by the authorities of the countries of origin can contribute substantially to addressing many of the challenges outlined above, and thus to enhance the sustainability of reintegration, both for individual returnees (and the receiving communities) and in terms of services and programmes.

The concept of 'reintegration systems'

'Reintegration system' refers to all the institutions, structures, processes, services and programmes in place in a country engaged in migrant reintegration through a coordinated approach.

Reintegration stakeholders commonly refer to three levels of reintegration: individual, community, and structural. The structural level encompasses a broad range of parameters, including programmatic frameworks, societal attitudes, and cultural norms. In this paper, the term *systemic* is used to highlight specific dimensions within the structural level, as outlined above.

Some stakeholders may refer to 'national reintegration mechanisms' or 'reintegration governance' to refer to the same concept.

Reintegration systems led by authorities in countries of origin can contribute to several key outcomes, including:

- ensuring that relevant public services are available and accessible to support returning migrants' reintegration as and when needed, and that these services are adapted to returnees' specific needs;

- improving the contextual relevance of reintegration assistance by adapting it more closely to local priorities and realities;

- better integrating reintegration assistance within existing sectoral policies, plans, and programmes – rather than treating it as a separate stream – thereby leveraging national systems and avoiding duplication;

- reducing reliance on external programmes, which often come with short-term perspectives, donor-driven parameters (such as eligibility tied to specific return modalities or countries of destination), and fragmented implementation approaches; and

- enhancing accountability of countries of origin toward returnees, the broader population, and countries of destination.

In recent years, several countries of origin have expressed a growing interest in leading and owning reintegration systems for returning migrants. This shift is driven by a desire for increased sovereignty, national ownership, and alignment with national priorities and needs. Rather than relying on external actors, countries of origin are exploring models that place them at the centre of reintegration efforts.

When we talk about returnees, we talk about citizens who return to their own country. They should be integrated into public services. It is the state's prerogative and responsibility, only authorities can do it.*

One cannot blame the agencies of the host countries for defending their interests. But the country's priorities and strategy have been presented and we have an institution in charge of returnees, so we must move forward on this basis. We must find common objectives, smooth things over, and find common ground.*

Strengthening national reintegration systems is also essential for ensuring accountability to citizens. When support is channelled exclusively through external partners, it becomes difficult for the government to verify whether assistance has been delivered and to respond appropriately when gaps arise. Establishing mechanisms that allow governments to oversee, guide, and, where necessary, validate interventions carried out on their behalf is therefore critical. Such systems also enable authorities to monitor the situation of returnees, identify those who may not qualify for specific reintegration packages, and ensure that no one is left without appropriate support.*

This approach aligns with the views of several donors and entities of countries of destination, who consider that national reintegration systems can enhance the sustainability of reintegration outcomes and services for returnees, while also supporting their intention to gradually reduce financial support for migrant reintegration.

An increasing number of programmes are focusing on the development and strengthening of such systems across various different Rabat Process partner countries. The following section will analyse the concept of national reintegration systems in more details.

III Fostering strong reintegration systems led and owned by countries of origin

1   Foundational elements of national reintegration systems

Several countries of origin have established reintegration systems placing national institutions at the centre, especially since 2017 (with European Union Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) support), but in some cases already before. There is no single model that can be considered adequate in all contexts or fully successful in the region (especially given that no country has taken full responsibility for reintegration). However, experiences in several North, West and Central African countries suggest that several key requirements are needed for a national reintegration system to be functional and effective, whether the system is intended to coordinate reintegration initiatives and facilitate access to services or to deal with the entire reintegration process, including case management and assistance provision. These interlinked elements, which reinforce each other, are described below.

1. **A driving force: political will (at the highest levels).** The willingness of authorities to engage meaningfully in reintegration is a preliminary condition for the establishment and steady functioning of effective reintegration systems. No strong mechanism can be established in the absence of strong political will, which is what will drive many of the other aspects described below. Political will may derive from humanitarian concerns, the centrality of return and reintegration in public discourse (for example due to significant volumes of returns), political dialogue with partner countries, and so forth. Crucially, support for developing reintegration systems must come from the highest levels of government to ensure action is taken at all necessary levels.

> *Now, many countries of origin have a clear determination to have a more central role in reintegration processes, and the authorities want to play that role. It is not seen as a European problem anymore, but as a domestic priority.**

> *In some countries, the issue has become politically important because returnees had revendications, so states wanted to demonstrate that they were proactive.**

In Côte d'Ivoire, the President and the administration have consistently emphasised the need for the State to assist its citizens abroad, especially those facing hardship and willing to return. This vision materialised in 2023, when Ivorian migrants suddenly found themselves in distress situation in Tunisia, and the Côte d'Ivoire government mobilised all the relevant national actors (and financial resources) to organise the voluntary return of approximately 1,500 Ivorians and support their reintegration.

The protection of Guineans abroad has become a key priority for the Guinean government, with support extending all the way to the Presidency. The government has received clear instructions from the Prime Minister's Office to assist stranded migrants abroad and establish reintegration programmes to support them upon their return.

In Cameroon, the Head of State drives the reintegration policy. In his public speeches on youth and migration, he regularly refers to the dangers of irregular migration and the importance of young people returning to contribute to the development of Cameroon.

2. **A clear framework: a national migration policy.** The existence of a national migration policy (and/or of a reintegration policy or strategy) sets the general framework in which reintegration should be envisaged. It can be a cornerstone to make reintegration a priority, to align other sectoral strategies and programmes with the policy, and to support the mainstreaming of migration and reintegration across sectoral policies and programmes (see below).[31]

> *The multiplicity of stakeholders and approaches should be in alignment with a global framework owned by countries of origin.**

Nigeria developed its national migration policy in 2015. The policy gave strong impetus towards increased ownership of migration matters and paved the way for the establishment and functioning of coordination structures for reintegration (that are described below).

Guinea developed a national migration policy, formalised by decree in 2021. All key migration stakeholders are identified. It includes a section focusing on the return and reintegration of migrants. Strongly linking migration and development, the migration policy enables better support for returning migrants and diaspora-related projects at the local level.

3. **Leadership: a mandated coordinating entity.** The existence or establishment of an entity clearly mandated to coordinate migrant reintegration supports the legitimacy of this entity and of the coordination system adopted. The entity can then become a driving force to bolster political will, ensure participation,

inclusiveness and coordination, and support reintegration mainstreaming, among others.

Several partner countries of the Rabat Process have directorates or agencies mandated to coordinate reintegration, including Nigeria and Tunisia.

The National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI), under the supervision of the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development, is Nigeria's migration coordinating agency. Initially focused on refugee protection, its mandate expanded in 2009 to include migrants and internally displaced persons. It plays a central role in Nigeria's migration governance, coordinating migration-related policies and programmes with a large range of stakeholders, including Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), civil society, and international partners. It is particularly active in the field of reintegration, chairing working groups and committees dedicated to return and reintegration and facilitating coordination for the accommodation, psychosocial support and economic empowerment of returnees. It is recognised by reintegration stakeholders as a driving force behind Nigeria's efforts to improve the governance and sustainability of reintegration.

The Office for Tunisians Abroad (Office des Tunisiens à l'Etranger, OTE) is an institution under the authority of the Ministry for Social Affairs that focuses on Tunisians around the world. Since its creation in 1988, it has been mandated to provide reception and support to returning Tunisians of all categories and profiles. Through its network of antennas in Tunisia's governorates, the OTE assists returnees in settling and stabilising in their areas of origin.

4. **Broad participation and inclusiveness: whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches.** For reintegration systems to be effective, a large variety of actors must be involved. Different ministries and agencies are relevant for economic, social and psychosocial reintegration, including those responsible for social affairs, youth, employment, entrepreneurship, agriculture, vocational training, education, health, legal identity and justice. Other stakeholders must be involved, including local authorities, civil society organisations, and the private sector. Addressing all types of reintegration needs requires the distinctive roles of each type of actor to be clearly defined and recognised, and the engagement of a large variety of actors help foster ownership (see below).

In Nigeria, approximately 100 actors are involved in the Technical Working Group Migration and Development (TWG), most of them also represented in the Return and Reintegration Working Group (WGRRR) , which plays the role of reintegration coordination mechanism. It includes at least 22 Federal Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) and more than 60 NGOs, associations, private sector entities and international partners. It is designed in a way that allows for the integration of new relevant organisations into the structure.

In Cameroon, many Ministries are involved in reintegration. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays a coordination role with embassies and consulates to support return. The Ministry of Social Affairs provides psychosocial assistance. The Ministry of Public Health deals with physical and mental health issues. The Ministry of Territorial Administration supports migrants' reception. The Ministry of Youth supports

the elaboration of business plans, while the Ministries of Labour and Vocational Training support returnees in their area of responsibility. The Ministries of Agriculture and Fisheries support returnees' reintegration activities. The Directorate for National Security handles cases of trafficking or smuggling. In addition, several NGOs are involved, notably for the provision of psychosocial support and for the monitoring of reintegration activities. This broad institutional and CSO involvement enables dealing with all types of reintegration needs.

5. **Accessible and effective public services.** Broad participation is not sufficient; this approach implies that services are available, accessible and effective for returnees. Functioning reintegration systems require public, mainstream services that play their role, are accessible and continue to function over time, beyond the timeframes and logic of projects. The effective functioning of public services goes far beyond what reintegration programmes can achieve, instead requiring sustainable development gains. Reintegration programmes, however, can support improved accessibility to these services for returnees and their potential adjustments to returnees' needs. That in turn requires the mainstreaming of reintegration across sectors, including employment, entrepreneurship, training, education, health, social protection, etc. This approach recognises that returnees are citizens of their country of origin, with the same rights and obligations as other citizens, while also recognising they may have specific needs, including in terms of access to available services.

" *The problem with national referral mechanisms since years is that the offer of services is limited, actors do not have the means to deliver these services. It is good to have coordination mechanisms, but if they don't work out, they're pointless. The actors must be able to provide the services.** "

6. **Coordination mechanisms, partnerships and dialogue.** The involvement of a large variety of stakeholders requires continuous coordination in order to produce the expected outcomes. Coordination and dialogue help ensure a continuous flow of information, develop a common language and focus on common objectives, address challenges collectively, avoid gaps and duplications, optimise stakeholders' role within a coherent framework, and align reintegration assistance with national priorities, policies and programmes in various sectors, thus ensuring coherence and optimisation of resources. Partnerships agreements are key to guide and formalise how different actors cooperate (and how data is shared). Coordination should be ensured at different levels, including at political and operational levels. To the extent possible, coordination should also be ensured both at national level and at local level (see below). Ensuring a continuous dialogue whereby the different stakeholders have a voice, also contributes to ensure a sense of ownership of the system by local actors (see below).

" *If each structure wants different things, it causes confusion. There needs to be a coordination framework. It's an opportunity to have lots of actors involved but the challenge is to organise and coordinate their contributions. So you need to establish committees, working groups, etc.** "

Multi-levels reintegration coordination mechanisms were established in most countries covered by the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration, amongst which:

In Cameroon, reintegration efforts are anchored in a multi-level coordination system that actively engages government institutions through the Project Steering Committee and Thematic Working Groups (TWGs). The Steering Committee provides strategic oversight, while TWGs – especially the Working Group on Reintegration Support – serve as operational platforms for dialogue, joint planning, synergy building, and expertise sharing among ministries, IOM, and EU representatives. This structure enables coherent reintegration assistance aligned with national policies. Government ministries contribute in various ways, ensuring that reintegration responses are context-sensitive, technically sound, and collectively owned. [32]

In The Gambia, eight thematic Working Groups provide technical support to the National Coordination Mechanism on Migration (NCM), chaired by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Among these, the Working Group on Return and Reintegration plays a central role. In addition to key government ministries, its membership includes representatives from the private sector, returnee associations and IOM, reflecting a broad and inclusive approach. The Working Group serves as an important platform for integrating reintegration considerations across all relevant sectors. It convenes on a quarterly basis to review emerging challenges and planned activities, with its outcomes subsequently presented at NCM meetings. Deliberations from the NCM are then communicated by the Chair to the Cabinet of Ministers, and feedback and decisions are relayed back to the Working Groups, ensuring a structured and continuous two-way flow of information and guidance.

In Nigeria, the reintegration governance system involves five levels that reinforce each other.

- The National Consultative Committee on Migration and Development is the highest-level platform dedicated to migration. Involving Ministers, the Committee develops Nigeria's policy on migration.

- The Technical Working Group on Migration and Development (TWG) gathers directors and other high-level representatives of key state and non-state actors at Federal level. Chaired by the NCFRMI, it discusses the policies formulated by the National Consultative Committee.

- Five Thematic Groups have been established at Federal level to discuss specific aspects linked to the national migration policy and migration matters. One of these groups is focused on return, readmission and reintegration (RRR): the Working Group on Forced Migration, Return Readmission and Reintegration (WGRRR). Chaired by NCFRMI and involving senior representatives of relevant MDAs and other organisations involved in reintegration, it discusses technical issues related to RRR. While it is not as large as the TWG, it involves a majority of its actors. At least 100 organisations are involved and they meet quarterly.

- Reintegration Committees were established at state level. The entities involved in the Working Group on RRR are represented and additional local participants, such as state ministries or local NGOs, are included. They discuss operational matters, including best practices or facilitation of referrals. As of July 2025, seven Reintegration Committees had been established, and the government was planning to increase their number. They meet on a regular basis under the chairmanship of NCFRMI.

- At state level, Case Management Expert Teams directly assist returnees in their reintegration. Monitoring and Evaluation Expert Teams are also involved at the local level.

According to Nigerian stakeholders, this multi-layered structure strongly contributes to the effectiveness of reintegration governance in Nigeria. Key stakeholders meet regularly and thus know each other; they speak the same language and share the same objectives; they can support policy coherence across different sectors; and they are able to cater for local specificities.

7. **Decentralisation.** Reintegration is a deeply local phenomenon, and local contexts may be radically different from an area to another one within the same country. The mechanisms established at national level should thus be replicated and/or adapted at the local level, at least in main areas of return. Likewise, the stakeholders involved in the system should be adapted. For instance, local associations or private sector entities that are specific to a region should be involved at that level, so as local authorities. These stakeholders will ensure that reintegration is adapted to local realities, opportunities and priorities, and will be able to better link returnees with services and programmes available in that area.

> *The best model to ensure sustainability at both individual and structural levels is a local mechanism integrated within public services.**

In Senegal, the 'BAOS' (Bureaux d'accueil, d'orientation et de suivi des Sénégalais de l'extérieur et des migrants – Reception, Counselling and Follow-up Offices) aim to support migrant reintegration, assist members of the diaspora during their stay in Senegal, and help potential migrants to prepare for their migration. They form the cornerstone of migration governance, especially with regard to reintegration, at the territorial level. Reporting to the State Secretariat for Senegalese Abroad (more specifically, the Directorate General of Support to Senegalese Abroad), they are responsible for assessing, referring and monitoring returnees at a local level. The BAOS are hosted by the Regional Development Agencies (Agences Régionales de Développement), which are responsible for local development and territorial planning.

The BAOS network spans all 14 administrative regions of Senegal, aiming to provide nationwide coverage. Following the opening of the first office in 1987, the BAOS expanded their territorial presence in 2018–2019 through four offices in regions marked by high emigration. As return flows evolved, additional regions were targeted, culminating in the establishment of BAOS in the 14 regions of Senegal.[33] The decentralised nature of this instrument has contributed to develop a framework for dialogue and cooperation at regional level and to localise migration policies and reintegration support.

In Guinea, the reintegration system is highly decentralised, with an important role played by local actors. Several initiatives are supporting further decentralisation in Guinea, including the Accompagnement, Mobilité, Insertion et Sensibilisation (AMIS) project[34] recently funded by the EU (DG INTPA) and implemented by Enabel and Expertise France, that supports the Ministry of Youth in strengthening its services for the youth; building on its highly decentralised structure and strong local presence, as well as

on the reintegration-sensitive instruments already developed by these structures. Recently, the government also established nine offices similar to Senegal's BAOS. It plans to increase their number to 13.

Tunisia's reintegration mechanism (Tounesna) covers the whole territory. All actors of the mechanism – i.e., the Office for Tunisians Abroad (OTE), the national employment service (ANETI) and the social protection service (CGPS) – are represented at the local level. Returnees are assisted directly at the local offices and are referred to local services.

In Côte d'Ivoire, efforts to decentralise migration governance are ongoing. The authorities are working to substantially involve deconcentrated ministry structures, municipalities, traditional leaders and local NGOs in decentralised migration management committees. This aims to ensure that services are provided as close as possible to returnees and adapted to local contexts.

8. **Clear roles and responsibilities: Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and National Referral Mechanisms (NRM).** The way in which various actors engage in reintegration should be guided by SOPs and/or formal referral mechanisms, which should be inclusive and cover all returnees. These are essential for providing a clear overview of which stakeholders must intervene at which stage and how, as well as the coordination required with others. They are also essential for holding stakeholders accountable and fostering ownership. In addition, robust referral mechanisms can help provide services to returnees as their needs evolve, over a period that is not necessarily dictated by short-term projects. Robust referral mechanisms are strongly in line with a logic of sustainability.

Reintegration SOPs have been developed in most countries of origin targeted by the EU-IOM Joint Initiative. Under the successive Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration Programme (MPRR), the roles and responsibilities of reintegration stakeholders was further clarified, when needed, and the definition or strengthening of national referral mechanisms were supported.

“

Before, we did not have a comprehensive overview of everything that was being done. With the MPRR, we implemented a new approach so that all actors, including the civil society, are involved through the national referral strategy, according to their sector of intervention.*

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9. **Data management and MEAL.** Reintegration systems require countries of origin to have in place national data management tools that enable the registration and tracking of returnees, as well as the management of their case, including the exchange of information on their profiles, needs and assistance among relevant stakeholders.

“

To enable us to support returnees, we need data. We need to know who returns, where, what their needs are. Only then we can coordinate so that they can receive the assistance they need.*

”

Given the volume and sensitivity of the information involved, these systems should be digitalised and securely protected. In addition, effective reintegration systems depend on robust monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) processes. MEAL is essential to track return and reintegration outcomes, assess the assistance provided, identify trends, gaps and good practices, and support continuous learning and the scaling up

of effective approaches. While data management is often recognised by authorities in countries of origin as a core component of reintegration systems, MEAL is frequently viewed primarily as a donor requirement, even though its centrality to system strengthening should be acknowledged.

“

It is paramount to have solid MEAL systems to ensure effective reintegration mechanisms. Continuous monitoring, and a specific attention to learning are particularly important.*

”

10. **Reintegration mainstreaming.** To ensure policy coherence and leverage sectoral programmes, reintegration must be mainstreamed into sectoral policies, services and programmes. This strengthens the links between reintegration and development, employment, social and other national policies. It also makes services available beyond project parameters, including to all types of returnees and after specific reintegration projects have ended. It is also key to accessing resources that would otherwise be difficult to get allocated.

“

Reintegration is something that cannot exist as an isolated phenomenon or policy area. It has to be incorporated into the way regions and countries operate. It is not a standalone topic with dedicated actors; it has to be integrated into existing services and policies. Only by adopting this approach can we hope to achieve sustainable reintegration - of services, not individuals. [...] Reintegration must be addressed within the framework of services that are of primary interest to countries, that are sustainable because they are funded. Then we can sensitise these services to the issue of reintegration and enable them to support individuals on their reintegration journeys.*

”

It is crucial that national migration policies are firmly anchored in, and referenced in, other sectoral strategies and policies.*

The Government of Guinea has developed a set of policies that all speak to each other and integrate considerations for returning migrants: a national migration policy, a national employment policy and a national youth policy. For example, the national employment policy includes a specific focus on employing vulnerable people, including returning migrants. The national youth policy addresses the employment needs of young people and could help with the reintegration of young returnees.

In the framework of the EU's 2025 Individual Measure for West Africa, the Action Unleashing the Potential of Youth in West Africa illustrates how broader development initiatives can integrate support for returnees within wider economic and social objectives. The overall objective of the Action is to improve the inclusion of youth in resilient and climate-smart green economic transitions that address the root causes of irregular migration, and its specific objectives include explicit reference to returning migrants.[35] Designed in complementarity with the Action *Managing Migration Better in Western Africa*, this programme places particular emphasis on key areas of departure and return and on the specific profiles, needs and reintegration challenges faced by returnees. It adopts a comprehensive approach combining skills development, improved access to finance for micro, small and medium enterprises – including through diaspora investment – and support to value-chain development. These measures are expected to expand local referral opportunities, impact individual decision-making, and prevent irregular migration, while also facilitating and reinforcing sustainable reintegration.

Reintegration mainstreaming also means that existing services and structures should be used as much as possible, instead of establishing separate and specific services for returnees. For example, when setting up reintegration centres, it is typically more advisable to promote their establishment within existing centres and their linkages with existing services, rather than setting up new or parallel centres dedicated solely to returnees and staffed through project funding. Doing so contributes to strengthen countries' own systems (that may benefit a broader population in the long-term) and avoid or mitigate gaps when external funding stops.

This boom of centres is worrying. Instead of establishing new centres for reintegration, why not use existing centres such as those dedicated to social support, that often do not have adequate budget for functioning? If social centres existed in regions where migrants return and were supported, they could provide relevant services to returnees but also to the local population.*

11. **National budget allocation.** Fully functioning reintegration systems, which not only guide and coordinate reintegration policy and schemes but also support the provision of services to returnees, require financial and human resources. However, allocating budget lines dedicated to reintegration in national budget planning remains a significant challenge for all countries. Several countries have taken initial steps in this direction by allocating human resources to reintegration coordination and implementation, or by leveraging programmes and services funded by the national budget to assist returnees.

Countries of origin will all still require financial support, but if [governments] decide to invest human resources and working time on reintegration issue, it's somehow financing reintegration.*

Nevertheless, a dedicated budget line for reintegration has not yet been allocated in most national budgets, although some countries are reportedly considering it.

In Cameroon, Nigeria and many other countries, governments have allocated resources to reintegration in the form of human resources, with focal points from ministries and agencies dedicated to working on the issue.

In Sierra Leone, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has allocated a budget line for the establishment of a Migration desk that will coordinate all migration issues, including reintegration, with other line ministries, agencies and departments. It is expected that by 2026, the main ministries involved in reintegration will have dedicated budget lines for the provision of reintegration assistance to returnees.

Ownership is a crucial condition for national reintegration systems to be sustainable. Given the centrality – and complexity – of ownership in this regard, it is described separately in the next section.

2   Ownership

For national reintegration systems to be sustainable, they must be owned by countries of origin. Ownership means that countries of origin recognise the system as their own and are committed to engaging with it meaningfully. When countries of origin take ownership, they are more likely to assume control over how the system operates and how assistance is delivered – allowing them to move beyond external priorities.

This sense of ownership fosters greater accountability from local institutions, both toward returnees and toward the entities of the countries of destination that may support or facilitate the return process. Ultimately, ownership ensures that the drive to address reintegration challenges originates within countries of origin themselves, rather than being externally imposed. It embeds reintegration into the country's routine governance, making it a natural responsibility of the government – managed across relevant ministries and treated as a standard policy domain, like any other.

Our vision is for reintegration to become part of the governance norm, a responsibility of the government through different ministries. When we talk about reintegration, we should think about our own government before thinking about external partners. [...] So, rather than being an ownership process, it must be integrated into normal governance. Then the state will allocate funding for it. Governing means anticipating.*

Ownership means that decisions are made by countries of origin independently. That might not result in the ideal sustainability that we had in mind when designing programmes, but if the country o takes its decisions, that is ownership. For [external partners], that means accepting that somebody else takes the decisions…. which is not easy to accept. We must accept that governments and CSOs adopt their own agenda items.*

Ownership is closely linked to the elements described in the previous section. For example, ownership cannot exist unless there is political will and reintegration becomes a government's priority. Involving a wide range of stakeholders fosters a sense of shared responsibility and ownership, which in turn helps to mobilise stakeholders. Governments have a stronger sense of ownership when initiatives align with their priorities, strategies and frameworks. Full ownership can only be achieved when countries no longer need to rely on external support, which also means that states must allocate resources to reintegration. Conversely, governments are more likely to invest resources (and effort) in a system if they have a strong sense of ownership of it.

Ownership cannot be imposed from the outside; it must originate from countries of origin.[36] However, as described in the next section, external partners can accompany and support this process to some extent.

> *The concept of ownership may also imply expropriation. To make an approach yours, you must take it away from someone else. In this case, the idea is that the state takes responsibility but without forgetting technical and financial partners, and host countries. There are linkages with migrants' host countries, and logically, the host country wants to keep an eye on what is happening. This should therefore be placed within a bilateral and multilateral framework.**

3 External support

Despite undisputable progress in the development of reintegration systems in several countries of origin, there is wide agreement among consulted informants that governments are not ready yet to fully take over reintegration. Continuous technical and financial support is required to strengthen countries of origin' systems, institutions and staff capacities to ensure they can lead these systems in a sustainable way.

> *Partners' support is essential. The significant developments we achieved so far have not been formalised yet. Support must continue.**

> *We observe a change of paradigm. We had the impression that reintegration was something coming from outside, that the state was supporting. Now, the state is directly involved, manages, structures its mechanism. Partners' support is essential to strengthen the achievements, not to create them.**

While some donors have started to consider reducing or phasing out reintegration programmes that provide direct support to returnees, the technical and financial partners of countries of origin remain essential and should continue to support reintegration. However, shifting towards reintegration systems led by countries of origin requires an evolution in the way support is provided.

To foster countries of origin' ownership, technical and financial partners should trust, support and empower countries of origin in line with their expressed needs and priorities, and put

governments of countries of origin at the forefront wherever possible. This will require striking a better balance between the priorities of countries of destination in terms of migration management and the priorities of countries of origin (mostly in terms of stability, social cohesion and sustainable development) in a spirit of cooperation and with a shared vision.

External technical and financial partners should support this process in the following ways.

1. **Systematically involve countries of origin in the design, implementation and monitoring of reintegration programmes.** Future programmes should be co-designed, acknowledging the interest of both the countries of destination and origin in reintegration, to ensure the central role of governments in countries of origin is reflected, national priorities are considered, and criteria and parameters are aligned. All relevant stakeholders should be involved, including governmental entities, local authorities, the civil society and, where possible, communities and returnees themselves.

> ❝
> *The issue is the design of programmes. Who decides what the components of programme are? Who decides if we need more cash support or more counselling to returnees? Who decides who sits at the table when designing programmes? Some countries already defined their priorities, but are they sitting at the table when reintegration programmes are designed? The decisions are taken by others, but now it is expected that these countries take responsibility over the system that they did not design.**
> ❞

2. **'Let them do!'.** Countries of origin won't be able to fully develop their systems as long as the management of reintegration programmes remain under external partners' full responsibility. Therefore, local stakeholders must be put in the driving seat and should gradually take more responsibilities (with partners' support), including in decision making.

> ❝
> *For ownership to take place, we have to stop doing things for them. They can only take ownership of the system if we let them do it and if we help them to do it.**
> ❞

> ❝
> *There have been significant achievements and good practices under the Joint Initiative, and now under the MPRR. The government has taken stock of these achievements and is preparing to implement a pilot project to support return and reintegration.**
> ❞

3. **Provide technical support.** In recent years, countries' capacities have been strengthened, primarily through training and institutional support. While this support remains necessary, there is now a need to support more specifically local entities in carrying out their activities, including through joint activities, coaching, mentoring, and shadowing local actors.

> ❝
> *I don't think that the government is able to do by itself now. Experience in handling some of these issues is being developed. [We understand that] the MPRR will stop one day, donor support will die. But we want to do it side by side with IOM for a bit longer and see if we are able to handle it comfortably.**
> ❞

In Cameroon, counsellors from the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Civic Education and from the Ministry of Social Affairs have been delocalised in IOM's offices to provide counselling and orientation, and psychosocial support to returnees, while learning directly from IOM's experience.

In Nigeria, Ghana, Tunisia and Morocco, GIZ's Centres for Migration and Development are located within the national employment agencies or Ministry of Labour premises. Besides enabling alignment with national employment strategies and the provision of integrated support for job seekers, returnees and potential migrant, this setup allows for the cross-fertilisation of approaches and processes.

As governments of countries of origin progressively take on a more substantial role in coordinating and providing reintegration assistance, they will face specific challenges and needs. For example, they may need to improve trauma-informed counselling, design community-based projects, or develop operational action plans. Technical partners can support these efforts by providing specific, expert assistance. They can also support the strengthening of public policies and services, ensuring they are adapted and accessible to returnees.

> *To perform well, to have the necessary tools and experience, we need to work with external partners. IOM has tools, experience, and is the UN's specialised agency for migration; we need to discuss with them how we can work together on certain aspects: training, study visits, sharing tools. We then need to allow the government to gradually integrate this.**

> *A mechanism has been set up by [the country], with decentralised and deconcentrated national structures working on employment, vocational training, psychosocial support, etc. Today, these components of the mechanism need to be capacitated. We need to strengthen the capacity of these structures [...] so that the mechanism is operational. This is an important step before ensuring that the mechanism can work and that certain structures can gradually withdraw from implementation, while remaining available for more spaced-out support and an exit strategy.**

4. **Provide material support.** For entities involved in reintegration to play their role in countries of origin' national reintegration systems, they need adequate resources. Until now, they have often faced challenges to participate in reintegration assistance and monitoring activities due to their lack of equipment or resources to cover operational costs such as transport to assistance and monitoring sites. Although countries of origin may allocate a budget for reintegration activities in the future, this is unlikely to happen in most countries for some time. External partners should thus support these systems financially, including to enable the entities composing them to carry out the activities and provide the support they are supposed to deliver.

> *Resources are a major obstacle. Before, the government did not have the capacities in terms of staff and expertise to play the primary role that it wanted to play. We thus asked for support to build our technical and intellectual capacities and train officials on migration management. Now, what we need is to be able to accompany and be part of the process. International partners should help us in this regard. When there is a return flight, we cannot go to the airport, while international partners can. If we reach the airport, international partners have visibility jackets, we don't. The international partner provides pocket money to returnees and offers them training courses, we don't. But the international partner does not have local relays to support and monitor returnees at the local level, we do.**

Funding should be flexible (to adapt to circumstances and developments) and committed in the long-term (see below).

5. **Commit to a long-term process.** Reintegration systems take time to establish and develop; they can't be built and become functional in a few years. The various conditions outlined above (e.g., development of a migration policy, coordination mechanisms, SOPs, referral mechanisms, etc.) should be developed and operationalised progressively, with the support of financial and technical partners.

> *It is unrealistic to expect these countries to become capable of handling reintegration within one programme cycle.**

> *[Reintegration systems] take time to set up. Long-term support is needed for their establishment and operationalisation.**

> *It can only be progressive, you can't impose a model overnight, and no government is capable of putting a system like that in place in a short space of time [...]. That takes years.**

While acknowledging that countries are at different stages in the development of their reintegration systems and have varying needs and capacities, it is essential to allow countries of origin to develop their systems over a relevant timeframe, experiment, and build on their achievements. As this represents a long process, financial and technical partners should commit to long-term support.

6. **Support a progressive transition.** It is not possible to shift abruptly from reintegration programmes managed by external actors towards assistance provided through national reintegration systems. There needs to be a transition phase during which responsibilities are progressively transferred. The transition phase must be supported by transition plans and exit strategies for the current programmes (which should already have been considered during the design phase). Strong technical support is required during this period. These plans should help to prevent issues that may arise from the transition between the two systems, such as gaps and delays.

It is a matter of planning. At the moment, we need [partners implementing reintegration programmes]. But if it is well planned, the government could start delivering assistance with the technical and financial support of partners.*

The transition should be gradual at different levels. In terms of assistance provision, national stakeholders could begin assuming greater responsibility for phases of the return and reintegration process or activities in which they are already most involved, that are relatively straightforward (e.g., reception at the airport, counselling), or that align with other criteria to be jointly defined by governments of countries of origin and external partners. Financial support should match this transition. On one side, funding should be adapted to the increasing role of governments and decreasing role of external partners. At the same time, some entities consulted suggested that financial support for reintegration overall could progressively decrease while national budget allocations should increase.

That governments of countries of origin have a role in coordinating and mobilising stakeholders, and in coordinating programmes, that is very important. But managing reintegration [in all its aspects], that is very complicated. It is not going to happen. It makes sense for governments to be in charge of certain aspects, such as post-arrival assistance, referrals, coordination between initiatives, ensuring connections with local actors and services ...*

For vulnerable cases, there is a question of responsibility for [entities] organising the returns and of continuity of care. There can't be a total shift without a safety net. So we may consider setting up a progressive system ... Perhaps we can launch countries of origin' systems with 'simple' cases. Where there's no need for extensive support, we can be more hands-off, but for vulnerable cases, external partners will have to retain more control. We could imagine a transitional system where protection, medical or legal issues, among others, remain covered by entities responsible for the return, while employment, housing or training could be managed by the government.*

Perhaps the funding to be given to the government should be progressive. Little by little, one aspect at a time. Rather than paying for all government staff to be in charge of everything at once, funding should be provided for specific steps while the rest of the work is carried out by a programme running alongside it.*

7. **Ensure coherent and coordinated technical and financial support.** Support provided by technical and financial partners should be coordinated with the relevant authorities in countries of origin, as well as among the partners themselves. In some countries, donors, international organisations and other partners have previously supported different mechanisms led by various institutions in countries of origin,[37] resulting in confusion and dispersed resources. While full harmonisation is not essential, efforts should be made to avoid duplicating systems or promoting competing models. To ensure coherence and impact, support should be aligned with the countries of origin' policy and operational frameworks, identified needs, and established priorities.

What is feasible in the short term is an alignment in terms of funding in the field of reintegration. More coordination is needed among stakeholders: if we work to support the operationalisation of a national referral mechanism, each [technical] partner, IOM, ICMPD, GIZ, must be more coordinated, they should contribute in a meaningful way [towards the same approach and objective]. So we need better coordination between donors, including DG INTPA, DG MENA, DG HOME, and between international organisations, IOM, ICMPD, GIZ …*

8. **Pursue dialogue.** Eventually, the above requires adopting a perspective that is less EU-centred and more country-of-origin-oriented and context-specific, particularly as returns from the EU often constitute only a small portion of the return flows countries of origin deal with. Remarkably, stakeholders consulted both in countries of origin and in countries of destination confirm that such change in perspective and paradigm is already happening. In this regard, formal and informal dialogues such as the Rabat Process, the discussions taking place in the framework of the Team Europe Initiatives, or MPI Europe's Community of Practice [38] are recognised by return and reintegration stakeholders in countries of origin and of destination as being essential for improving mutual understanding of needs and priorities, and for advancing towards more adapted reintegration systems and better policy alignment.

There are more and more formal dialogues and informal discussions on migration. They make it possible to look at return and reintegration in a less dramatic way. These dialogues are essential to advance on these questions.*

The Team Europe Initiatives allow to have discussions with EU officials and share the priorities of the government. It allows for a better understanding of the government's needs and to identify how the EU can support programmes that are aligned with our priorities.*

Bilateral dialogues between a country of destination and a country of origin are fine, but we would like to see more region-to-region dialogues.*

9. **Support an effective return – reintegration continuum.** On an operational perspective, countries of destination and entities in charge of return can facilitate the work of national reintegration systems in countries of origin by carrying out quality counselling and vulnerability screening before departure, informing countries of origin in due time and coordinating any specific support needed in advance. This will help countries of origin better prepare to receive and assist returnees, including by activating the appropriate actors and preparing the appropriate services.
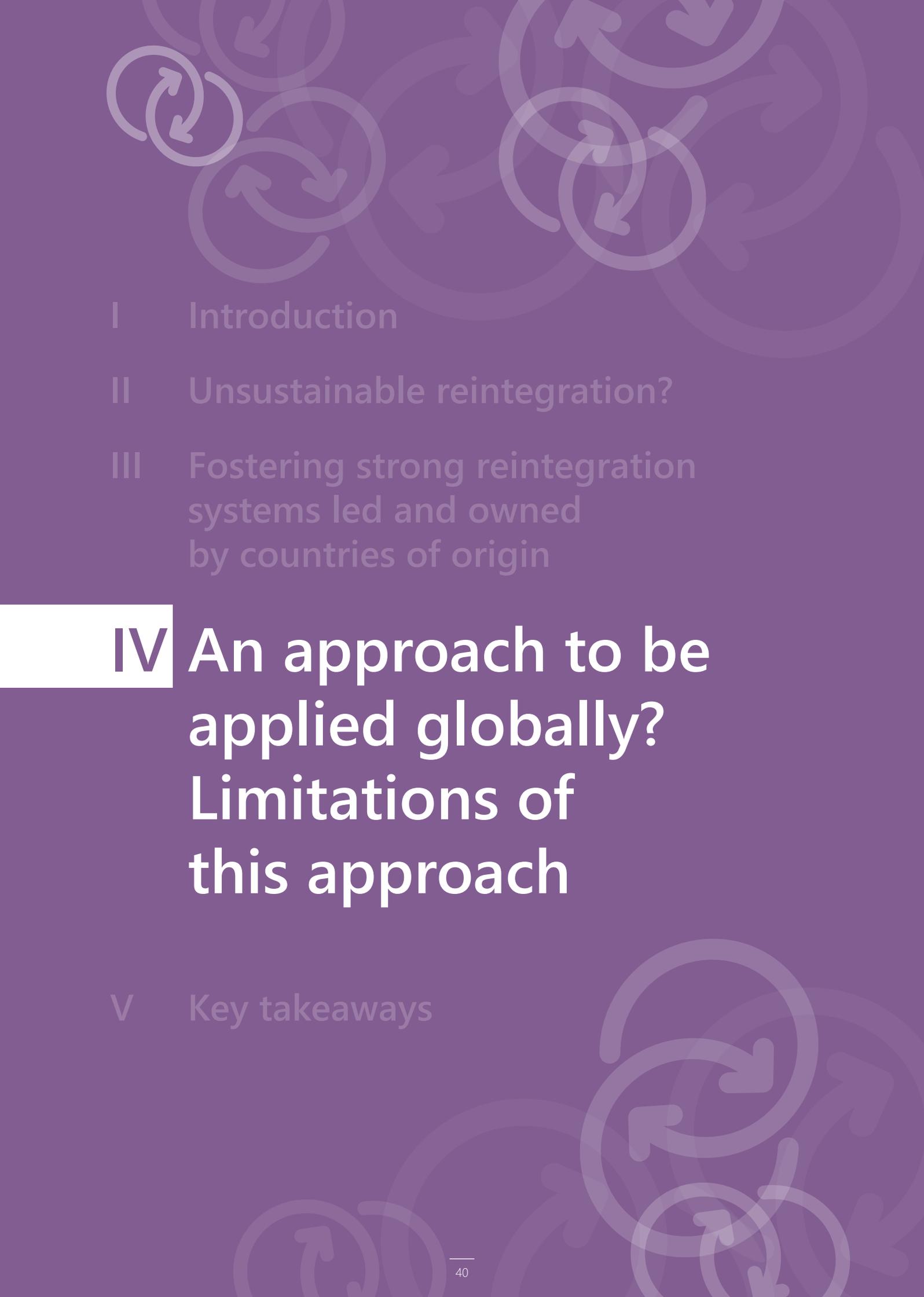
IV An approach to be applied globally? Limitations of this approach

Reintegration systems led and owned by authorities in countries of origin can contribute to enhancing the sustainability of reintegration outcomes and services for returnees. Many entities in countries of origin and destination, as well as donors, share an interest in establishing such systems to guide, coordinate and/or provide reintegration assistance to returnees.

But could this approach work globally? Are these systems appropriate in all countries and contexts? Could it address the priorities of all stakeholders, both in countries of origin and in countries of destination? Different countries, and different entities within them, have different views on reintegration systems led by countries of origin. While some are highly supportive of developing such systems, others express little interest or raise concerns about their feasibility and relevance. This section examines the concerns and limitations related to this approach.

1   An approach not universally adequate or relevant

While the rationale for systems led by countries of origin is compelling, their success depends on the presence of enabling conditions, mostly aligned with the foundational elements described in section III.1. These conditions include political will, institutional capacity and the availability of relevant public services.

> *[The idea is] to work with the governments of the countries of origin on developing their reintegration systems [and] to give them responsibility for coordinating reintegration, where the conditions are right for this work to be carried out, bearing in mind that national contexts vary greatly, that countries are more or less stable and have very different capacities and volumes [of returnees].**

> *Yes, national systems can strengthen sustainability. Links with public services and with local contexts are needed... but in contexts where this is possible. [...] In many countries this is premature, several [of the Rabat Process partner] countries have public policies that are far from satisfactory. Yet these public policies should be the starting point for the rest.**

While some of these conditions can be developed over time, the willingness and perceived interest of countries of origin to take responsibility for reintegration is central. In the absence of such willingness, these systems cannot be imposed.

Although that was not raised by any of the informants consulted for this paper, some countries of origin may not perceive a need to invest in migrant reintegration – or may lack a specific political interest in doing so – particularly where return flows are limited and the issue is not prominent in public discourse. These countries may prefer to maintain the status quo, where external partners manage reintegration.

2 Capacity and accountability: a shared concern

Taking ownership of reintegration systems also means assuming responsibility for the reintegration process. If countries of origin aim to fully manage reintegration – including the delivery of assistance – they become accountable to returnees, the wider population, and countries of destination that have a stake in the outcomes of migrants returning from their territory.

In this regard, countries of origin must be prepared to deliver assistance even in contexts where public services are weak or referral systems are unclear. Some stakeholders question countries of origin' capacity to do so, especially given limited resources and competing priorities.

> *I'm not entirely confident on the ability – not willingness – of third country governments to do a lot in this area, considering they have so many other issues. How likely is it that [governments of countries of origin] can do themselves, and can prioritise that with their own funding?**

> *What will governments do when there are no services to refer migrants to? If they are in charge of reintegration, they are responsible, they must find solutions for all as [implementing organisations] currently do.**

> *This vision is completely unrealistic because it assumes that countries will have specific services for returnees. But state budgets are limited, it's difficult to provide basic services for the population, they have difficulties with cross-cutting issues. [With these systems] we are unrealistically burdening these services.**

Frustrations from returnees – who previously directed grievances toward international actors like IOM or GIZ – may now be aimed at national institutions.

> *There may be a political backlash if everything is handed over to governments. Returnees will benefit from few services, that might create tensions and political problems in North Africa and in areas of origin. There will be risks of demonstrations and dissatisfaction with the government. And returnees will go and ask for assistance to [the partners that previously delivered reintegration assistance].**

Moreover, domestic populations may question why returnees receive support while broader social needs remain unmet, raising sensitive political dilemmas around prioritisation and equity.

> *Ownership means that […] you are in charge of the reintegration of your returning citizens. They need your help, you need to act, coordinate, refer, ensure monitoring. But that are higher standards than for their citizens, that is what IOM does [through dedicated programmes] … So it is tricky. How will the population [react]?**

Donors and entities in countries of destination also remain cautious about the transparency and effectiveness of country-of-origin-led systems. Without robust accountability mechanisms, there is a risk that reintegration funds may be diverted or diluted within broader development agendas (see below), undermining their intended impact.

> **"**
> *To what extent are we able to control what they do with the funding if given to them?**
> **"**

> **"**
> *If you provide direct budget support, you don't know where the money will go. Will it actually support reintegration?**
> **"**

As described more specifically in the next point, institutions in countries of destination may also consider themselves accountable to returnees. Handing over responsibility for reintegration to countries of origin would significantly reduce their control over the process, which may make them reluctant to do so.

3   Managing the return-reintegration continuum

A major challenge lies in bridging the pre-departure and post-return phases. Reintegration is part of a continuum that begins before departure and extends well beyond arrival. Current return and reintegration programmes largely rely on continuity between the pre-return and post-return phases, which has traditionally

been ensured either by a single organisation or through specific agreements between the entities responsible for the pre-return and return phases and those responsible for reception and reintegration.

The development of national reintegration systems challenges this modus operandi and could potentially disrupt the continuity of care. This is a key concern for entities facilitating voluntary returns, as they may feel liable towards returnees and unable to guarantee safe return or access to relevant services in the countries of origin. Strong reflection, planning and coordination will be required to address this issue.

> **"**
> *The issue of continuity of care is very important. If there is no adequate healthcare upon return for a person with a severe medical condition, the return cannot be done. If there is no trauma-informed care available, the return cannot be done. The organisation facilitating the return needs guarantees that adequate services will be available upon return. We don't know if countries of origin can [guarantee this], except maybe [a few of them]. And we cannot fully rely on other entities, including for data protection and accountability issues. So there will always need to be some form of follow-up by the organisation facilitating the return.**
> **"**

> **"**
> *Case management is critical. If [the organisation facilitating the return] is not in charge after the return, how is the coordination pre- and post-return ensured? There is a problem of due diligence. If governments manage reintegration, will they do case management?**
> **"**

This also creates challenges for data protection, data sharing, and the IT systems that enable information exchange.

Although the 2021 EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration supports national ownership,[39] representatives of a number of European entities consulted for the development of this paper have expressed limited interest in the development of reintegration systems in countries of origin as they want to remain involved in reintegration processes and to keep some control over the assistance delivered, viewed as a way of ensuring that returnees settle in the country of origin and do not migrate again (see below). Some of these actors consider it more pragmatic to continue supporting individual reintegration through international organisations, NGOs or private service providers.

> *Working with service providers rather than with countries of origin [governments] is more pragmatic, it is less complex, there are no diplomatic games. We want to keep a layer of basic reintegration assistance to have something to offer to people returning and we can commit on, and then on top, we can look at the landscape [and] refer people to these national systems.**

> *[Service providers such as] NGOs or IOs allow for more accountability because they are contract-based, the partner is accountable for the quality of services they provide as per the contract. It's a commercial relation. While making the governments [of countries of origin] accountable is nearly impossible.**

While they may be open to leveraging countries of origin' referral mechanisms to provide complementary support, they still want to retain the ability to commit to specific assistance for migrants who opt for voluntary return.

> *We don't have expectations that countries of origin manage reintegration from a to z. We are rather looking for complementarities, with national referral mechanisms providing services beyond those that we offer.**

4   Financial sustainability and strategic interests

The financial sustainability of country-of-origin-led reintegration systems is a critical concern. Current systems are largely subsidised by donors – particularly the EU – which raises questions about the actual interest for and ownership of these systems by countries of origin, as well as about their long-term viability.

> *There are some successes given that coordination mechanisms, reintegration policies, national referral mechanisms have been developed. But if these efforts are strongly supported by European budgets and international and local organisations, can they really be considered sustainable? Are these efforts driven by requests from countries of origin or by the significant resources made available, which condition support for reintegration on the establishment of national reintegration systems? Wouldn't that put too much pressure on countries of origin? This may be a bit artificial.**

While donors may seek to reduce their financial commitments, their strategic interest in promoting effective and durable returns remains.

> *Before sustainable reintegration comes sustainable return, which is the specific interest of EU Member States. They want to see the person return and never come back. How do you get sustainable return? In many cases through sustainable reintegration. Reintegration assistance is thus a tool to have sustainable returns. [...] It is the interest of the EU to continue funding reintegration to have sustainable returns.**

> *If the EU has an interest in returning migrants, incentivising returns, then they have no other choice than paying for these returns and for reintegration. The alternative is leaving people in Libya, mistreated, or in detention centres in Europe, or to force them in charters. This is a question of acceptability.**

The question of continuity of funding may be particularly acute for intra-African returns. However, several informants emphasised that supporting reintegration for migrants returning along the main migration routes leading to Europe also remains a strategic priority for the EU.

> *Why does the EU fund [returns from Africa]? To prevent migrants who are on their way from reaching Europe. It might be much more costly if they reach Europe, they will be there for a long time, they will need support during the asylum process. Organising returns from Libya is cheaper. Returning much sooner on the trip is a major justification for this kind of programmes.**

Countries of origin, on their side, may view reintegration systems as an opportunity to strengthen public services that benefit both returnees and the broader population.

> *Individual reintegration [assistance] is an approach from [sending] countries, to incentivise returns. countries of origin would never fund reintegration assistance as such, this is [...] not countries of origin' approach. What countries of origin would like, is more support to employment and social protection systems, through which they could assist returnees but also other youth and vulnerable people.**

However, this development-oriented approach may not align with donor expectations for targeted reintegration assistance. Some donors and countries of destination thus express concerns about accountability (as described above), notably regarding the use of funding – whether it will support individual reintegration or be absorbed into broader development programmes – and about the equal treatment of all returnees.

5 Migrants' trust and acceptability

Concerns have been raised that country-of-origin-led systems may act as a deterrent to voluntary return, particularly when migrants perceive government institutions as ineffective, corrupt, or indifferent to their needs. As a result of this mistrust, some migrants in countries of destination may be reluctant to opt for return if they are informed that their government will be responsible for their reintegration. This mistrust may also discourage returnees from engaging with government institutions upon arrival – whether to register, plan their reintegration, or access services. They may consider it much more acceptable to receive assistance through IOs or local NGOs, which may enjoy higher levels of trust than governments. [40]

> *Lots of migrants have such a distrust in their government … If you tell them a local NGO will help them, they agree, if you tell them their government will help, they don't trust it, and so they don't return.**

> *Returnees may be reluctant to return if they were to be put in the hands of their governments. Some governments might want to take away money from them, detain them, etc. By working with [IOs or NGOs], we remove that fear of being detained [...] or of not receiving any assistance.**

6 Looking ahead: a full shift or a pragmatic balance?

As national reintegration systems gain traction, many stakeholders advocate for an acceleration toward more systemic, country-of-origin-owned approaches. These approaches have multiple advantages, as described in this paper. However, the above limitations and concerns suggest that this evolution does not signal the end of individualised reintegration assistance.

> *How can we move away from individual approaches? I don't think we can do it realistically. The EU Member States will continue with [their national programmes implemented by] Frontex, IOM, Caritas, etc., because politically it is essential to show that there are returns, so incentives are needed.**

Individual assistance remains politically and operationally essential – especially for countries of destination in the EU seeking to incentivise returns and maintain visibility over reintegration outcomes. It also remains essential for countries of origin that have little interest in developing and investing in their own national reintegration systems. At the same time, many actors in Europe and in countries of origin increasingly favour systemic investments in employment, social protection, and public services that benefit both returnees and the wider population, and support schemes that create synergies and ensure returnees are effectively referred to these sectors.

As suggested above, national systems can help connect short-term reintegration support – such as the assistance envisaged under AVRR programmes – to longer-term service provision.

They can also fill gaps for returnees who are not eligible for individual assistance under AVRR or reintegration projects. However, when transitioning or accelerating towards more prominent national systems, or in fragile contexts, national systems may struggle to support all returnees. In such situations, individual reintegration assistance provided through donor-funded programmes can guarantee that no returnee is left without assistance.

> *[By supporting national systems,] the intention is to focus support on sectoral services to provide a better reintegration environment, align more with countries of origin' priorities, and avoid duplication of services. But this is a bet – and risky if the focus is exclusively on that. Reintegration programmes that envisage assistance for returnees can serve at least as safety nets in case national systems have significant gaps or face significant challenges.**

Each approach thus entails its own benefits and trade-offs, and ultimately the most appropriate approach – or the right balance between these approaches – will depend on specific contexts and should be defined through coordination between countries of origin and destination.

A hybrid approach – supporting both national systems and individual assistance – would require sustained donor commitment. While this may not align with expected reduction in reintegration funding in the medium term (in particular at the individual level), it offers a pragmatic pathway in the short to medium term: enabling countries of origin to gradually assume greater responsibility for reintegration management, while ensuring that partner countries' (of origin, transit and destination) strategic priorities continue to be addressed.

> *There's a blind spot in EU-thinking around sustainability. Some assume they won't need to fund returns and reintegration anymore – but it remains necessary. You need something acceptable at the human level. It has to be funded.**

Such an approach may be particularly valuable during a transition phase. As national systems mature and become more comprehensive, the need for individualised assistance through dedicated programmes may diminish. However, until those systems are fully operational and inclusive, maintaining both streams of support remains essential to avoid gaps in service delivery and ensure that all returnees are adequately assisted.

> *If you want quick wins – which should not be understood negatively – you need some direct assistance. But this type of assistance is not sustainable. If you aim at the sustainability of systems and service provision, you need to support [national systems], but then individuals may fall through the cracks.**

The move toward country-of-origin-led reintegration systems reflects a broader evolution in migration governance. It offers opportunities for greater sovereignty, improved accountability, and more sustainable outcomes. Yet it also demands realism: without the right conditions, adequate funding, and trust between partners, these systems may struggle to deliver. Ultimately, sustainability comes at a cost – and that cost must be acknowledged, accepted, and funded.
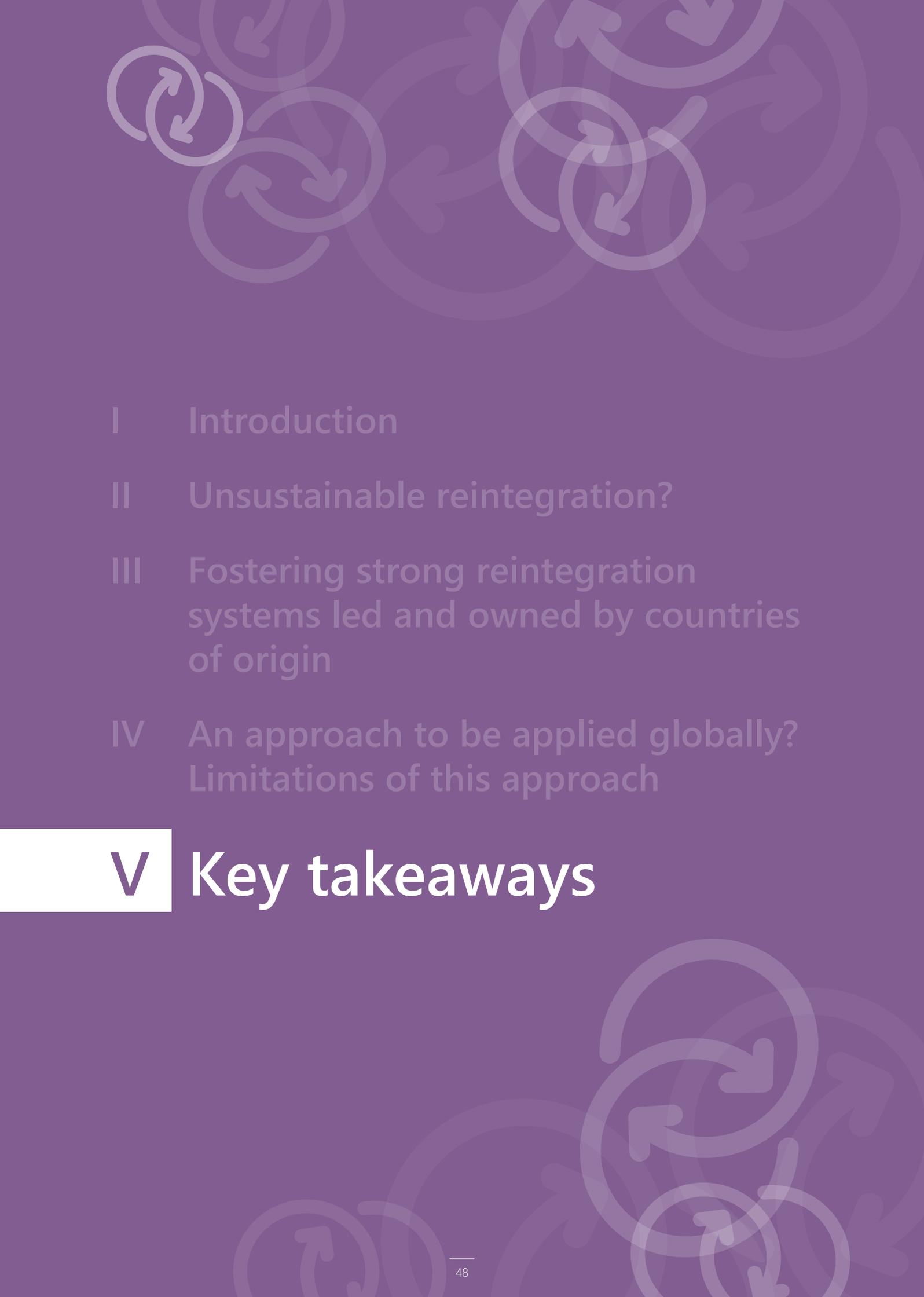
Several challenges affect the sustainability of reintegration, both in terms of individual outcomes and service provision. Individual reintegration is often hindered by short-term assistance that may not fully respond to the diverse and evolving needs of returnees, with many facing limited access to public services and others excluded from support altogether. At a structural level, constrained national resources and reliance on externally funded projects with limited timeframes can result in fragmented approaches largely shaped by donor priorities. These efforts may not always be fully aligned with the broader migration and development strategies of countries of origin, nor fully responsive to the wider return dynamics.

Adopting a development-oriented approach to reintegration can significantly improve the sustainability of reintegration. In particular, the development of reintegration systems led and owned by countries of origin may help address several of these challenges. They can contribute to ensuring accessibility to adapted public services as and when needed, better aligning assistance with local priorities and integrating reintegration assistance within existing sectoral policies and programmes, reducing dependence on short-term and fragmented external programmes, and strengthening accountability of countries of origin. Driven by a desire for greater ownership and alignment with national needs, countries of origin – including in the region covered by the Rabat Process – are increasingly investing in such systems, a trend also supported by donors aiming to enhance long-term outcomes while gradually reducing funding for individual reintegration assistance.

Effective national reintegration systems must be built on a set of interlinked and mutually reinforcing foundational elements. Countries of origin that aim to take a more substantial role in guiding, coordinating, and/or delivering reintegration support should progressively establish these foundations. These key components include: high-level political commitment; a clear policy framework, such as a national migration policy and/or reintegration strategy; a mandated lead agency to drive efforts and coordinate stakeholders; inclusive engagement across government and society to mobilise diverse expertise and foster ownership; accessible and effective public services tailored to returnees' needs and sustained beyond project timelines; robust coordination mechanisms and partnerships to align efforts and avoid duplication; clearly defined roles and responsibilities through SOPs and referral mechanisms to optimise stakeholders' role and ensure accountability and long-term support; adequate data management and MEAL systems; reintegration mainstreaming across sectors; decentralisation to reflect diverse local contexts and ensure accessibility of services at the local level; and dedicated national budget allocations to operationalise the system and ensure service delivery.

For country-of-origin-led reintegration systems to be effective and sustainable, they must be genuinely owned by countries of origin – meaning governments recognise these systems as their own and are actively committed to their development and operationalisation. Ownership, which is closely interlinked with the elements outlined above, fosters accountability, embeds reintegration into routine governance, and encourages resource allocation, especially when initiatives align with national priorities and involve a broad range of stakeholders.

As most countries of origin are not yet ready to fully lead reintegration efforts, external financial and technical partners have an essential role to play in supporting the development of national reintegration systems led by countries of origin. Continued support is essential to strengthen institutional capacities and put in place the core elements required for effective systems outlined above. At the same time, transitioning toward reintegration approaches led by countries of origin requires rethinking how assistance is provided – empowering governments to lead, aligning support with their priorities, and balancing migration management goals with development and social cohesion needs. Concretely, partners should systematically involve countries of origin in the design ('co-design'), implementation, and monitoring of reintegration programmes. Acknowledging that countries of origin won't be able to fully develop their systems as long as external partners retain full control, they should place countries of origin in the lead and progressively transfer responsibilities to them. In parallel, partners should continue providing tailored technical support (in the form of joint activities, coaching or mentoring, as well as through expert technical assistance on specific aspects) and financial support to operationalise systems and ensure service delivery. This support must be coherent – coordinated with authorities in the country of origin and among partners – and committed over the long term to enable gradual system development, experimentation, and consolidation. Responsibilities must be transferred progressively, taking into account specific countries of origin' contexts, capacities, and experience. This transfer must be guided by transition plans and exit strategies and accompanied by strong technical support. Meanwhile, ongoing dialogue between countries of origin and destination should continue, to foster mutual understanding and advance toward a more balanced, country-of-origin-oriented and context-specific approach.

....

While many return and reintegration stakeholders recognise the potential reintegration systems led by countries of origin to enhance the sustainability of reintegration outcomes and services for returnees, this approach is not universally appropriate. As described above, this approach relies on a set of core elements, which are not always present. In particular, the willingness and perceived interest of countries of origin to take responsibility for reintegration, as well as institutional capacity, and the availability of public services are fundamental. **Reintegration systems led by countries of origin are thus not appropriate in all contexts, but only where relevant conditions are met. In addition, some stakeholders express concerns related to the relevance or feasibility of reintegration systems led by countries of origin and over the full transfer of responsibility to authorities of the countries of origin.** Concerns are raised around countries of origin' ability to deliver reintegration assistance effectively and equitably, particularly in contexts with weak public services and limited institutional capacity. Stakeholders worry that national institutions may face challenges in meeting returnees' expectations, managing public perceptions in the face of broader unmet social needs, and ensuring resources are indeed used for reintegration rather than diluted within broader development agendas. Some entities in countries of destination are reluctant to fully transfer the management of reintegration processes to countries of origin due to their willingness to keep some control over the assistance delivered – seen both as an incentive for voluntary returns and as a way to meet their strategic interest in ensuring returnees do not re-migrate. They also emphasise challenges in ensuring due diligence and continuity of care across the return – reintegration continuum

if reintegration assistance is fully taken care of by countries of origin. Additionally, some entities in countries of destination are concerned that migrants may be discouraged from opting for voluntary return if they know that the government institutions in their country of origin will be responsible for their reintegration assistance. Due to their mistrust of government institutions, migrants may consider it much more acceptable to receive assistance through IOs or local NGOs.

....

The consultation held to develop this paper and the successive analysis, summarised in the above paragraphs, confirms that **national reintegration systems led and owned by countries of origin have strong potential to enhance the sustainability of reintegration** – both at the individual level and in terms of service provision. These systems can help address long-standing gaps, such as the limited alignment of reintegration initiatives with national development plans and other local priorities, and the narrow focus on returnees from specific schemes or regions. They can strongly contribute to foster enhanced accountability and progressively establish reintegration as an ordinary governance area for countries of origin. Over time, they may also enable a gradual reduction in the level of direct engagement and resource commitments required from financial partners. However, the development and effectiveness of such systems depend on the presence of foundational elements, or key enabling conditions, including political will, institutional capacity, and adequate resources. To move forward effectively, it is also essential to acknowledge the concerns of certain actors – particularly migration and internal affairs stakeholders in destination countries – regarding a full paradigm shift toward systems led by countries of origin.

....

In this regard, **sustained dialogue is needed between countries of origin and destination, alongside other return and reintegration stakeholders, to identify context-specific approaches that balance the interests and priorities of all parties involved.** The structures and mechanisms developed will necessarily vary across contexts, depending on each country's level of interest, capacity, and available resources.

....

The transition toward reintegration systems led and owned by countries of origin will need to be gradual and supported by continued technical and financial assistance. In many cases, this may involve a phased transfer of responsibilities – for example starting with specific stages of the return process (e.g., reception), particular areas of reintegration (e.g., vocational training or housing), or targeted returnee profiles (e.g., migrants returning from specific regions, young men without specific vulnerabilities). Countries of destination's engagement with these systems may also be gradual. For instance, they may initially use these systems to complement reintegration assistance provided through their own programmes.

....

In the short term, this shift will not reduce the need for technical and financial partner support – on the contrary, sustained investment will be essential to develop effective systems. But in the longer term, it may contribute to a more efficient use of resources and a gradual reduction in external funding needs. In parallel, countries of origin will gain greater autonomy, accountability, and the ability to exercise stronger ownership and control over reintegration as a national policy domain.

....

Key resources

African Union (unpublished). Continental Guidelines on Return, Readmission and Reintegration (working version / draft)

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European Commission (2021). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration

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European Commission (2025). Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC

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Khartoum Process (2025). Conclusions Report, Thematic Meeting on Safe and Dignified Return and Sustainable Reintegration: A Partnership Approach to Lasting Solutions for Returnees and their Communities (Addis Ababa, 19 to 20 February 2025)

MPI (2021). European Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration Advances Action within Bloc, Leaves More to Discuss with Countries of Migrant Origin

MPI (2022). Embedding Reintegration Assistance for Returning Migrants in the Local Context. The Role of Referrals

MPI (2023). Linking Migrant Reintegration Assistance and Development Goals

MPI (2025). The Forgotten Side of Deportation: The Cost of Ignoring Returnees' Reintegration Challenges

OECD (2024). Return, Reintegration and Re-migration: Understanding Return Dynamics and the Role of Family and Community

Rabat Process (2022). Cadiz Action Plan

Rabat Process (2023). Outcome Document: Thematic Meeting, Voluntary return and reintegration, 25-26 April 2023, Yaoundé, Cameroon

Endnotes

1   See Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, Objective 21 – Dignified return and reintegration.

2   As indicated in the European Commission's Policy Document 'Towards an operational strategy for more effective returns', '[e]stablishing an effective and common EU system for returns is a central pillar of well-functioning and credible migration and asylum systems, and of the comprehensive approach of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. [...] An effective and common EU system for returns should also serve as a deterrent to help reduce unsafe and irregular migration.' 'The key objective of the operational strategy should be to enhance the functioning of return so that the overall number of effective returns increases [...], returns are implemented more swiftly [...], and the returns are sustainable [...].' One of the four focus areas identified by the European Commission to form the basis of the operational strategy refers to the promotion of 'reintegration as [a] core element [...] in the EU return system, both for voluntary and forced returns.' (European Commission (2023). Towards an operational strategy for more effective returns).

3   European Parliament, Council of the European Union (2008). Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals (summarised here).

4   European Commission (2021). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration. 'The Commission is adopting the [Strategy] to promote voluntary return and reintegration as an integral part of a common EU system for returns and improve the overall effectiveness of EU migration policy, key objectives under the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. The Strategy identifies challenges that need to be addressed and proposes practical measures, based on seven pillars, to strengthen the legal and operational framework for voluntary returns from Europe and from transit countries, improve the quality of return and reintegration programmes, establish better links with development initiatives and strengthen cooperation with partner countries.' (European Commission, New EU Strategy on voluntary return and reintegration: Questions and Answers).

The Strategy also 'aims to overcome the fragmentation of approaches [...] and to promote coordination between all stakeholders involved in return and reintegration.' (Rabat Process (2023), Outcome document: Thematic Meeting, Voluntary return and reintegration).

5   European Commission (2025). Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC. The proposal, intended to replace the 2008 Directive, aims 'to have swifter, simpler and more effective return procedures across the European Union' (home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/new-common-european-system-returns-2025-03-11_en). It includes the possibility to establish return hubs outside of EU's territory.

6   These flows have continued since then, while returns from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia also increased significantly (more recently).

7   FAiR (2025), Returnee Voices Matter: Towards More Inclusive Return Policies, Policy Brief

8   Many African countries of origin see return and reintegration from a variety of angles, not only linked to irregular migration but also to the benefits countries of origin can draw from returnees, among others in terms of skills and qualifications. Return and reintegration are addressed in three different pillars of the African Union's Migration Policy Framework for Africa, namely the migration governance, the irregular migration, and the labour migration and education pillars. The African Union is also finalising Continental Guidelines on Return, Readmission and Reintegration, which materialise AU Member States' willingness to have their own narrative on return and reintegration.

9   Notably through the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa (EUTF for Africa), and more recently through other EU funding instruments, as briefly presented below. Examples include the EU–IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration (funded by the EUTF for Africa and implemented by IOM); the Renforcement de la gestion et de la gouvernance des migrations et le retour et la réintégration durable au Sénégal project (funded by the EUTF for Africa and implemented by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) and IOM); and the Prospect project (funded by the EU through the Return and Reintegration Facility and implemented by ICMPD in Nigeria).

10 Return and reintegration have, for example, been discussed in the following meetings:
• Rabat Process Thematic Meeting – Voluntary Return and Reintegration, 25 to 26 April 2023, Yaoundé, Cameroon
• Khartoum Process Thematic Meeting – Safe and Dignified Return & Sustainable Reintegration: A Partnership Approach to Lasting Solutions for Returnees and their Communities, 19 to 20 February 2025, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

11 Cádiz Action Plan 2023 – 2027

12 Rabat Process, www.rabat-process.org/en/activities/technical-meetings/tm-voluntary-return

13 Rabat Process (2023), Outcome document: Thematic Meeting, Voluntary return and reintegration.

14 Conducted between May and September 2025.

15 It should be noted that the informants interviewed are all migration stakeholders directly engaged in return and reintegration, either as practitioners, policymakers or donors. The analysis presented in this paper mostly reflect their views, which do not necessarily reflect those of higher-ranking officials or of representatives from other ministries and entities.

16 It should be noted that the informants interviewed are all migration stakeholders directly engaged in return and reintegration, either as practitioners, policymakers or donors. The analysis presented in this paper mostly reflect their views, which do not necessarily reflect those of higher-ranking officials or of representatives from other ministries and entities.

17 Conducted between 30 June and 5 July 2025.

18 See box on The concept of 'reintegration systems' on page 21 for more details about what is intended by 'systemic' level.

19 This issue is detailed further in the paper.

20 Nozarian N., N. Graviano, A. J. Wadud, A. Götzelmann (2017), Towards an Integrated Approach to Reintegration in the Context of Return, IOM.

21 The 2021 EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration also refers to these elements: 'Sustainability is a multi-faceted concept that encompasses the needs and vulnerabilities of the individual, the economic, social and psychosocial reintegration in the community, cost-effectiveness for the donors and the contribution to local development. In addition to supporting individual returnees, the concept of sustainable reintegration has the broader goal of building up the capacity of receiving communities, the private sector and local stakeholders.'

22 One entity consulted actually emphasised that sustainability can only be determined at a structural level because individual reintegration depends heavily on contextual issues and individual choices. 'We don't talk about sustainable reintegration of individuals because no individual path is guaranteed to be sustainable. Individual sustainability is a matter of individual choices. Instead, we must talk about sustainability of systems and approaches, that have the obligation to be sustainable. Countries of origin must have systems in place to enable reintegration.'

23 Conducting robust research based on evidence from reintegration programmes would be highly relevant to confirm, nuance or debunk whether migrant reintegration is generally sustainable or not. In this regard, IOM's Impact Study developed under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration in the Horn of Africa provides a robust methodology that can be used in other regions (including the Rabat Process region) and to make comparative analysis across country contexts and programmes. More information is available on the IMPACT Study webpage.

24 In this regard, it is worth noting how reintegration assistance has evolved in the last decade, with much more attention given to the social (e.g., access to basic public services) and psychosocial (e.g., addressing the psychological needs of returnees, supporting the reestablishment of their social networks and combating stigma) dimensions of reintegration. An increasing number of programmes, funded by development donors (most notably the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration in Africa funded in large parts by DG INTPA) or implemented by development agencies, have indeed applied a development-oriented and integrated approach to reintegration, addressing the economic, social and psychosocial dimensions of reintegration at individual, community and structural levels. Such approach is now widely recognised as a good practice and even programmes funded by non-development donors now usually consider the different dimensions of reintegration (while they often remain focused on the individual level). See IOM (2019), Reintegration Handbook - Practical guidance on the design, implementation and monitoring of reintegration assistance.

25 For more information on the challenges linked to employment for returnees, as well as examples, good practices and recommendations in this regard, see EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub (2022), Knowledge Paper #3, Fostering Returnees' Employment, Sustainable Reintegration Knowledge Papers Series.

26 'While policy attention in destination countries has been focused on assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programs, particularly for migrants with expulsion orders, [they] represent only a fraction of broader return movements.' (OECD (2024), Return, Reintegration and Re-migration: Understanding Return Dynamics and the Role of Family and Community).

27 While data on return migration flows are generally incomplete, several studies illustrate the scale of returns compared to the number of migrants assisted under reintegration schemes. See, for example, OECD (2024), Return, Reintegration and Re-migration: *'In Morocco, annual return estimates since 2000 range from 10 000 to 40 000 depending on the data source, far exceeding the 4 800 return migrants who have received AVRR assistance between 2013 and 2022. In Tunisia, the MED-HIMS survey indicates that approximately 115 966 migrants returned between 2000 and 2020, with an average of 5 800 returns per year, which is much higher than the annual average of 183 return migrants who received AVRR since 2013. These figures suggest that AVRR represents only a small fraction – at best 5% – of total return movements in these regions.'*

28 Migrants returning through voluntary return schemes only constitute a portion of return flows to West, Central and North African countries of origin. Migrants indeed also return in a self-organised manner, through forced return schemes, or from countries where AVRR programmes are not available (or that provide assistance for the return travel but not for reintegration). In addition, several countries of origin participating in the Rabat Process face IDP movements, including returns.

29 Such programmes include the Migrant Protection, Return, and Reintegration Programme (MPRR) implemented by IOM, the EU Reintegration Programme (EURP) managed by Frontex and implemented by its implementing partners, EU Member States' (EUMS) national AVRR projects (usually implemented by IOM and/or NGOs), and different capacity-building programmes (often implemented by EUMS development and migration agencies, international organisations and countries of origin' ministries and agencies, and funded, among others, through the EU Flexible Mechanism for Migration and Forced Displacement, EU bilateral funding with target countries of origin, and actions under the EU's annual Individual Measure for West Africa).

30 The list may not be comprehensive, but it illustrates the variety of projects and external stakeholders involved in reintegration in Nigeria. Some of these and other past projects have aimed to strengthen Nigeria's migration and reintegration governance through policy support, technical assistance, and capacity-building activities.

31 For more analysis and recommendations on the interlinkages between sustainable development and sustainable reintegration, see EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub (2021), Knowledge Paper #2, Fostering and strengthening interlinkages between sustainable development and reintegration programmes.

32 It may be argued that a national migration policy (or reintegration policy/strategy) is not a prerequisite for establishing national reintegration systems, as reintegration can also be mainstreamed directly into sectoral policies. However, while recognising the importance of reintegration mainstreaming, several stakeholders consulted for this paper emphasised the value of a migration policy as a framework that clarifies a country's role in reintegration and supports the development of national reintegration mechanisms. How a migration policy or reintegration strategy interacts with reintegration mainstreaming could constitute an interesting area for further research.

33 EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub (2020). Reintegration good practices #5 - Establishing a permanent whole-of-government dialogue to foster ownership and sustainability of reintegration mechanisms in Cameroon.

34 Different projects supported this expansion, notably the Gouvernance Migration et Développement project implemented by the General Directorate of Support to Senegalese Abroad (DGASE) and the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) and funded under the EUTF.

35 More information available on the AMIS webpage.

36 Specific Objective 1: Reducing the gap between the skills of young people, including potential migrants and returnees, and labour market and business opportunities in West Africa in the field of green economy.

Specific Objective 2: Increasing labour inclusion and entrepreneurship of young people, including potential migrants and returnees, in the field of circular and climate neutral economy with a particular focus on regions of departure and arrival.

37 A few key informants consulted emphasised that unless a system is designed and built by countries of origin, there cannot be any ownership. Either a system is developed by countries of origin and there can thus be ownership by the countries of origin, or countries of origin develop systems with external partners, and in this case, we should talk about 'co-development' and 'joint ownership' of these systems.

38 This is not specific to Rabat Process partner countries. This issue is visible in other regions where different donors have supported different organisations to establish and strengthen different referral mechanisms.

39 More information available on the project factsheet.

40 The Strategy 'puts forward an approach that fosters coherent action, forges closer links with development initiatives and national strategies in partner countries, reinforces their capacity and fosters their ownership over the return, readmission and reintegration of their nationals.' (European Commission (2021). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration).

Annex ▶
Entities consulted

Rabat Process partner countries governments

Country	Ministry/ Office/ Agency
Belgium	Enabel (Belgian Development Agency)
Belgium	Fedasil (Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers)
Cameroon	Ministry of External Relations
Côte d'Ivoire	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, African Integration and Ivorians Abroad
France	French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII)
The Gambia	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and Gambians Abroad
Germany	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Guinea	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Guineans Abroad
Senegal	Ministry of African Integration and Foreign Affairs
Sierra Leone	Ministry of Internal Affairs
Spain	Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration
Tunisia	Office for Tunisians Abroad (Office des Tunisiens à l'Etranger, OTE)

Regional institutions

Entity	Institution/ Directorate/ Agency
African Union	African Union Commission
European Union	European Commission – Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA)
European Union	European Commission – Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME)
European Union	FRONTEX, European Border and Coast Guard Agency
European Union	European Union Delegation to Tunisia
European Union	European Union Delegation to Senegal

International organisations

Organisation	Unit / Region
ICMPD	Pan-Africa Region
ICMPD	Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF) – Global Initiatives
ICMPD	Policy, Research and Strategy (PRS) Directorate – RRR Thematic Expertise
IOM	IOM Headquarters in Geneva

Think tanks and research

Type of entity	Entity
Consulting organisation	Altai Consulting
Think tank	Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Europe

Field research in Nigeria

Type of entity	Entity
MDA	National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI)
MDA	Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Reduction
MDA	Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment
MDA	National Directorate of Employment (NDE)
MDA	Federal Ministry of Education
MDA	Federal Ministry of Health
MDA	Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS)
MDA	National Social Intervention Programme (NSIP)
MDA	Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy
MDA	Federal Ministry of Justice
Local NGO	Female Returned Migrants Association
Local NGO	Patriotic Citizens Initiative
Local NGO	Web of Hearts Foundation (Migrant Reintegration Centre)
Private sector	Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Private sector	Lani Consulting/ Lani Group
International Organisation	ICMPD
International Organisation	IOM
Development agency	GIZ (Centre for Migration and Development)
EU	European Union Delegation to Nigeria

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