



PACES

Making migration and migration policy decisions
amidst societal transformations

Migrations Intentions After Return

Lessons from EU programming in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire

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Abstract

This policy brief examines the migration intentions of returnees who have received support through assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Dakar (September 2025) and Abidjan (February 2026), alongside a review of the existing evidence on post-return trajectories, it explores two questions: to what extent do returnees wish to leave again after their return, and what implications do these findings have for the design and policy objectives pursued within current EU-funded reintegration programmes?

The findings indicate that migration intentions after return are shaped by a combination of factors, including economic precarity, social stigma, and limited access to legal mobility options. Among the twenty returnees interviewed, half either held concrete plans to leave again or maintained renewed migration as a conditional fallback. While most expressed a strong preference for regular migration pathways, they recognised that such channels remain largely inaccessible to them. Reintegration assistance was described as helpful in absorbing the immediate shock of return, but insufficient to address the structural conditions that had shaped the original decision to migrate.

The brief argues that current programming focuses predominantly on individual-level support (business grants, training, psychosocial assistance) while the broader economic and social context in which returnees must rebuild their lives remains largely unchanged. Where sustained, personalised, relationship-based support was available, respondents described more stable trajectories when settling-in. Yet this model is delivered primarily by smaller bilateral actors and remains structurally difficult to scale within larger multilateral programmes. The findings suggest that EU policymakers may need to reconsider how sustainable reintegration is defined and measured, and whether a shift toward more structural, development-oriented approaches could achieve more durable outcomes than the current model.

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Introduction

Return and reintegration have become central pillars of EU migration policy. The 2021 EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration positions assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) as a key component of the EU's approach to managing migration flows, while the ongoing negotiations on a new Return Regulation signal sustained legislative momentum in this area.¹ These policy developments have gone hand in hand with substantial financial and operational investments at the EU level, including the expansion of Frontex's mandate and the creation of its EU Reintegration Programme, and the gradual transition from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) to the EU's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) as the primary vehicle for financing return and reintegration support in partner countries.²

The objective underpinning these efforts is to promote sustainable reintegration of migrants having returned to their countries of origin, a term that enjoys broad consensus in policy circles but conceals significant disagreement about what it actually means.³ For destination countries and EU institutions, sustainability is often implicitly equated with permanence in the country of origin and reduced propensity for irregular post-return migration. For countries of origin, however, sustainable outcomes may look quite different: they may include access to legal migration pathways, remittance flows, or the strengthening of diaspora ties. For returnees themselves, sustainability is lived as an everyday question about whether life at home offers opportunities to make staying a genuine choice rather than an absence of alternatives. These diverging perspectives create ambiguity around policy and programme goals and also impacts how EU support for reintegration gets funded, measured, and reported. Yet, even as investments in return and reintegration have grown, the evidence base on their outcomes has not kept pace. Monitoring what happens to migrants once they return to their countries of origin is difficult because many returnees change contact details, move, or deliberately disengage from anyone they associate with migration authorities. Therefore, evidence on post-return trajectories (including on whether returnees do in fact migrate again, and under what conditions) remains limited.

This policy brief aims to contribute to filling that gap. It draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Senegal in September 2025 and in Côte d'Ivoire in February 2026, alongside a review of the existing evidence on post-return migration intentions, to explore two questions: to what extent do returnees supported under assisted return schemes wish to leave again, and what does that tell us about how EU programming should be designed and evaluated?

The brief draws on two complementary sources. First, it reviews the emerging evidence on migration intentions among people who have returned to their countries of origin with some form of assisted support. Second, it draws on original qualitative fieldwork: sixteen

key-informant interviews with government officials, international organisations, development actors, reintegration service providers, and diplomatic missions, alongside nine in-depth interviews with returned migrants in Dakar (September 2025); and eleven in-depth interviews with returned migrants in Abidjan (February 2026), complemented by key-informant interviews conducted separately for a parallel country study in August 2025.

Both samples are small and non-representative of the overall returnee populations in the respective countries of origin. Returnees were identified primarily through reintegration service providers and migrant associations, which means that those with no engagement with formal support structures – often the most marginalised, and potentially those especially likely to leave again – are absent from the data. These limitations reflect a structural gap in knowledge about what happens to people after return that affects the entire field and makes the evidence base thinner than policy discussions typically acknowledge. What the data collected in these two settings can offer therefore is an illustration of the conditions, mechanisms, and tensions that shape how returning migrants think about their future – and, in doing so, offers an exploratory opening onto assumptions about reintegration policies.

Evidence and Literature Review: Migration After Return

What does the existing literature tell us about migration intentions after return? How is EU programming in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire supporting efforts for sustainable reintegration? And how are national governance frameworks in these countries addressing these topics? Although research on post-return trajectories is still limited, a small but growing body of research speaks to two interconnected questions: how common are intentions and aspirations to migrate again among returnees, and what drives them? The evidence on both points is more nuanced than policy discussions often acknowledge.

Factors shaping post-return decision-making

Decisions about leaving again after return are, like initial migration decisions, shaped by a mix of personal, structural, and community factors. What distinguishes them is that returnees bring direct experience of migration with them. They have lived in a destination country, navigated irregular routes, and developed knowledge that makes their assessment of costs, risks, and potential gains more concrete than that of first-time migrants.⁴ This distinction is not merely conceptual. It means that awareness of risks does not straightforwardly translate into deterrence, and that the post-return decision-making process unfolds against a backdrop of real, lived comparisons between life at home and life abroad.

The existing literature suggests that economic conditions and livelihood prospects remain central. Across different studies, limited access to decent work and low or unstable income are among the most consistently cited drivers of renewed migration aspirations. Returnees

may also face the additional pressure of debts incurred during the initial journey, creating immediate financial strain that short-term reintegration assistance is ill-equipped to resolve.⁵ Social factors are at least as important. In settings where migration to Europe is strongly associated with success and the ability to provide for one's family, returning without visible material achievement can generate shame and stigma that sustains the desire to leave again, not as an economic calculation alone, but as a means of restoring a damaged identity.⁶ The availability (or absence) of legal migration pathways shapes whether those aspirations can be channelled through safe and regular routes, or find expression only through irregular ones. Research consistently finds that most returnees who contemplate moving again express a preference for regular channels. It is the inaccessibility of those channels, not a preference for irregular routes, that determines how intentions ultimately translate into behaviour.⁷ Finally, the overall reintegration experience acts as a crosscutting factor. Where reintegration remains fragile (economically, socially, or psychologically), the idea of leaving again can become more attractive. Yet a lack of resources can at the same time trap people in a state of involuntary immobility, neither firmly anchored at home nor able to act on their aspirations.⁸

Migration intentions and aspirations among returnees

A useful conceptual distinction in this literature is between *aspirations* (a more diffuse desire to migrate at some point in the future) and *concrete intentions* (clearer plans involving active preparation). Across the available evidence, a consistent but qualified picture emerges: most returnees do not hold concrete plans to migrate again, but aspirations to do so at some point in the future are more widespread. This distinction between aspiration and concrete intention matters considerably for how reintegration programming is designed and what it is expected to achieve.

In one study drawing mainly on interviews with AVRR beneficiaries only about 10 per cent reported concrete plans to leave again, while more than half expressed a desire or aspiration to do so at some future point.⁹ Findings from a comparative analysis of return surveys across Algeria, Armenia, Mali, Morocco, and Tunisia are broadly consistent with this picture: roughly 10 to 25 per cent of returning migrants expressed intentions to emigrate again, while sizeable shares were either uncertain or said they did not wish to migrate. It is worth noting, however, that these surveys focused primarily on migrants who had returned spontaneously, with only a small minority having experienced assisted or forced return.¹⁰ Recent experimental work with assisted returnees in Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia reinforces this picture of widespread but conditional interest in migration after return. When presented with hypothetical choices between staying and leaving, 24 per cent of returnees in Sudan, 12 per cent in Somalia, and 3 per cent in Ethiopia preferred to migrate again. An additional group (described as "conditional movers") indicated they would consider leaving depending on the balance between expected income at home and abroad, perceived risks on the journey, and migration costs.¹¹ In other words, a majority either wished to stay or contemplated leaving only under specific and relatively favourable conditions. Among those who had returned from Europe specifically, aspirations appear

stronger. Research with migrants returned to Afghanistan and Iraq following rejected asylum applications in Sweden found that many framed their return as a temporary, imposed interruption in a longer-term migration project rather than its conclusion. And most, when contemplating moving again, expressed a preference for doing so through legal channels if these were available.¹² Finally, some research indicates that many returnees who want to leave again express a preference for returning to their previous host country. For example, OECD analysis finds that around sixty per cent of such returnees have their original destination in mind.¹³ Among those returning from Sweden to Afghanistan or Iraq, most indicated that they would like to go back to Sweden or, if that were not possible, move on to another EU country, preferably through regular, legal migration pathways rather than risking irregular routes.¹⁴ In the experimental study of assisted returnees in Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia, the main desired destinations vary somewhat by country but are concentrated in Europe and the United States, with South Africa and, in the Ethiopian case, Saudi Arabia also featuring prominently.¹⁵

Together, these findings suggest that for many returnees, the post-return period is characterised by uncertainty and ambivalence rather than fixed plans. Migration can remain "on the horizon" even when people lack the immediate resources or opportunities to act.

EU Programming and Governance in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire

Understanding how returnees think about their futures requires situating their experiences in the governance landscape they return to. What is formally in place matters less than how frameworks function in practice, and specifically, whether the institutional infrastructure exists to deliver assistance that is meaningful to returnees. This section draws on key-informant interviews conducted in Dakar in September 2025 and on a parallel country study in Abidjan in August 2025 to map that landscape in each country.

Senegal

EU engagement on return and reintegration in Senegal has evolved over nearly two decades. Since the *Cayucos* crisis of 2006, when rising departures from West African shores towards the Canary Islands called for new approaches to cooperation, there has been sustained EU investment in return and reintegration support in the country.¹⁶ The EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration (2017-2023) was widely cited by interviewees as the flagship instrument of this period, providing assistance to thousands of Senegalese migrants returning primarily from Libya, Mauritania, and Tunisia.¹⁷ In parallel, development-oriented projects such as the Governance, Migration and Development (GMD) project, implemented by AECID alongside the Senegalese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and financed by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), were credited with making meaningful advances in institutional capacity around return and reintegration.¹⁸ Several interviewees, however, underlined the limits of this project-based approach. Once EU funding ended (as with GMD in 2023), it was difficult to sustain the capacities and services that had been built up. As one implementing partner put it, when the funding stopped, many of the activities came to a halt due to constraints in Senegal's state budget.¹⁹

Since the end of the EUTF, there is growing recognition within parts of the European Union that project-based approaches have delivered limited results, especially in terms of building durable national capacities and domestic ownership over reintegration processes.²⁰ The new emphasis, financed under the EU's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), is more clearly on strengthening institutional capacities and governance structures. In addition, the EU announced a €30 million action in late 2024 to reinforce Senegal's capacity to manage migration, with an emphasis on return and reintegration alongside measures to prevent irregular departures.²¹ Yet some civil society representatives in Dakar raised concerns about the sustainability of an approach that links institutional capacity-building to migration containment objectives, and about its potential implications for trust with local partners.²²

At the bilateral level, the picture is more varied. France maintains longstanding cooperation through the Office Français de l'Immigration et de l'Intégration (OFII), which implements the assisted return programme for Senegalese migrants and hosts a referral desk under the EU-funded Return and Reintegration Facility. Germany, through GIZ, played a significant role until 2024, creating the Centre Sénégalais pour l'Appui à l'Emploi, la Migration et la Réintégration (CSAEM) with the National Agency for the Promotion of Youth Employment (ANPEJ) to offer employment counselling and job-matching services to returnees. That cooperation was terminated in 2024 following a broader geopolitical refocusing of German development cooperation. Belgium, through Fedasil and Caritas Senegal, continues to offer start-up support, training, and psychosocial assistance for returnees from Belgium under its own assisted return scheme.²³

Senegal's own governance framework reflects competing domestic priorities and external constraints. The government elected in 2024 has placed strong rhetorical emphasis on strategic sovereignty, but interviewees described more continuity than rupture in actual migration policy.²⁴ For instance, the National Migration Policy, drafted with EUTF funding and IOM support, has not been politically adopted but was technically validated by the new government. Civil society representatives have argued that it focuses too heavily on migration control, pays too little attention to legal pathways and protection needs, and reflects European rather than domestic priorities.²⁵ These concerns about ownership and framing at the policy level are compounded by operational shortcomings at the delivery level. The *Bureaux d'Accueil, d'Orientation et de Suivi* (BAOS), presented as regional receiving structures for returnees, operate in practice with very limited budget and staffing.²⁶

Côte d'Ivoire

EU engagement on matters related to return and reintegration in Côte d'Ivoire has been shaped by a rise in Ivorian nationals arriving at Italy's maritime borders (up 305 per cent in 2023 compared to the previous year) and by new cooperation actions involving a readmission agreement and counter-smuggling initiatives.²⁷ The main multilateral instrument, the Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration Programme for Sub-Saharan Africa (MPRR-SSA), has supported over 3,107 Ivorian returnees between August 2022 and

August 2025, with the majority having returned from North Africa.²⁸ At the structural level, the MIGRET project, jointly implemented by IOM, Enabel, and Expertise France, is investing in national institutional capacities, including the development of a national return and reintegration strategy and a national referral mechanism, both of which have been technically validated.²⁹

Within Côte d'Ivoire, the *Direction générale des Ivoiriens de l'étranger* (DGIE), created in 2013 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, provides a dedicated institutional anchor on matters relating to return and reintegration. Yet, at a strategic political level these questions remain sensitive and the draft of a national migration policy has stalled. The national return and reintegration strategy, though technically approved, has not yet been operationalised.³⁰ The absence of dedicated national budget lines for return and reintegration creates dependence on international donor funding, which raises questions about the longer-term sustainability of services funded through them.³¹ Finally, bilateral support from some European countries, such as France (via OFII) or Italy (via AVSI) provides highly personalized but small-scale assistance to returning migrants. This stands in contrast to the majority of returnees (including those returning through forced removal or spontaneously) and who typically receive no assistance.³²

Taken together, the governance frameworks in both Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire reveal some similarities, including significant budget limitations and challenges to formally adopt national migration policy frameworks given their politically sensitive nature. In both settings, a tension between domestic development objectives and migration containment imperatives shapes priorities on return and reintegration. Yet, both countries are also continuing their engagement with European donors and have built up national capacities over the past years to manage return and reintegration activities, with increasingly clear institutional roles and responsibilities, especially in Côte d'Ivoire. However, these developments still translate insufficiently into concrete support for returning migrants, which constrains the effective delivery of reintegration support. This is the context in which returnees' experiences, presented in Part 2, need to be read.

Findings

Interviewees profiles

In Senegal, nine men were interviewed: four had returned from Belgium with support from Caritas under an assisted voluntary return programme; three had been deported from Germany but received post-return assistance funded by GIZ; and two had attempted to reach the Canary Islands by boat before being intercepted and returned. They ranged from their mid-twenties to early fifties. Eight were living in Dakar at the time of interview and one near Saint-Louis.

In Côte d'Ivoire, eleven returned migrants were interviewed (eight men and three women). Eight had returned through an assisted voluntary return programme (three from France via

OFII, two from Italy, one from Germany, one from Belgium, and one intercepted along the migration route). Three had been forcibly removed (two from France, one from Italy). They ranged in age from 22 to 41 and came from several regions, including Bouaké, Daloa, Man, Korhogo, and Bondoukou. All were living in Abidjan or its immediate surroundings at the time of interview.

In both settings, returnees were recruited primarily through reintegration service providers and migrant associations. This likely means those with no connection to formal support are absent from the data, and some selection effects are plausible, particularly in Senegal where Caritas selected respondents. Consequently, the interviewees represent a small sample that is not representative of the overall returnee populations in either Senegal or Côte d'Ivoire. Still, the data can serve as a valuable illustration of the conditions, mechanisms, and tensions that shaped how these individuals thought about their experiences and future migration options. With that caveat in mind, the table below describes the range of post-return migration intentions expressed by respondents.

Post-return migration intentions among respondents

| | Senegal (n=9) | Côte d'Ivoire (n=11) | Total (n=20) |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Concrete plans to leave | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Conditional aspiration / "backup" | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Previously considered, no longer | 1 | – | 1 |
| No current intention to migrate | 5 | 4 | 9 |

Economic precarity: reintegration assistance as temporary relief, not structural change

Economic conditions and livelihood challenges emerged as the most consistently cited factor shaping how respondents thought about their futures after return. Almost all described the immediate post-return period as extremely difficult financially, and across both countries, the majority of those interviewed described some degree of ongoing livelihood struggle at the time of interview.

In Côte d'Ivoire, reintegration grants were consistently described as insufficient to establish financially viable activities or achieve anything approaching economic stability. The

structural conditions that made this so – high urban rents, intense market competition, limited access to credit, unreliable infrastructure, and low purchasing power among potential customers – are not new or exceptional: they are characteristic of the economic environment that shaped the original decision to migrate. More so, they appear not meaningfully altered by the individual, time-limited reintegration assistance they had received. Respondents described the grants as providing a brief reprieve before the same pressures reasserted themselves: one, who had gone through the IOM reintegration programme, put it directly: "€1,400 sounds like a lot when you first hear it. But when you start a business, it disappears fast. You need space, you need stock, you need equipment. Then you have rent every month, you have to eat, you have family obligations. Within six months, the money is gone and you're back to zero."³³ Another said: "If the support was enough to really build something solid, maybe I would stay. But it's not. It's just enough to survive for a while, then you're back to struggling. So people think: why struggle here when I could struggle in Europe and at least have a chance at something better?"³⁴ Where the broader economic environment offers few realistic pathways to sustainable livelihoods, the interviews show that the question of whether to stay or to try again elsewhere is often guided by reasoned economic considerations.

These considerations were articulated explicitly by several respondents, in ways that reveal how reintegration support can become folded into migration planning rather than serving as an alternative to it. One returnee, actively saving money from informal work to fund another attempt, explained: "I can use €2,000 to try to start a business here, and it will probably fail. Or I can use that same €2,000 to pay a smuggler and try to reach Europe. The second option is risky, yes, but at least if I make it, the payoff is much bigger."³⁵ Several described reserving part of their reintegration grant as a financial buffer for a potential future attempt. One explained: "I used some of the money for the business, yes. But I also kept some aside. Because if this doesn't work, I need to have something to fall back on. And for me, that means trying to go back."³⁶ In this context, the knowledge that money was saved, even a small amount, functioned less as a practical resource than as a form of agency, a reminder that one was not completely trapped.³⁷

In Senegal, the picture was somewhat similar in structure if different in detail. Respondents described successive cycles of activity failure in which each reinvestment of limited resources produced diminishing returns against the backdrop of Dakar's high rents and competitive markets.³⁸ Several respondents also described the pressure of debt incurred during their initial migration journey, adding a financial strain that short-term, reintegration grants couldn't adequately resolve.³⁹

What the pattern across both settings ultimately points to appears to be a fundamental challenge in the way EU-funded reintegration assistance is designed: current assistance appears to be helpful in practice to absorb the immediate shock of return, while the structural conditions (limited employment, weak social protection, high urban costs of living) that shaped the original decision to migrate remain largely unchanged.

Social stigma: the hidden challenges that reintegration assistance lacks to address

If economic precarity is the most visible dimension of the post-return experience among those interviewed, social stigma may be the most consequential and the least adequately addressed by current programming. In both countries, respondents described experiences of exclusion, shame, and loss of standing in their communities that shaped their sense of self in ways that go well beyond what economic indicators capture.

In Senegal, respondents described the social environment upon return in terms that pointed to a fundamental rupture in their social status and community belonging. They underlined that in contexts where migration to Europe is strongly associated with success and the capacity to provide for one's family, returning without visible material achievement was experienced not merely as personal disappointment but as a form of public failure – something that drew criticism both openly and behind the back.⁴⁰ One beneficiary, returned from Germany and living near Saint-Louis, also expressed the distrust felt by his community after being sent back: "People in the village think I made a mistake or committed a crime, that it is my fault they sent me back to Senegal." He also described the disorientation of misread expectations: neighbours would ask "When are you going back to Germany?" – a question that carried its own form of social pressure, as if return were self-evidently temporary.⁴¹

In Côte d'Ivoire, a similar dynamic can be observed, particularly among those who had been forcibly removed and for whom the absence of choice in return added a layer of perceived judgement to their situation. One man, forcibly removed from France, described the social atmosphere: "When you come back like this, people think you did something wrong. They don't say it to your face, but you feel it. The neighbours, even the family, they're watching."⁴² Another described the dual weight of social expectation and psychological dislocation: "You come back and everyone expects you to immediately be a man and provide. But mentally, you swing between relief to be home and regret about lost years."⁴³ The most poignant account came from a man whose community standing had visibly collapsed: "Before I left, people respected me. They thought I was going to succeed, send money, maybe even sponsor others to come. Now they see me struggling in the same neighbourhood, doing the same small jobs. Some people mock me, others just avoid me."⁴⁴

Among the eight respondents in Côte d'Ivoire who had returned through an AVRR programme, five had spent time in immigration detention before agreeing to return, with periods ranging from a few days to several months. Detention's relationship to future migration intentions was not straightforward: for some, the trauma was a partial deterrent; for others, the return-and-post-return-migration calculus resumed relatively quickly. One man who had been detained said: "For now, I say never again. But if my children are starving, if I have no other choice, I don't know what I would do."⁴⁵ For several respondents, the experience of detention did not settle the question of whether to migrate again – it

deferred it. Once home, once the immediate trauma had receded, the calculus of leaving resumed.

The comparative literature on post-return stigma suggests that this pattern is not specific to these two contexts: in settings where migration carries strong aspirational associations, unsuccessful return typically generates social costs that can sustain the desire to leave again independently of economic conditions. What makes this finding particularly significant for programme design is the mechanism it implies. For some respondents, the aspiration to migrate again was not, or not only, economically motivated: it was about the possibility of restoring an identity that return had damaged, of becoming again the person who was going to make something of themselves. Reintegration programmes have increasingly sought to address this dimension (for instance through community-level activities and peer exchange mechanisms) but in practice they struggle to do so meaningfully, given the depth of identity disruption that return can entail and the structural social norms that sustain it.

What the research does point to, however, is that, among respondents who had found ways to rebuild their social standing (through business activity, participation in returnee associations, or by repositioning themselves as community resources with first-hand knowledge and experience about migration risks), aspirations to leave again appeared more muted. Consequently, these findings show that efforts to strengthen the social embedding might have significant impacts on the durability of reintegration outcomes.

The legal pathway paradox

When asked about the possibility of migrating again, respondents in both Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire expressed, almost unanimously, a strong preference for regular, legal migration pathways. This is consistent with what the comparative literature on return and post-return migration also finds: returnees who have experienced irregular status in Europe tend to have a particularly clear-eyed understanding of its costs – the precarity of undocumented work, the inability to move freely, the fear of detection, the subordination it entails – and their preference for regular pathways is correspondingly grounded in direct experience rather than abstract principle. In Côte d'Ivoire, one woman who had returned from Belgium was unambiguous: "I sometimes imagine leaving again, but I would never risk the irregular route. If I go, it has to be official – a visa, a contract."⁴⁶ In Senegal, those who no longer planned to migrate similarly framed irregular routes as too costly in terms of lost years and risks of living without status – while expressing a preference for legal channels if they were ever to move.

Yet further in the conversation, a more layered picture emerged. Respondents recognised that their profiles (often displaying lower education levels, limited professional networks, lack of financial capital, and in many cases the fact of having already been returned) made accessing legal channels to Europe highly unlikely. Describing the gap between preference and possibility, one Ivorian returnee said: "Of course I would prefer to go with papers. But who gives papers to people like us? So you have to choose: stay here with nothing, or try again the hard way."⁴⁷ Another, who had returned from France after detention, explained that knowing the route was dangerous and having seen people die along it did not resolve

the underlying question of what the alternative was. That staying and watching one's family suffer while doing nothing was also a choice, and not a better one.⁴⁸

This recognition – that irregular migration remains the only realistic pathway for most – shaped how respondents thought about future mobility. Several described a gradual shift in their position: from a "never again by irregular means" toward reluctant realization that this might be their only option if they wanted to migrate again. As one man who was saving to attempt the route again put it: "The money they gave me, it helped for a few months. But now it's finished and I'm back where I started. So I'm saving again. Not to start a business here, to try the route one more time."⁴⁹

In Senegal, awareness of the risks was also high. The "lost years" framing recurred across multiple interviews. As the existing literature also suggests, however, awareness of risk does not necessarily translate into deterrence when legal alternatives are absent.⁵⁰ This preference for regular channels is, notably, not unique to the returnees in this study. Research has found it to be a consistent and widely shared preference.⁵¹ These convergent findings invite reflection on the role that legal mobility options could play as part of broader reintegration strategies, a dimension that current programming rarely addresses directly. For instance, regional free movement provisions such as within ECOWAS⁵² offer space for further exploration.

Learning from promising practices

Across both countries, one factor appears to distinguish respondents who described a more stable post-return trajectory from those who felt their situation had remained precarious or deteriorated: access to sustained, personalised, relationship-based support that extended in a meaningful way beyond the initial assistance window.

In Senegal, respondents who had returned with support from Caritas described close, ongoing personal relationships with staff who guided them through the first months after return and, in some cases, provided additional funding or in-kind support to help them start or expand activities.⁵³ In Côte d'Ivoire, respondents assisted by OFII and AVSI described similar experiences of continuity. One woman who returned from France with OFII support said: "My adviser didn't just give me money and disappear. She called, she followed up. When there was a problem with the paperwork for my catering activity, she helped me solve it. That made a real difference."⁵⁴

Where support fell short, the contrast was stark. In Senegal, one participant enrolled in GIZ/ANPEJ support had been promised 200,000 XOF but said he ultimately received only a fraction and suspected some had been diverted by intermediaries.⁵⁵ Another recalled that his 2005 return from Spain came with a flight ticket, new clothes, and 10,000 XOF, and felt the highly publicised arrival was more about optics than genuine concern for his situation.⁵⁶ In Côte d'Ivoire, others described attendance requirements that were formally designed to maintain engagement but that imposed significant time costs on respondents

already struggling economically, and a gap, for some, between what support had been described as offering and what it had ultimately delivered.⁵⁷

Returnee associations emerged in both settings as a resource that operates mostly outside formal programme architectures but which the fieldwork suggests is doing important work. In Senegal, several Caritas beneficiaries were discussing the idea of founding such an association; in Côte d'Ivoire, one participant active in an established returnee group described it as a source of both solidarity and purpose that formal programming had not provided.⁵⁸

These observations suggest that the quality and continuity of human support matters, and that social embedding – the sense of being accepted, purposeful, and valued in one's community – may be at least as important for longer-term post-return intentions as financial assistance. Yet EU-funded reintegration programming is predominantly built around individual assistance, including grants, training, and business support. The more intensive, relationship-based model described above tends to operate at the margins of that architecture, delivered by smaller bilateral actors with more resources per returnee. In comparison, the larger-scale multilateral programmes process higher volumes of cases with lower per-person budgets, which makes the kind of highly personalized accompaniment that respondents described as making a real difference structurally difficult to deliver. This raises two questions that deserve attention in programme design discussions. First, if intensive, relationship-based support is not financially or operationally feasible at scale, what does that mean for the majority of returnees who will not have access to it, and what lighter-touch but still meaningful forms of follow-up might reach them? Second, and more fundamentally, whether a shift toward more structural, development-oriented approaches, making support available as part of a broader public offer accessible to returnees and the wider population alike rather than as a time-limited individual package, could achieve more durable and inclusive outcomes than the current model.

Conclusion

For ten of the twenty respondents across both countries, migration remained an option they were actively weighing after return: as a concrete plan for some, as a conditional fallback for others, and for still others as an unresolved aspiration held in suspension by a lack of resources or opportunities rather than a settled decision to stay. Many described a situation in which limited economic prospects, persistent social stigma, and a desire for mobility combined to produce something less than genuine reintegration and more like a temporary pause.

While the number of interviews underpinning this research is small and non-representative, the findings invite a reflection on some of the foundational assumptions that underpin current programming and on the gaps in knowledge that make rigorous assessments of return and reintegration programming challenging.

The most consequential of those assumptions may be that reintegration assistance addresses the individual conditions that made migration an attractive choice in the first place. What the accounts gathered in these Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire suggest is that reintegration assistance can help individuals upon their return, but its effects are temporary when the structural constraints that shaped the original migration decision remain unchanged. In addition, the accounts show that social stigma shapes migration aspirations in significant ways and that current reintegration programmes are insufficiently equipped to address challenges related to social stigma. Furthermore, findings suggest that the absence of legal pathways does not reduce the desire to move; it shapes whether that desire finds a safe and regular outlet or reasserts itself through irregular and dangerous ones.

These findings point to three avenues that return and reintegration policymakers may want to explore:

- Recognise that for a meaningful share of returnees, return is not the end of the migration journey. Redefining what 'successful reintegration' means, to include psychosocial stability and social belonging, rather than simply permanence in the country of origin, would have implications for how programmes are designed, what they measure, and how they are evaluated.
 - A shift toward more systemic, development-oriented support is needed to address the structural constraints that shape reintegration outcomes. Investments in public employment services, social protection systems, and local economic development can help tackle conditions that individual assistance is not designed to resolve. At the same time, targeted individual support remains an important complement, particularly for returnees facing specific vulnerabilities, and when these individual support offers are funded and designed to provide longer-term, personalised accompaniment.
 - Expand opportunities for legal mobility options, including pathways that are realistically accessible to people with the profiles of those typically returned through AVRR programmes. Regional mobility within free movement frameworks such as ECOWAS represent underexplored opportunities that could provide a valuable alternative.
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Endnotes

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- ⁶ Constanza Vera Larrucea et al., '[Those who were sent back: Return and reintegration of rejected asylum seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq](#)', DELMI, October 2021.
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- ⁸ Samuel Hall, '[Study on Reintegration Outcomes Through a Comparative Lens: Executive Summary](#)' (Geneva: November 2020. ; Mixed Migration Centre, '[Mixed returns: return migration and reintegration dynamics Insights and key messages](#)', October 2024 .
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- ¹² Constanza Vera Larrucea et al., '[Those who were sent back: Return and reintegration of rejected asylum seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq](#)', DELMI, October 2021. ; OECD, '[Return, Reintegration and Re-migration](#)', 31 January 2024.
- ¹³ Jasper Tjaden et al. '[Explaining re-migration preferences among assisted returnees: Experimental evidence from Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia](#)', Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 20 May 2025.
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³⁰ Adrienne Ehouman, '[La Côte d'Ivoire peaufine sa stratégie nationale de retour et de réintégration des migrants](#)', Agence Ivoirienne de Presse, 22 May 2025.

³¹ Ravenna Sohst, 'CRPM2 rapport Côte d'Ivoire', MPI Europe, August 2025.

³² Ravenna Sohst, 'CRPM2 rapport Côte d'Ivoire', MPI Europe, August 2025.

³³ Interview with a returnee, Abobo, February 2026: "1 400 euros, ça semble beaucoup quand tu l'entends la première fois. Mais quand tu lances une activité, ça disparaît vite. Tu as besoin d'un espace, tu as besoin de stock, tu as besoin d'équipement. Ensuite tu as le loyer chaque mois, tu dois manger, tu as des obligations familiales. En six mois, l'argent a disparu et tu es de retour à zéro."

³⁴ Interview with a returnee, Koumassi, February 2026: "Si l'aide était suffisante pour vraiment construire quelque chose de solide, peut-être que je resterais. Mais ce n'est pas le cas. C'est juste assez pour survivre un moment, puis tu recommences à galérer."

³⁵ Interview with a returnee, Adjamé, February 2026: "Je peux utiliser 2 000 euros pour essayer de lancer une entreprise ici, et ça va probablement échouer. Ou je peux utiliser ces mêmes 2 000 euros pour payer un passeur et essayer d'atteindre l'Europe. La deuxième option est risquée, oui, mais au moins si je réussis, le gain est beaucoup plus grand."

³⁶ Interview with a returnee, Koumassi, February 2026: "J'ai utilisé une partie de l'argent pour l'activité, oui. Mais j'en ai aussi gardé de côté. Parce que si ça ne marche pas, j'ai besoin d'avoir quelque chose sur quoi compter. Et pour moi, ça veut dire essayer de repartir."

³⁷ Interview with a returnee, Adjamé, February 2026: "Juste savoir que j'ai de l'argent de côté, même un petit montant, ça me donne de l'espoir. Ça veut dire que je ne suis pas complètement coincé. Si les choses empirent vraiment, j'ai une option."

³⁸ Interview with a returnee, Dakar, September 2025: "I had received 50,000 XOF to raise chickens, but it didn't work. The space to rent in Dakar is too expensive... I reinvested my money into a small shop; it didn't work. Now we opened a restaurant with my wife."

³⁹ Interview with a returnee, Dakar, September 2025: "It's impossible to live like this with so few resources in Senegal."

⁴⁰ Interview with a returnee, Dakar, September 2025: "You will get a lot of criticism [upon return], directly into your face and behind your back."

⁴¹ Interview with a returnee, Saint-Louis region, September 2025: "People in the village think I made a mistake or committed a crime, that it is my fault they sent me back to Senegal... the authorities also rejected me."

⁴² Interview with a returnee, Port-Bouët, February 2026: "Quand tu reviens comme ça, les gens pensent que tu as fait quelque chose de mal. Ils ne le disent pas en face, mais tu le sens. Les voisins, même la famille, ils observent."

⁴³ Interview with a returnee, Abobo, February 2026: "Tu rentres et tout le monde attend que tu sois immédiatement un homme et que tu subviennes aux besoins. Mais mentalement, tu oscilles entre le soulagement d'être à la maison et le regret des années perdues."

⁴⁴ Interview with a returnee, Yopougon, February 2026: "Avant mon départ, les gens me respectaient. Ils pensaient que j'allais réussir, envoyer de l'argent, peut-être même parrainer d'autres pour venir. Maintenant ils me voient galérer dans le même quartier, faire les mêmes petits boulots. Certains se moquent de moi, d'autres m'évitent."

⁴⁵ Interview with a returnee, Port-Bouët, February 2026: "Pour l'instant, je dis plus jamais. Mais si mes enfants ont faim, si je n'ai pas d'autre choix, je ne sais pas ce que je ferais."

⁴⁶ Interview with a returnee, Cocody, February 2026: "Parfois j'imagine repartir, mais jamais par voie irrégulière. Si je pars, ça doit être officiel, un visa, un contrat."

⁴⁷ Interview with a returnee, Abobo, February 2026: "Bien sûr, je préférerais partir avec des papiers. Mais qui donne des papiers aux gens comme nous? Alors tu dois choisir: rester ici sans rien, ou réessayer par la voie difficile."

⁴⁸ Interview with a returnee, Port-Bouët, February 2026: "Je connais la route, c'est dangereux. J'ai vu des gens mourir. Mais quelle est l'alternative? Rester ici et regarder ta famille souffrir? Au moins si tu pars, il y a une chance."

⁴⁹ Interview with a returnee, Yopougon, February 2026: "L'argent qu'ils m'ont donné, ça a aidé pendant quelques mois. Mais maintenant c'est fini et je suis de retour au point de départ. Alors j'économise à nouveau. Pas pour lancer une entreprise ici, pour essayer la route encore une fois."

⁵⁰ Jasper Tjaden et al. '[Explaining re-migration preferences among assisted returnees: Experimental evidence from Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia](#)', Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 20 May 2025.

⁵¹ Jasper Tjaden et al. '[Explaining re-migration preferences among assisted returnees: Experimental evidence from Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia](#)', Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 20 May 2025 ; Constanza Vera Larrucea et al., '[Those who were sent back: Return and reintegration of rejected asylum seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq](#)', DELMI, October 2021.

⁵² Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), '[Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment](#)', A/P.1/5/79, 29 May 1979.

⁵³ Interviews with returnees, Dakar, September 2025.

⁵⁴ Interview with a returnee, Treichville, February 2026: "Ma conseillère n'a pas juste donné de l'argent et disparu. Elle appelait, elle suivait. Quand il y a eu un problème avec les papiers pour mon activité de restauration, elle m'a aidée à le régler. Ça a vraiment fait une différence."

⁵⁵ Interviews with returnees in Dakar, September 2025.

⁵⁶ Interviews with returnees in Dakar, September 2025.

⁵⁷ Interview with a returnee, Abobo, February 2026: "Les réunions aident parce qu'elles t'obligent à rester engagé. Mais parfois tu perds une journée entière pour aller à une réunion de l'autre côté de la ville, et tu rentres sans avoir rien gagné. Donc tu te demandes si ça vaut le coup."; Interview with a returnee, Yopougon, February 2026: "On m'avait dit que j'allais recevoir une aide pour un projet. Ce que j'ai vraiment reçu, c'était bien moins. Les gens parlent. On entend des choses. Je ne veux accuser personne, mais ça laisse un mauvais goût."

⁵⁸ Interviews with returnees in Dakar, September 2025; interview with a returnee in Abidjan, February 2026.
