YOUTH POLICY CENTER

Policy Brief No 261124

THE WARDEN OF AFRICA

MOROCCO'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE MIGRATION MANAGEMENT BETWEEN AFRICA AND EUROPE

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DECEMBER 2024

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ABSTRACT

As global migration patterns shift in response to conflict, economic instability, climate change, and other forces, this policy brief examines how enhanced cooperation between African nations—particularly Morocco—and Europe can foster sustainable migration management. Positioned at the crossroads of Africa and Europe, Morocco plays a dual role in advancing European migration goals while addressing migration dynamics across North and sub-Saharan Africa.

Morocco's complex role as a destination, transit country, and a source of migration, coupled with its strategic and historical ties to Europe, shifted from that of a "gatekeeper" to what can be described as a "**migration warden**" balancing guardianship with control over migration flows. The country faces significant challenges, including resource constraints, complex border dynamics, and the need to balance diplomatic relations with both European and African partners. These issues require policies that integrate humanitarian priorities with security objectives. By analysing Morocco's current partnerships and identifying areas for policy innovation, this brief highlights the potential for migration frameworks that prioritize regional stability and economic growth and proposes strategies to reframe migration as a sustainable growth opportunity, promoting stability, economic development, and mutual benefits for Africa and Europe.

Introduction

Africa, with the youngest population globally—approximately 40% under the age of 15 as of 2023—faces significant challenges in creating economic opportunities to support its expanding youth demographic. With a median age of about 20 years, well below the global average of 30 years, this youthful population represents both an economic potential and a challenge in workforce integration and development (United Nations Population Division, 2023). Morocco exemplifies these challenges, as its national unemployment rate climbed to 13.6% in the third quarter of 2024, with youth unemployment reaching a critical 36.1% in the second quarter of the same year (High Commission for Planning, 2024). This economic hardship has fueled emigration aspirations among young Moroccans, many of whom are influenced by social media narratives that glamorize migration as a pathway to success. Studies indicate that platforms like TikTok and Facebook amplify idealized migration stories, often encouraging irregular migration attempts (PERCEPTIONS Project, 2023; ICMPD, 2023).[1]

In 2024, these pressures culminated in a marked increase in mass migration attempts from northern Morocco, particularly toward the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. In response, Moroccan authorities have reinforced border management strategies, including heightened patrols in high-risk areas and coordinated sea rescue operations. So far this year, over 45,000 irregular migration attempts have been prevented, with more than 10,800 individuals rescued at sea (Moroccan Ministry of the Interior, 2024). These efforts reflect Morocco's comprehensive approach to balancing humanitarian responsibilities with security measures, addressing irregular migration from sub-Saharan Africa and domestic migration pressures within a rapidly evolving landscape (Amnesty International, 2023).

Morocco's evolving role in migration management

With its strategic geographic position and historical ties to Europe, Morocco has become a key partner for the European Union (EU) in controlling migration flows. Beyond its domestic policies under the National Immigration and Asylum Strategy (SNIA)[2], Morocco's role has expanded through recent agreements that broaden its migration control and labor mobility responsibilities. The 2023 EU-Morocco Cooperation Program provides a substantial €624 million package, including €152 million specifically allocated for strengthening Morocco's border security, combating smuggling networks, and supporting voluntary return programs.

[1] **The PERCEPTIONS Project** examines how social media platforms, including Facebook and TikTok, create alternative perceptions of migration, often presenting idealized views that encourage risky migration attempts. The ICMPD report highlights the role of "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles" on these platforms, where positive migration narratives are amplified, shaping migration aspirations among youth and emphasizing the need for targeted counter-narratives.

[2] **Morocco's National Immigration and Asylum Strategy (SNIA)** was introduced in 2014 to provide a framework for migrant regularization and integration. This approach aims to align with international human rights standards, offering access to public services and legal residency for eligible undocumented migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. (IOM, 2023)

This collaboration accentuates the EU's commitment to a robust migration partnership with Morocco, addressing migration challenges through security and socio-economic support measures (European Commission, 2023).

In 2024, the Germany-Morocco Migration Partnership introduced additional bilateral efforts to reduce irregular migration and establish structured pathways for Moroccan labor migration. This agreement facilitates legal migration to Germany while coordinating the return of Moroccan nationals lacking residency status, reflecting Morocco's role shift to a "migration warden"[3] managing regional migration pressures and contributing to Europe's labor market needs (Federal Ministry of the Interior, Germany, 2024). These partnerships illustrate Morocco's transition from a "gatekeeper" (Carrera et al., 2016) to a strategic migration manager in the Euro-Mediterranean framework, balancing security responsibilities with Morocco's socio-economic priorities and internal migration pressures.

However, Morocco's expanded role comes with complex challenges. Economic hardships exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened emigration aspirations among Moroccan youth, while environmental pressures and regional conflicts drive migration toward Morocco from the Sahel region (Fargues & Rango, 2020). Increasingly stringent European border controls and high costs of moving northward have led many migrants to remain in Morocco long-term, shifting its role to that of a destination country. Consequently, Morocco must address the integration of a growing migrant population, balancing humanitarian and integration needs with European security expectations (Migration Policy Institute, 2019; Abderrahim, 2019).

This dual focus on security and human rights has led to policy tensions. Reports have highlighted instances of migrant mistreatment at borders, raising concerns over the country's adherence to international human rights standards (Amnesty International 2023; Human Rights Watch 2024)[4]. Such critiques stress the need for a cohesive approach that balances security measures with protections for migrant rights.

While EU funding strengthens Morocco's migration management capacity, it raises questions about Morocco's sovereignty over its migration policies. Reliance on EU financial support often comes with pressures to align with EU security interests, potentially at the expense of Morocco's own socio-economic and humanitarian priorities (Zardo & Abderrahim, 2018). Scholars argue that this dynamic can shift resources away from the SNIA's rights-based

[3] The term "**migration warden**" is coined by the author to reflect Morocco's evolving role in migration management. Unlike the passive role of a "gatekeeper," a "warden" embodies both guardianship and control, indicating Morocco's proactive authority in regulating migration flows, balancing humanitarian obligations with security responsibilities across the Euro-African migration landscape.

[4] In June 2022, an incident at the Melilla-Nador border involving Moroccan and Spanish security forces resulted in the deaths of at least 37 migrants and the disappearance of 77 others. Reports from Amnesty International and the United Nations criticized the excessive force used by authorities against a group of over 2,000 migrants attempting to cross, emphasizing concerns over Morocco's adherence to human rights standards in high-risk border areas. This incident highlighted the urgent need for accountability and the protection of migrant rights in Morocco's migration management practices

protections for migrants, directing them toward stricter enforcement actions that primarily serve European objectives (Carrera et al., 2016; Cherti & Collyer, 2015).

Assessing current policy outcomes

Since implementing the SNIA in 2014, Morocco has made progress toward regularizing undocumented migrants, with significant efforts targeting migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. By 2023, these efforts had granted residency permits to over 50,000 individuals including both economic migrants and a substantial number of refugees and asylum seekers (IOM, 2023). This regularization process provides access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and entry into the labor market. However, despite these strides, the implementation has been uneven, and challenges persist; many regularized migrants face precarious work conditions, primarily in informal sectors like agriculture and street trading, where legal protections and job stability are limited. The informal job market remains a major source of employment for these migrants, particularly in urban centers like Casablanca and Marrakech, where their labor contributes to local economies but underlines the need for more secure employment pathways and improved social integration (IOM, 2023).

Key issues in migration management

As Morocco navigates its complex role in migration management, it faces both internal and external challenges. Internally, Morocco grapples with rising emigration aspirations among its citizens, driven by economic instability and limited opportunities. These pressures are compounded by external demands to align its policies with European security concerns, requiring Morocco to balance its socio-economic priorities with international commitments. Together, these distinct challenges shape Morocco's migration policies, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach that addresses both local and regional needs.

Internal Challenges

Human rights and economic pressures: Despite SNIA's commitment to human rights, inconsistent application has led to reports of arbitrary detention, discrimination, and inadequate protections for migrants, particularly at borders (Cherti & Collyer, 2015; Amnesty International, 2023).[5] Coupled with economic instability and a youth unemployment rate of 36.1%, these conditions drive many Moroccans, especially young adults, to consider emigration, often through irregular channels (Fargues & Rango, 2020). A recent survey conducted by The Arab Barometer published in August 2024 on migration trends in the MENA region, revealed that around 35% of Moroccans are considering emigration, primarily due to economic challenges. Young people aged 18 to 29 show the highest inclination to seek opportunities abroad, with many expressing a willingness to migrate without proper documentation.

[5] According to **Amnesty international**'s 2023 report (www.amnesty.org), on June 24, 2022, a tragic incident at the border resulted in at least 37 deaths of sub-Saharan migrants, with 77 individuals reported missing. Additionally, around 217 people were injured, including 140 members of the Moroccan security forces.

External Challenges

Geopolitical dynamics and policy sovereignty

Morocco's role as a "migration warden" has made it an indispensable partner in the EU's strategy for controlling migration. The recent 2023 EU-Morocco Cooperation Program, with its substantial €624 million funding—of which €152 million is specifically allocated for border security—demonstrates the depth of this relationship (European Commission, 2023). However, this reliance on EU funding comes at a cost: Morocco is often required to prioritize European security objectives over its own socio-economic and humanitarian needs.

This dependence on EU support limits Morocco's flexibility to develop migration policies that address local issues, such as the integration of migrants into Moroccan communities and fostering local economic development (Cherti & Collyer, 2015).

While EU-driven priorities may lean toward border security, sometimes diverting resources from rights-based protections outlined in Morocco's SNIA, the country could benefit from diversified funding sources. By seeking additional support from entities like the African Development Bank (AfDB), United Nations agencies, and Middle Eastern partners, Morocco could increase its policy autonomy. With a more varied funding base, Morocco would have greater freedom to pursue migration policies that balance its humanitarian commitments with national socio-economic aspirations, enabling a migration model that aligns more closely with its long-term goals (Abderrahim, 2019).

Social media's influence on migration Social media increasingly shapes migration aspirations, especially among young Moroccans, by amplifying success stories of migration while downplaying risks. Platforms like TikTok and Facebook often present idealized views of migration, which encourage irregular migration attempts (PERCEPTIONS Project, 2023; ICMPD, 2023). Studies highlight that social media "echo chambers" reinforce these narratives, contributing to unrealistic expectations about migration (Fargues & Rango, 2020).

Policy recommendations for sustainable migration management

Africa's youthful population, coupled with Europe's aging demographics, presents a unique opportunity for economic synergy. By establishing structured migration programs, both regions can address labor shortages, support sustainable development, and create mutual economic benefits.

Expand circular migration programs

Expanding circular migration programs and developing safe, legal pathways for skilled African workers offer more effective, structured migration options. Programs like Germany's partnership with Morocco and Tunisia in healthcare illustrate the potential of sector-specific

circular migration. However, the Y-MED[6] initiative has shown the need for better reintegration support. Building on these models, Morocco and EU nations could establish sector-diverse pathways in agriculture, digital technology, and green energy, tailored to labor needs in both regions. To enhance program effectiveness, "circularity clauses" could allow periodic work stints, enabling migrants to transfer skills and maintain economic ties. Reintegration incentives—such as matched savings, skill certification, or business grants—would empower returning migrants to stimulate local economies (Cherti & Grant, 2013; Fargues & Rango, 2020).

Youth employment opportunities in high-growth sectors

Building on Morocco's progress in green energy, digital skills, and entrepreneurship, this recommendation proposes targeted expansions in these sectors to create sustainable job opportunities that address migration drivers.

- **Green energy and tech apprenticeships**
  Expand Morocco's existing solar and renewable energy projects, such as the Noor Solar Complex, by creating apprenticeship programs in green energy and digital technology. Partnering with EU institutions, these programs would offer hands-on experience in renewable tech installation, maintenance, and energy management, with a focus on AI-driven solutions for energy optimization.

- **Digital skills accelerators for youth entrepreneurship**
  Establish digital skills accelerators with EU support, offering short, intensive training in fields like AI, data analysis, and digital marketing. These accelerators would provide Moroccan youth, especially in underserved regions, with the skills needed to enter high-demand tech roles or start digital-based businesses, addressing local economic needs and reducing emigration pressures.

- **Green entrepreneurship funding**
  Launch a Green Entrepreneurship Fund to provide seed funding, mentorship, and networking for youth-led startups focused on sustainability. Modeled after Tunisia's Souk At-tanmia but specialized in green tech, this fund would empower young entrepreneurs to create innovative solutions in water conservation, sustainable agriculture, and eco-friendly products.

Enhanced regional migration cooperation

Strengthening collaboration between African nations through regional migration hubs and resource-sharing platforms would improve migration management. As a strategic transit country, Morocco could lead regional initiatives on return, reintegration, and sustainable funding. Collaborative platforms for data-sharing and legal resources, supported by the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), and new funding sources like the African

[6] Programs like Y-MED have highlighted the importance of comprehensive reintegration support, revealing that returning migrants benefit from incentives such as business grants or skill certifications to ease their transition and ensure sustainable local impact.

Development Bank (AfDB) and UN agencies, would enable streamlined responses to migration pressures. Securing additional support from diverse international bodies, including potential partnerships with Middle Eastern countries, would reduce dependency on EU funds, allowing Morocco greater autonomy in developing migration policies that align with its socio-economic and humanitarian priorities (Abderrahim, 2019).

Promotion of positive public sentiment through diaspora achievements and economic benefits

Shifting public perception of migration in Europe is key to policy success. EU-African campaigns could highlight the achievements of African diaspora communities, showcasing their contributions to business, healthcare, and the arts. Studies indicate that diaspora communities strengthen local economies and enhance societal diversity (Cherti & Collyer, 2015)[7]. Media partnerships, local events, and honest conversations addressing public concerns about migration would build trust and demonstrate migration's benefits as an economic and cultural asset.

Targeted digital awareness campaigns

To counter the influence of social media on migration decisions, EU-Africa awareness campaigns on platforms like TikTok and Facebook are essential. These platforms often amplify idealized views of migration, obscuring risks and fueling irregular migration attempts. AI-driven content moderation and targeted messaging could provide accurate, realistic migration information and highlight safe alternatives. Collaborative efforts with digital influencers, fact-checking organizations, and youth advocates would further enhance credibility and reach, promoting safer migration choices (PERCEPTIONS Project, 2023; ICMPD, 2023). Ethical safeguards, such as transparency in content moderation, should be emphasized to maintain public trust.

AI-driven migration management solutions

AI-powered technologies hold transformative potential for Morocco's migration management by enhancing data analysis, border security, and misinformation monitoring. Specific AI applications, used responsibly, could streamline migration operations while supporting Morocco's socio-economic and humanitarian goals.

- *Predictive analytics for migration trends*

AI-driven predictive analytics can provide valuable insights into migration patterns by analyzing data on economic conditions, climate impacts, and regional instability. For instance, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) employs predictive tools like the Displacement Tracking Matrix to monitor displacement trends in real-time, enabling countries to proactively allocate resources and respond to surges in migration. Morocco could adopt similar AI-powered tools to anticipate migration flows from sub-Saharan Africa and better coordinate resources for humanitarian and security needs (IOM, 2023).

- *Automated border security and identity verification*

[7] Studies show that the contributions of African diaspora communities, including economic input and cultural enrichment, positively impact host societies, helping to shift public perception of migration as a beneficial exchange. (Cherti & Collyer, 2015)

Automated border control solutions, such as biometric identity verification, enhance border security while reducing processing times and minimizing errors. EU-funded initiatives, like Smart Borders in Europe, have implemented AI-driven facial recognition and fingerprint systems that help verify identities at entry points with greater accuracy. Morocco could adopt similar AI systems at its key border sites, such as Ceuta and Melilla, to strengthen border management without compromising humanitarian standards (European Commission, 2023).

- *Misinformation monitoring and counteraction*

Social media platforms are powerful influencers of migration narratives, often amplifying idealized views that encourage risky journeys. AI-driven tools like natural language processing (NLP) and sentiment analysis, used by platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, can help monitor migration-related misinformation trends. Morocco could partner with the EU to deploy these technologies, tracking and countering misinformation targeted at potential migrants. Programs like the PERCEPTIONS Project, an EU Horizon 2020 initiative, have demonstrated the effectiveness of AI in monitoring harmful migration narratives and promoting accurate information through targeted campaigns (PERCEPTIONS Project, 2023).

- *Job matching and skill development platforms*

AI-powered job-matching platforms, such as LinkedIn's Skills Match, could facilitate skill alignment between migrants and local labor markets. For example, Canada's Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada program uses AI to assess immigrant skills and match them with in-demand jobs, easing the integration process. Morocco could adopt similar AI-driven platforms to align the skills of regularized migrants with sectors that have local labor shortages, such as agriculture, renewable energy, and healthcare, fostering integration and economic participation.

- *Ethical AI use and privacy safeguards*

While AI offers numerous benefits, its implementation must prioritize privacy protection, data transparency, and ethical considerations to prevent over-surveillance and misuse. Establishing an AI ethics committee or adopting guidelines like the OECD's AI Principles could help Morocco ensure that AI applications in migration management align with privacy standards and respect human rights. By setting ethical standards, Morocco can protect migrant privacy while using AI tools to enhance security and efficiency.

Summary of key recommendations

Recommendation	Description	Expected Benefits
Expand and improve circular migration programs	Broaden programs to cover diverse sectors such as agriculture, digital technology, and green energy. Introduce reintegration incentives like matched savings, skill certification, and business grants for returning migrants	Promotes skill transfer, supports local entrepreneurship, fosters sustainable economic growth, and reduces irregular migration pressures.

Create safe and legal migration pathways	Develop structured migration channels for skilled African workers, with agreements in high-demand sectors (e.g., healthcare, tech). Reinforce with "circularity clauses" allowing migrants to work abroad periodically.	Addresses EU labor shortages, provides safe migration alternatives, and encourages long-term economic ties and skill development in origin countries.
Promote positive public sentiment	Highlight diaspora achievements and economic contributions through EU-African campaigns.	Improves public perception of migration, emphasizing its economic and social benefits.
Launch targeted digital awareness campaigns	Implement EU-Africa campaigns on social media to combat migration misinformation.	Educates youth on migration realities and legal options, reducing irregular migration risks.
Enhance regional cooperation	Strengthen Morocco's role in coordinating migration governance within Africa through regional platforms.	Improves regional migration management; fosters cooperation on return and reintegration initiatives.
Invest in youth employment opportunities	Partner with EU stakeholders to create jobs in key sectors like green energy and digital tech in Morocco.	Reduces emigration drivers by creating sustainable job opportunities; and builds a skilled local workforce.
Adopt AI-driven migration solutions	Use AI for data analysis, security, and misinformation monitoring in migration management.	Enhances efficiency, predicts migration trends, and promotes humane, transparent management practices.

Conclusion: Toward a balanced, collaborative migration strategy

Morocco's role in migration management reflects a larger issue that requires coordinated action between Africa and Europe. Economic pressures, climate change, and regional instability will continue to drive migration flows, demanding a balanced approach that meets both humanitarian and security needs. Expanding circular migration, creating safe legal pathways, and investing in regional cooperation can transform migration into a mutually beneficial opportunity for both regions. Morocco's strategy must also address misinformation and promote accurate narratives and informed decisions to succeed. These steps align with international frameworks like the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration and can position Morocco as a model for sustainable migration management in the Mediterranean, balancing security with economic opportunity and human dignity.

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ABOUT THE YOUTH POLICY CENTER

The Youth Policy Center (YPC), established in 2014, is a "think and do tank" dedicated to empowering young people politically and economically while promoting civic engagement and dialogue. It works with local and international partners, including Moroccan institutions, European and African NGOs, the Danish Youth Council, and the U.S. Department of State.

YPC's initiatives focus on involving youth in decision-making, publishing research to inform policy, and enhancing employability and leadership skills. Its core values include democracy, intercultural dialogue, gender equality, and sustainability. The organization actively leads programs to inspire and equip young leaders for impactful societal contributions

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