FIERI
Researching Migration and Society
TORINO

Towards more humane, forward-looking and effective policies to support voluntary return

A MANIFESTO

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INTRODUCTION

This document was produced in the framework of the NADIHO project (full title: “Navigating Returns: West African Experiences of Difficult Homecoming”), funded by the Italian ministry of Research and University, with Prof. Alice Bellagamba (University of Milan-Bicocca) as principal investigator and coordinator.

The original Italian version of this manifesto[1] was drafted between October 2024 and February 2025 by an interdisciplinary group composed of researchers, professionals and activists, most of whom of foreign origin and/or with a migrant background. The members of the NADIHO Reflection Group are listed below:

- Eleonora Celoria, lawyer and researcher at FIERI;
- Yassin Dia, researcher at FIERI and the University of Milan-Bicocca;
- Baye Diouf, NGO representative, Sindacato Autonomo dei Lavoratori Africani;
- Fatima Zahra El Harch, lawyer and PhD student in Law at the University of Trento;
- Yagoub Kibeida, NGO representative, MOSAICO-Azioni per i Rifugiati, and former member of the executive committee of ECRE-European Council for Refugees and Exiles;
- Mamadou Adama Kouassi Pli, NGO representative and activist, Ex-Canapificio e Movimento Migranti e Rifugiati di Caserta e Castel Volturno;
- Ronke Oluwadare, psychologist, psychotherapist and activist;
- Petra Mezzetti, independent researcher;
- Ferruccio Pastore, researcher and director of FIERI.

In addition to the work of the Reflection Group, this manifesto is based on the findings of a sociological and legal study of the current state of Italian and European policies that support voluntary return, as well as the subsequent research report.[2]

[1] Available here: https://fieri.it/il-nodo-dei-ritorni-il-pragmatismo-dei-diritti-contro-lideologia-delle-deportazioni/.

[2] Celoria E. *Il rimpatrio volontario: una priorità solo sulla carta. Le contraddizioni del rimpatrio volontario (assistito) e la distorsione coercitiva nelle politiche italiane di rimpatrio delle persone straniere*, Working Paper FIERI, March 2025, available here: https://fieri.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Concept-note-NADIHO-1.pdf.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

I. There is an unmet need for circular mobility and return

Within the diverse and dynamic universe of immigrant communities in Italy, there are situations characterised by a desire for greater circular mobility towards the country of origin and, in many cases, a real need to return.

Often, however, migrants who aspire to greater circular mobility or return do not have the conditions and/or resources to satisfy this need.

The frustration of the need for circular mobility or return can lead to situations of individual and collective suffering; significant potential in terms of well-being and development, both in Italy and in the country of origin, can consequently be wasted.

II. Public policies could play a positive role

Faced with the unmet need for circular mobility or actual return, public policies could play a decisive role.

Renewed policies in this field could bring benefits for all parties involved. First and foremost, of course, for migrants, whose currently unfulfilled aspirations would be satisfied; but families and communities in the country of origin would also benefit, for whom forced return (or inadequately prepared and managed voluntary return) is currently a source of suffering and hardship. Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that voluntary return under humane and sustainable conditions would also benefit the country of immigration, whose migration policies could gain in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, and whose international cooperation policies could receive unexpected stimuli.

Despite awareness of the potential advantages and the principle in force in the Italian and European legal systems that voluntary repatriation should be given priority over coercive repatriation, the role of information, promotion and support of public policies in this field is currently marginal and inadequate.

As illustrated in the policy analysis produced by FIERI (see above, note 3), the stagnant and inadequate nature of public policies in this field is particularly evident in the Italian case.

III. The voice of migrants is essential for a necessary rethink

For the purposes of rethinking and relaunching policies to support return and circular mobility - which is not only appropriate but necessary and urgent - the members of the Reflection Group believe that it is essential to involve immigrant communities and/or those with a migrant background in the policy-making process.

The need for this involvement depends not only on general requirements of justice and democracy, but also on specific requirements of efficiency and effectiveness. In fact, one of the main limitations of current return support policies is their abstract nature and disconnection from concrete migration realities and from lived experiences, both in the country of immigration and in the country of origin, i.e. the destination of return.

IV. Return support policies must be differentiated by category

There are various categories of immigrants who could benefit from renewed policies to facilitate circular mobility and support return.

To be effective, policy innovation in this area must start with a careful assessment of the specificities of the different situations. In particular, the work of the NADIHO Reflection Group highlighted the necessity of distinguishing between four different categories of migrants, which require differentiated approaches:

A) irregularised migrants, for whom return implemented through a voluntary assisted departure can be a priority alternative to forced return;

B) regular migrants in marginalised situations and with vulnerability profiles willing to rejoin their families or return home, for whom return assistance takes on humanitarian significance and pursues damage reduction objectives.

C) elderly migrants who have reached the end of their working lives, for whom facilitating return or circular mobility would have humanitarian, but also economic and social value for their families and local communities in their country of origin;

D) Finally, there is a large and diverse category of active people with professional skills and/or entrepreneurial vocation, for whom Italian public policy support should aim not so much at stable return as at smooth circularity, which would benefit not only the migrant but also the societies at both ends of their transnational mobility.

In any case, before proceeding with repatriation (whether of persons with regular or irregular status), it is always necessary to assess whether the vulnerability of the person (e.g. elderly, with physical or mental health problems, with strong social or emotional ties to the territory) is an obstacle to effective reintegration in the country. In this case, repatriation should never proceed.

PROPOSALS

Based on the principles outlined above, we believe that any proposal should be tailored to the specific characteristics of the different categories of migrants concerned and to their specific contexts of origin.

In particular, while for the first two categories (A and B: irregular and regular migrants in vulnerable situations) we can talk about genuine support for return and reintegration, for the other two categories (C and D: elderly migrants and persons with a vocation to take on a transnational economic role) it is more appropriate to talk about promoting and supporting circular mobility.

Among the recommendations that emerged during the work of the NADIHO Reflection Group, we will briefly illustrate here only those that are of general relevance, i.e. those that concern all the categories identified in the previous point.

i) More widespread, accessible and comprehensive information is needed on the opportunities available for support for return and circular mobility

It is important that information campaigns on the various forms of support for return are not only disseminated in institutional contexts dedicated to control and forced repatriation (as is currently the case, for example, in police headquarters), but also in associative contexts that enjoy the trust of immigrant communities.

ii) A sustainable approach is needed that considers a long-term perspective and, ideally, the entire life cycle.

Currently, return support policies are formulated and implemented with a short or, at most, medium-term horizon, which does not consider the social and economic sustainability of the returnee's condition beyond a few weeks or, at most, a few months. It is important, however, to establish a more long-term vision. Such an approach would **make return a sustainable choice over time** and offer the persons concerned the opportunity to resettle in their country of origin with greater security and prospects.

iii) The approach to mobility and return must be realistic, i.e. based on an up-to-date assessment of the economic and social context of return.

Current policies are often based on an abstract and unrealistic view of the contexts of reintegration. In the Italian context, the average value of the financial contribution is generally between €1,000 and €2,000, which is completely insufficient to set up a path to autonomy and *self-reliance* in any contemporary African city. Therefore, not only is it necessary to increase the financial contribution provided to those who participate in a voluntary return programme[4] ,but also **to consider the possibilities for the concrete sustainability of the projects designed.**

Finally, it is necessary to take into account the specificities of the return contexts (e.g. rural or urban), whose characteristics can strongly influence return trajectories and related developments over time.

iv) Appropriate and accurate *counselling* must be provided for those preparing to return to their country of origin.

It is essential to develop a return plan before the return takes place. In this sense, **the economic and professional reintegration plan must be credible and feasible in the context of origin**. Furthermore, it must be developed individually based on the characteristics of the person: their specific skills and needs must be assessed, also in relation to their stage of life. In addition, during *counselling,* **a holistic analysis of the person's condition** must **be carried out,** assessing whether repatriation is really the appropriate response to their needs.

Counselling should be multidisciplinary, involving various professionals with expertise in legal, social, employment and psychological matters, to enable migrants to make an informed and accurate choice about their return.

v) It is necessary to think of return as a community issue. Families and associations need to be involved in planning and implementation.

In many contexts of origin, for example in most of West Africa, migration processes involve not only the individual who emigrates, but also family groups, sometimes large ones, and even village communities. **Return migration also has this social nature.** Without taking this fact into account, return (or even circular migration for economic purposes) risks encountering obstacles and prejudices. Promoting the development of associations of 'returnees', for example, can be useful in smoothing out these obstacles, normalising return and making it easier and more productive.

vi) Specific measures need to be taken for people who have reached retirement age

We propose paying particular attention to the situation of **people who have worked for a long time in Italy and who, under current legislation, are denied access to pension contributions in the event of repatriation**.

Currently, **a non-EU citizen who repatriates before meeting the contribution requirement will never be able to benefit from the contributory pension.**

With a view to ensuring dignified forms of return and adequately supporting circular mobility, we believe it is essential to amend the current provisions and **provide for the possibility of immediate redemption of contributions upon departure to the country of origin.**

In order to facilitate return, it is also essential to allow the redemption of contributions paid over many years**, even for people who have subsequently become irregular.** Unlike legal residents, who can demonstrate their willingness not to return in a stable way to the EU by surrendering their residence permit, these individuals should be able to certify their willingness not to return by means of a certificate of 'successful repatriation' issued by the competent consular authority.

CONCLUSIONS

With this document, the members of the Reflection Group set up within the NADIHO project aim to provide some ideas for addressing the issue of return and mobility from a perspective that takes into account the views, interests and needs of those directly or indirectly involved in repatriation policies or return decisions.

Our proposals aim to outline the fundamental features of a more forward-looking policy approach, capable of escaping rigid ideological frameworks and taking into account the expectations and concrete potential of migrants.

The ambition and hope of the members of the Reflection Group is that these proposals will contribute to launching a pragmatic and non-simplistic public debate on what we consider to be a central and unjustly neglected aspect of the migration debate.