

# **BUILDING A YOUTH EURO-MED COMMUNITY THROUGH LEARNING AND RESEARCH MOBILITY: INCUBATORS AND OBSTACLES**

*Amal El Ouassif*

Young researchers face several challenges in getting recognition for their work at the level of institutions and senior intellectual communities. Obstacles include trust issues, funding restrictions, and linguistic and cultural barriers. To these aforementioned limitations, researchers and university students from the Southern Mediterranean shore face an additional struggle, which is access to mobility. The latter is a key driver of quality in the research field. Depending on the subject matter at hand, a researcher can only be partially successful in addressing issues, solely focusing on the public information available in books and electronic sources. A significant part of quality scientific and academic production involves exposure to field experience, direct contact with stakeholders and exchanges with fellow researchers from abroad. Furthermore, in addition to the well-known scientific benefit of mobility, it is also important in fighting stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings in an era where most of the current issues, such as terrorism and the rise of populism, are largely the result of biased perceptions of the other.

The present policy brief will look at the factors that hinder the access of young researchers from Southern Mediterranean countries to scientific mobility. The analysis will address both the policy and implementation challenges of the existing mobility schemes. Driven by the experience of the author as a young Southern Mediterranean researcher and her academic background in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, the arguments defended in this article aim to highlight the fact that the youth mobility struggle finds its roots in complicated issues pertaining to perception and security matters, which have long conditioned the success of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. The second part of this contribution aims to provide recommendations on ways to improve young researchers' access to mobility in the Euro-Mediterranean space.

---

\*Research Assistant, OCP Policy Center

## **“Mobility” in the Framework of Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation: Cultural Vocation vs. Security Concerns**

In the framework of European Union (EU) cooperation with neighbourhood countries, legal mobility has been used to tackle two sensitive areas: the fight against irregular migration and promotion of the EU's moral norms, by guaranteeing mobility to third country nationals for scientific, economic and cultural purposes. On the one hand, mobility is cited in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as a tool and objective to promote the prosperous Mediterranean space the ENP is keen to achieve (European Commission, 2015). On the other hand, this same mobility is used in the framework of the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM) as an incentive for partner countries to sign readmission agreements to limit irregular flows at the external borders of the EU. Interestingly, the idea of visa facilitation in addition to signing readmission agreements has only been proposed to ENP countries, in contrast to other third countries with which the EU has developed the Common Agendas for Migration and Mobility (CAMM), with no mention of visa facilitation. Such orientation is not random, since the neighbouring countries of the EU are precisely the ones that constitute direct entry points of irregular migrants aiming to reach the EU. The latter has then sought to link the easing of regular mobility to enhance cooperation on matters of irregular migration (Trauner & Krus, 2008). It is precisely the policy of “issue linkage” that has undermined the efficiency of mobility schemes. Such an approach has only led to raising hostilities between EU member states and southern ENP countries on the question of migration and mobility, since the visa facilitation procedures were never enough to mitigate the diplomatic and political consequences of readmission agreements for these countries.

The complexity of mobility policies at the EU level resides in the fact that they fall in the intersection between external affairs and home affairs, which makes them subject to cooperation and competition between member states and the European Commission (EC). The latter has on many occasions urged EU member states to show greater flexibility in their visa procedures in order to achieve the ENP objectives on stimulating people-to-people interactions and exchanges (European Commission, 2006). However, such inquiries are often faced with scepticism that is motivated by security concerns.

The illustration of these security concerns lies in the fact that, although officially the EU has suggested signing mobility partnerships to both its southern and eastern neighbourhood, in practice, only countries of the eastern neighbourhood, such as Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, effectively benefited from visa facilitation that has led to a visa free regime for their citizens to access the EU for short stays and tourism. Such a duality of treatment has been badly perceived by southern neighbouring countries that were frequently asked to cooperate on matters of illegal migration, without getting preferential mobility facilitation in return. It is interesting to take the example of Morocco, with which the EC has had a mandate to

negotiate a mobility partnership and a readmission agreement since 2003, but negotiations did not progress until 2013 when for the first time the EC suggested visa facilitation in the package of negotiations. Again, in this case the suggested facilitation was not enough to make further progress in negotiations. The EU's offer was mainly on the technical side of visa procedures, such as improved conditions in consular services, without direct mention of privileged treatment of some categories of Moroccan applicants, such as researchers and diplomatic passport holders.

In summary, two political aspects can be considered responsible for the institutional limitations of mobility schemes towards southern neighbouring countries. First, issue linkage. Regular mobility has always been used as an incentive to get concessions on readmission agreements and better cooperation on irregular migration. While it is not our role to judge whether this approach is justified or not, we can simply conclude that categories such as researchers and students seeking legal and legitimate mobility are directly affected by this linkage. The recent communication of the Council of the EU (553/18) on the amendment of the visa code only confirms this security-oriented policy and announces the continuation of the readmission/visa facilitation duo.

Second, while the EU has been for so many years the most demonstrative example of successful integration, on the question of mobility and migration it is still hesitant. Divergences between the EC and member states from one side and between member states themselves also hinder the development of one clear message the EU wants to convey with its partnering neighbours on the question of regular mobility.

### **Challenges of Mobility Schemes at the Implementation Level**

The institutional limitations explained in the previous section should not distract attention from one important fact: the EU is among the very few entities that have sought to develop mobility schemes for third country nationals. This is explained by the general orientation of the EU and its willingness to act as a soft power with the objectives of promoting a set of principles such as tolerance and cultural acceptance. In fact, the European Union has developed a set of instruments to promote the mobility of young Mediterranean researchers. However, the implementation and outreach of these instruments remain limited.

Countries in the southern neighbourhood have their own characteristics and social/cultural limitations. Hence, when the EU develops mobility and exchange programmes with southern neighbourhood partners, it is important to give particular attention to the following aspects:

## **I- Limited Outreach**

As in many countries, the information remains highly concentrated in the centre, particularly the capitals and big cities. Southern neighbourhood countries are no exception. To take the example of Morocco, most exchange programmes abroad are available in universities in big cities. While it is technically not possible to cover all Moroccan universities, it is worth considering enlarging the outreach of European mobility programmes to small cities out of the traditional axis of Rabat-Casablanca and Marrakech. It is even more effective to target small universities in marginalised cities, as they are the ones that struggle to get funding and mobility partnerships, in comparison to bigger institutions with more financial and human resources. Such an approach will help achieve level access to research opportunities and create synergies between local researchers and their peers from Europe and the Mediterranean basin.

## **II- Communication Gap**

In addition to the high concentration of information in big cities, another challenge for young Mediterranean researchers is access to the right information. While the technological advances in communication are revolutionary, their use in communicating mobility programmes is unfortunately insufficient. Calls for applications and scholarships are indeed available on the websites of funding institutions but they are not sufficiently communicated via social media networks that the young community uses more often. Another part of the issue lies in the fact that often the application documents are written in legal and technical terms not always easy to understand, which may create a communication gap that is worth considering. Finally, the requirements in terms of completing lengthy documents to submit applications for grants can be discouraging. While such a highly demanding process allows the funding institutions to assess the applicant's motivation and capabilities, it is worth considering the easing of application procedures, and a better use of technological means that proved to be more effective.

## **III- Complex and Costly Visa Procedures**

Lengthy and costly visa procedures are among the biggest challenges that hinder the access of young Mediterranean researchers to mobility in the Schengen Area. While the requirements are similar across member states, the process of visa application varies considerably. First, most consulates are based in the capitals, which implies additional transport and accommodation costs for applicants from other cities. Second, getting the visa appointment can be very challenging, particularly at the beginning of academic year, where the flow of applications leads to processing and delivery delays. It is not uncommon for a researcher to miss a conference or an international event due to visa delays. Third, the fact that some member states use

intermediate agencies<sup>1</sup> between visa applicants and the consulates is not always to the benefit of applicants, who are denied direct interaction with the consulate to seek information or request justified urgent processing. This latter point is also an important one; it seems like visa mandated agencies charge for every service, including the request for an urgent appointment for academic or job requirements, which did not use to be the case some years ago when applications were directly managed by members state consulates. Finally, one point that is particularly relevant to researchers is the fact that on the official websites of EU member state consulates, it is clearly stated that “researchers travelling to perform scientific research” (European External Action Service, 2018) are exempt from visa fees. In practice, however, all applicants pay visa and service fees, as most of the time the intermediate agencies do not accept such derogation or simply ignore its existence. The question is then the following: who is responsible for this information gap? Are consulates doing enough to oversee the work of the intermediate agencies? Why is there a lack of clear specifications on what can serve as recognised proof of research activity?

## Recommendations

The foregoing is a non-exhaustive list of the technical and operational limitations of mobility programmes. To overcome these limitations, this section provides a set of aspects that are worth consideration.

### I- Better Stakeholder Mapping

An improved stakeholder mapping will allow at least two shortcomings of the list above to be addressed. First, it will extend the outreach of mobility programmes. A starting point could be the analysis of the research field in the southern neighbouring countries. What are the fields with the most urgent need in qualified researchers, such as in the sciences, health...? What are the research priority areas in the Mediterranean basin? How can mobility schemes be a win-win deal for the southern and northern shores through a focus on knowledge sharing in areas such as migration, security and so on?

The second objective of the mapping would be to address the communication shortcomings. A better knowledge of the researcher’s community in the south will also permit the development of adequate channels of communication. Relevant questions could be: how do university students get information about professional opportunities? Is it through electronic sources, or rather networks and job fairs? Such information could

---

<sup>1</sup> While not all the consulates of EU member states use the services of intermediate agencies to process visa requests, a significant number of them have recently been resorting to this practice. To take the example of Morocco, the traditional destinations of Moroccans (France, Italy, Spain and France) all use intermediate agencies (Ex: TLs, BLs...).

be available from local sources and can be of great use in developing a relevant communication strategy.

## **II- Channelling of Information**

In a time where it is easy to get overwhelmed by abundant information, it is worth considering the channelling of information in a way that makes it easily identifiable by and accessible to the target group. In the case of exchange programmes, one way of doing so could be through the creation of one electronic website exclusively dedicated to EU mobility schemes. Such a valuable source will serve as a guiding tool to the researchers wishing to learn about exchange programmes in the EU.

## **III- Better Synergies between Stakeholders**

It is important to enlarge the scope of mobility programmes to be able to cover a bigger number of fields. For this, it is important to get support from different institutions in the southern and northern shores of the Mediterranean. The ideal outcome would be to have a balanced share of institutional and non-institutional partners willing to host researchers from neighbouring countries in the areas of common interest, such as migration, youth unemployment, and so on. Such a policy will allow the creation of synergies between intellectual communities and institutions throughout the Mediterranean.

## **IV- Improve Communication at the Level of Consulates and Authorities in Charge of Visa Delivery**

As mentioned earlier, the intermediate visa agencies are not always aware of the visa facilitation that researchers are entitled to by European regulation. Hence, it is important for the consulates to oversee the work of these agencies and reduce the communication gap in this regard.

## **V- Balanced Top-Down Approach**

Most of the available grant projects and scholarships go through either ministerial authorities or universities. While this approach allows better structuring of the partnerships, there is also room to improve the outreach of mobility programmes through a more balanced top-down, bottom-up approach. EU mobility funders can do this through direct outreach to independent researchers who are not affiliated to institutions to benefit from mobility schemes.

## **Conclusions**

Research mobility is an important tool to improve cultural and intellectual cooperation in the Mediterranean area. It is also a great means of reducing intolerance and misunderstandings, particularly since both shores of the Mediterranean share lot of

common concerns that require joint efforts to overcome them. Now, more than ever, it is important to promote people-to-people interactions and there are no better ambassadors for this than the young researchers' community. However, in the persistence of political and operational obstacles, access to mobility is becoming challenging for the southern component of the equation.

This policy brief is not under any circumstances questioning the absolute sovereignty of states over their visa policies. It is simply an attempt to share the multiple challenges that a young researcher from the south is facing to get to the northern part of the Mediterranean for research purposes.

It is also a call for the different stakeholders in their capacities to support the mobility of young researchers through concrete operational actions, such as improving communication about exchange programmes and easing visa requirements for research purposes.

## References

**COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION.** (2018). Visa Policy: Council agrees negotiating mandate on the amendment of the visa code. *Press Release*, 353/18. Retrieved from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/06/19/visa-policy-council-agrees-negotiating-mandate-on-the-amendment-of-the-visa-code/#>

**EL OUASSIF, A.** (2016). Comparative study between EU mobility partnerships with Morocco and Moldova. *EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies Department*. College of Europe.

**EUROPEAN COMMISSION.** (2006). Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy. COM(2006)726 final. Retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52006DC0726&from=EN>

**EUROPEAN COMMISSION.** (2015). Joint Communication to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions : Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy. JOIN(2015)50 final. Retrieved from [http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/documents/2015/151118\\_joint-communication\\_review-of-the-enp\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/documents/2015/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf)

**EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE.** (2018). General Schengen visa requirements. Retrieved from [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/general\\_schengen\\_visa\\_requirements\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/general_schengen_visa_requirements_en.pdf)

**EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT.** (2018). Revision of the Visa Code (Regulation 810/2009) and Visa Information System (Regulation 767/2008). Briefing. Implementation Appraisal. Retrieved from [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/615646/EPRS\\_BRI%282018%29615646\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/615646/EPRS_BRI%282018%29615646_EN.pdf)

**TRAUNER, F. & KRUS, I.** (2008). EC visa facilitation and readmission agreements: Implementing a new EU security approach in the Neighbourhood. *Centre for European Policy Studies, CEPS Working Document .No. 290*. Retrieved from <https://www.ceps.eu/publications/ec-visa-facilitation-and-readmission-agreements-implementing-new-eu-security-approach>