

Research report

II

Mobility & Visa: a basic right for culture.

by **Transmitting Stones.**



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*This report was initiated and organized by **Transmitting Stones** as part of its broader vision to foster a more inclusive, accessible, and interconnected cultural landscape.*

Transmitting Stones is an organic platform for non-mainstream music, supporting creators, practitioners, and promoters from creation to diffusion. We unite musicians, technicians, thinkers, and organizers, fostering dialogue and innovation to address the challenges of this underrepresented field.

Through intentional processes and genuine connections, we aim to build sustainable tools and networks across Algeria, Tunisia, and Switzerland, with a focus on emerging voices.



Context

We are cultural workers and artists from Algeria, Tunisia, and Switzerland, who have navigated various cultural events and programs across borders. One of the most time-consuming, emotionally draining, and energy-intensive challenges we face is dealing with complex visa processes. These experiences have highlighted the profound impact of visa restrictions—not only on individual artists but also on the broader cultural landscape, particularly in regions like North Africa.

In Tunisia and Algeria, where we have firsthand experience implementing projects, cultural initiatives already struggle to survive due to financial constraints and a lack of sustainable funding for cultural infrastructure, particularly for independent and emerging projects. Visa barriers further exacerbate these challenges, restricting opportunities for collaboration and artistic exchange.

Motivated by our shared commitment to addressing these challenges, we convened in Basel and Tunis in 2024 for research and creative residencies focused on mobility and visa processes. Our goal is to explore these complexities and propose alternative solutions to facilitate visa access for cultural workers and artists from North Africa.

Through our research, we aim to understand the significance of mobility for emerging and independent North African artists and cultural actors. We seek to question the forces that dictate access to international cultural exchanges while proposing recommendations for cultural and federal institutions to address inequities in the application of Schengen visa procedures.



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Introduction



Article 13 - Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Everyone has the right to **freedom of movement** and residence within the borders of each state.

Everyone has the right to leave any country, including their own, and to return to their country.

Freedom of movement is a fundamental human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet in today's world, divided by borders, scarred by colonial legacies, and shaped by unequal power dynamics, this basic right is often reduced to a symbol of exclusion and humiliation for those born on the margins of global privilege.

The denial of mobility rights creates far-reaching social, political, psychological, economic, and cultural consequences. Among the hardest hit are artists and cultural workers from the Global South, whose ability to connect, create, and thrive is directly tied to their freedom to move.

Culture flourishes through mobility, serving as a bridge between individuals and societies. However, access to this bridge is not universal. Systemic inequalities rooted in historical injustices continue to restrict mobility for many, especially those from the broader Global South. These restrictions perpetuate cycles of marginalization, stifling creative exchange and limiting professional development.

The visa system exemplifies this inequality. Designed without consideration for the unique realities of the Global South, it imposes rigid, often discriminatory, barriers. For many cultural workers, navigating this system becomes a recurring struggle that curtails international collaboration and suppresses cultural diversity.

This report focuses on the **Schengen visa system's impact on North African artists and cultural workers**. By examining its challenges and bureaucratic complexities, we seek to illuminate the obstacles they face in accessing international cultural platforms and pursuing creative careers.

Through this analysis, we advocate for equitable mobility rights and call for policies that ensure fair access to the global cultural landscape. **Freedom of movement should be more than a principle on paper; it must become a lived reality for all.**



Cultural mobility for North Africa

Mobility to prevent cultural stagnation

Mobility restrictions hinder participation in cultural events such as festivals, workshops, residencies, and exhibitions. These engagements are essential as they inspire, rejuvenate, and foster long-term human connections, enabling collaborations between North African and International artists.

Many festivals have embraced these goals through diverse programming, ensuring equitable representation for Global South artists. A key example is the [Le Guess Who?](#) Festival in the Netherlands, which has transformed its curation and programming into a model of inclusivity and diversity. Over the years, the festival has cultivated an international platform for meaningful discovery, cultural exchange, and groundbreaking performances, despite facing persistent visa struggles.

This commitment has made Le Guess Who? one of Europe's most vital cultural hubs, where audiences expect to encounter voices they won't find elsewhere. Thanks to its inclusive approach, the festival has also become a launchpad for emerging talent, creating career-defining opportunities for artists.

In fact, the festival has publicly addressed this issue, publishing a [statement on their Instagram](#) about how visa restrictions impact their vision.

Mobility to resist the regional isolation

North Africa's cultural sector is politically and geographically isolated due to strict visa regimes and complex air travel routes across Africa. This isolation stifles artistic expression and limits global visibility.

Mobility to expand cultural horizons

Limited mobility leads to cultural isolation by restricting encounters, artistic exchanges, and access to diverse creative models. Exposure to different experiences nurtures inspiration, innovation, and knowledge-sharing crucial for artistic and cultural development.

Mobility for cultural diversity

Restrictive migration policies and anti-migration rhetoric further jeopardize the mobility of North African artists, making cultural diversity more vulnerable in today's polarized world. The shrinking space for creative expression endangers the region's rich artistic heritage.

Geopolitical impact and context

North Africa is acutely affected by geopolitical tensions. The region's socio-political landscape, shaped by the Arab Spring's legacy, has led to increased restrictions on mobility and economy. The past decade has seen these limitations escalate, disproportionately affecting artists and cultural workers.

Mobility for professional growth and exposure

Artists need visibility beyond regional boundaries. Mobility facilitates presenting their work to new audiences and gaining career-defining exposure in different cultural contexts, essential milestones in an artist's professional journey.

Mobility for networking and collaboration

Cross-border mobility enables artists to connect with cultural institutions, peers, and professionals. These networks play a crucial role in artistic and cultural advancement by fostering collaborations and shared projects.

Mobility for economic and cultural enrichment

North African artists contribute significantly to Europe's cultural scene and economy. Their participation in festivals, exhibitions, and cultural programs stimulates economic activity, supports local businesses, and enriches the creative ecosystem.

Mobility for access to resources and training

Funding, training programs, and art residencies are scarce in North Africa. Engaging with international contexts offers access to essential resources, enabling artists to realize ambitious projects and expand their professional horizons.

Mobility to prevent resource scarcity and structural fragility

Due to limited resources and creative spaces in the region, the North African cultural sector remains fragile and often unsustainable. Mobility barriers further isolate the scene, compounding a lack of opportunities and deepening its vulnerability.

Cultural actors become prisoners of their territories, reinforcing discrimination against their visibility and presence on the international stage.

This fragility drains the creative energy of artists and cultural workers. Instead of focusing solely on creation and exchange, they are forced to navigate complex visa processes, organize travel logistics, and secure funding, a task made even more overwhelming by the stark economic imbalance between North and South.

For example, a European artist can live comfortably in Tunisia for a month on €1,500 (covering mid-range lodging, meals, and transport), while a Tunisian artist typically requires at least 10,000 TND (\approx €2,800), nearly half the average annual Tunisian salary (22,000 TND/€6,400), to obtain a Schengen visa, secure travel funds, and meet Europe's cost of living. This stark disparity highlights how systemic economic inequities compound mobility barriers.



Visa policies

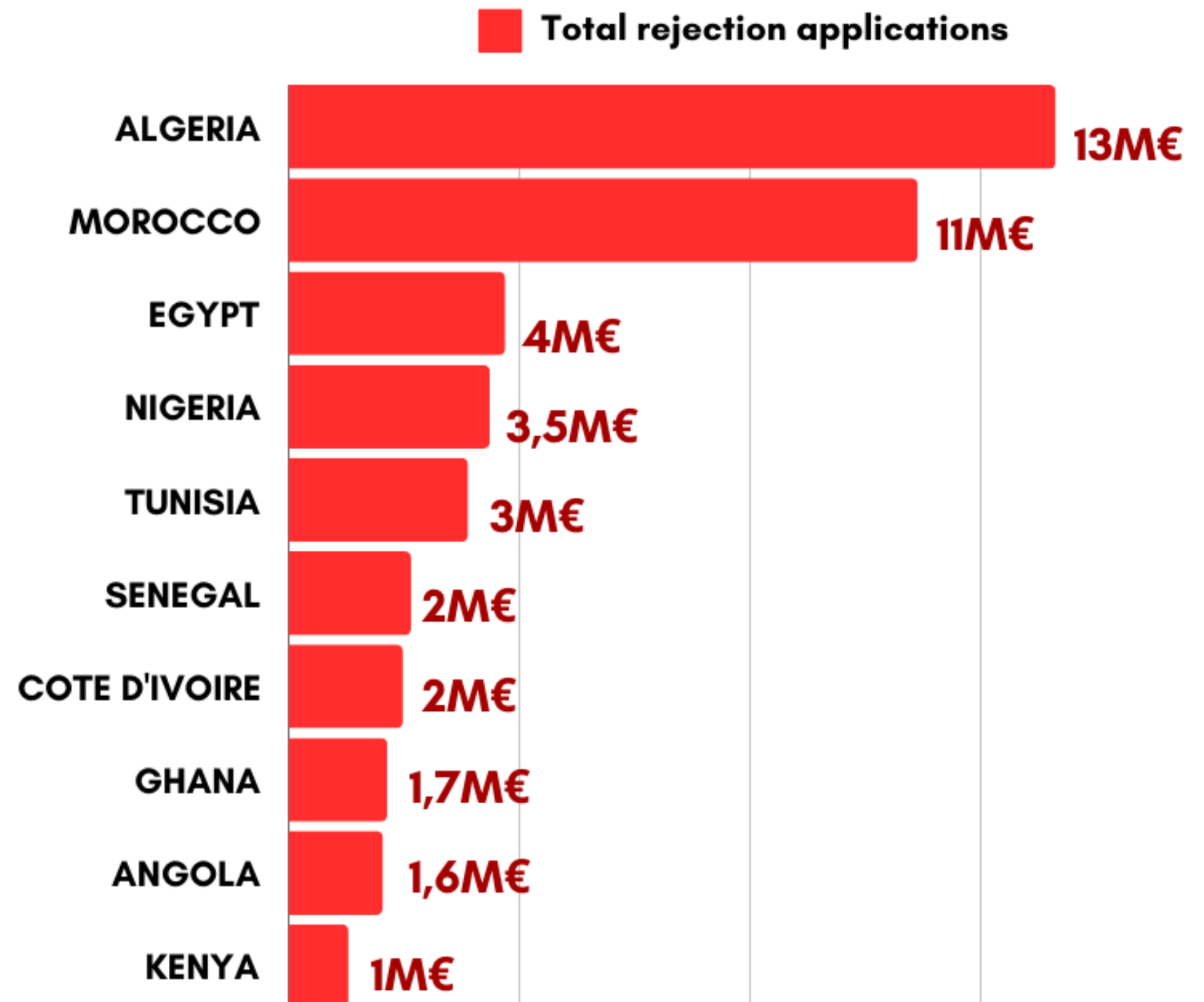
Visa costs: profit and prejudice

Statistics on visa applications and rejections reveal a troubling reality. The visa system profits from applicants willing to sacrifice significant amounts of time, financial resources, and emotional energy, only to face rejection without refunding, a process that can be both traumatic and dehumanizing. Meanwhile, the system continues to benefit from this cycle of exclusion.

*According to:

- [Data on 2023 short-term visa rejection rates and costs](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/data-on-2023-short-term-visa-rejection-rates-and-costs) on home-affairs.ec.europa.eu
- <https://schengenvisainfo.com/news/eu-cashes-in-e56-million-from-rejected-visa-applications-from-african-countries/>

Estimated total costs of **Visa Schengen rejection**
in Africa in 2023: **56M€ ***



Estimated total costs of Visa Schengen **rejection in North Africa** in 2023: **32M€**

Country	Total application	Total rejection applications	rejection rate	Estimated cost of rejection
<u>Algeria</u>	467167	166260	35.59%	€13,300,800.00
<u>Morocco</u>	574168	136367	23.75%	€10,909,360.00
<u>Egypt</u>	186497	46943	25.17%	€3,755,440.00
<u>Tunisia</u>	161780	38896	24.04%	€3,111,680.00
<u>Libya</u>	24140	5681	23.53%	€454,480.00
<u>Sudan</u>	2361	999	42.31%	€79,920.00
<u>Western Sahara</u>	<i>unavailable</i>	<i>unavailable</i>	<i>unavailable</i>	<i>unavailable</i>

2024 Schengen Visa highlights:

- In June 2024, the Schengen visa fee **increased from €80 to €90**.
- EU cashed over €995 Million in Visa applications in 2024
- According to data from SchengenVisaInfo, the number of rejected Schengen visa applications rose from 1.6 million in 2023 to 1.7 million in 2024, marking a 4.4% increase year-over-year.
- Schengen States received 11,716,723 visa applications in 2024.
- Nationals of third countries filed 13.45% more visa applications in 2024 than in the previous year.
- In 2024, Algerians submitted 544,634 visa applications to France, spending a total of €29.9 million on fees. Of these, 228,267 were approved, costing applicants approximately €19.4 million in processing expenses. Meanwhile, France retained €10 million from rejected Algerian visa applications.
- Overall, Algerians spent over €46.2 million on 544,634 visa applications to France in 2024.
- Moroccans submitted 606,800 applications, €51.6 million in expenses. 115,774 applications were rejected, costing €9.8 million in expenses.

According to:

<https://schengenvisa.info.com/news/applicants-lost-e145-million-in-rejected-schengen-visa-applications-in-2024/>



TLScontact & VFS Global controversies

Many visa agencies exist in North Africa (TLS contact, VFS Global, Capago, BLS International, Almaviva Visa Services, TT Visa Services, etc.)

The two largest visa facilitation service providers are **VFS Global** and **TLSccontact**.

TLScontakt

TLScontakt has encountered significant challenges in North Africa, particularly concerning data security and service reliability. In 2023, Morocco's National Data Protection Commission (CNDP) launched an investigation into the company over **alleged mishandling of applicants' personal information**. Beyond data privacy concerns, travelers have frequently complained about **excessive appointment wait times, scarce availability, and recurring technical failures in the online booking system**. Legal disputes have further complicated the company's operations in the region, raising questions about its **ability to uphold service standards and public trust**. These issues continue to cast a shadow over its reputation in North Africa.

More detailed info about TLScontakt in Tunisia through Inkyfada Media investigation article: <https://inkyfada.com/en/2023/06/23/visa-business-tls-tunisia-luxembourg/>

TLScontakt is now part of the multinational group **Teleperformance**, a global leader in outsourced customer experience management. However, Teleperformance has faced several controversies and legal issues in recent years, including issues related to content moderation practices, such as **traumatic content exposure**, where moderators, particularly in Colombia, were exposed to **distressing materials**, causing psychological trauma ([The Bureau Investigates](#)) and allegations of using **explicit materials for training moderators** ([Forbes](#)). In terms of labor practices, the company paid \$10M in 2024 for misleading marketing in Illinois ([LawMBG](#)). Teleperformance has also faced concerns over employee monitoring, with **extensive surveillance**, including AI-powered cameras, raising privacy issues ([The Guardian](#)). The company has also been involved in **class action lawsuits accusing it of securities fraud and misleading investors about working conditions**.

VFS Global

VFS Global, the world's leading visa and consular services provider, was established in 2001 as a subsidiary of Switzerland's **Kuoni Travel Group**. Following **Blackstone**'s majority stake acquisition in October 2021, the company relocated its headquarters to Dubai, UAE. Today, VFS Global operates through a network of application centers across **147 countries**, processing millions of visas annually for over **60 client governments**.

Despite its global reach and influence, VFS Global has faced several **controversies and legal challenges** in recent years. The company has been involved in **data security breaches**, such as a 2005-2007 incident where a security flaw exposed personal data of applicants from India, Nigeria, and Russia ([The Guardian](#)) and a 2015 breach where users could access other applicants' personal information ([Wikipedia - criticism & controversies](#)).

VFS Global has also been accused of **monopolistic practices in the visa outsourcing sector**, including investigations by the South African Competition Commission for market dominance in 2014 ([Tourism update](#)). Additionally, the company faced allegations of **"extorting" and "mistreating" visa applicants** in Global South countries ([Nigeria example](#)). The company has also faced **fraud-related issues**, such as a 2023 incident where employees in India were involved in a scheme to fraudulently enroll biometrics for visa applicants ([Economic Times](#)), and reports have emerged of agents selling free visa appointments at high prices, like for UK student visas ([The Guardian](#)). The Swiss foundation Kuoni & Hugentobler holds 25 percent of the voting rights in the parent company of VFS Global Ltd, raising questions about Switzerland's role in enabling a visa system that thrives on inequality and systematically mistreats applicants, particularly those from the Global South.



Visa challenges and impact

Visa procedure: a dehumanizing procedure

Visa procedures in North Africa are highly complex and disconnected from the socio-economic and political realities of the region. They also fail to account for the precarious status of cultural workers and independent artists, who often lack official recognition.

The process starts with securing an appointment—sometimes unavailable for up to two months—through visa application centers (TLScontact, VFS Global, BLS, CAPAGO) or, in certain cases, directly at embassies.

The second step involves gathering required documents, which can take up to **three weeks (or more)** to prepare. These include certified translations, municipality-legalized papers, bank statements from the last three months, employment certificates, leave authorizations, travel orders, hotel reservations, biometric data, official invitations covering accommodation and living expenses in the Schengen area, notarized invitations from European residents, health insurance, proof of financial means, and more.

As of June 11, 2024, the Schengen visa fee increased from €80 to €90, with additional service charges (€20–35 at agencies like VFS Global), optional premium services (€50–100+), and no fees when applying directly at consulates.



Examples of Short-Stay tourist visa requirements
(less than 90 days):

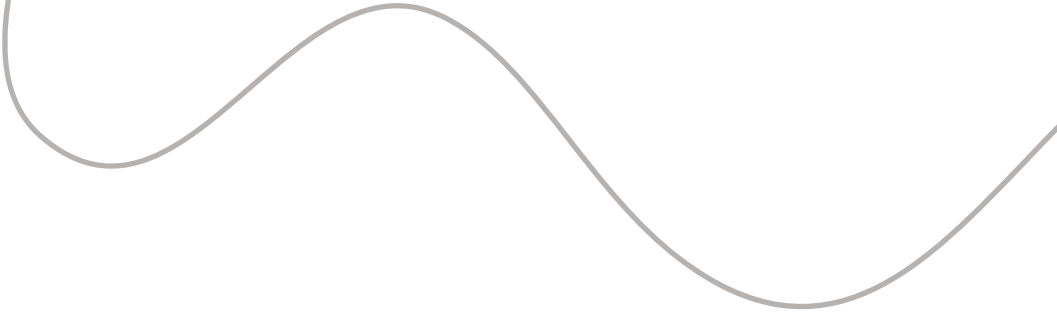
Switzerland: [Swiss Visa Cultural Checklist](#)

France: [France Visa Guide in ENG/AR](#)

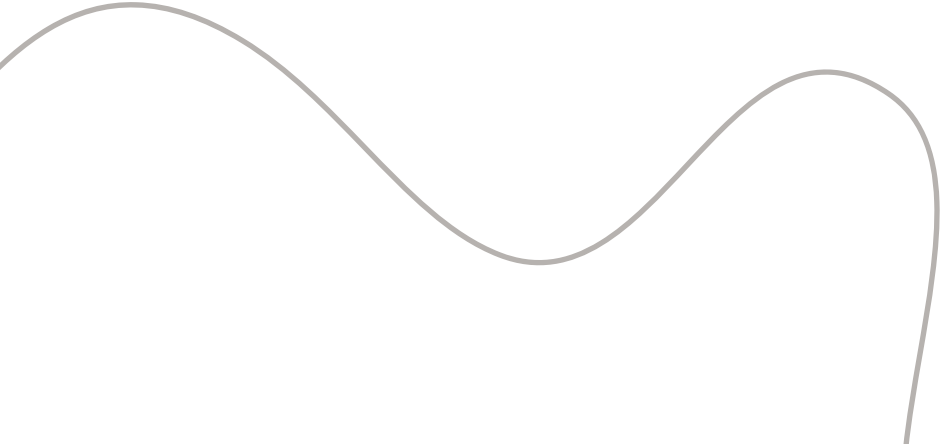
Germany: [Germany short visa cultural checklist](#)

Spain: [Spain Visa Checklist](#)

Italy: [Italy Visa Checklist](#)

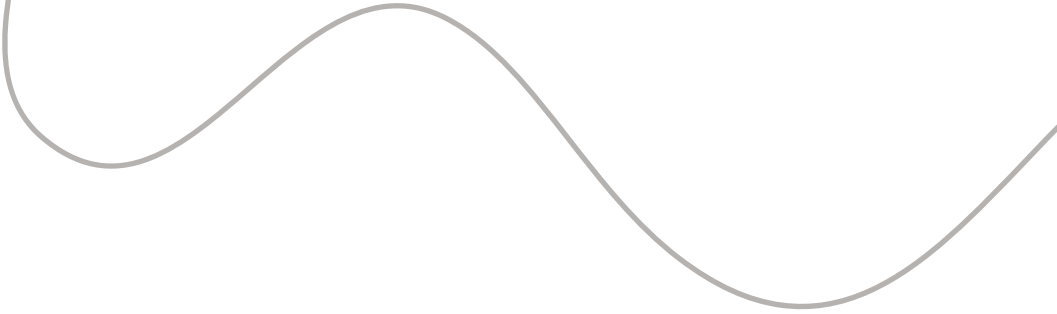


These procedures and document requirements, often difficult to access depending on the country, are **emotionally, financially, and time-consuming**. The entire process, from booking appointments to preparing documents, interacting with institutions, and dealing with the behavior of staff (security, agents, etc.), is **exhausting and unjust**.



Visa procedure: a **complex** and **stressful** process

- **Expensive process:** Visa and service fees (totaling €110+) often almost match or exceed the monthly minimum wages in North Africa, equivalent to a full month's income for workers in Tunisia (\approx €150), Algeria (\approx €145), and Egypt (\approx €115), Libya (\approx €80), etc. creating prohibitive financial barriers for applicants.
- **Time-consuming process:** Document preparation is labor-intensive, requiring considerable time and resources.
- **Uncertainty and waiting:** Appointment availability, processing times, and response dates are beyond applicants' control, causing prolonged waiting periods inside and outside visa centers.
- **Discrimination, racism, and mistreatment:** Applicants may face discriminatory treatment by visa agency staff and embassy officials, intensifying the stressful experience.
- **Fear and anxiety:** The visa process induces constant stress and anxiety with each travel attempt.
- **Deprivation of freedom:** Applicants must surrender their passports during visa processing, often for 8 to 20 days (or more), restricting their freedom to travel.
- **Humiliation and dehumanization:** Invasive security checks and confiscation of personal belongings like phones and bags erode applicants' dignity and privacy.
- **Lack of clarity and accessibility:** Ambiguous requirements and inaccessible information further complicate the process for freelance artists and cultural workers.
- **Arbitrary rejections and random process:** Visa decisions are often inconsistent, with no valid explanations provided for rejections. Missing or incorrect documents typically result in outright denial rather than opportunities for correction.



Applying for a visa can be a **dehumanizing** experience. You're reduced to paperwork, waiting endlessly while bureaucrats decide your fate. The costs add up quickly, application fees, translations, travel expenses, all **non-refundable**, even if you're denied. They demand your **most private details**: bank statements, fingerprints, your entire life history laid bare.

Adding to that the **uncertainty** that derails careers, separates families, and puts dreams on hold. It's a system that treats people like problems to be processed rather than human beings with lives and aspirations.





Low self-esteem and dehumanization: Applicants often feel devalued and stripped of personal dignity. Feelings of shame and criminalization: Applicants may feel as though they are doing something wrong during the process.

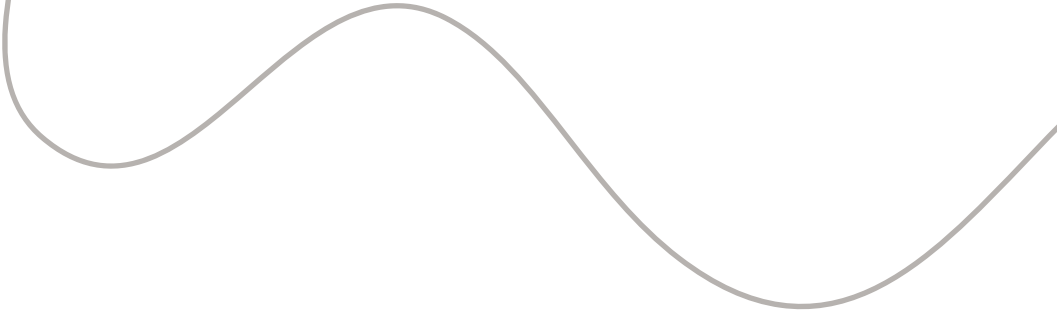
Financial loss: The time and money invested in visa applications are irrecoverable, worsening financial strain.

Violation of privacy: Submitting personal documents like bank statements and biometric data causes a loss of privacy and feelings of worthlessness.

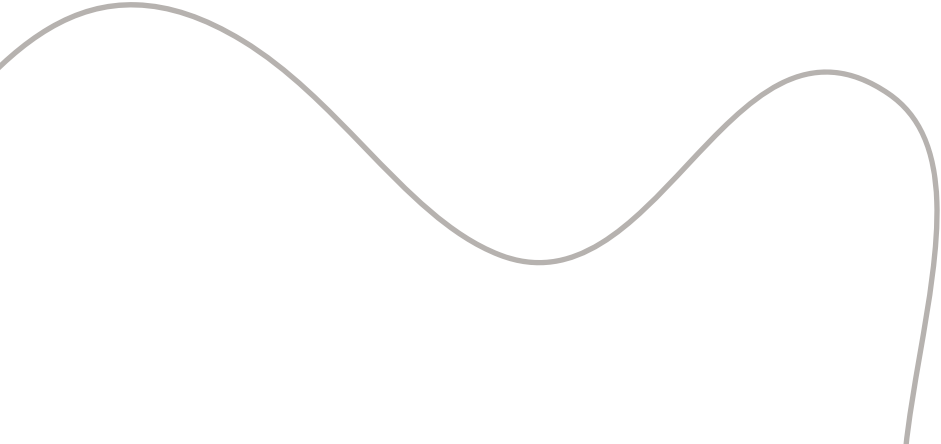
Career setbacks: Lack of control over the process leads to missed professional opportunities, residencies, and networking events, obstructing career and artistic growth.

Artistic blockage: The energy spent on visa procedures and uncertainty about approval can hinder artistic inspiration and productivity.

Mental health struggles: Mistreatment and constant uncertainty cause anxiety, stress, and trauma, particularly for those with pre-existing mental health challenges.



The emotional toll of visa rejections runs deep. For artists and professionals, each denial isn't just paperwork - it's a **personal and creative setback that lingers**. The frustration of missed exhibitions, canceled collaborations, and abandoned projects chips away at motivation, leaving many creators questioning their worth. Over time, the cumulative effect goes beyond career obstacles; it breeds **isolation** as artists withdraw from international opportunities altogether. The most corrosive impact might be how the process makes people feel - reduced to case numbers, their ambitions dismissed with a stamp. This breeds **not just disappointment but real anger**, especially when colleagues from visa-privileged countries fail to understand these systemic barriers. The result is a cultural landscape where talent and diversity remain **constrained by inequitable borders**.





Emotional impact: Rejection leads to feelings of trauma, frustration, and anxiety, stalling personal and professional growth.

Professional setbacks: Rejection limits access to international opportunities, collaborations, and artistic development.

Personal demotivation: Repeated rejections can cause artists to lose motivation and inspiration for their creative work.

Stagnation and isolation: Continuous setbacks foster personal and professional stagnation, isolation, and a loss of hope.

Dehumanization and low self-worth: Artists may feel worthless and unrecognized in their professional and personal lives.

Withdrawal from international engagement: Some applicants may avoid applying for visas again, isolating themselves from the international cultural scene.

Feelings of injustice and rage: Rejections can generate resentment and communication breakdowns in professional collaborations, especially when working with individuals unfamiliar with visa challenges. This misunderstanding may lead to frustration, miscommunication, and even hostility.



Stories about visa trauma

To provide more details on the challenges and impacts of the visa procedure mentioned above, we interviewed and gathered testimonies and stories from artists and cultural professionals in Tunisia.

Story 1: A.

A cultural worker and university teacher, had several negative visa experiences from 1996 to nowadays.

*"My visa problem started since 1996, when I was still a student at university and wanted to go on holiday to visit my Italian boyfriend. It was so traumatic that I decided not to go anymore to the Italian consulate. **They humiliated me and told me that the visa is not a right for me even though I had all the requested documents.***

*In 2008, I was invited to an event in Paris, in which a film that I partly shot in Tunisia was to be screened. I got a refusal from the French consulate. I had to do the request a second time with the help of my superior who had connections with the French Institute. I then used to work in a Tunisian production company. I had all the requested documents. I did the visa because once you have a refusal from a European country you will be denied from the other countries. They gave me a 7 days visa. I paid twice of course without reimbursement. And I got the visa 3 days after the end of the event. **That experience was so traumatic that I decided not to do it anymore.** I travelled to countries that didn't require a visa. **For 9 years I didn't go to any European country."***

Story 1: A.

*"In 2015, I was invited by the German Foreign Affairs and the Goethe Institute to attend a festival in Berlin. I was then Teacher-researcher at university in Tunis. I was also married to a German citizen but based in Egypt. Our son, was born in Tunisia in 2012, and has a German passport. **I remember the stress I felt while doing the visa request.** I was traumatized by the previous experience. I got the visa. But in the meantime I separated from my husband. My last Schengen visa expired spring 2020. At that time, it was impossible to have an appointment to deposit the request. In January 2022, I did the request with all my documents proving that I have permanent work at university, that I have money, social security, and all the requested documents and I asked for 3 years. The consulate called me one week later to ask for a Formal obligation from a German person. I found the request humiliating because I had all the requested documents that prove my ability to take myself in charge. It was a Schengen Visa request for only short stay. A friend and colleague made the Formal Obligation for me and I got my Schengen Visa 3 weeks later.*

*In any case, **I find the visa in itself a harmful, humiliating and traumatic question. It is a restriction to my freedom of mobility.** At this point I am not a "citizen of the world" because many countries restrict my right to circulate freely."*

Story 2: G.

A filmmaker and video artist, was invited to screen his film at the Art Explora Festival in Venice. He applied for a Schengen visa to Italy immediately after learning his film had been selected, three weeks prior to the screening. However, as the festival began, he had yet to receive any updates from TLS or the Embassy.

*"Tomorrow, my film will be screened as part of the Art Explora Festival during the opening week of the 60th Venice Biennale of Art. This "itinerant festival that travels the seas with its museum ship" will travel across the Mediterranean with a rich and varied exhibition of "cultural expressions designed to rethink our relationship (...) with the Mediterranean basin, raising contemporary issues such as migration." However, I will not be able to accompany my work. I'm unable to attend as my visa application is still being processed. **It's disgraceful that authorities imprison us behind meaningless borders, preventing us from moving freely and denying us our right to travel.**"*

Story 2: G.

After posting about the situation on social media, he received a response from the Embassy the following day.

*"I finally received my visa on the day of the film's screening at 12 p.m., but I still cannot travel as all my reservations have already been canceled.
That said, I stand firm in my position, and **I am outraged.***

I am outraged by everything I saw and experienced in this infernal race to obtain the visa. I am outraged because, like me, thousands of people suffer mistreatment to enjoy their right to free movement. I am outraged because we should not have to endure this discrimination simply because we were born on the "wrong" side of the map!"

Story 3: M.

International DJ and music promoter from Tunisia, has held a stable job for the past nine years at an insurance agency. She has social security, a good salary, and all the necessary documents to prove her stable status. Despite this, she received her first visa refusal to France after being invited for short-term work as a promoter at a well-established French radio station, as well as to perform at various venues and festivals in France. This was the first time she experienced a visa refusal, and no explanation was provided.

*"I've been applying for my visa for years. The process is **discriminatory, inappropriate, stressful, and humiliating**. We all know how difficult it is to secure an appointment, and even then, we have to pay for it before we can proceed with the rest of the process.*

*We must gather a lot of personal information to minimize the chances of a refusal. Applying for a visa is a nightmare for me because it feels like **I'm constantly proving to the embassy that I don't plan to leave my country permanently, when all I want to do is pursue my passion.***

Financially, the process is extremely expensive—I paid around 110 EUR only to get rejected without any explanation, which feels completely unfair.

The system takes advantage of us financially, and it's ridiculous that our freedom is in the hands of people who have no understanding of our lives or our struggles"

Story 4: Y.

Engineer and founder of an art residency hosting over 70 artists annually, faced multiple visa refusals and humiliating processes, deeply impacting his personal life and marriage.

*"I first experienced a visa refusal when I applied to attend a concert in the U.S. The embassy didn't consider it a valid reason. I was naive then, thinking applying for a visa was simple. They asked humiliating questions like whether I planned to commit a crime or a terrorist attack. It **traumatized me**, and I vowed never to apply for a U.S. visa again."*

Later, Y's struggles continued with European visas. Despite securing a stable career and marriage to a Belgian woman, the process remained degrading.

*"I wanted to attend a Radiohead concert in France in 2012. The paperwork was exhausting—bank statements, pay slips, social security proof, even legalized documents, etc. I got a visa but returned traumatized, **feeling invaded**. **I shared information with the French embassy that I wouldn't even share with my parents.**"*

Story 4: Y.

Things became worse after marrying his Belgian wife. When Y applied for a visa to spend Christmas with her family, delays nearly ruined his plans.

"I got my passport on December 18 for a trip on the 19th and was granted just 8 days. I organized a surprise wedding party for my wife in Belgium, only to be given a visa starting two days after the planned celebration. This lack of respect for my plans and commitments enraged me and created tensions in our marriage."

In 2022, his visa was refused again, despite evidence of financial stability and prior returns to Tunisia. The rejection cited insufficient proof that he would leave Europe.

*"It was **devastating**. I became **angry** even at my wife—she could come and go freely, but I had to endure endless humiliation for a few days' visit. I **lost time, money, and dignity, being treated like a child in queues, stripped of my phone and stuff, without any clarity on the time of the process of anything, with documents in my hand to prove that I am not a criminal**"*

Story 4: Y.

Later, when his wife was diagnosed with cancer, the situation worsened.

*"I urgently applied for a visa, but the earliest appointment was in two months. I emailed the embassy, sent marriage documents, and explained the emergency. They replied asking for her medical report, then her biopsy results. I **felt violated**, but my wife insisted I send them. Even after all this, it took over a month to get the visa."*

Y eventually reached Belgium but only received a one-month visa, forcing him to reapply for his wife's operation later that year.

***"This process broke me.** I accepted the humiliation because I had no choice—being with my wife during a life-or-death moment was my only goal. But the control they exerted over our lives, our plans, and our dignity is unacceptable. Europeans don't know this humiliation, but we do. **Who gave them this right?**"*

Story 5: A.

Curator and architect, was invited for an exhibition in Frankfurt. But upon arrival, he was detained, interrogated for hours, and deported despite holding a valid visa

"I had a Schengen visa for six months, issued by France. I had already traveled to Germany once without any issues. Before flying to Frankfurt again, I checked with the embassy, and they assured me there was no problem. At passport control, the officer asked about my plans. I explained I had an exhibition in Frankfurt, then planned to visit Poland before returning to Tunisia. He left the counter, came back, and told me to follow him without explanation. He took my passport and asked for my phone.

I was led to a small grey room with two doors, three chairs, and a glass wall where officers watched me. I sat there for two hours, no answers, no information, treated roughly and aggressively for no reason. I was terrified. I had no phone, no passport, and no idea what was happening.

*Finally, I was taken to an investigation room. They waited for an interpreter because I'm Tunisian. They brought a Moroccan interpreter, though we all spoke French and English. For two hours, I was interrogated with the same questions repeated: **Why was I coming to Germany? Who paid for my flight? How did I get my visa? What was my job? How much money did I have?** "*

Story 5: A.

"I told them I had asked the embassy before traveling and they told me that I have the right to travel here, but they insisted I didn't have the right to enter German territory.

Meanwhile, my colleague, waiting outside, searched for me desperately and eventually confirmed my story. The officers returned with two "choices":

1. Pay 300 euros, be deported, cancel my visa and won't be able to apply for a new visa again for six months.
2. Refuse, get deported anyway, but be banned from applying for a visa for 8 years.

What kind of options are these? I chose the first.

That night, I slept on airport chairs without my passport. In the morning, I was escorted to the plane and only got my passport back upon landing in Tunisia. **I felt like an international criminal.**

That same night, I walked through downtown Tunis, **overwhelmed and confused**. It felt like I was still in that small locked room. Except now, the prison was the borders of Tunisia. Maybe Africa itself.

I had once believed I was privileged as an architect who finished university after years of hard work. I didn't understand why so many Tunisians, my friends, cousins, felt trapped and frustrated.

Now I do. "

Story 6: R.

Filmmaker and cultural worker, was invited to attend the Oberhausen Short Film Festival for the premiere of her first film. After an initial visa refusal, the embassy issued a humiliating 48-hour visa, only granted thanks to the intervention of the curator.

*"The festival was crucial for my career, it's an important step after finishing a film, providing networking opportunities, and it marked the premiere of my film. I **was already exhausted before even starting the paperwork, which is stressful** and completely **disconnected** from the reality of cultural workers and artists in Tunisia. It's incredibly difficult to have a clear artist status or stable income, let alone meet the bureaucratic requirements. It is utterly disrespectful and humiliating to be without my passport for over 20 days, forced to prepare an absurd amount of documents and answer questions as though I were a criminal. I spent hours waiting at both the TLS agency and the embassy, enduring **mistreatment** from security guards, including having my phone confiscated at the entrance. In the end, I was given a refusal with an absurdly vague explanation written in German."*

Story 6: R.

"It is completely **unfair** to endure this just to attend a festival like the Oberhausen Short Film Festival, where my film premiered. Being humiliated with a 48-hour visa, only after the curator intervened, is an **oppressive and suffocating experience**. As a human, an artist and cultural worker, I should have the freedom to travel anywhere, anytime, for my practice and career—just as any artist in the North can attend festivals, residencies, tours, or simply travel for inspiration, research, and cultural exchange. I should be able to do this without the **constant fear of rejection, wasted time, and money**. This process not only **infringes upon my professional life but also impacts my private life and mental health**. It's **an abuse** I shouldn't have to endure."

Story 7: E.B, Appealing a Visa Refusal: Tunisia to Switzerland example.

All visa applicants have the right to **request a review when their application is refused**. In Switzerland specifically, this appeal process is handled by the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM).

'Legal Recourse

The visa applicant, their duly authorized representative, their host in Switzerland, or a company expecting them in Switzerland may file an appeal with the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) against a visa refusal decision within 30 days of its notification (Art. 6, para. 2bis of the Federal Act on Foreign Nationals; FNIA, SR 142.20). This appeal must be submitted as a signed and dated letter in an official Swiss language, either to the representation that refused the visa or directly to the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM), CH-3003 Berne-Wabern. The SEM's decision is subject to further appeal upon payment of an advance fee of CHF 200 (Art. 63 of the Federal Administrative Procedure Act; APA, SR 172.021). This fee must be paid strictly in accordance with the instructions provided by the representation or the SEM.'

We received testimony from E.B, a Swiss association that invited a Tunisian musician for a tour in Switzerland, alongside other Tunisian musicians who were granted visas, except for this artist.

Story 7: E.B, Appealing a Visa Refusal: Tunisia to Switzerland example.

They filed an appeal with the SEM. The final decision from the SEM arrived 10 days after the tour had ended, with no communication during the process, or very little, and there was no way to contact the SEM directly except through an online form.

This left them in **uncertainty** until the tour was over, unable to cancel events scheduled for the artist or even inform her properly, as they clung to a faint hope of approval.

Their appeal process took two months. The SEM and the relevant cantonal authorities demanded additional evidence, including: a signed letter from the artist herself confirming she would leave Switzerland after the tour, a form signed by the association's president committing to cover up to 30,000 CHF in case of issues (e.g., accidents, overstay), a criminal record check for the association's president

Despite submitting proof of guarantees, the SEM upheld its refusal without modification. This raises serious questions about the **appeals mechanism's efficacy** - if neither additional evidence nor legally-binding guarantees can alter outcomes, **what substantive role does review actually serve?** The stated rationale - "Host assurances cannot guarantee specific behavior" - effectively renders the process performative, as it dismisses even contractual obligations as insufficient.

Story 7: E.B, Appealing a Visa Refusal: Tunisia to Switzerland example.

This case exposes **fundamental flaws in cultural mobility systems** through multiple layers of systemic failure. The procedural breakdown is evident in an appeals process that renders itself meaningless by systematically disregarding new evidence, creating a bureaucratic black hole where documentation vanishes without consideration. Beneath this lies a **deeper structural bias that privileges formal employment frameworks, automatically excluding independent artists** – particularly from regions like Tunisia – whose professional legitimacy is questioned simply because they operate through freelance arrangements, cash payments, and non-contractual engagements that reflect their local cultural economic realities rather than European administrative preferences.

This institutional myopia creates and maintains an asymmetric privilege where European artists enjoy seamless mobility while colleagues from North Africa face disproportionate barriers that actively suppress careers before they can even begin.

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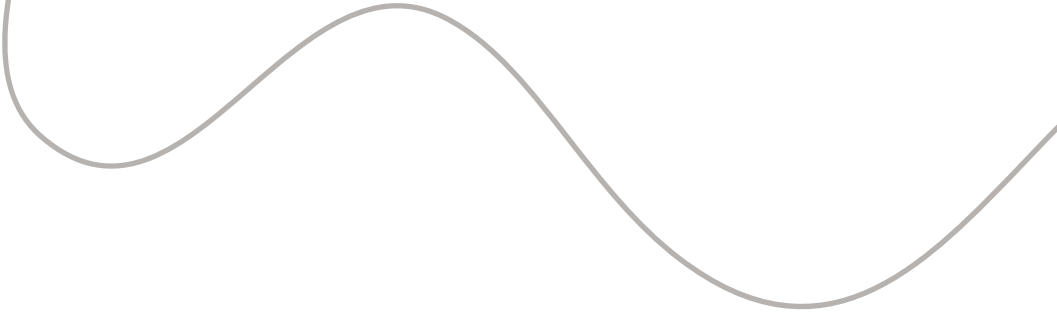
Story 7: E.B, Appealing a Visa Refusal: Tunisia to Switzerland example.

*"We share this account not merely to express frustration but to **document how visa regimes function as neo-colonial controls, acting as gatekeepers that determine who may participate in global cultural exchange based on criteria that reinforce existing power imbalances.***

*Until borders cease to dictate creative opportunity, we must **collectively challenge arbitrary decision-making processes, demand genuine transparency in appeals systems, and fundamentally recognize mobility as a basic right of cultural practitioners** rather than a privilege reserved for those from "privileged" nations. This is not a single visa refusal case, it represents an ongoing struggle over who gets to create, collaborate, and belong in international artistic spaces, revealing how administrative systems reproduce global inequalities under the guise of neutral bureaucracy."*



Some recommendations for an easier mobility



Following collective brainstorming sessions, we propose the following short- and long-term recommendations to mitigate the challenges related to Schengen visa applications for cultural workers and artists from North Africa.

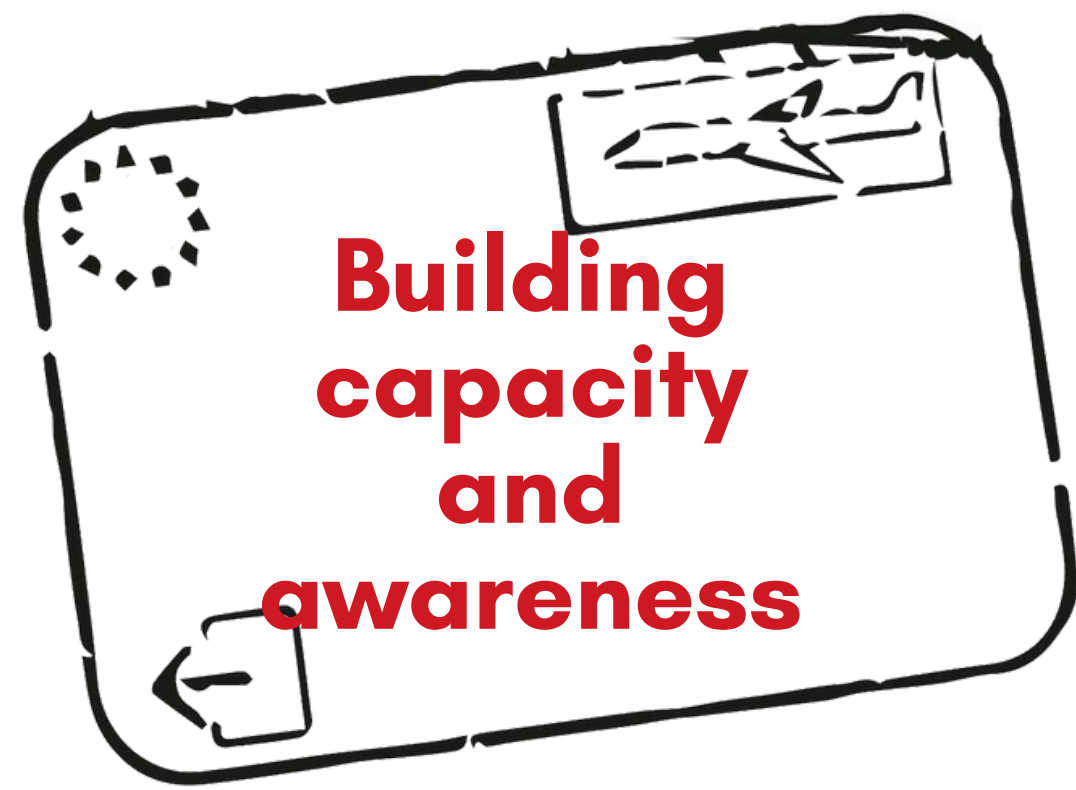
While **we fundamentally oppose the existence of borders and the visa system**, believing that **every human being has the right to move freely**, we recognize the current reality.

These suggestions target **embassies, cultural institutions, and migration services, focusing solely on Schengen visa-related mobility issues**, not broader concerns such as cultural funding.





- **Advocate for a cultural visa:** establish a dedicated cultural visa with simplified application procedures, longer validity, and multi-entry flexibility—making the process as straightforward as booking a flight, taking in consideration the independent cultural scene.
- **Streamline procedures:** reduce administrative burdens by simplifying documentation requirements, minimizing bureaucratic steps, and expediting visa processing times.
- **Addressing visa costs:** Advocate for reduced or waived visa fees for artists and cultural workers, with pricing scaled to reflect the economic realities of applicants' home countries.
- **Mandating full reimbursement** of visa fees for all refused applications
- **Clarity on visa processing times:** provide clear timelines for visa processing, ensuring applicants know when to expect decisions, enabling better travel planning and reduced uncertainty.
- **Keep passports during processing:** allow applicants to retain their passports during visa processing. a copy or scan could be provided until the final decision. If approved, applicants could schedule a passport submission appointment for visa issuance.
- **Data protection measures:** enforce strong data protection policies to secure the privacy of artists and cultural workers, particularly concerning sensitive topics in their work. Personal information must be handled securely, giving artists control over how their identities are represented publicly.



- **Training migration, embassies and visa agencies officers:** organize specialized training for visa officers in both EU and North African countries to improve their understanding of cultural work and the unique circumstances artists face.
- **Awareness toolkits:** develop a toolkit explaining the visa process for applicants and cultural organizations, festivals, and residencies hosting artists requiring visas.
- **Digital visa resource platform:** create a centralized, user-friendly website listing visa requirements for all Schengen countries, with clear procedures and document checklists specific to cultural trips.



- **Support for emotional impact:** recognize the emotional toll of the visa process and offer psychological support tools for affected artists and cultural workers.
- **Feedback surveys:** conduct surveys on the treatment of applicants by visa agencies and embassies to ensure accountability and improve procedures.



- **Create a support network:** establish a recognized coalition of cultural institutions offering logistical, financial, and administrative support for visa applications—accessible to all, including emerging and independent artists.
- **Cultural passport initiative:** propose a cultural passport recognized by embassies and institutions, streamlining visa applications for regular travelers in the cultural sector.
- **Promote co-productions:** foster collaborations between institutions to facilitate cultural projects and sustain a healthy cultural ecosystem.
- **Solidarity taxes and financial support:** create a solidarity fund to support visa applicants unable to afford fees. Institutions, organizations, and donors can contribute, ensuring no artist is denied mobility due to financial barriers.
- **Recognition of supportive collectives:** establish a recognized collective of cultural organizations dedicated to supporting visa applicants by providing invitations, letters of recommendation, and direct contact with embassies. This should be non-selective, welcoming emerging and independent artists.



- **Raise awareness on mobility issues:** highlight visa-related challenges at cultural events by clearly stating when artists couldn't attend due to visa refusals. This initiative aims, among other goals, to engage European artists and cultural practitioners, making them aware of the realities of mobility within the North African cultural field. By fostering solidarity and a deeper understanding of the systemic barriers faced by their counterparts, it seeks to build a more inclusive and equitable cultural landscape.
- **Continuous advocacy and lobbying:** keep the conversation about visa-related injustices alive through advocacy, lobbying governments and institutions, and raising awareness within the cultural sector about how borders reinforce colonial, capitalist, and racist systems.
- **Engage in permanent lobbying** and advocacy at national and European levels, pressing governments and institutions for change.
- **Emphasize the value of physical residencies** and in-person cultural exchanges. Avoid replacing them with online alternatives, which risk undermining genuine cultural interaction.



Conclusion

Borders are among the most **unjust and inhumane constructs** of our modern world, arbitrary lines drawn by colonial powers, now enforced through **neo-colonial visa regimes that replicate old hierarchies of control**. For cultural workers and artists from North Africa, these barriers are not just bureaucratic obstacles; they are **extensions of a system designed to exclude, surveil, and subordinate**.

How can we create, collaborate, and share stories in a world where our right to move is denied? How can art survive when colonial-era power structures persist under the guise of "border security"?

Cultural mobility should not be a privilege for western countries, it is a basic right ([Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)), long denied through policies that **treat African passports as threats rather than equals**. The fight against borders is not just about visas; it is about **dismantling a global order that still operates on colonial logic**.

Until this reality changes, the **fight against borders and visa restrictions must remain at the forefront of our collective struggle for justice and equality**.

References and other reports

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Research report

Mobility & Visa: a basic right for culture.

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