

PISM REPORT

Development Assistance and Root Causes of Migration: A Risky Road to Unsustainable Solutions



DECEMBER 2021

Morten Bøås | Patryk Kugiel | Sejla Pehlivanovic



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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the 2015 migration-management crisis, both the European Union and several European states declared that they would be using development aid more strategically to address root causes of migration.¹ The final report from the MiDeShare project, a joint two-year research project managed and implemented by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), addresses two key issues that such a declaration brings to the fore: First, can development assistance really tackle root causes of migration, and second, have the EU and European countries such as Norway and Poland changed the direction of their aid since 2015? By reviewing the research already published by our joint project, we will sum up both what we know and in what areas new research-based knowledge is needed.

After several years of European attempts at solving the push factors of irregular migration, the records of such policies are mixed. Yet, as the new U.S. strategy to “address root causes of migration” adopted in July 2021 shows, this approach is still popular among donor countries.² Policymakers find it intuitive that more and better development assistance will create economic growth and social development that will inevitably lead to less migration. The logic is that donor assistance, if given correctly, will help eradicate poverty, create jobs, and lead to peaceful societies. Thus, as countries become more prosperous, many fewer people will decide to leave on an uncertain and dangerous journey to possible greener pastures elsewhere. According to the same logic, if refugees are given more humanitarian assistance in their countries of origin or in neighbouring third countries, they will remain closer to their home of origin and will not embark on dangerous “secondary movements” towards, for example, Europe. While we understand that this may seem intuitive, almost all available research shows that this is not the case. The relationship between development and migration is far more complex and context-dependent.

Thus, not only will we show that it is highly uncertain that development assistance, at least in the short term, will have much effect on popular migration aspirations, but also that in the cases of Norway and Poland, a strategic redirection of these two countries’ development assistance has not taken place.

The EU has flexed its economic muscles to reduce flows of refugees and migrants to European shores, but to the extent this has happened, it is not through aid to address “root causes”, but rather through an externalisation of European border management, such as the deal with Turkey that is paid for by European taxpayers. Several questions can be raised about the sustainability of these arrangements, and recent events on the Belarusian-Polish border not only show that while some routes to Europe can be closed down other alternatives will materialise, as well as how politicised and securitised this field has become.

The MiDeShare project—*Migration and Development: Sharing Knowledge between Poland and Norway*—is aimed at analysing the relationship between the development and migration and especially the role of development cooperation in addressing root causes of migration. By focusing on selected case studies, our project wanted to understand how this approach has been implemented and functioned in the foreign policy of European

¹ See for instance: A. Knoll, A. Sherriff, “Making Waves: Implications of the irregular migration and refugee situation on Official Development Assistance spending and practices in Europe. A study of recent developments in the EU institutions, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden,” EBA, 2017.

² See: “U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America,” National Security Council, White House, Washington, July 2021.

donors when aid proved to be an effective tool of European migration policy, where it was less successful, and what the long-term consequences are.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has highly restricted field research, the project managed to prepare nine research papers and hold nine international seminars to discuss important aspects of the migration-development nexus. Special attention has been paid to the EU response to irregular migration since 2015 and the development and migration policies of Poland and Norway. The effectiveness of the “root causes of migration approach” was tested against several examples—Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, Afghan migrants fleeing their war-torn country, the forgotten crises in the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel, Egyptian migration policy, and intra-Africa migration. This final report brings together the major observations and shares recommendations for the future.

DEVELOPMENT AND MIGRATION: COMPLEX AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL

While few doubt that development assistance has an impact and can produce positive results, how much it affects economic growth in receiving countries is much less certain. One important reason for this is that development assistance is just one, and increasingly not the most important factor that contributes to economic growth. In most developing countries, trade and foreign direct investment are becoming much more important, and in the least developed countries (LDCs), remittances play a huge role.

A recent study from the World Bank, for example, shows that the value of the remittances that migrants send back home is three times larger than the total amount of development assistance in the world. Estimates from the same report indicate that, in 2020, the total amount of remittances increased by 7.3%, and the total sum will be larger than the combined sum of development assistance and foreign direct investment.³ As research by the World Bank also shows, these remittances have been a lifeline for families in developing countries where the indirect economic effects of COVID-19 have hit the hardest. One could argue that **migration is the most effective development assistance**, as remittances go directly to people in need with few intermediary costs. In this sense, using development aid to simultaneously stop migration and support economic growth creates both a paradox and a contradiction.

Nevertheless, there are also studies that show a positive impact of development assistance on economic growth if the aid is big enough and sustained over a long enough period.⁴ However, much more than economic growth is needed. Growth must be inclusive and pro-poor, and political stability, legitimate and transparent institutions, and trust in political and social stability will also matter greatly in people’s decisions about whether to invest in their home country or seek better fortunes elsewhere. This is where the counter-intuitive relationship between development and migration becomes visible, namely that **more development in the poorest countries (especially the LDCs) will lead to more, and not less, migration**,⁵ at least until the country reaches a certain level of economic prosperity.

³ See: “Migranter sender hjem 5300 milliarder kroner i år,” BistandsAktuelte, 29 November 2021.

⁴ M.A. Clemens, S. Radelet, R.R. Bhavnani & S. Bazzi, “Counting chickens when they hatch: timing and the effects of aid on growth,” *Economic Journal*, vol. 122, no. 561, 2012, pp. 590–617.

⁵ J. Berthélemy, C. Beuran, M. Maurel, “Aid and Migration: Substitutes or Complements?,” *World Development*, vol. 37, no. 10, 2009, pp. 1589–1599; M.A. Clemens, “Does Development Reduce Migration?,” Working Paper, Center for Global Development, Washington DC, 2014, p. 359; M.A. Clemens, “Development Aid to Deter Migration will do Nothing of the Kind,” *Refugees Deeply*, 31 October 2016; UNESCO, “Migration as Development Challenge. Analysis

Simply put, when people get slightly richer, they have more financial resources for more expensive migration routes. It is important to recognise that there are theoretical and methodological challenges related to measuring migration aspirations,⁶ and several of these will be elaborated on in this section.

In severely conflict-affected countries like Afghanistan, Myanmar, Syria, or the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin of Africa, it is obvious that aid alone will not address or solve the root causes of the protracted refugee crises that these conflicts created. Yes, where local communities in neighbouring third countries are not over-burdened by refugees, international assistance that targets both refugees and local host communities may help reduce secondary movement towards sanctuary elsewhere in the world. Our research shows that this may be the case for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, but whether this is due to international assistance can be questioned, as these refugees are far away from Europe and most lack both the resources and networks needed to embark on such a long journey to Europe.⁷

Similarly, in the case of transit migration through Niger, it may seem that the EU has succeeded in reducing the numbers transiting significantly. However, as we pointed out in our research, this is not based on the approach to use aid to tackle root causes, but rather through the externalisation of European border control, the sustainability of which can be questioned.⁸ Thus, tackling root causes of migration and protracted refugee crises in fragile and conflict-affected areas requires political solutions, and while international assistance may contribute, aid in itself is not the main tool in this regard.

A prime example of “forgotten” refugees at the very bottom of the hierarchy because of the refugee-management crisis, are those in the Lake Chad Basin.⁹ Similar to the conflicts in Iraq in Syria, the conflicts in northern Nigeria involving Boko Haram also create large refugee streams, both internally and to neighbouring countries, but in contrast to those from the Middle East, they do not have the opportunity to travel to and seek refuge in Europe. The general explanation for this is poverty and a lack of the networks needed to reach Europe, and they therefore end up as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or as refugees in fragile neighbouring countries.¹⁰ Consequently, they are trapped as IDPs in their own countries or as refugees just across the border in the Diffa region of Niger. The same phenomenon was observed among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, who despite the poverty and limited freedoms in the refugee camps do not flee to Europe for safety.¹¹ Only the most affluent can afford the risky sea routes to neighbouring ASEAN countries. As these examples show, **migration is an option inaccessible to most refugees**. Aid may help selected migrant groups accumulate some resources in some cases, but it could also fuel secondary migration movements in the short-to-medium term rather than reduce it.

of Root Causes and Policy Implications,” MOST, January 2017; H. Temprano Arroyo, “Using EU Aid to address the Root Causes of Migration and Refugee Flows,” Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute, Florence, 2019.

⁶ J. Carling, “Measuring Migration Aspirations and Related Concepts,” MIGNEX Background Paper, Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2019, www.mignex.org.

⁷ P. Kugiel, “Migration-Development Nexus: The Case of the Rohingya in Bangladesh,” *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 11 (186), December 2020.

⁸ M. Bøås, “The European Union and Migration Management in Fragile States,” *PISM Strategic File*, no. 14 (106), December 2021.

⁹ V. Haavik, A. Iocchi, “Unable to Leave: Refugee Management and the Forgotten Refugee Crises in the Lake Chad Basin,” *PISM Strategic File*, no. 12 (104), November 2021.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹¹ P. Kugiel, “Migration-Development Nexus...,” *op. cit.*

One of the most important studies in the field confirms this, indicating that both bilateral aid and recipients' total aid have significantly positive impacts on migrant stocks.¹² Similarly, recent major studies “find no evidence that aid reduces worldwide refugee outflows or flows to donor countries in the short term”.¹³ In the literature, this has become most commonly known as “mobility transition” and presented what Zielinski called the “inverted-U” curve¹⁴, which shows that with an increase of GDP per capita, emigration from poor countries must first rise before it can eventually fall. The point where migration starts to fall is commonly referred to as the “tipping point”. Since Zielinski, many scholars have found a similar pattern but named it differently, such as the “migration curve”,¹⁵ “migration transition”,¹⁶ “emigration life cycle”,¹⁷ and “migration hump”.¹⁸

What constitutes this tipping point, that is, the point at which migration starts to fall, and if there is one at all, has long been up for debate among scholars. Some argue that the threshold is at PPP¹⁹ \$6,000–\$8,000 per capita income, meaning that after reaching this point, higher incomes are associated with reduced emigration.²⁰ Others put the exact amount at about PPP \$7,300 per capita in year 2000 prices,²¹ or locate it closer to PPP \$8,000–\$10,000.²² If these calculations are correct, it means that if today's poorest countries continue to grow at their historical growth rate, they would reach PPP \$8,000 only by the year 2198.²³ This indicates such a slow growth rate that aid alone will not do much for these people in terms of addressing the root causes of migration in their home countries, and following from that, people may continue to emigrate at the same pace as long as they have the aspiration and ability to do so.

Yet, one must point also to one recent study using panel data that questions the casual positive relationship between development and migration and suggests that **“economic development, on average, reduces emigration towards OECD destinations”**.²⁴ Yet, it shows also that migration is even more complicated and dependent on many more factors than economic growth. One important factor connected to GDP per capita as a suitable indicator is how economic growth is distributed across the society. If the growth is centred on elites rather than the general population, it is not inclusive and trust-building, and thus might even contribute to an increase in migrant aspirations. GDP per capita is a general indicator that does not say much about individual migration aspirations, and it is uncertain whether objective levels of development can comprehend the migration decisions of individuals, or if there is a need to account more for the relative level of

¹² J.C. Berthélemy, C. Beuran, M. Maurel, “Aid and Migration...,” *op. cit.*

¹³ A. Dreher, A. Fuchs, A. and S. Langlotz, “The Effects of Foreign Aid on Refugee Flows,” *European Economic Review*, 112, 2018, pp. 127–147.

¹⁴ W. Zelinsky, “The Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition,” *Geographical Review*, vol. 61, no. 2, 1971, pp. 219–249.

¹⁵ S. Akerman, “Theories and Methods of Migration Research,” in H. Runblom, H. Norman (eds.), *From Sweden to America: a History of the Migration*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976, pp. 19–75.

¹⁶ J.D. Gould, “European Inter-Continental Emigration 1815–1914: Patterns and Causes,” *Journal of European Economic History*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1979, pp. 593–679.

¹⁷ T.J. Hatton, J. G. Williamson, “What Drove the Mass Migrations from Europe in the Late Nineteenth Century?,” *Population and Development Review*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1994, pp. 533–559.

¹⁸ P.L. Martin, J. E. Taylor, “The Anatomy of a Migration Hump,” in: J. Edward Taylor (ed.), *Development Strategy, Employment, and Migration: Insights from Models*, Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1996, pp. 43–62.

¹⁹ Purchasing power parity (PPP).

²⁰ M.A. Clemens, “Does Development...,” *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²¹ J.C. Berthélemy, M. Beuran, M. Maurel, “Aid and Migration...,” *op. cit.*

²² M.A. Clemens, H.M. Postel, “Deterring Emigration with Foreign Aid; an Overview of Evidence from Low-Income Countries,” *CGD Policy Paper 119*, February 2018.

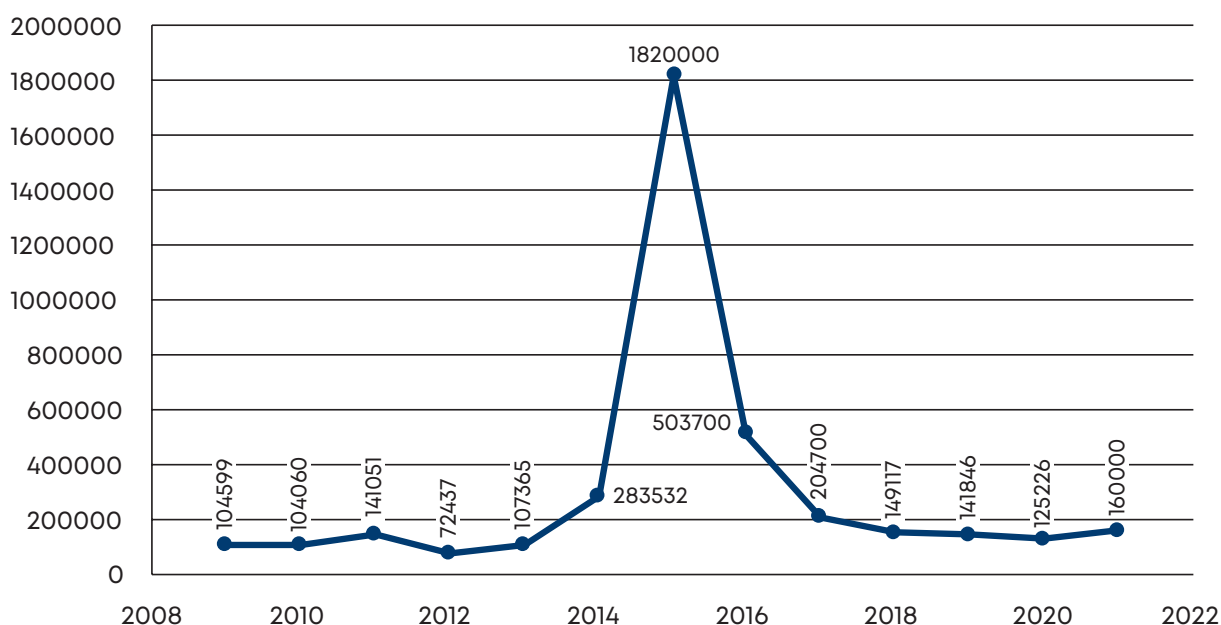
²³ M.A. Clemens, “Does Development...,” *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁴ D. Benček, C. Schneiderheinze, “Higher economic growth in poor countries, lower migration flows to the OECD—Revisiting the migration hump with panel data,” *Kiel Working Paper No. 2145*, Kiel Institute for the World Economy, June 2020, p. 15.

development vis-à-vis neighbouring countries or even richer parts of the world, and an individual's sense of deprivation and marginalisation.²⁵ People's decision about whether to stay where they are or to seek refuge, protection, or simply better lives elsewhere, therefore depends on a number of factors. The level of poverty and economic opportunities to social mobility is one, but the decision to move elsewhere or stay put in the country of origin is also influenced by the political system people live under and to what degree they have trust in the institutions they are confronted with on a daily basis. Economic growth that is seen as non-inclusive or short-term, combined with low levels of trust in public institutions, often does not lead to less inclination to leave the country in question, even if people get access to more resources.²⁶ **Migration decisions are highly contextual and can differ across regions, countries, and individuals.** Thus, more studies focused on local conditions and drivers of migration are required.

There are other dimensions than economic growth and political issues that also may influence emigration decisions. These can include macro-level factors such as existing migrant networks, demographic trends, geographical and historical links, the level of crime and security in the country of origin, and climate change, as well as micro-level factors such as age, sex, individual skills, and education, perceptions of available opportunities abroad, and estimates of the risk of travelling.²⁷

FIGURE 1. IRREGULAR BORDER CROSSINGS AT EU EXTERNAL BORDERS, 2009–2021



Source: FRONTEX (data for 2021 through October, preliminary)

²⁵ See: M. Czaika, H. de Haas, "The Role of Internal and International Relative Deprivation in Global Migration," *Oxford Development Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2012, pp. 423–442; P. Bhandari, "Relative Deprivation and Migration in an Agricultural Setting of Nepal," *Population and Environment*, vol. 25, no. 5, 2004, pp. 475–499.

²⁶ See: P. Kugiel, H. U. Erstad, M. Bøås, J. Szymańska, "Can Aid Solve the Root Causes of Migration? A Framework for Future Research on the Development-Migration Nexus," *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 1 (176), March 2020, p. 5.

²⁷ M. Latek, "Interlinks between Migration and Development," Briefing, European Parliamentary Research service, 2019, pp. 4–5.

While Europe has witnessed a drastic reduction in the number of arrivals since 2015,²⁸ the global migration pressure is not abating. In 2019, the number of international migrants was estimated to be almost 272 million (3.5% of the world's population), with nearly two-thirds being labour migrants.²⁹ This included almost 26 million refugees in 2018, the highest number since the Second World War. Migration flows are expected to increase in the coming decades, driven by a wide range of factors, including economic inequality, demographic imbalance, and climate change.³⁰

And while the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed the growth of migration, it will most likely not reverse it in the long run. Apart from strong push factors, there are also increasing pull factors in developed countries in terms of labour market needs and ageing populations. So, as the pandemic may make migration more difficult and more expensive, it will adjust to a new reality. New travel restrictions can lead to new travel routes, and if legal migration becomes more problematic, more people will turn to irregular travel.

As an extension of this, **understanding the relationship between migration aspirations and ability is crucial to understanding migration decisions.** Research on “migration aspiration” underlines the importance of the psychological or social drivers of migration.³¹ Studies show that it is rarely the poorest and least-educated people who migrate to Europe irregularly.³² A study of intentions to migrate found that migration is strongly linked to aspirations (for a better life, economic opportunities, and development of skills) rather than desperation or the experience of poverty. Further, it found that “being young, male, foreign-born, highly educated, unemployed, or having networks abroad are all strongly associated with a higher likelihood of preparing for international migration”.³³

AID AND MIGRATION MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

As shown above, economic growth alone is not a satisfactory solution to irregular migration, as poverty and lack of progress are not the only reasons why people choose to migrate. Yet, it is not to say that economic tools have no role to play in addressing the root causes of migration. The assumptions of this project were that some forms of aid can be more helpful than others in easing migration pressure, and development assistance might be useful for donors in realising their migration interests. The research has proved some viability, though limited, of that hypothesis.

An important question to consider is, what are the effects of aid when used in the context of migration, both intended and unintended? What are the differences between aid that aims to resolve the economic causes of migration, and humanitarian aid that deals with preventing the immediate threats and saving lives? These questions will be further explored through the lens of the EU, and the migration management practices of Norway and Poland.

Following the refugee management crisis that unfolded in 2014–2015, the EU and European governments' top priority has been migration management in the

²⁸ See: Frontex, “Number of Irregular Crossings at Europe's Borders at Lowest Levels in 5 years,” Frontex, 4 January 2019, <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/number-of-irregular-crossings-at-europe-s-borders-at-lowest-level-in-5-years-ZfkoRu>.

²⁹ “World Migration Report 2020,” International Organisation for Migration, Geneva, 2019, p. 2.

³⁰ World Bank, “Leveraging Economic Migration for Development. A briefing for the World Bank Board,” World Bank Group, Washington DC, September 2019, p. XVI.

³¹ See: J. Carling, F. Collins, “Aspiration, Desire and Drivers of Migration,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 44, no. 6, 2018, pp. 909–926.

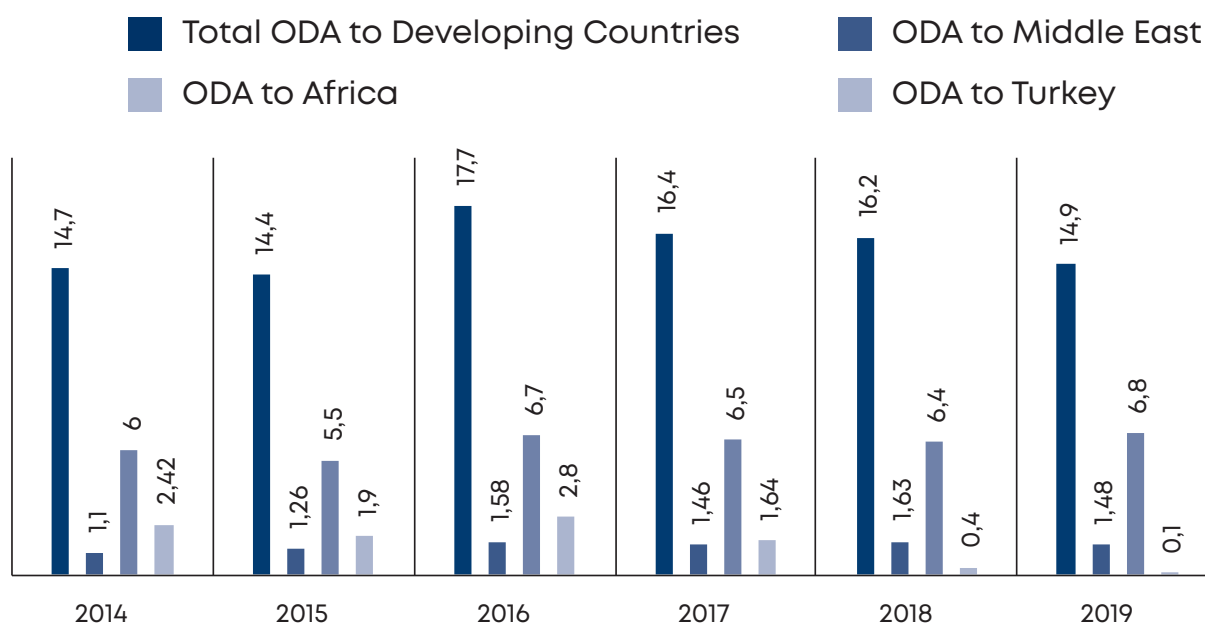
³² UNDP, “Scaling Fences: Voices of Irregular African Migrants to Europe,” *UNDP Report*, 21 October 2019.

³³ S. Migali, M. Scipioni, “A Global Analysis of Intentions to Migrate,” European Commission, JRC111207, 2018.

“neighbourhoods”, that is, to better manage irregular migration flows and avoid the same events from occurring again. Official Development Assistance (ODA) was considered a key instrument in addressing the “root causes” of irregular migration. These “root causes” were defined by the European Commission as global issues such as poverty, insecurity, inequality, and unemployment.³⁴ Thus, the EU promised to increase its humanitarian assistance to emergency crises in the Middle East and pledged more development assistance to support growth in the neighbourhood through different aid programmes aimed at origin and transit countries.³⁵ With the progress of internal actions (i.e., relocation scheme, Common European Asylum System reform) stalling, economic and financial instruments became an integral part of the EU’s external migration policies.³⁶

Yet, closer scrutiny of disbursements of development assistance since 2015 revealed that the new migration focus has not led to strong prioritisation of aid in EU foreign policy.³⁷ Some early reports showed that the initial increase in aid funding in 2015–16 was partly a result of trade-offs between the costs of hosting refugees in European countries and traditional external development cooperation programmes, and that migration increasingly played a stronger role in the geographical ODA allocations of European donors.³⁸ While new trust funds were created to respond to the refugee crisis in Europe’s vicinity in the Middle East and Africa, the bulk of that money was redirected from existing programmes.

FIGURE 2. EU INSTITUTIONS’ ODA (NET DISBURSEMENTS) 2014–2019
(\$ BILLIONS, CONSTANT PRICES 2019)



Source: Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions [DAC2a], OECD Stat.

³⁴ European Commission, A European Agenda on Migration, COM (2015) 240, final, Brussels 13 May 2015, p. 8.

³⁵ See: J. Szymańska, P. Kugiel, H.U. Erstad, M. Bøås, “The External Dimension of EU Migration Management: The Role of Aid,” *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 6 (181), July 2020, pp. 3–4.

³⁶ In 2018 alone, the EU spent €71.9 billion in Official Development Assistance (ODA), including €13.6 billion in ODA provided by EU institutions.

³⁷ J. Szymańska, P. Kugiel, H.U. Erstad, M. Bøås, “The External Dimension...,” *op. cit.*

³⁸ A. Knoll, A. Sherriff, “Making Waves...,” *op. cit.*

It was also difficult for EU officials to understand what the real “root causes” are and how traditional development aid was different from aid to resolve the “root causes of migration” and how to measure the aid’s effectiveness.³⁹ As a result, only a minority of EU aid projects had a clear migration tag, such as information campaigns on the risks of migration or security sector reforms in several countries. A new, development assistance instrument, the Neighbourhood, Development And International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)–“Global Europe”, worth almost €80 billion in the Multiannual Financial Perspective 2021–2027, holds migration as one of its horizontal targets with at least 10% of the resources “to tackle the management and governance of migration and forced displacement, including actions addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement”.⁴⁰ Yet, most EU aid has continued in areas not directly linked to migration. As observed already in 2016, “increased framing of development cooperation and ODA spending under the umbrella of ‘addressing root causes’ has not necessarily meant a visible shift in the thematic focus of activities”.⁴¹

The approach has, in fact, been criticised by experts, NGOs, and EU partner countries, who argue that there are several possible risks in using aid to achieve migration goals, such as concerns about the quality of the assistance as it leads to “aid inflation”, increased conditionality, and the fact that it may divert resources from traditional priorities on development and poverty eradication.⁴² There are also voices arguing that the EU’s use of aid for migration interests undermines the very idea of traditional development assistance and risks further worsening the image of the EU as a normative power.⁴³

The stronger links between the development and migration policies illustrated above have not led to major changes in the development cooperation of our two analysed countries, Poland and Norway.⁴⁴ While Poland, a relatively new and small source of development assistance, fully embraced the policy of addressing the root causes of migration, Norway, a more experienced and much larger donor, was more distanced to the new trend in development policy advocated by the EU. Yet, in the case of Poland, no major changes in its development cooperation have taken place, either in terms of the scale of financing or in the priorities or directions of aid flows. Polish aid levels are still among the lowest in the EU, while Norway has continued to be one of the biggest donors globally, regardless of its positions on “root causes”. This suggests that for actors like the EU or Poland, the root causes of migration are more of a diplomatic tool aimed at easing domestic concerns (e.g., to reassure the public that the problem is being managed and outside the country) and to send a positive signal to partner countries (i.e., promises of more aid).

Thus, the provision of development aid in the migration context was most importantly a political or diplomatic tool rather than an economic or technical solution to problems in the developing world. For a large donor like the EU, aid was a useful financial incentive to encourage partner countries to better cooperate on migration management. Poland’s

³⁹ Interview with a European Development cooperation expert, 17 December 2021.

⁴⁰ European Commission, “Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)–“Global Europe”, Fact Sheet, 9 June 2021.

⁴¹ A. Knoll, A. Sherriff, “Making Waves...”, *op. cit.*

⁴² “AIDWATCH 2018. Aid and Migration The externalisation of Europe’s responsibilities.” Concord, Brussels, 2018.

⁴³ Authors’ interview with a European expert on EU foreign policy in Brussels, conducted online, 1 December 2021.

⁴⁴ P. Kugiel, V. Haavik, M. Bøås, “Much Ado About Very Little? Migration-Linked Development Assistance—the Cases of Poland and Norway,” *PISM Strategic File*, no. 2 (94), April 2021.

position on the root causes approach was much more influenced by internal political debates and relations with partners in Europe than a response to the needs of refugees and migrants in the developing world. Norway has continued to focus its aid on the countries and crises with the greatest needs. And in both cases, Poland's and Norway's migration policies have been driven more by their internal politics than by external factors. Based on the examples of the three analysed actors (the EU, Poland, and Norway) one can argue that Official Development Assistance (ODA) has played a limited role in addressing the root causes of migration since 2015. If that is the case, how can one then explain decreasing irregular migration to Europe?

Most likely, it was a combination of political and economic instruments—mainly the externalisation of EU border management—that eventually proved effective in curbing irregular migration to Europe following the 2015 refugee management crisis.⁴⁵ Externalisation in practice means the EU trying to influence the migration policies of important sending and transit countries outside of its borders in order to reduce the number of arrivals to Europe.⁴⁶ What proved most decisive in regaining control over irregular migration flows was the agreements signed between the EU and major transit countries, including Turkey, Libya, and Niger.⁴⁷ Following these agreements, the number of arrivals to Europe fell to the lowest level in more than five years,⁴⁸ and the EU's response to the 2015 crisis has thus been considered largely successful. However, more recent developments show that the current approach might not be sustainable in the long term.⁴⁹

The EU-Turkey deal is probably the most known across Europe. Signed in March 2016, the EU launched the Facility for Refugees in Turkey, offering €6 billion to ease Turkey's burden of hosting people displaced from Syria and other poor and/or conflict-affected states in the region. The deal essentially halted the flow of migrants on the Eastern Mediterranean route to the EU,⁵⁰ but the streams instead moved to the Central Mediterranean route (from Libya, Tunisia, or Algeria to Italy) which became the most heavily travelled route by irregular migrants.⁵¹

The same year as the EU-Turkey deal was implemented, the EU's Partnership Framework was launched with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration, and included several African countries, the top five being Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and Ethiopia. The partnership's aim was focused on improving cooperation on migration management and on return and readmission.⁵² For example, in Niger, which has gained prominence as one of Africa's main hubs for northbound irregular migration, the EU has used aid as leverage to facilitate processes to improve border management, state capacity, and economic development.⁵³ Further, Libya in 2017⁵⁴ was given millions of euros from the EU Trust Fund for

⁴⁵ J. Szymańska, P. Kugiel, H.U. Erstad, M. Bøås, "The External Dimension...", *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁴⁷ E. Palm, "Externalized Migration Governance and the Limits of Sovereignty: The Case of Partnership Agreements between EU and Libya," *Theoria* 86, 2020, pp. 9–27.

⁴⁸ Frontex, <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/number-of-irregular-crossings-at-europe-s-borders-at-lowest-level-in-5-years-ZfkoRu>, 2019.

⁴⁹ J. Szymańska, P. Kugiel, H.U. Erstad, M. Bøås, "The External Dimension...", *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁵¹ There were 181,376 detections in 2016 and 118,962 in 2017.

⁵² European Commission, "Partnership Framework on Migration: Commission reports on results and lessons learnt one year on," Fact Sheet, 13 June 2017.

⁵³ See: M. Bøås, P. Rieker, "Executive Summary of the Final Report and Selected Policy Recommendations," EUNPACK, 15 March 2019; R. Carayol, "What Happened when the EU Moved its Fight to Stop Migration to Niger," *The Nation*, 05 July 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/niger-agadez-migration/>; A. Lebovich, "Halting Ambition: EU Migration and Security Policy in the Sahel," European Council on Foreign Relations, 25 September 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/halting_ambition_eu_migration_and_security_policy_in_the_sahel.

⁵⁴ D. Boffey, "Migrants Detained in Libya for Profit, Leaked EU Report Reveals," *The Guardian*, 20 November 2019.

Africa (EUTF for Africa) to tighten border controls and disrupt the main migration routes from Sub-Saharan Africa. The same mechanism (offering aid in return for closer cooperation on migration control and readmission) was applied in relations with Afghanistan in 2016 and 2021.⁵⁵ These examples show how aid become an element of EU externalisation of migration policy, and in this sense contributed to less migration.

The results of this migration-management approach on the African continent, however, is contested. The EU's attempt to create a new security architecture for migration management in the Sahel, and more specifically Niger, a poor and weak state with relatively fragile stability, has been criticised.⁵⁶ Niger is the lowest-ranking country in the Human Development Index and therefore in dire need of both humanitarian and development assistance, and the EU is its most important donor. In 2016, it is estimated that 50% of the migrants that reached Lampedusa, Italy, travelled through Agadès, a desert city in Niger.⁵⁷ In the years since then, Agadès' role as a "transit-migrant hub" has been significantly reduced, and the EU's approach has been said to be the main explanation for this.⁵⁸ Yet, the EU's approach as an agent of externalised European border control in the country has been suspected of adding to the destabilisation of an already fragile state. The main argument is that the EU, through its security-oriented changes, swiftly implemented new policies and redefined existing ones to focus on security sector reform and border management.⁵⁹ This approach has collided with the local understanding, with some locals in Agadès expressing that they benefited from migrant arrivals. This illustrates the dissonance between the EU and local communities, as external security concerns are not necessarily shared by those that live in these areas, some of whom believe that European attempts at externalising migration control has deprived them of an important aspect of their livelihood.⁶⁰ Further, there is a question about the implications this may have on the stability of the politically fragile Niger, where EU's policies must be context- and conflict-sensitive. The EU's soft power and "do no harm" approach is incongruent with its interests of reducing northbound migration as much as possible. This approach in Niger may prevent total state collapse, but it does not represent any sustainable path to recovery, stability, reconciliation, or development.⁶¹

A further example of the international community's failed attempt at managing the global refugee crisis is seen in the Lake Chad Basin and in Bangladesh, two different regions that have in common accommodating the world's "invisible" refugees. In contrast to the refugees living in or around Turkey and Greece as well as those arriving in Lampedusa, the refugees around the Lake Chad Basin and the Rohingyas in Bangladesh are trapped without the opportunity to flee, most often explained as lacking the resources and networks to do so, rendering them invisible to Europe. This is where a global migration hierarchy becomes visible: Syrian refugees close to Europe were made the priority and could count on special assistance, while others, in more distant and remote regions, have limited attention and support. They are at the bottom of the global refugee hierarchy. The same trend was found in the less known case of migrants from the Middle East to Africa (Syrians to Sudan and

⁵⁵ P. Kugiel, J. Szymańska, "Afghan Refugees in the European Union: Experiences and Perspectives," *PISM Strategic File*, no. 11 (103), November 2021.

⁵⁶ M. Bøås, "The European Union...," *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁵⁷ F. Molenaar, T. van Damme, "Irregular Migration and Human Smuggling Networks in Niger," *Clingendael Report*, February 2017.

⁵⁸ Recent unconfirmed figures from Agadès, however, suggests that the numbers of migrants are rising again, and some sources report numbers as high as 800 migrants passing through the city every week (information obtained from sources in Niamey, October 2021).

⁵⁹ See: M. Bøås, "The European Union...," *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

Yemenis to the Horn of Africa), where they receive less attention and less support from Europe.⁶²

The lack of attention is not only plain in international media but also seen by a lack of resources. Humanitarian funds for crises in these areas are chronically underfinanced by developed countries, with the consequence that the capacity of countries neighbouring conflict-affected areas to house refugees are at a breaking point, with Lebanon being a prime example. This means that poor and more fragile states bear the brunt of the burden to house the majority of the world's refugees. One can observe that **the farther a refugee crisis is from Europe, the less chance it will receive support**. A recent OECD study of international aid to refugees found out that European donors are the main sources of financing in such situations, and only three main donors—the U.S., Germany, and EU institutions collectively—provided almost two-thirds (63%) of all bilateral ODA to refugee situations. Not surprisingly, the Middle East received by far the largest share of region- and country-allocable bilateral ODA (45.1%), while donors did not prioritise Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, or South America.⁶³

In sum, the European refugee-management crisis has contributed to two further crises: one, a European crisis about Europe and the EU's ability to respond, and second, a "real" refugee crisis mainly playing out outside Europe. The former has been the most visible one, while the "real" one is invisible. In sum, there is a geographical hierarchy at play where those who have closer proximity and the resources to flee do so, while the ones at the bottom of the ladder remain the most vulnerable, in areas where access to humanitarian protection remains highly volatile.

This policy brings a certain risk in the longer term. As fragile, developing countries in crisis-hit regions host most of the refugees worldwide, this has led to a change in the discourse of host countries, from being welcoming and including refugees in local societies, to putting more restrictions on, and in some cases even returning, refugees. These imbalances may lead to tensions between host communities and refugees, destabilisation and more restrictive state policies, risking new humanitarian crises. The case of Lebanese, Syrian, and Yemeni refugees to Africa⁶⁴ is an example of developing countries that for decades have been open and refugee-friendly in times when the EU and European countries were not. Easy access to the labour market (such as in Jordan) and refugee status early upon arrival (such as in Ethiopia) have created opportunities for individuals to pursue their dream of a brighter and more peaceful future. Others have met more hostile environments after a while, when locals felt that the newcomers' economic prospects had an impact on their own (which has been the case in both Bangladesh⁶⁵ and Sudan).⁶⁶

There are more limitations to the effectiveness of aid in migration policy. While the EU could effectively push aid-dependent countries to respect its migration interests (as the cases of Afghanistan and Niger clearly demonstrate), this tactic does not work that well in relations with countries less dependent on ODA. The EU's financial assistance offer failed to influence Egypt's migration policy, not only because the aid was relatively small but also it went against the country's national self-esteem.⁶⁷ The EU proved unsuccessful in influencing pro-refugee legal changes in Bangladesh, as the government rejected foreign pressure, seen as against the national interest. Also, most of the signed agreements on

⁶² J. Czerep, "Newest Wave of Middle Eastern Emigration to Africa," *PISM Strategic File*, no. 7 (99), July 2021.

⁶³ J. Hesemann, H. Desai, Y. Rockenfeller, "Financing for refugee situations 2018–19," OECD Publishing, Paris, 2021.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ P. Kugiel, "Migration-Development Nexus...," *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ J. Czerep, "Newest Wave...," *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁶⁷ M. Pawłowski, "The Impact of EU Development Assistance on Egypt's Migration Policy," *PISM Strategic File*, no. 10 (102), December 2021.

return and readmission have not clearly contributed to a better return rate of people not granted international protection in Europe.

Finally, while aid was applied very often with the intention of curbing irregular migration, less attention has been paid to its role in supporting legal migration. Only a few projects have been exclusively focused on legal and safe mobility.⁶⁸ As our case on intra-African migration reminded us, many refugees from the Middle East often try to find better lives in other developing countries in Africa or Asia.⁶⁹ Though it may be premature to argue that more South-South migration can be a remedy for migration to Europe, certainly more aid for hosting nations can help them accommodate these refugees and implement policies (such as out-of-camp activities and access to the local labour market) leading to a more durable solution. The emerging trend of “refugee compacts” like the one being implemented in Jordan since 2016, gives some hope for alleviating protracted crises by closing the gaps between humanitarian and development assistance and aligning foreign support with national plans and the development of host nations. Yet, as the case of the Rohingya in Bangladesh has shown, opposition from a government that is rightfully afraid that their country will become a dumping ground for refugees and that powerful actors in the international community would not like to see them travel any farther will make most poor countries reluctant to enter into refugee compacts on a larger scale, as they do not represent any real burden-sharing of the global refugee crisis.

And the statistics show that proper distribution of funds to various refugee crises needs more work from the international community. The recent OECD refugee financing survey found that in 2018–19, 32 bilateral donors gave a total of \$44.3 billion in ODA to refugees and host communities, which represented 12.3% of all ODA worldwide in that period.⁷⁰ Yet, this amount was almost equally divided between support to all developing countries, which hosted 86.6% of the world’s refugee population (\$22.7 billion, or 6.7% of bilateral ODA), and highly developed OECD members (as in-donor refugee costs), which host only 11.3% of the world’s refugee population (\$20.1 billion, or 5.6%, in 2018–19).⁷¹ Yet, the vast majority (71%) of the funds for protracted refugee situations in developing countries was largely addressed through short-term humanitarian financing, and development aid played a lesser role in most cases.⁷²

Another interesting example is Poland, which emerged as a top destination for labour migrants (mostly from Ukraine) in the EU in recent years. This case suggests that allowing more legal pathways for migration effectively reduces the pressure of irregular migration from a given country⁷³. One needs to consider how aid can be used to facilitate more regular and safe migration to better match the supply of workers in developing countries with the needs of labour markets in developed countries. Rather than stopping migration, development aid may prove more useful in making better use of migration.

It is important to rethink the current approach, as it seems unsustainable for at least two reasons. As the most recent data on rising irregular migration to the EU and new crises at the EU’s eastern borders show, the immigration pressure is not going to go away.

⁶⁸ See, for instance, this €25 million project: “Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa,” EU Emergency Trust Fund For Africa, adoption date 13 December 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/north-africa/regional/towards-holistic-approach-labour-migration-governance-and-labour_en

⁶⁹ J. Czerep, “Newest Wave...,” *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ J. Hesemann, H. Desai, and Y. Rockenfeller, “Financing...,” p. 9.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁷³ J. Szymańska, V. Haavik, M. Bøås, “Norway and Poland’s experiences with migration: A Comparative Perspective”, *PISM Strategic File*, no. 16 (108), December 2021.

First, if the EU manages to close one migration route, an alternative route emerges. The deal with Turkey in 2016, which closed the Eastern Mediterranean route, pushed migrants to the Central Mediterranean route, and when that route was restricted after deals with Libya, migrants moved to the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes. When pandemic restrictions made the sea routes more dangerous and limited, migrants moved to a new channel of migration through Belarus, offered to them and enhanced by that state in its political conflict with the EU.

Second, the situation on the Poland-Belarus border demonstrates that the previous deals signed with third countries on migration have only incentivised others to use migration as leverage in relations with the EU, or to outright try to blackmail Europe with migration threats. Therefore, the attempt by Belarusian leader Lukashenko to use migrants as a cudgel in his policy towards the EU might seem to be a dangerous innovation, but other countries had earlier used migrants to extract more aid or concessions from the EU. And it seems that whether a country is authoritarian or not does not correlate so significantly to its willingness to cooperate with the EU on migration issues, but other factors, such as the internal conditions in partner countries and its regional ambitions, matter more.⁷⁴ As this exposes the EU to further pressure from third countries, it requires introspection as to whether previous European policies prepared the ground for the recent escalation and whether this approach is sustainable in the longer term.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The **policy focused on addressing root causes of migration through development assistance is based on false assumptions** and is unlikely to bring desired outcomes. The available literature shows that, as poor countries develop, more people will be more willing to emigrate until reaching a relatively high level of development, as aspirations and availabilities to travel grow faster than the objective economic situation in a country. The unending migration pressure will be sustained as long as there are huge economic inequalities between rich and poor countries and development assistance alone cannot stop voluntary economic migration. With regard to forced migration, root causes are commonly related to political conflict and violence, and development aid can rarely bring about solutions to end violent conflict and political instability.

Though the flow of irregular migration to Europe has decreased in recent years, this was not because of the elimination of the root causes of migration in migrant-sending or transit countries. Despite declaratory commitments from the EU and some European countries to address the root causes of migration, this has not led to huge increases in aid funding or major changes in the geographical or sectoral priorities of the donors analysed in this project (EU, Poland, and Norway). Though some aid was redirected to migration-focused projects, the majority of development cooperation continued in traditional sectors, and migrant-sending countries did not see a massive inflow of development funds. Rather, the decrease in irregular migration came about due to the blocking of migration routes, as a result of European actors' externalisation and securitisation of migration policies. Political

⁷⁴ A. Koch, A. Weber, I. Werenfels (eds.), "Profiteers of Migration? Authoritarian States in Africa and European Migration Management," *SWP Research Paper*, 2018/RP 04, 24 July 2018.

agreements with several third countries, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, have played a decisive role.

Foreign aid was instrumental in achieving EU migration goals, yet, the initial **economisation of the European response to migration has been increasingly replaced by a securitisation approach**. The rise in irregular border crossings in 2021, most recently on the Polish-Belarusian border, shows that strong migration pressure still exists in Europe's neighbourhood, and migrants and refugees will try to find new routes also in the future. What this shows is that the EU still fears large waves of uncontrolled migration towards Europe, and this may encourage political leaders in countries close to the European border to seek the role of a "swinging-door producer" of refugees and migrants in an attempt to receive economic or political concessions from the EU or individual European countries.

The MiDeShare project has examined only a limited part of the complex relationship between development aid and migration, and more research is needed to better understand the nexus. As shown above, **more research on migration aspirations is required to better understand what motivates people to stay where they are or seek greener pastures elsewhere**. Obviously, people will seek shelter from war and violent conflict, but as it rarely is the most vulnerable that attempt to migrate, it is important to understand both push and pull factors better than we currently do. In order to achieve this, we need both several in-depth cases studies and comparative studies. The reason is that people's aspirations to migrate depend on a number of contextual factors, but generally it seems like a lack of trust in future possibilities for social mobility matters a lot for young people who seek to migrate to improve their livelihood options. What we still are blind about what it takes to make people start trusting that things may improve in the place where they live so that it becomes more rational to invest in a future in their country of origin rather than attempt a great escape to Europe or elsewhere, which will come with economic costs and most often huge risks to the people undertaking the journey.

While we still are confronted with a considerable knowledge gap concerning the complex relationship between aid, economic growth, trust in the future and migration, we can still offer some general conclusions and observations that can form the basis of some policy advice. In our research, we have found some evidence of cases where this approach was effective in limiting irregular migration, cases where it has not worked out well, and others where this policy brings certain risks.

1. Where aid proved to be an effective instrument in terms of migration policy:

- From a short-term donor perspective, if the objective is simply to reduce migrant flows, development aid has proved in some cases to be an effective **diplomatic tool** in negotiations with developing countries to extract closer cooperation on migration control. By offering financial incentives, aid has helped to persuade partners to improve border controls, enter practical arrangements on readmission and returns, or clamp down on those that facilitated migrants' movement for a profit.
- **Humanitarian assistance** to refugees and refugee-hosting countries is critical in mitigating the suffering of refugees, saving lives, and decreasing some of the burden that hosting refugees has on local host populations. By addressing the basic needs of displaced populations and providing services that also target host populations, it eases the pressure for secondary movements.
- **Development aid** to communities hosting refugees in developing countries is important to stabilise the situation and avoid negative impacts, including spillover effects of humanitarian crises. Yet, closing the gap between humanitarian and

development aid in response to protracted refugee crises still requires more effort, increased support from donors, and cooperation from partner countries.

2. Where aid has not been effective in terms of migration policy:

- Aid is too small to address the economic drivers of migration and improve the macroeconomic situation in the short term. A relatively small increase in the level of funding to developing countries will not address the economic motivation for migration.
- Aid is not an appropriate tool to solve the sources of forced migration, as most contemporary humanitarian crises also require political and security solutions.
- Aid is not an effective diplomatic tool in relations with less aid-dependent countries, especially to reduce migration from countries where foreign assistance in total makes up less than remittances from abroad.
- A close link between aid and migration turned out to be less helpful in mobilising extra funding and public support for official development assistance.

3. Close links between development assistance and migration interests also carry certain risks:

- When aid is instrumental in closing one migration route, this pushes migrants to find other routes, possibly more costly and dangerous. While this may lower the migration pressure for some time, it is not a sustainable solution to migration.
- As aid is used as leverage to improve cooperation with other countries in migration management, it likewise encourages other countries to use migration as a bargaining chip in relations with donors. In this sense, it exposes donors to blackmail by third countries, which expect more financial support or political concessions in return for cooperation on migration control.
- Use of aid to secure some EU migration interests can lead to negative and unintended consequences in poor and fragile states, as it hampers natural intra-regional migration and deprives many people of their livelihoods.
- Close links between aid and migration interests distort the very idea of development cooperation and may reduce the level of funding available for traditional objectives of development aid. It raises questions about the quality of aid and may make donor countries' populations less supportive of foreign aid in the long run. This can also harm the image of donors and make partner countries more suspicious of the intentions of aid.
- When aid is part of an attempt at externalised migration management by the EU, it provides artificial solutions and eases the pressure on European actors to reform common migration and asylum policy. It strengthens dependence on external actors rather than on finding solutions within the Union and exposes its political vulnerabilities to future large-scale migration and refugee flows.

Recommendations to European donors:

1. Delink development cooperation from migration interests at a rhetorical level, as the risk with this approach outweighs the benefits. ODA must focus on its traditional goals of fighting poverty and supporting economic development, and not on stopping migration

2. Continue and increase when necessary the amount of humanitarian assistance in existing crises with an additional focus on “invisible refugees” to mitigate migration risks at early stages.

3. Work with partner countries to develop holistic responses to protracted refugee crises, linking humanitarian and development assistance with national planning and development strategies. Offer additional financial incentives to host governments to advocate for domestic changes (access to labour market, out-of-camp activities) that can create a more durable solution.

4. Continue development assistance to fragile and aid-dependent countries as this helps to buy more time and avoid the total collapse of states and prevent new refugee crises.

5. Focus more development aid to strengthen orderly, safe, and regular migration, including through training and skills development designed to match the needs of local, regional, or international markets.

6. Use aid to address the unintended consequences of increased migration control by providing alternative livelihoods and job opportunities in affected communities.

7. Risks and vulnerabilities associated with the policy of externalisation of migration management should compel the European Commission and EU Member States to finalise reforms of the common migration and asylum policy. Neither economisation nor securitisation of the European response to migration serves the EU international strategic position well.

8. Poland, which expands its aid to non-traditional areas, including fragile states in Africa or the Middle East, may like to learn from the experiences of more traditional donors like Norway. This can include lessons in planning, multiyear programming, use of new aid modalities, but also joint development projects between the Polish and Norwegian partners.

9. Norway’s response to refugee crises in the past suggests that strong institutions, tested mechanisms, and sound migration policies help in responding to sudden migration pressure on external borders. Poland may also learn from Norway’s experiences in organising resettlement programmes.

10. Norway, Poland, and other donors must make certain that their assistance to refugees is sensitive to the local context and do their best to relieve host communities of the burden of hosting refugees. While most donors do this now, there is still much room for improvement, particularly in the many cases of protracted refugee situations where often there are the “forgotten” refugees of the contemporary world. This means that if or when a donor starts giving assistance in such places they should have a long-term perspective on 1) support to refugees, 2) support to local host communities, and 3) support to the host government. Such assistance should not come with conditionalities that the recipient country could end up as a reservoir for refugees and migrants that donors prefer not enter the European space in larger numbers as this is not only ethically wrong but also most certainly would raise red flags in most host states.



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