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The External Dimension of EU Migration Management: The Role of Aid

Jolanta Szymańska, Patryk Kugiel, Henriette Erstad, Morten Bøås

Aid is seen as a key EU instrument in addressing the root causes of migration, but it has not been decisive for the drastic reduction of irregular arrivals in Europe in recent years. Nevertheless, development assistance has become crucial leverage for the EU in persuading major transit countries to improve their border control. Although this “externalisation” of EU border management seems like a successful approach for now, it is not sustainable in the long term. The Union still needs to find better synergy between migration management and development policy that is not designed to stop migration but to manage and regulate it in a more mutually beneficial way.

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Introduction

Following the refugee and migration management crisis in 2015, the European Union strengthened its external policies to better manage irregular migration flows. While addressing the root causes of irregular migration through official development assistance (ODA) was initially declared to be the primary tool, it was the externalisation of border management that eventually proved most effective in regaining control of the situation. Following agreements with major sending and transit countries such as Turkey and Niger, the number of arrivals in Europe fell to the lowest level in more than five years.¹ Judging by the numbers, the EU's response to the crisis in 2015 has therefore been largely successful. However, recent developments on the Greece-Turkey border² are a reminder that the current approach is not necessarily sustainable in the long term.

The aim of this paper is to assess the external dimension of EU migration management after 2015 with a focus on the role of aid. After providing a broad overview of the main policy instruments implemented, we discuss the degree to which they are effective in managing irregular migration in the long term. We conclude by summarising key takeaways for future research and policymaking.

The EU's response to the crisis in 2015 has therefore been largely successful. However, recent developments on the Greece-Turkey border are a reminder that the current approach is not necessarily sustainable in the long term.

Background

In 2015, more than 1.8 million illegal border crossings were detected along the EU's external borders.³ This was more than six times the number reported in the preceding year. Without an adequate responsibility-sharing mechanism, the EU soon proved incapable of responding to irregular migration pressure of this scope. European leaders were divided between those who wanted a responsibility-sharing quota system and those who wanted to close their borders, making it difficult to enact joint policy on migration. The concurrence with a number of terrorist attacks in Europe and the fear that terrorists would enter the EU through irregular migration flows did not make this task any easier.⁴ Consequently, Europe witnessed a re-nationalisation of border management and ultimately, a de facto collapse of both the Dublin Regulation and Schengen Agreement.⁵ Major internal and external weaknesses of the EU's migration regime were therefore exposed, and the 2015 refugee and migration-management crisis was the consequence.

¹ Frontex (2019): <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/number-of-irregular-crossings-at-europe-s-borders-at-lowest-level-in-5-years-ZfkoRu>.

² See, for example, Salacanian, S. (2020) Europe appears to be powerless to tackle the migrant issue, *Middle East Monitor*, 20.04.2020: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200430-europe-appears-to-be-powerless-to-tackle-the-migrant-issue/>.

³ Frontex (2015): <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/474bb018-b537-11e6-9e3c-01aa75ed71a1>.

⁴ Two of the terrorists involved in the Paris attacks on 13 November 2015 had entered the EU irregularly via Leros and had presented fraudulent Syrian documents to Greek authorities upon registration. See: Frontex (2015): <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/474bb018-b537-11e6-9e3c-01aa75ed71a1>.

⁵ Lovec, M. (2017). Politics of the Schengen/Dublin system: The case of the European migrant and refugee crisis. *Border Politics* (pp. 127-142). Springer, C. and De Some, M. (2018) Dublin and Schengen: A tale of two cities. *EPC Discussion paper*, 15.07.18. Brussels: European Policy Centre.

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As the progress on internal actions (i.e., relocation scheme, Common European Asylum System reform) stalled, the EU shifted its focus towards the external dimension of migration management to regain control. As the Union is the world's largest donor,⁶ it is not surprising that economic and financial instruments, including aid, became an integral part of the EU's external migration policies. Initially, it declared that "addressing root causes" through the strategic use of ODA would be its main approach.⁷ In line with previous strategic documents,⁸ the 2015 European Agenda on Migration declared that "reducing the incentives for irregular migration" was as one of four pillars of better migration management.⁹ Global issues such as poverty, insecurity, inequality, and unemployment were highlighted by the Commission as root causes of irregular migration that needed to be addressed.¹⁰

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Following this logic, several new economic and financial instruments were implemented. In November 2015, the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF for Africa) was established at the La Valetta Summit on Migration with African leaders, aiming to "foster stability and to contribute to better migration management, including by addressing the root causes of destabilisation, forced displacement and irregular migration."¹¹ Resources currently allocated to the EUTF for Africa amount to €4.6 billion. Member States and other donors (e.g., Switzerland and Norway) have contributed €578.5 million, of which €511 million has been spent so far.¹² In 2016, the European Resilience Initiative was created by the European Investment Bank to support public and private investments in the Southern neighbourhood and Western Balkans to "respond to challenges such as forced displacement and migration, economic downturns, political crises, droughts and flooding".¹³ In September 2017, the EU launched the European External Investment Plan (EIP) directed towards Africa and the Southern EU neighbourhood. The core of the EIP is the more than €4.4 billion European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD), which finances guarantees and investment facilities to leverage private money to generate investments in these regions worth €44 billion through 2020.

In September 2018, European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker announced the Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investments and Jobs. This upgraded version of EIP was expected to create 10 million jobs over the next five years, offer 750,000 people vocational training, and include an additional 100,000 students in the Erasmus exchange program. Moreover, most EU Member States increased their ODA for sending and transit countries, such as the "Marshal Plan for Africa" proposed by Germany in early 2017.¹⁴ This money was used for a number of interventions, from providing food and shelter to refugees to creating jobs, facilitating investments, and improving border controls.

As part of its response, the EU also increased its humanitarian assistance to emergency crises in the Middle East and pledged more development assistance to support growth in the neighbourhood. It

⁶ In 2018 alone, the EU spent €71.9 billion in Official Development Assistance (ODA), including €13.6 billion in ODA provided EU institutions.

⁷ See: Kugiel, P., Erstad H.U., Bøås, M. and Szymańska, J. Can Aid Solve the Root Causes of Migration? A Framework for Future Research on the Development-Migration Nexus, *PISM Policy Paper 1* (176), 05 March 2020.

⁸ See: Council of the European Union (2005) *Global Approach to Migration*, Council Presidency Conclusions; European Commission (2011) *The Global Approach to Migration and Mobility*, Brussels: COM (2011) 743 final; Council of the European Union (2012) *Council Conclusions on the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility*, (9417/12).

⁹ European Commission (2015) *A European Agenda on Migration*, COM (2015) 240, final, Brussels 13.05.2015, p. 6. A similar link between development cooperation and migration was also underlined in the 2016 EU Global Strategy and the 2017 New European Consensus for Development (in article 41).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.8.

¹¹ EU Emergency Trust Fund For Africa, https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/index_en

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ <https://www.eib.org/en/about/initiatives/resilience-initiative/index.htm>.

¹⁴ Africa and Europe—A new partnership for development, peace and a better future. Cornerstones of a Marshal plan with Africa. Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, Bonn, January 2017.

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added several new instruments on top of existing aid programmes to support refugees and origin and transit countries. In addition to regular development cooperation instruments like the European Development Fund (with Sub-Saharan Africa), Development Cooperation Instrument (Asia) and the European Neighbourhood Instrument (South Mediterranean and Eastern Neighbourhood countries), new emergency mechanisms were created specifically to meet the needs of refugees and migrants in the neighbourhood. Already in December 2014, the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis had been created to support host communities, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq. The underlying objective of all these measures was the same— to reduce the number of irregular migrants heading towards Europe.

Development assistance has played an important role in this dimension of the EU's response, also commonly referred to as the "externalisation" of border management. Aid helps the EU to influence the migration policies of important sending and transit countries outside the EU in order to reduce the number of arrivals in Europe.

However, what proved most decisive in regaining control over irregular migration flows was not all these new programmes the Union had launched but the agreements signed between the EU and major transit countries, including Turkey, Libya, and Niger.¹⁵ Development assistance has played an important role in this dimension of the EU's response, also commonly referred to as the "externalisation" of border management. What this essentially means is that the EU tries to influence the migration policies of important sending and transit countries outside the EU in order to reduce the number of arrivals in Europe. Indeed, according to the EU itself, "tailor-made cooperation with African partners as well as key countries in Asia, as developed through the Partnership

Framework, has been at the heart of the progress so far."¹⁶ A well-known example is the EU-Turkey deal that was signed in March 2016, which essentially halted the flow of migrants on the Eastern Mediterranean route to the EU. Following the deal with Turkey in March 2016, the EU launched the Facility for Refugees in Turkey, which offered €6 billion to ease Turkey's burden from hosting people displaced from Syria and other poor and/or conflict-affected states in the region.

After successfully lowering the influx of people to Greece via Turkey, the Central Mediterranean route (from Libya, Tunisia, or Algeria to Italy) became the most heavily travelled by irregular migrants.¹⁷ In June the same year, the EU launched the Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration. This included several African countries, the top five being Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and Ethiopia, and was focused on improving cooperation on migration management and on return and readmission.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ Another agreement signed between Italy and Libya in 2017 (and extended in 2019) facilitates the fight against smuggling and trafficking networks in Libya and reduced irregular arrivals along the Central Mediterranean route.²⁰ To reduce traffic via the Western Mediterranean Route, strengthening cooperation between

¹⁵ Palm, E. (2020), "Externalized Migration Governance and the Limits of Sovereignty: The Case of Partnership Agreements between EU and Libya," *Theoria* 86: 9-27.

¹⁶ See: European Commission, *Progress report on the Implementation of the European Agenda on Migration* Brussels, COM(2019) 481 final, 16.10.2019.

¹⁷ 181,376 detections in 2016 and 118,962 in 2017.

¹⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_17_1606

¹⁹ See: Bøås, M. and Rieker, P. (2019) *Executive Summary of the Final Report and Selected Policy Recommendations*, EUNPACK.eu. 15 March 2019; Carayol, R. (2019) "What Happened when the EU Moved its Fight to Stop Migration to Niger," *The Nation* 05.07.2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/niger-agadez-migration/>; Lebovich, A. (2018) "Halting Ambition: EU Migration and Security Policy in the Sahel," *EU Council of Foreign Relations*, 25.09.2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/halting_ambition_eu_migration_and_security_policy_in_the_sahel.

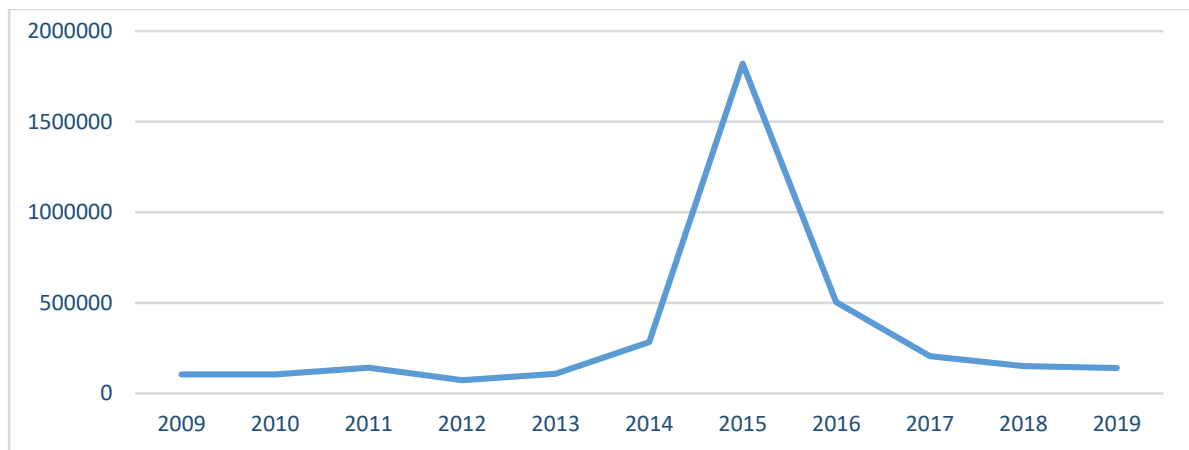
²⁰ Michalska, K. and Pawłowski, M. *Libya Agreement's Impact on Italy's Migration Policy*, PISM Bulletin 10.02.2020.

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Spain and Morocco²¹ became an effective tool to share responsibility between transit and destination countries in migration management.

Through these agreements, the EU has managed to reduce the number of irregular arrivals in Europe to levels similar to those at the start of the century.²² In 2019, the total number of illegal border crossings detected along the EU's external borders was 139,000, which is a 92% decrease from the peak of the crisis in 2015.²³ As we entered 2020, increasing pressure on Greece's borders once again become a main concern after Turkey opened its borders for irregular migrants heading towards Europe.

Figure 1. Irregular Migration to the EU, 2009-2019.²⁴



Aid and EU Migration Management after 2015

The EU seems generally satisfied with the outcomes of the use of aid in solving migration challenges.²⁵ Indeed, development assistance is still predominant in the EU's relations with developing countries. As proposed increases in the next MFF's ODA budget suggest, the EU will remain committed to its global obligations and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030.²⁶ Yet, the close linkage between development cooperation and EU migration management stirs some controversy and has been criticized by aid experts and practitioners. Some argue that "development aid disbursements do not generally follow the "root causes rhetoric",²⁷ and that the new financial instruments did not generate additional money for ODA, rather redirect existing development funds and

²¹ See: Brito, R. Migrant arrivals plunge in Spain after deals with Morocco, <https://apnews.com/6e4c62e3255444c78196aef3f463fca0>

²² As result, in 2018, the Western Mediterranean route (stretching across the sea between Spain and Morocco) became the most frequently used.

²³ Frontex (2019): <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/number-of-irregular-crossings-at-europe-s-borders-at-lowest-level-in-5-years-ZfkoRu>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See: European Commission, *Progress report on the Implementation of the European Agenda on Migration Brussels*, COM(2019) 481 final, 16.10.2019.

²⁶ Knoll, A. and Veron, P. (2019) 'Migration and the Next EU Long-Term Budget: Key Choices for External Action', Discussion Paper no. 250, ECDPM March 2019.

²⁷ Clemens M.A. and Postel, H.M. (2018) 'Deterring Emigration with Foreign Aid; an Overview of Evidence from Low-Income Countries', *CGD Policy Paper 119*, February, p. 1.

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programmes to deal with new tasks.²⁸ Indeed, the focus on supporting migrant sending- and transit countries in Europe’s Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods is hardly reflected in the statistics on ODA flows over the past few years.

Data from the OECD shows an interesting discrepancy between what the EU pledged (ODA commitments) and what it actually spent on aid (disbursements). The ODA commitments from EU institutions to Sub-Saharan African countries have indeed increased astonishingly, from less than \$2 billion in 2014 to \$7.6 billion in 2016, followed by a decrease to \$4.6 billion in 2018. Aid commitments to the Middle East and Northern Africa remained stable (see Table 1 below). However, the actual flows of money show a different story and are less spectacular.

Table 1. EU Institutions’ Aid (ODA) Commitments to Selected Countries and Regions [DAC3a] (total net ODA in millions of USD dollars, 2017, constant prices)

Recipient	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Developing Countries	17,507.61	22,841.29	22,067.74	16,244.68	20,622.06	23,993.49	22,764.3	21,609.05
Europe	5,349.74	7,329.86	7,002.87	5,527.68	4,566.29	5,346.42	5,549.25	5,061.67
Turkey	2,475.74	3,570.52	3,586.4	2,896.18	2,114.42	2,668.96	3,166.96	2,265.12
Africa	5,738.9	8,134.5	7,482.77	4,264.37	7,641.85	10,896.68	8,168.37	7,108.89
North Sahara	1,509.6	2,996.51	1,558.81	1,752.03	1,219.5	1,776.87	1,810.82	1,401.61
South Sahara	4,053.11	4,964.2	5,737.57	1,991.45	4,283.05	7,682.44	5,819.03	4,667.24
Middle East	896.56	944.41	1,394.52	1,365.86	1,618.12	1,371.01	1,354.86	1,477.47

Source: Data extracted on 11 Feb 2020 15:07 UTC (GMT) from OECD Stat.

Total ODA disbursements by EU institutions to North Africa rose only from about \$1 billion in 2014 to \$1.5 billion in 2016, before falling to \$980 million in 2018 (see Table 2 below). In a similar vein, disbursements to the Middle East jumped from \$1.1 billion in 2014 to \$1.6 billion in 2018. ODA to Sub-Saharan Africa stayed relatively constant, fluctuating between \$4.5 billion in 2014 and \$4.8 billion in 2018. Aid commitments to the Middle East and Northern Africa remained stable. Naturally, one would need to add to this the bigger ODA flows from EU Member States.

²⁸ Lehne, S. *Upgrading the EU’s Migration Partnerships*, Carnegie Europe, 21 November 2016.

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Table 2. Aid (ODA) Disbursements to Selected Countries and Regions [DAC2a] (total net ODA in millions of USD dollars, 2017, constant prices)

Recipient	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Developing Countries	14,769.67	15,895.28	13,850.07	14,386.38	14,025.57	17,347.95	16,054.49	15,774.69
Europe	4,804.09	4,945.35	4,264.29	4,281.27	3,425.99	4,628.41	3,514.56	2,418.57
Turkey	2,417	2,697.77	2,207.61	2,368.52	1,866.79	2,736.47	1,606.69	415.83
Africa	5,230.95	6,609.75	5,251.3	5,913.96	5,359.84	6,521.54	6,325.53	6,281.16
North Sahara	10,14.47	1,848.58	1,014.83	1,237.11	980.03	1,501.3	1,275.7	931.38
South Sahara	3,912.39	4,483.43	3,985.04	4,469.12	4,025.28	4,385.36	4,595.23	4,835.84
Middle East	655.63	681.94	1,022.81	1,095.89	1,237.96	1,549.95	1,427.64	1,599.36

Source: Data extracted on 11 Feb 2020 15:07 UTC (GMT) from OECD Stat

The overall increase in spending for these regions may reflect additional efforts undertaken in response to the crisis and may be linked to migration-related assistance. The majority was spent, however, on regular development cooperation programmes in these countries. This may suggest that the money for additional EU emergency trust funds was indeed redirected from existing mechanisms and has not necessarily mobilised substantial extra funding.

Analysis of data may suggest that the money for additional EU emergency trust funds was indeed redirected from existing mechanisms and has not necessarily mobilised substantial extra funding

In addition to questions about the quantity of aid used for migration-related programmes, some also raise concerns about the quality of the assistance as it leads to “aid inflation”, increased conditionality, and may divert resources from traditional priorities on development and poverty eradication.²⁹ For instance, according to recent Oxfam calculations, of the €3.9 billion approved for projects in Africa from the EUTF, funding for development cooperation stands at

56% (€2.18 billion) while spending on migration governance reaches 26% (€1.011 billion), and spending on peace and security components is as much as 10% (€382 million).³⁰ Less than 1.5% of the total EUTF for Africa was allocated to fund regular migration schemes between African countries or between Africa and the EU. Although the EU claims that its EIP is “expected to meet its objective to leverage total investments of more than €44 billion” by 2020³¹ it is not clear if this creates additional FDI in developing countries. It is interesting that overall foreign investments in Africa decreased by \$10 billion between 2015 and 2018, from \$56 billion to \$46 billion, and the impact of greater European investments are not yet visible.³²

²⁹ AIDWATCH 2018. Aid and Migration The externalisation of Europe’s responsibilities, Concord, Brussels, 2018.

³⁰ The EU Trust Fund for Africa Trapped between aid policy and migration politics, Oxfam International January 2020, p. 4.

³¹ European Commission, Progress report on the Implementation of the European Agenda on Migration Brussels, COM(2019) 481 final, 16.10.2019, s. 13.

³² UNCTAD, Foreign direct investment: Inward and outward flows and stock, annual, UNCTADStat, Accessed 10.03.2020.

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Despite this criticism, one needs to underline that European ODA contributed to EU migration goals in a number of ways. In the most basic dimension, such as humanitarian assistance, it

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was crucial in addressing the needs of refugees and forcibly displaced persons to respond to emergency situations. It assisted countries hosting a large number of refugees as well as transit countries to deal with this additional strain on their resources. At the same time, aid served as an incentive and bargaining chip in relations with transit and sending countries to extract

better cooperation on border control and migration management in exchange for increased financial support. Subsequently, it was instrumental to the success of political aims such as the deal with Turkey. Similarly, aid financed information campaigns in sending and transit countries. Most importantly, as traditional aid, ODA supported numerous programmes and projects targeting such root causes of migration as poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunities. These included interventions in the education sector, skills development, job creation, healthcare, and much more. Aid was also increasingly used as leverage to attract private investments in Africa and the Middle East.

While the externalisation of EU border management proved highly effective, it did not always bring the expected results. The European Council plans to outsource asylum processing by

While the externalisation of EU border management proved highly effective, it did not always bring the expected results. For instance, it has not helped in signing new return and readmission agreements and improving the effective rate of returns of irregular migrants.

creating centres of disembarkation outside Europe for migrants rescued at sea have failed, as transit countries showed a reluctance to host returned migrants on their territory. Cooperation with countries of origin, initiated by the Commission and declaratively supported by all political actors in the EU, has also encountered problems. Although migration partnerships concluded with African countries appear to be working,³³ they were reluctant to enter new readmission agreements. By October 2019, the EU had in place formal readmission agreements or practical

arrangements on return and readmission with 23 countries of origin and transit—only six more than in 2015.³⁴ Yet, all additional documents are in the form of “flexible”, “non-legally binding” arrangements, and not formal readmission pacts. The only new “readmission agreement” was signed in January 2020 with Belarus.³⁵ The initial resistance of African partners to enter into new deals made the EU change its tactics and focus on more technical and practical solutions.³⁶ These informal accords vary significantly in format and content, ranging from administrative arrangements setting out standard operating procedures to commitments of cooperation in return procedures, such as memorandums of understanding

³³ International Centre for Migration Policy Development, ICMPD Migration Outlook 2019 – Origins, key events and priorities for Europe, p. 5.

³⁴ European Commission, Progress report on the Implementation of the European Agenda on Migration Brussels, COM(2019) 481 final, 16.10.2019.

³⁵ All previous agreements were signed by 2015 with the following 17 countries: Hong Kong, Macao, Sri Lanka, Albania, Russia, Ukraine, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Moldova, Pakistan, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Cape Verde

³⁶ Slagter, J. An “Informal” Turn in the European Union’s Migrant Returns Policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa, Migration Policy Institute, 10 January 2019

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(MOU) and joint statements.³⁷ As these did not turn out to be very effective, the EU also engaged at the multilateral level. The Union's stronger demands for better cooperation on return and readmission have been among its top priorities in the negotiations of the "post-Cotonou" agreement with African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries, and is one reason why the parties had to extend their talks after the original Cotonou agreement expired in February 2020.

As a result, the rate of return of irregular migrants to their countries of origin has not improved. In 2018, for example, 478,155 persons illegally staying in the EU were ordered to leave, with 170,380 being effectively returned to a third country. This meant a general return rate of 36%, slightly less than in 2017 (37%), but for some countries, the return rate remains very low, such as 1.7 % for Mali and 2.8% for Guinea.³⁸ It seems that the lack of clarity and predictability in EU policy with regard to facilitating legal migration limits the willingness of third countries to enter into better cooperation on return and readmission.³⁹ It is already well understood that restricted access to legal channels of migration to Europe was one of reasons behind a rising trend of irregular entry or stay and growth in asylum applications in order to gain entry and legal status.⁴⁰

EU External Migration Management: Effective, but Not Sustainable

The lower number of irregular migrants arriving in Europe points to the relative success of the European response to the 2015 crisis. Development cooperation has certainly played a role in this, though not a decisive one. Aid has supported refugees and their host countries and helped reach political and deterrence objectives (deals with third countries, funding information campaigns, return and reintegration programmes, etc.) in the EU's approach. It has also potentially laid the foundation for long-term development; whose effects are not visible yet. The actual impact of ODA disbursements is hard to measure, yet there is little doubt that they did not represent the main force in changing the migration trends; rather, it was the combination of economic and political measures that played a decisive role in stemming irregular migration towards Europe. Through its political and economic leverage, the EU managed to make third countries an integral part of its migration management by persuading them to act as its border guards, as well as extracting some commitments on return and readmission. The signalled tightening border control and migration policies promoted in migrant-sending and transit countries also sent a signal to discourage people from taking the journey to Europe. In this sense, irregular migration to Europe was not reduced because the EU helped to address its main

Irregular migration to Europe was not reduced because the EU helped to address its main causes and push factors, rather that migration became more expensive and riskier. While the official rhetoric about "addressing root causes" of migration fits well into the older image of the Union as a soft power, it has therefore actually acted as more hard power.

³⁷ *Ibidem*. By end 2019 these included deals signed with Afghanistan (in 2016), Guinea and Bangladesh (in 2017), Ethiopia, The Gambia, and Côte d'Ivoire (in 2018)

³⁸ European Commission, Progress report on the Implementation of the European Agenda on Migration Brussels, COM (2019) 481 final, 16.10.2019, s. 15.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ *10 trends shaping migration*, European Political Strategy Centre, https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/sites/epsc/files/epsc_-_10_trends_shaping_migration_-_web.pdf.

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causes and push factors, rather than migration became more expensive and riskier. Consequently, while the official rhetoric about “addressing root causes” of migration fits well into the older image of the Union as a soft power, it has therefore actually acted as more hard power. This is also demonstrated by the EU’s shifting focus from saving lives at sea to protecting European borders, with the most recent reaction to the situation in Greece being an illustrative example.⁴¹ Hence, the EU’s approach, which corresponds well with the new vision of the “geopolitical Commission”, has been heavily criticised for turning its back on refugees, building a “fortress Europe”, and giving up on its values and adherence to international law.⁴²

Thus, while irregular migration to Europe has decreased significantly, the EU still does not seem well prepared for future migration pressure. It is not unreasonable to question the sustainability of agreements with politically fickle, unstable, or war-torn countries, respectively exemplified by Turkey, Niger, and Libya.⁴³ Indeed, what these agreements mean is that control of irregular migration flows is currently in the hands of increasingly authoritarian rulers who repeatedly threaten to flood Europe with refugees⁴⁴ or weak administrations in Africa’s fragile and conflict-affected states. Turkey’s opening of borders in February 2020 is a reminder of this. In addition, many migrants are stuck in detention camps in highly unstable countries in the EU’s neighbourhood. The fact is that the return rate of illegal migrants is low and effective readmission agreements are still lacking. Europe still lacks a coherent approach to creating legal pathways to migration and its participation in resettlement programmes is not impressive. This in a time when unfinished conflicts, demographic trends, economic growth, and climate change in Europe’s vicinity will increase the likelihood of sustained migration pressure. In the absence of legal ways of international mobility and attractive alternatives at home, many people may again turn to irregular migration to Europe.

If one looks at the larger, global picture, the drastic reduction in the number of arrivals to Europe is also quite problematic. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, around 70.8 million people are currently displaced.⁴⁵ This is 2.3 million more than in 2018. What this means is that the current focus on fighting terror and stopping migration through strengthened border management only scratches the surface of a much larger challenge. First of all, Europe’s new frontiers have led to increased pressure on systems characterised by varying degrees of fragility and weak state capacity, with Niger illustrative of this.⁴⁶ Second, the increased security orientation has come at the expense of development, even though locals in these areas are experiencing deteriorating living conditions.⁴⁷ This is highly problematic. In short, root causes of irregular migration are still not addressed adequately,

⁴¹ EU chief says Greece is Europe’s shield in migrant crisis, BBC World News, 3 March 2020.

⁴² Judy Asks: Is Europe Betraying Refugees?, Carnegie Europe, 12 March 2020; Akkerman, Mark (2018) *Expanding the Fortress: The policies, the profiteers and the people shaped by EU’s border externalisation programme*. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute.

⁴³ Sasnal, P. Six Takeaways on European Migration Management since the Adoption of the Global Compact for Migration, PISM Strategic File No. 2 (90), December 2019. See also: Bøås, M. “EU Migration Management in the Sahel: Unintended Consequences on the Ground in Niger,” *Third World Quarterly* (forthcoming).

⁴⁴ Syria war: Turkey warns Europe of new migrant wave, BBC World News, 5 September 2019.

⁴⁵ https://www.flyktinghjelpen.no/shorthand/fr/70.8-million-displaced-people/index.html?_ga=2.266471118.1923890002.1588261723-2020994936.1568719219.

⁴⁶ Carayol, R. (2019) “What Happened when the EU Moved its Fight to Stop Migration to Niger,” *The Nation* 05.07.2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/niger-agadez-migration/>.

⁴⁷ See: Bøås, M. (2018) Rival priorities in the Sahel – finding the balance between security and development, NAI Policy Note (3), Nordic Africa Institute. <https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/handle/11250/2605558>.

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although their consequences are less visible on European shores. In addition, little is yet known about the (un)intended consequences of the current approach,⁴⁸ as little attention is paid to the negative impact the current policies may have on African countries and regional stability.⁴⁹ The situation may worsen again as developing countries feel the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and global recession. The EU has already offered more than €15 billion in assistance packages to developing countries and supported the G20's decision for a moratorium on debt payments from the 77 least-developed countries in 2020. It is also in favour of extending this decision to next year, and may consider cancellation of debt for the poorest states⁵⁰.

Therefore, the EU is still in need of an effective policy that can deal with increasing migration pressures in the future. Recent criticisms of linking development and migration also suggest that the EU may need to rethink its approach. Decreased migration pressure offers the EU

Decreased migration pressure offers the EU a chance to look at migration through a different lens: beyond a threat and as an opportunity.

a chance to look at migration through a different lens: beyond a threat and as an opportunity. Well-designed, well-implemented migration policy may address the challenges of the shrinking working-age population by attracting specific groups of migrants and upholding EU international humanitarian responsibilities. The EU has two interlinked major interests in migration: to prevent irregular migration while benefitting more from

regular, controlled, and safe migration, which at the end of the day is the majority of migration to Europe anyway. ODA may be a useful tool, particularly if used to better manage migration than prevent it entirely.

Conclusion

Overall, the combination of political and economic instruments—mainly the externalisation of EU border management—proved effective in curbing irregular migration to Europe following the 2015 crisis. In essence, what has really led to the drastic reduction in the number of arrivals has been the EU's ability to use its political and economic leverage to externalise its borders. While it is hard to find proof that the more ordinary ODA really mattered much in this, it unarguably plays a role in persuading transit countries to act as the EU's external border guards. However, as recent events on the Greece-Turkey border demonstrate, this approach is not necessarily sustainable and has unintended consequences for both people on the move and the transit countries where these policies are implemented. Ultimately, the only way to curb the numbers of people attempting dangerous routes overland and by sea to Europe is to provide more security and higher living standards at home. This is especially important given the COVID-19 pandemic, which will hit economically developing countries hard. While the EU's positive role in pushing for debt relief for the least-developed countries must be applauded, there is room to do even more to help improve resilience and restart the economies of Africa.

⁴⁸ See: Abebe, T.T., *Securitisation of migration in Africa. The Case of Agadez in Niger*, Institute for Security Studies, Africa Report 20, December 2019; M. Bøås, P. Rieker, *Executive Summary of the Final Report and Selected Policy Recommendations*, EUNPACK.eu, 15 March 2019.

⁴⁹ Abebe, T.T. *Securitisation of migration in Africa. The Case of Agadez in Niger*, Institute for Security Studies, Africa Report 20, December 2019.

⁵⁰ *EU to discuss Africa debt relief*, Euractiv, 29 April 2020.

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While the EU will need to continue reforms of migration and asylum policy internally, it will need to find the best synergy between migration and development policy. As mentioned, some recent studies show that foreign aid can help reduce migration flows from developing countries when it is used to improve public services or provide alternatives to migration.⁵¹ It offers even more opportunities when it is not designed to stop migration but rather to manage it and regulate it in a mutually beneficial way. Yet, there must be an improvement in the understanding of how aid can be used to respond to irregular migration challenges in a more sustainable manner.

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⁵¹ For more, see: Kugiel, P. Erstad, H.U. Bøås, M. and Szymańska J., "Can Aid Solve the Root Causes of Migration? A Framework for Future Research on the Development-Migration Nexus," *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 1 (176), 5 March 2020.