

The Nexus between Migration and Development in EU External Action: No Quick Fix

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Introduction

EU policymakers are currently hotly debating how the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) will budget for the 2021-2027 period. For the MFF area dedicated to external action, the European Commission has proposed a new mega instrument that will significantly shape the EU's relations with third countries: the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). With a proposed budget of €89.2 billion, NDICI will give substantial impetus to the EU's development cooperation in the years to come. Exactly which features will be included in the instrument are still unclear, as negotiations in the Council and the European Parliament are still ongoing. However, member states have decided to follow the Commission's proposal that 10% of the NDICI be earmarked for migration-related spending (ECRE 2019). With that amount standing at €8.9 billion if based on the current proposal, this would significantly shift the NDICI's focus towards migration (ECRE 2019). In this situation, tackling the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement in third countries will be a cornerstone of EU external action. For the next eight years, the nexus between migration and development will thus take centre stage in the EU's development assistance initiatives.

In this context, it is worth reflecting on the EU's current migration and development policies in order to inform the negotiations on the NDICI. A closer look reveals

For the next Multiannual Financial Framework, the Commission has proposed a new mega instrument in the area of external action that will make migration a key focus of the EU's development cooperation. The nexus between migration and development will thus take centre stage in the EU's engagement with third countries. In this context, it is interesting to look at current policies combining external migration governance with development cooperation. While the EU seems to assume that policies concerning migration and development cooperation are coherent, a closer look reveals that this is not always the case. Particularly concerning aid conditionality and the emphasis on short-term versus long-term goals, development cooperation and migration policies have different objectives, at times leading to incoherence in the EU's external policies.

that they are more controversial than would appear at first glance. These policies combine development and migration policy issues in ways that are sometimes contradictory, thereby inhibiting their effectiveness. It is thus imperative that we draw lessons from the EU's present external migration policies and its approach to development cooperation, as this will help foster more effective and evidence-based policymaking in this area in the future. To that end, this policy brief outlines the EU's current migration and development policies and

then looks at two examples (aid conditionality and the emphasis on short-term versus long-term objectives) to show that migration governance and development cooperation are not always complementary and coherent. In concluding, this brief offers another perspective on the current debate on NDICI.

The approach of tackling the root causes of migration with development aid

In its policies addressing migration and displacement issues in third countries, the EU often uses development cooperation as an instrument and a funding scheme (cf. Caso 2007; Castillejo 2018). It has buttressed this approach especially since 2015, when the influx of immigrants increased. The idea is to “tackle the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement” (Commission 2018) with development cooperation in origin and transit countries.

At first glance, this strategy seems to make sense. This approach follows the logic that people migrate due to poverty, instability, conflict, and natural disasters-aspects of underdevelopment that lead to a lack of opportunities at home. Development cooperation -so the theory goes- can mitigate these factors and improve livelihoods in origin countries, thereby reducing irregular and forced migration to Europe (cf. Valletta Summit on Migration 2015; Commission 2015; Commission 2011; Commission 2002). Such an approach would seem to support the interests of all parties involved: prospective migrants, European destination countries, and home countries. The assumption is that prospective migrants generally want to stay in their home countries, such that enhancing living conditions through development cooperation is in their interest. Countries of transit and origin, which often lack basic resources, would benefit from development assistance. Finally, the EU as a destination area would benefit from a decrease in the pressure from irregular migration.

According to this approach, development in transit and origin countries and the reduction of irregular migration to Europe complement each other, with the former following the latter in a relatively neat relationship. At a policy level, the assumption is that the EU can decrease irregular migration and forced displacement by using development cooperation to tackle their root causes. This approach declares to put support to the people in origin and transit countries at the centre of EU external action. After all, they are the ones who deserve to earn a livelihood at home. Of course, it is difficult to argue against this, “as it is also not an option to just keep them poor” (Interview with Commission official, May 2019). Thus, development assistance for reducing irregular migration pressure on Europe and for supporting prospective migrants to stay at home allegedly is a straightforward and indisputable strategy. Above all, this strategy seems to address migration and development in a coherent way.

Aid conditionality and a short-term logic

On second glance, however, the coherence between the EU’s external migration policies and its development cooperation is not so strong (cf. Castillejo 2016; Den Hertog 2016). In some instances, the inherent logics of migration policies and development cooperation contradict each other, at times leading to an incoherent policy approach to EU external relations.

First, external migration policymaking uses the principle of aid conditionality to induce third countries’ adherence to the EU’s migration agenda (Castillejo 2018, Den Hertog 2016). There is a trend in the EU towards linking development assistance to compliance with respect to return and readmission, which is a clear case of conditionality (Castillejo 2016, Den Hertog 2016). In the NDICI, 10% of the funding may be used in accordance with a more-for-more logic, to reward third countries for their progress in migration

management and control, among other areas (cf. Commission 2018). The more-for-more principle is an example of positive conditionality that uses development cooperation funding as a “carrot” for third countries that comply with the EU’s objectives. Negative conditionality of withholding development aid for cases when a third country does not abide by the EU’s agenda can be termed “less-for-less.” EU member states are divided as to whether conditionality should be positive or negative (Castillejo 2016), in the sense of a carrot or a stick. Notwithstanding this discussion, the policy trend is to make development cooperation a tool for promoting EU interests via aid conditionality. This goes against the principles of development cooperation, which denounce aid conditionality and maintain that aid should be based on need and not on compliance with an external agenda. At present, the migration and development policies of the EU are in a predicament with respect to conditionality: they risk undermining development cooperation principles by making aid conditional on adherence to the EU’s migration interests, rather than focusing on the goal of reducing poverty. Development aid principles aside, such a policy is also flawed at the substantive level. Disbursing or withholding aid according to third countries’ compliance might actually increase irregular and forced migration to the EU instead of reducing it. In this sense, aid conditionality goes against the very premises upon which this policy is built.

Second, migration policies focus on short-term goals instead of the long-term objectives that development cooperation policies emphasize. The EU’s aim to offer short-term responses and maintain flexibility with respect to migration might hinder the long-term perspective and sustainability objectives of its development cooperation. In some cases, the long-term development needs of third countries even conflict with the EU’s short-term migration interests (Den Hertog 2016). In such instances, the

logic inherent to development cooperation possibly contradicts that of migration politics, with the latter often gaining priority over the former. Indeed, the term “root causes” itself requires an emphasis on long-term objectives, but the EU’s focus on the reduction of arrivals runs counter to this. For example, there is a contradiction between a root causes approach to migration and a short-term emergency fund to address these root causes – as is the case with the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (Castillejo 2016). Regarding the NDICI, the Commission acknowledges this possible conflict and stresses that the proposed instrument will mobilise “short-term, medium-term and long-term action in a streamlined manner” and “ensure complementarity between short- and long-term actions” (Commission 2018). Sufficient safeguards should be in place to ensure that the NDICI will actually address the possible trade-offs between a short-term versus a long-term approach to migration and development. Otherwise, the NDICI would risk adhering to a migration policy rationale to the detriment of development cooperation. This would undermine the very “root causes” approach that this instrument is supposed to address.

While a holistic approach requires that the twin topics of migration and development in origin and transit countries be considered side by side, the perspective that development policy can bring to the table is necessarily focused on long-term aspects of the migration phenomenon, as well as on the non-conditionality of aid. The short-term aspects of migration are very relevant, but trying to address them by making aid conditional on third-country compliance with EU objectives undermines the principles of development cooperation and the logic of the approach itself.

Conclusion

Migration and development of origin and transit countries influence each other and are closely interrelated, which is why it makes sense to address them in a concerted manner through a policy that encompasses both external migration and development. In shifting its development cooperation to focus on the area of migration, the EU recognizes this connection. However, at this crucial point in time and with a view to the NDICI negotiations, the EU policies on migration and development need closer examination.

Indeed, the development cooperation policies and the external migration policies put forth by the European Union are not always coherent. Regarding aid conditionality and perspective (long-term versus short-term goals), they follow conflicting and possibly contradictory rationales. These rationales are inherent to each of the two policy fields, and reconciling them is a difficult task. Nevertheless, it is paramount that policymakers find a way to “address the current migration challenge without jeopardizing development policy achievements and objectives” (European Parliamentary Research Service 2017). The task for the EU is to consider the respective contributions of migration policies and development cooperation to the migration phenomenon in accordance with the specific logic of each. Given that development cooperation focuses on the long-term aspects of migration, development policy should not be shaped

by the immediate political priorities of the Union. If one accepts that migration and development are closely related- as the EU does- then undermining development principles through conditionality and adopting policies that have short-term objectives might negatively impact on migration itself, and might even foster irregular and forced migration. Thus, policymakers should address the underlying causes of migration through a holistic development policy that treats development and migration in the broadest sense. One way to do this would be to recognize that migration, if organized in a safe and orderly way, can sometimes benefit the development of origin countries. Following such an approach does not mean that the short-term aspects of migration should be ignored, but only that development cooperation funds and instruments should not be focused on the immediate goals on migration. Indeed, if the EU really aims to address the structural causes of irregular and forced migration and recognizes that these phenomena require a development perspective, it should consider the links between migration, development, trade, finance, energy, security policies, the external aspects of the common agricultural and fisheries policy, natural degradation and climate change. This is especially crucial in the context of the current NDICI negotiations, given that this instrument will significantly shape future policies in the area of development and migration.

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