

## EU Development Aid and Migration: Clearing up Misconceptions

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*EU debates on migration and development aid have suffered from four problems: a misdiagnosis of the geographical origins of EU-headed migration; a misinterpretation of the relationship between development and migration; a misunderstanding of EU policy on migration conditionality and aid; and the misconstruction of EU development commitments with regard to migration controls. Although the EU has not implemented a policy on migration conditionality for its development assistance, it should pilot such schemes in the near future. Given the centrality of irregular migration to the health of EU democracies, the bloc would be well advised to add the conditionality experiment to the migration control toolbox.*

On 16 July 2025 the European Commission presented its proposal for the EU's long-term budget for the years 2028–34. Among the suggestions is the [idea](#) that the European Commission make the provision of EU development aid conditional on the recipient countries' performance in terms of re-admitting their own nationals illegally staying on the territory of the bloc.<sup>2</sup>

The Commission has submitted its proposal in view of the growing recognition that improving repatriation rates is becoming essential for retaining popular support not only for the bloc's migration policies but for democracy on the continent. Although the Commission's proposal is not the first of its kind, it is

likely to provoke further discussions on EU development assistance and the role of the EU's external and migration policies. This InBrief addresses some erroneous assumptions that have guided the bloc's policy on the subject so far, and which have considerably skewed the debate.

### Development aid

The main purpose of development aid is to promote long-term economic and social development. Unlike humanitarian aid, which addresses short-term crises, development aid seeks to target underlying structural challenges in the countries that receive assistance. Donor countries also use development assistance to [foster existing ties](#), be they due to history, trade, or political and economic affinities. The EU has provided development assistance since the founding of the European Communities in 1957. Although reducing poverty in developing countries has always been the guiding principle of EU aid, the tools and modes of operation have been [subject to substantial change](#).

Over the past decade, the intersection of EU aid and migration policy has been fiercely contested. This debate has suffered from four problems: a *misdiagnosis*, *misunderstanding*, *misinterpretation* and *misconstruction*.

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Peter Hefe for his comments and his encouragement to extend parts of the first draft. Thanks go also to Caroline Schmidt.

<sup>2</sup> This proposal does not address the many factors that contribute to the failures of repatriation policy inside the EU.

### **Misdiagnosis: EU funds and the geographic location of migration challenges**

The EU has, sometimes, misdiagnosed the problem. Take the example of the [Emergency Trust Fund for Africa](#) that was created at the Valletta Summit in November 2015. In that year, the EU was facing a significant asylum and border crisis. Most of the newcomers were arriving in Greece from Türkiye. They were mostly Syrians, along with smaller numbers of other nationalities.

Although Africans constituted only 9% of irregular border crossers into the EU in that year, the EU leaders decided to give first priority to a massive trust fund that combined development and humanitarian aid and migration policy support for Africa. Substantive funding for Türkiye came later. However effective it later turned out to be, [the EU-Turkey Statement](#) only materialised in March 2016.

### **Misinterpretation: economic development and migration**

Second, many EU policies have assumed that economic growth in developing countries will reduce migration.

A large body of academic literature tells us otherwise. Academic authors have published studies which claim that the propensity to emigrate *grows* as countries grow richer and it *falls* only when countries attain an upper-middle income. Such a conclusion was reached by [Zelinsky](#) as early as 1971, and more recently [Clemens](#), as well as the rather left-leaning [de Haas](#) have corroborated it. This 'hump theory' of migration and development assumes that to migrate, people first need to obtain the resources to do so, as well as the necessary social capital to direct their international mobility. Academic consensus on this is not iron-clad. There are studies, for example, one by [Migali and Natale](#), that show that poverty can drive refugee migration. Nevertheless, most academic authors would probably say that in most situations and most of the time, the hump theory of migration does apply.

The impact of development aid on migration is even less clear. Scientific papers provide contradictory

evidence and there is very little agreement on whether and how development aid influences the desire to migrate. Some authors, such as [Gamso and Yuldashev](#), argue that certain types of aid, for example governance aid, do result in a somewhat lower desire to migrate, whereas other types, such as economic and social aid, have no discernible relationship to emigration. And of course, there is the question of the efficacy of development cooperation, of whether aid always improves development.

All in all, the state of academic enquiry on the relationship between economic development, aid and migration strongly suggests that the existing research is not sufficient to guide policy. However, based on what we know we can state that attempts to 'fight the root causes of migration' by stimulating economic development in developing countries are probably doomed to fail.

### **Misunderstanding: conditionality and EU aid**

A third problem in the debate on migration and development is one of a misunderstanding of EU policy. Observers, especially those from development and non-governmental organisation circles, have claimed that the EU has been applying conditionality to its foreign aid relative to how the recipient countries behave on migration controls and re-admitting their nationals.

This is not the case. Conditionality of funding refers to the use of sanctions—such as the reduction, suspension or termination of financial benefits—when the recipient state fails to meet specific conditions or requirements. This researcher has *not found a single instance* of the EU cancelling development aid due to a country's policy on migration. The same finding applies to aid disbursed by the EU's national capitals.

[Rietig and Walter-Franke](#) in their paper did point out that the EU's long-term budget for 2021–7 has introduced the possibility of making EU development aid conditional on how beneficiary countries perform on the readmission of their nationals. However, there are no indications that the EU has made use of this option. On one occasion, the European Commission came close to withdrawing its development funding from The Gambia. This was several years ago, after

the country had refused to accept the return of its own nationals illegally staying in the EU. The bloc did not proceed with withdrawing the funds, although in 2021 it did adopt visa restrictions for The Gambia. Indications are that these measures have been at least partly effective. However, such an escalation between the EU and a recipient country has been quite rare.

This may change if the new long-term budget is adopted according to the Commission's intentions and if the EU does follow up this renewed intention with practical steps. But so far, the assertion that the EU is applying migration conditionality to its provision of aid has borne little relationship to reality.

### **Misconstruction: EU development commitments, treaties and policy coherence**

Fourth, certain government officials, academics and [representatives of non-governmental organisations](#) have argued that migration conditionality would amount to backtracking on the development principles and commitments made by the EU.

Again, these claims are mistaken. Existing EU policies and commitments on development currently offer a clear and well-defined scope for considering the issues related to irregular migration. To the extent that the objectives of EU (or any other) development policy can be internally coherent, a diligent reading of the existing EU documents and undertakings would do away with some of the emotional policy and political discussions that still exist at the EU and national levels about linking development cooperation and migration policy.

[Agenda 2030](#) is a UN document adopted in 2015, its full name being the *Agenda for Sustainable Development and Its Sustainable Development Goals*. The provisions of the document aim, among other things, to end poverty and hunger globally and to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality. In the area of migration, the document recognises the positive contribution of migrants for inclusive growth. It also recognises that states should cooperate internationally to ensure safe, orderly and regular migration involving full respect for human rights. It adds: 'We . . . recall that states must ensure that their

returning nationals are duly received'. There is nothing in the Agenda 2030 document that would prohibit the use of development aid levers by the countries that receive and host irregular migrants.

Even more relevant, in 2017 the Council and the governments of the member states, the European Parliament and the European Commission adopted the [European Consensus on Development](#). This highly consensual document represents part of the EU response to Agenda 2030. The paper points out the need to enhance partners' capacities for improved migration management. One passage spells out that

*"the EU and its Member States will address in a comprehensive manner the multiple aspects of migration and forced displacement, including smuggling and trafficking in human beings, border management, remittances, addressing the root causes, international protection and return, readmission and reintegration, on the basis of mutual accountability and full respect of humanitarian and human rights obligations. The EU and its Member States will take a more coordinated, holistic and structured approach to migration, maximising the synergies and applying the necessary leverage by using all relevant EU policies, instruments and tools, including development and trade."* (Emphasis mine)

The document further outlines that EU support is needed for improving the legislative, institutional and operational capacities of the recipient countries to ensure well-managed migration. This EU support, the document continues, focuses on training and equipping partner countries with the right skills and tools so they are better positioned to address migration and forced displacement. EU migration aid includes capacity building for border management, including the readmission of the recipient country's nationals. In line with the EU's comprehensive approach to migration, the document points out the need to facilitate legal migration and mobility.

Finally, EU treaties make it possible for the EU to apply migration-related conditions to the disbursement of aid. Article 208 of the Treaty on the

Functioning of the European Union states that EU development cooperation has, ‘as its primary objective the reduction and, in the long term, the eradication of poverty’. This implies that secondary objectives may exist. In addition, the same article makes it clear that ‘Union policy in the field of development cooperation shall be conducted within the framework of the principles and objectives of the Union’s external action’. Since controlling illegal migration is both a treaty objective (see Article 70 of the same treaty) and an [established](#) part of [EU external policy](#), there can be no doubt about the legitimacy of linking migration policy requirements to the provision of EU aid.

## Conclusions

In contrast to the unclear consequences of development aid on migration intentions, we know that the voluntary agreements or arrangements that the EU has concluded since 2016 with practically all the countries in its southern and south-eastern neighbourhood, have helped stem EU-headed irregular migration. These discretionary agreements, which contain elements of migration policy and border-management support, development aid and, in some cases, legal migration channels, have not been fully effective. But in their absence the EU would be facing the prospect of much higher numbers of people attempting to cross the bloc’s borders illegally.

None of the above implies that the EU should stop providing development aid. There are many good reasons to finance development where such financing is needed and where it coincides with EU interests. In many instances, the EU will continue to provide aid without migration strings attached, thus fulfilling the treaties’ primary objective of giving aid to reduce poverty. Yet, the bloc’s policymakers should be asking questions before they commit funds.

Given the mistaken assumptions about conditionality, policy coherence and the bloc’s development commitments, the EU could, rather uncontroversially, recognise that its support for migration and border management in its partner countries is a recognised part of the existing development consensus.

Whether development aid conditionality will work to secure the partner countries’ cooperation on migration controls is a different question altogether. Some of the existing research [points out](#) the [practical limitations](#) of this approach. In the non-governmental sector and among development professionals, downright hostility to the idea dominates. But however abundant the latter camps’ criticism may be, it tends to be based on normative assumptions rather than empirical evidence. With this in mind, this author suggests that the EU starts piloting the migration-related conditionality of its development aid in real-life negotiations with non-EU countries.

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