

**01**  
**2026**

**LINKING MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT:  
EUROPEAN EXPERIENCES AND POLICY LESSONS FOR SWEDEN**

Henrik Malm Lindberg and Iris Luthman, eds.



# Linking Migration and Development: European Experiences and Policy Lessons for Sweden

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Report 2026:01

to

The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA)

## Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere thanks to Karolina Edsbäcker, Charlotte Kirotar, Hugo Rickberg, Johan Schaar, and Ingela Winter-Norberg for serving on the reference group for this anthology and for generously contributing their expertise and insights throughout the project. Particular thanks are due to Torbjörn Pettersson, who served as Chair of the reference group, and to Mats Hårsmar, Deputy Managing Director at the Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA) and project leader for this anthology, both of whom provided invaluable guidance and support in relation to the content of the chapters as well as the overall editorial and project management process.

We would also like to thank the authors for their thoughtful contributions, constructive engagement in the editorial process, and commitment to producing a high-quality and policy-relevant volume.

The authors are solely responsible for the analyses, conclusions, and recommendations presented in this volume, including those set out in the chapters authored by the editors. The members of the reference group and the Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA) do not necessarily share the views expressed.

Please refer to the present report as: Malm Lindberg, H and Luthman, I (eds), *Linking Migration and Development: European Experiences and Policy Lessons for Sweden*, EBA Report 2026:01, The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), Sweden.

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ISBN 978-91-90014-10-3 (printed edition), 978-91-90014-11-0 (web edition)  
Printed by Multiply Solutions AB  
Järfälla 2026

Cover design by Julia Demchenko

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## List of abbreviations and acronyms

AID	Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion
AMIF	Asylum Migration and Integration Fund
AVR	Assisted Voluntary Return
BAMF	Federal Office for Migration and Refugees
BMI	Federal Ministry of the Interior
BMVI	Border Management and Visa Instrument
BMZ	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
BMZ	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
CD4D	Connecting Diaspora for Development
CEAS	EU's Common European Asylum System
DAC	The Development Assistance Committee
DCI	Development Cooperation Instrument (EU)
Delmi	The Migration Studies Delegation
DEval	German Development Evaluation Organisation
DEVCO EU	Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development
DG INTPA EU	Directorate-General for International Partnership
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
DT&V	Return and Departure Service
EBA	The Expert Group for Aid Studies
EMN	European Migration Network
EUTF	European Union Trust Fund for Africa

ECDDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
ERPUM	European Platform for Unaccompanied Minors
GAAP	Common Analysed and Agreed Planning
GAMM	Global Approach to Migration and Mobility
GCM	Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
GFMD	Global Forum on Migration and Development
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GNI	Gross National Income
HRT	Return and Reintegration Scheme
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IDP	Internally Displaced People
IFC	International Finance Corporation
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ILOs	Immigration Liaison Officers
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MENA	The Middle East and North Africa
MFA	Ministry for Foreign Affairs
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
MoRR	Ministry for Return and Repatriation
MP	Mobility Partnership
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation

Norad	The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
NPIS	National Police Immigration Service
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PGU	Swedish Policy for Global Development
SDG	Sustainability Development Goals
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SVR	Advisory Council on Migration and Integration
TRQN	Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UAM	Un-Accompanied Minors
UDI	Norwegian Immigration Directorate
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
ZME	Centre for Migration and Development



## Foreword by EBA

A central theme in the Swedish Government's aid reform is to link development cooperation more closely with migration objectives. Aid is expected to strengthen preconditions for return migration and sustainable reintegration, as well as support partner countries in improving their migration management capacities with a focus on countering irregular migration. These are key objectives of the government strategy that was decided in 2024, financed with 3 billion SEK over a four-year period.

Migration is a natural part of any development process. However, using development aid to promote return migration, reintegration and efforts to counter irregular migration represents a new policy direction in the Swedish context. The implementation of the strategy places new demands for improved collaboration between migration and development actors. It may even demand new kinds of interventions and approaches. At the same time, knowledge about the effectiveness of such approaches remains limited.

Sweden is not the first country to align development cooperation more closely with migration objectives. Several countries with similar aid and migration policies have already moved in this direction, although with different levels of emphasis. This anthology is an attempt to learn from others. The focus is on the implementation level: how such policy shifts have been translated into collaborations between different government agencies, how interventions have been chosen and shaped, and to what extent conditionality has been used to reach migration-related objectives.

The anthology is a joint project between Delmi, EMN Sweden and EBA. It emerged from joint discussions and a felt need among staff working at the implementation level to better understand how migration and development policies interact in practice, as well as the effects and outcomes of integrating these two policy areas.

It is our hope that this study will be of value to policymakers and program managers within the relevant implementing agencies and ministries working at the intersection of migration and development cooperation.

The study has been guided by a reference group chaired by Torbjörn Pettersson, member of Delmi. It has followed the EBA format for quality assurance and is thus published in the EBA report series. The authors bear sole responsibility for the content, analysis and conclusions of the report.

Stockholm, March 2026

Torbjörn Becker

Torbjörn Pettersson

# Sammanfattning

## Realism, samordning och tydlighet

Migration har blivit en av de viktigaste politiska frågorna i Europa. Samtidigt förväntas utvecklingssamarbetet i allt högre grad bidra, inte bara till fattigdomsminskning och hållbar utveckling, utan även till migrationsrelaterade mål såsom att minska irreguljär migration, stärka återvändande och återtagande samt att hantera de så kallade grundorsakerna (root causes) till att människor tvingas fly eller flytta.

Sveriges nya reformagenda för biståndet och *Strategi för Sveriges globala utvecklingssamarbete inom migration, återvändande och frivilligt återvändande 2024–2028*, markerar en tydlig förändring i vad som betonas. Migration pekas där ut som ett strategiskt område för utvecklingssamarbetet. Detta ställer nya krav på samordning, genomförande och resultat.

Flera europeiska länder har redan genomfört liknande reformer. Danmark, Norge, Tyskland och Nederländerna har på olika sätt kopplat samman migration och utvecklingssamarbete. Deras erfarenheter kan ge värdefulla lärdomar – inte minst när det gäller styrning, institutionell utformning, politiska avvägningar men också i att ha realistiska förväntningar på vad bistånd kan åstadkomma på migrationsområdet.

Denna antologi analyserar hur sammankopplingen har utformats och genomförts i praktiken. Fokus ligger på styrning, samordning och resultat snarare än politisk retorik. Den centrala frågan är inte om migration och utveckling bör kopplas samman – det sker redan i hela Europa – utan hur sådana kopplingar kan hanteras på ett sätt som är effektivt, koherent och förenligt med grundläggande utvecklingsprinciper.

## **Migration har fått större och strategisk betydelse inom utvecklingssamarbetet**

I samtliga fyra studerade länder har migration blivit en allt mer framträdande referenspunkt inom utvecklingssamarbetet. Graden av integration och den politiska inramningen skiljer sig dock åt.

Danmark är det land där man har gått längst. Migrationsmål har uttryckligen påverkat geografiska prioriteringar, anslagsfördelning och den övergripande inriktningen på utvecklingssamarbetet. Biståndet ramas tydligt in som ett verktyg för att förebygga irreguljär migration och stödja partnerskap för migrationskontroll.

Nederländerna har också tydliggjort kopplingen och fastslagit att utvecklingssamarbetet ska bidra till att hantera migrationsflöden. Detta har åtföljts av en omprioritering av biståndet till regioner som anses särskilt relevanta ur ett migrationsperspektiv.

Tyskland har institutionaliserat samverkan mellan migration och utveckling genom strukturerade program och formella samordningsmekanismer, men här pratar man ofta om att bägge parter ska ha något att vinna. Utvecklingssamarbetet spelar en viktig roll i återintegrationsstöd, migrationspartnerskap och initiativ för kompetensrörlighet.

Norge har valt en mer försiktig och inkrementell ansats. Migrationsmål har införlivats stegvis och ofta formulerats i humanitära eller utvecklingspolitiska termer snarare än uttryckligen som migrationskontroll.

Ett gemensamt mönster i samtliga fall är att migrationsmål ofta integreras gradvis genom anpassning och omorientering av befintliga biståndsinstrument snarare än genom omfattande och långtgående institutionella reformer.

## **Samordning – viktigt men komplicerat**

Att koppla samman migration och utveckling kräver samarbete mellan departement och myndigheter med ansvar för utrikesfrågor, bistånd, rättsväsende, migration, polis och diplomatiska tjänster. Samtliga fyra länder har infört någon form av whole-of-government ansats.

Samordning leder dock inte automatiskt till koherens inom politiken. Utvecklingsaktörer arbetar vanligtvis med långsiktiga mål och mandat för att åstadkomma fattigdomsminskning, medan migrationsmyndigheter ofta står under ett kortsiktigt politiskt tryck att leverera synliga resultat. Skillnader i tidshorisonter, institutionskultur och ansvarsförhållanden skapar dock spänningar.

Danmark har antagit en relativt centraliserad samordningsmodell med stark politisk styrning från högsta nivå. Tyskland förlitar sig på strukturerade men komplexa interdepartementala processer ofta på mer ad-hoc-basis. Nederländerna kombinerar samarbete mellan departement och myndigheter med nära anpassning till EU-initiativ. Norges modell är i sin tur mer pragmatisk och flexibel.

Den viktigaste lärdomen är att samordningsmekanismer måste upprätthållas aktivt och vara tydligt strukturerade. Utan klara roller och ansvar riskerar man att få dubbelarbete och interna spänningar inom förvaltningen.

## **Incitament vanligare än villkor**

En viktig fråga är om och i vilken utsträckning bistånd bör villkoras med migrationsrelaterade åtaganden, såsom samarbete kring återvändande och återtagande.

Studien visar att den ”hårda” konditionaliteten, där givarlandet uttryckligen avbryter eller kraftigt minskar biståndet om mottagarlandet inte uppfyller krav på migrationsområdet, är ovanlig. I stället tenderar länder att använda modeller som baseras på incitament och

ömsesidig vinning. Migrationspartnerskap kombinerar vanligtvis återintegrationsstöd, institutionsuppbyggnad, program för kompetensrörlighet och diplomatiskt engagemang.

Danmark och Nederländerna har varit mer benägna att använda explicit politiskt villkorande. Tyskland har betonat partnerskapsbaserade lösningar och positiva incitament. Norge har i stor utsträckning undvikit ett mer tydligt villkorande.

I samtliga fall är beläggen begränsade för att villkorande i sig leder till betydande effekter på migrationen. Samarbetet beror ofta mer på diplomatiska relationer, administrativ kapacitet och bredare politiska faktorer än på biståndets storlek.

## **Få belägg för effekter på faktisk migration**

En återkommande iakttagelse i landsstudierna är att initiativ i gränslandet mellan migrations- och utvecklingsamarbete ofta motiveras med deras potentiella bidrag till att minska irreguljär migration, underlätta återvändande eller adressera migrationens “grundorsaker”. Tillgängliga utvärderingar tyder dock på att den övergripande effekten av att använda utvecklingsbistånd för att påverka migrationsutfall i regel är *begränsad, starkt kontextberoende och svår att mäta*.

Utvecklingsamarbete kan samtidigt stödja vissa migrationsrelaterade styrningsmål, till exempel genom att stärka institutionell kapacitet för migrationshantering, förbättra förutsättningarna för återintegrering av återvändande migranter samt stödja lagliga migrationsvägar. Dessa bidrag bör dock inte tolkas som belägg för att utvecklingsamarbete leder till mätbara förändringar i migrationsflöden.

Program för återvändande och återintegrering kan förbättra situationen för *enskilda* återvändande, men leder sällan till varaktiga ökning av återvändandet i stort. Informationskampanjer kan öka medvetenheten, men det finns *begränsad evidens* för att de påverkar människors beteende. Insatser för att hantera migrationens “grundorsaker” möter liknande begränsningar: en omfattande forskning

visar att utveckling ofta leder till ökad migration på kort till medellång sikt i takt med att inkomster och handlingsmöjligheter ökar.

Sammantaget tyder fallen på att utvecklingssamarbete med migrationskoppling kan generera meningsfulla resultat på projektnivå, men att dess samlade påverkan på migrationsdynamik eller strukturella utvecklingsförändringar förblir begränsad och svår att entydigt tillskriva dessa insatser.

Slutsatsen är emellertid inte att migrationsrelaterat utvecklingssamarbete helt saknar värde, utan att förväntningarna måste vara realistiska och baseras på evidens.

## **Utvecklings- och humanitära principer står under press**

Att koppla migrationsmål till utvecklingssamarbetet väcker viktiga normativa och praktiska frågor. Ett återkommande tema är hur prioriteringar på migrationsområdet förhåller sig till grundläggande principer såsom fattigdomsminskning, mottagarländerns ägarskap, mänskliga rättigheter och att utvecklingspolitiken förblir koherent.

De danska och nederländska fallen visar hur en starkare betoning på migrationshantering, utifrån från inrikespolitiska hänsyn, kan påverka de geografiska och tematiska prioriteringarna. Bistånd har i ökad utsträckning kanaliserats till länder som anses strategiskt viktiga för migrationskontroll eller återvändandesamarbete. Detta kan stärka kopplingen till utrikespolitiken, men också innebära att fokus flyttas från de fattigaste länderna eller att långvariga utvecklingspartnerskap avbryts.

I Tyskland har debatten i högre grad rört institutionella roller. Aktörer inom utveckling och bistånd har uttryckt oro för att biståndet riskerar att underordnas kortsiktiga migrationsmål, särskilt när åtgärder t.ex. återintegrations- eller återvändandeprogram förväntas leverera mätbara migrationseffekter. Samtidigt visar tysk praxis att utvecklingsbaserade ansatser – exempelvis partnerskap för laglig

migration vilket bidrar till kompetensförsörjning samt återintegrationsstöd – kan utformas så att de tjänar både utvecklings- och migrationsmål.

Norges mer försiktiga ansats speglar en medveten strävan att undvika en öppen politisering av biståndet. Migrationsmål har integrerats stegvis och ofta formulerats i humanitära termer eller i termer av ”grundorsaker”. Detta har bidragit till kontinuitet i utvecklingspolitiken, men också begränsat hur explicit migration och bistånd har sammankopplats.

I samtliga fall har aktörer inom utvecklingsbiståndet lyft en oro för en möjlig ”instrumentalisering” av biståndet. Spänningen blir särskilt tydlig när migrationskontroll hamnar högt på den politiska dagordningen och när förväntningar på snabba resultat riktas mot instrument som är utformade för långsiktig strukturell förändring.

## Övergripande lärdomar för Sverige

Erfarenheterna från Danmark, Norge, Tyskland och Nederländerna visar att sammankopplingen mellan migration och utvecklingssamarbete numera är en del av etablerad europeisk praxis. Frågan är inte längre om sammankopplingen ska göras, utan hur den kan hanteras på ett sätt som är effektivt, koherent och trovärdigt.

Tre lärdomar framstår som särskilt viktiga.

- I. För det första är frågan om styrning helt avgörande. En whole-of-government ansats kan vara nödvändig, men är samtidigt krävande. Tydliga mandat, väldefinierat ansvar och långsiktig samverkan mellan departement och myndigheter är viktiga inslag för att undvika fragmentering och interna spänningar.
- II. För det andra måste förväntningarna vara realistiska. Utvecklingssamarbete kan stärka institutioner, stödja återintegration och bidra till långsiktig stabilitet. Det är däremot osannolikt att det snabbt leder till färre irreguljära migranter eller fler återvändanden.

III. För det tredje beror legitimiteten på policykoherensen. Om man kan integrera och harmoniera migrationsmålen med en trovärdig utvecklingslogik blir spänningarna lättare att hantera. När bistånd främst ramas in som ett verktyg för migrationskontroll skärps målkonflikterna och riskerna för bristande samstämmighet ökar.

## **Framåtblick**

Sverige går nu in i en avgörande fas när den migrationsrelaterade utvecklingsstrategi ska genomföras. Erfarenheten av de landexempel vi har jämfört med visar att resultaten i mindre utsträckning beror på formella strategidokument och i högre grad på praktisk samordning, institutionell kapacitet och att kunna etablera långsiktigt partnerskap.

Migration och utveckling är strukturellt sammanflätade. Att hantera detta kräver tydlighet när strategier ska utformas, administrativ kompetens och en fast förankring i evidensbaserad politik.

Vår förhoppning är att denna antologi ska kunna bidra till detta arbete. Genom att förankra debatten i jämförande erfarenheter, snarare än antaganden, ger den en grund för informerade och balanse-  
rade politiska vägval under de kommande åren.

# Summary

## **Realism, coordination and clarity**

Migration has become one of the most politically salient issues in Europe. At the same time, development cooperation is increasingly expected to contribute not only to poverty reduction and sustainable development, but also to migration-related objectives such as reducing irregular migration, strengthening return and readmission, and addressing the “root causes” of displacement.

Sweden’s new *Reform Agenda for Development Cooperation and the Strategy for Sweden’s Global Development Cooperation on Migration, Return and Voluntary Return (2024–2028)* mark a clear shift in emphasis. Migration is now framed as a strategic area for development cooperation. This places new demands on coordination, implementation and results.

Several comparable European countries have already gone through similar reforms. Denmark, Norway, Germany and the Netherlands have each linked migration and development cooperation in different ways. Their experiences offer valuable lessons – not least regarding governance, institutional design, political trade-offs and realistic expectations of what development aid can achieve in the field of migration.

This anthology examines how these linkages have been designed and implemented in practice. It focuses on governance, coordination and results rather than political rhetoric. The central question is not whether migration and development should be linked – that is already happening across Europe – but how such linkages can be managed in a way that is effective, coherent and consistent with core development principles.

## **Migration has gained larger and strategic importance within development aid**

Across all four countries studied, migration has become an increasingly prominent reference point in development cooperation. However, the degree of integration and political framing differs.

Denmark represents the most far-reaching example. Migration objectives have explicitly shaped geographic priorities, funding allocations and the overall direction of development cooperation. Development assistance is clearly framed as a tool to prevent irregular migration and support migration control partnerships.

The Netherlands has also made the linkage explicit, stating that development cooperation should contribute to managing migration flows. This has been accompanied by a refocusing of aid towards regions considered particularly relevant from a migration perspective.

Germany has institutionalised migration–development cooperation through structured programmes and formal coordination mechanisms, but the framing is often in win-win terms. Development cooperation plays an important role in reintegration support, migration partnerships and skills mobility initiatives-

Norway has taken a more cautious and gradual approach. Migration objectives have been incorporated incrementally, often framed in humanitarian or development terms rather than explicitly as migration control.

A common pattern across all cases is that migration objectives are often integrated gradually, through the adaptation and repurposing of existing development instruments rather than through abrupt institutional reform.

## **Coordination is essential – but complex**

Linking migration and development requires cooperation across ministries and agencies responsible for foreign affairs, development, justice, migration, police and diplomatic services. All four countries have introduced some form of whole-of-government coordination.

However, coordination does not automatically lead to coherence. Development actors typically operate with long-term objectives and poverty reduction mandates, while migration authorities face short-term political pressure to deliver visible results. These differences in time horizons, institutional culture and accountability structures create tensions.

Denmark has adopted a relatively centralised coordination model with strong political steering. Germany relies on structured but complex inter-ministerial processes on a more ad-hoc basis. The Netherlands combines inter-ministerial collaboration with close alignment to EU-level initiatives. Norway's approach is more pragmatic and flexible.

The key lesson is that coordination mechanisms must be actively maintained and clearly structured. Without clear roles and responsibilities, duplication and internal tensions can arise.

## **Incentives rather than aid conditionality**

One important question is whether development assistance is and should be conditioned on migration-related commitments, such as cooperation on return and readmission.

The study shows that explicit aid withdrawal linked to migration cooperation is rare. Instead, countries tend to rely on incentive-based approaches. Migration partnerships typically combine reintegration support, institutional capacity-building, skills mobility schemes and diplomatic engagement.

Denmark and the Netherlands have been more willing to use explicit political conditionality. Germany has emphasised partnership-based arrangements and positive incentives. Norway has largely avoided overt conditionality.

Across cases, there is limited evidence that conditionality alone produces significant migration effects. Cooperation often depends more on diplomatic relations, administrative capacity and broader political factors than on aid volumes.

## **Evidence of migration impact is limited**

A recurring finding across the country cases is that migration–development initiatives are frequently justified in terms of their potential to reduce irregular migration, facilitate returns, or address the “root causes” of migration. However, available evaluations suggest that the overall impact of using development aid to influence migration outcomes remains modest, context-dependent, and difficult to measure.

Development cooperation can nonetheless support *certain* migration-related governance objectives, for example by strengthening institutional capacity for migration management, improving reintegration conditions for returnees and supporting legal migration pathways. However, these contributions *should not* be interpreted as evidence that development cooperation produces measurable changes in migration flows.

Return and reintegration programmes may improve outcomes for *individual* returnees, but rarely translate into sustained increases in return rates. Information campaigns may raise awareness, yet evidence of behavioural effects remains limited. Efforts to address the “root causes” of migration face similar constraints: a broad body of research shows that development often increases migration in the short to medium term as incomes and capabilities rise.

Taken together, the cases suggest that migration-related development cooperation can generate meaningful outputs but its aggregate

impact on migration dynamics or structural development change remains modest and difficult to attribute.

The implication is not that migration-related development cooperation lacks value, but that expectations must be realistic and grounded in evidence.

## **Development and humanitarian principles are under pressure**

Linking migration objectives to development cooperation raises important normative and practical questions. Across the country chapters, a recurring theme is how migration-related priorities interact with core principles of development cooperation – poverty reduction, recipient-country ownership, human rights and policy coherence for development.

The Danish and Dutch cases illustrate how a stronger political emphasis on migration management can influence geographic and thematic priorities. In both cases, aid has increasingly been directed towards countries considered strategically important for migration control or return cooperation. While this may strengthen foreign policy leverage, it can also shift attention away from the poorest countries or from long-standing development partnerships.

In Germany, the debate has centred less on geographic shifts and more on institutional roles. Development actors have expressed concern that aid risks being subordinated to short-term migration objectives, particularly when reintegration or return programmes are expected to deliver measurable migration outcomes. However, German practice shows that development-based approaches – for example skills partnerships and reintegration support – can be framed in ways that serve both development and migration goals.

Norway's more cautious approach reflects a conscious effort to avoid overt politicisation of development assistance. Migration objectives have been integrated incrementally, often framed in human-

itarian or “root causes” language. This has helped preserve continuity in development policy, but has also limited the extent to which migration considerations are made explicit.

Across all cases, development professionals have raised concerns about the potential “instrumentalisation” of aid. The tension is particularly visible when migration control becomes politically urgent and when expectations of rapid results are placed on development instruments that are designed for long-term structural change.

## **Overarching lessons for Sweden**

The experiences of Denmark, Norway, Germany and the Netherlands show that linking migration and development cooperation is now part of mainstream European practice. The key question now is not whether to make this linkage, but how to manage it in a way that is effective, coherent and credible.

Three lessons stand out.

- I. First, governance is decisive. Whole-of-government coordination is necessary but demanding. Clear mandates, defined responsibilities, and sustained inter-ministerial cooperation are crucial for avoiding fragmentation and internal tensions.
- II. Second, expectations must be realistic. Development cooperation can strengthen institutions, support reintegration and contribute to long-term stability. It is unlikely, however, to produce rapid or automatic declines in irregular migration or immediate increases in returns.
- III. Third, legitimacy depends on clarity. When migration objectives are embedded within a broader development logic, tensions are easier to manage. When aid is primarily framed as a migration-control tool, trade-offs become sharper and risks to coherence increase.

## Looking ahead

Sweden is now entering a decisive phase in implementing its migration-related development strategy. The comparative experience suggests that results will depend less on formal strategy documents and more on practical coordination, institutional capacity and long-term partnerships.

Migration and development are structurally intertwined. Managing that interconnection requires strategic clarity, administrative competence and a firm commitment to evidence-based policymaking.

Our hope is that this anthology will support that effort. By grounding the debate in comparative experience rather than assumptions, it provides a foundation for informed and balanced policy choices in the years ahead.

# Introduction

Henrik Malm Lindberg and Iris Luthman

## **Why another anthology on the migration – development nexus and why now?**

*“For far too long, migration policy has been based on hunches, anecdotes, and political expediency. It is now time to turn to the evidence, and use it to build a common understanding of how international migration can bring benefits to all.” –Kofi Annan, Opening Statement at the United Nations High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, 2006*

Nearly two decades later, Annan’s appeal at the first High-Level Dialogue on international migration and development, convened in New York on 14–15 September 2006, remains strikingly relevant. Migration policy – still among the most politicised and contested areas of governance – continues too often to be shaped by short-term political pressures rather than systematic evidence or accumulated experience.

At the same time, the policy context in which Annan made this statement differed in important ways from today’s debate. In the mid-2000s, discussions about the so-called *migration-development nexus* largely focused on how migration could generate positive development outcomes, for example through remittances, diaspora engagement and the circulation of skills and knowledge. In recent years, however, the policy agenda in Europe has broadened – and in some respects shifted – towards how development cooperation can also contribute to migration governance objectives, such as addressing the drivers of irregular migration, strengthening migration management in partner countries, and facilitating return and reintegration.

This evolving policy landscape makes Annan’s statement no less relevant, but arguably more complex. The challenge is not only to understand how migration can contribute to development and vice versa, but also how policies linking migration and development are designed, implemented and coordinated in practice – and what consequences these linkages may have for both policy fields.

These questions have become increasingly central to current debates across Europe, including in Sweden. In recent years, Swedish policy-makers have placed growing emphasis on the relationship between migration management and development cooperation, as reflected in the government’s 2023 reform agenda for development cooperation and the *Global Development Cooperation Strategy on Migration, Return and Voluntary Return* (2024–2028) (The Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2024), which together mark a significant policy shift. These frameworks signal that the linkages between migration management and development cooperation are becoming increasingly central to Swedish aid policy. Migration is now explicitly framed as a strategic area for international collaboration – requiring new coordination across ministries, agencies, and partner countries. At the same time, the Swedish government has indicated that it is looking to experiences in European countries – most explicitly Denmark – when shaping its approach to migration policy, underscoring the growing relevance of cross-country learning in this field (Reuters, 2023).

The idea for this anthology has grown out of this changing landscape. In 2024, The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA) and the Migration Studies Delegation (Delmi), two Government committees, and the European Migration Network (EMN Sweden) entered into a sustained dialogue on how to strengthen knowledge exchange between the research and policy communities. Two subsequent discussions in roundtable and workshop format followed partly based on the EMN Inform (2024). They brought together relevant stakeholders from civil society organisations, ministries (primarily the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice) and public agencies (primarily The Swedish Migration Agency and Sida).

From these conversations emerged the idea of producing a comparative anthology that could provide evidence-based insights, grounded in practical experience, to inform Sweden's reform process and contribute to broader European discussions. The resulting volume, *Migration, Aid and Development: Experiences from European Countries*, is a joint initiative between EBA, Delmi and EMN Sweden. It examines how migration and development objectives have been linked in Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and Germany – countries that share strong donor traditions but differ in how they have coordinated aid and migration policy. Their experiences offer valuable points of comparison for Sweden as it moves forward with implementing its own migration-related strategies, while also holding broader relevance for European policymakers confronting similar dilemmas.

By examining how migration has been integrated into development cooperation across a set of European donor states, the volume aims to provide both a scholarly and a policy-relevant contribution. Its analytical focus lies on *implementation* and *governance*: how policies are put into practice, what compromises and innovations emerge, and how institutions manage potential or perceived trade-offs between development and migration objectives. This emphasis reflects the insight from implementation research that *policy is made in practice* (Bengtsson, 2012). It is often during execution – rather than through high-level declarations – that the real content of policy is shaped.

The volume thus situates the Swedish reform agenda – epitomised by the *Global Development Cooperation Strategy on Migration, Return and Voluntary Return (2024–2028)* – within a wider European landscape in which similar linkages are being made, tested, and contested. The purpose of this introductory chapter is threefold: **first**, to situate the volume within contemporary European and global debates on the migration–development nexus; **second**, to introduce Sweden's current reform agenda and describe and explain why comparative insights are particularly timely; and **third**, to outline the guiding questions, case selection, and analytical framework of the volume. By doing so, this chapter sets the empirical and analytical stage for the

country studies that follow, and positions the volume as a resource for first and foremost evidence-based policymaking but also academic research.

Ultimately, this volume answers former Secretary-General Annan’s call to “turn to the evidence.” By drawing on experiences from across Europe, it aspires to strengthen the knowledge base for migration and development policy – anchoring future decisions not in hunches or expediency, but in systematic analysis and evidence-informed practice – what in Swedish policy tradition is known as *beprövad erfarenhet* (“proven experience”).

## **The migration–development nexus in international and European policy**

While the call to ground migration policy in evidence has echoed through many international forums since Annan’s address, it was also part of a broader shift in the global policy landscape. Already in 1994, at the landmark *International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)* in Cairo, states emphasized the potential benefits of migration for both sending and receiving countries. Its Programme of Action – described as “the most comprehensive” negotiated UN text on international migration prior to the 2016 *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants* – stressed the need for stronger cooperation and dialogue between countries of origin and destination in order to maximise the benefits of migration for those involved and to enhance the likelihood that migration would have positive developmental consequences for both sending and receiving states (Wilmoth, 2017; United Nations, 1995, p. 51).

A little over a decade later, this agenda was taken forward at the *United Nations High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development in New York* (14–15 September 2006) – the first global forum devoted entirely to this theme (Gasper & Roldan, 2011). It was at this event that Kofi Annan delivered his oft-cited words on the need to “turn to the evidence” and build a shared understanding of how

migration can benefit all. The Dialogue marked a turning point in the international recognition of migration as a potential enabler of development. It gave rise to the *Global Forum on Migration and Development* (GFMD) and to a more structured effort to link migration to development cooperation, policy coherence, and global governance.

**Box 1. What is meant by the “migration–development nexus”?**

The migration–development nexus refers to the interconnected relationship between migration and development: migration can enhance or hinder development outcomes, while levels and patterns of development, in turn, shape migration. In research and policy debates, migration is often seen as contributing to development through remittances, skills transfer, labour mobility, and diaspora engagement, but also as being driven by underdevelopment, inequality, conflict, and weak governance, raising concerns about brain drain and irregular migration.

As highlighted by Nyberg-Sørensen, Van Hear, and Engberg-Pedersen in their influential 2002 paper *The Migration–Development Nexus: Evidence and Policy Options*, migration–development linkages transcend national boundaries and require cross-national analysis and cooperation between states, migrants, and local actors, as well as attention to how migration reshapes socio-economic and political structures in both countries of origin and destination (Nyberg Sørensen, Van Hear, & Engberg-Pedersen, 2002).

The understanding of migration as both *affecting* and *being affected by* development has, since the launch of the GFMD, been reiterated in a range of major international and national frameworks. Whether this relationship has been conceptualised in academic and policy debates as *positive* – migration as a driver of prosperity through remittances, skills transfer, and diaspora engagement – or *negative* – migra-

tion as a symptom and potential amplifier of underdevelopment through brain drain and dependency – has however shifted over time in line with political, economic, and security contexts.

A key milestone – anchored more in the positive discourse on the migration-development nexus – was the adoption of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* in 2015, which explicitly acknowledges “the positive contribution of migrants for inclusive growth and sustainable development” (para. 29) and includes a dedicated target (10.7) on facilitating safe, orderly, and regular migration (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). By situating migration within the broader development agenda, the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* marked an important step toward mainstreaming migration into global policy frameworks.

Building on this trajectory, the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)* – adopted in 2018 after the groundwork laid by the *New York Declaration* – represents the first comprehensive global framework on migration. It explicitly recognises migration as a driver of sustainable development while situating migration governance within the broader objectives of the 2030 Agenda. The GCM sets out 23 objectives, several of which directly address the migration–development nexus, including commitments to facilitate remittances, strengthen diaspora engagement, and promote skills mobility. In doing so, the Compact consolidated earlier efforts to link migration with development cooperation and policy coherence, while also reflecting the growing importance of migration management in international politics.

Taken together, these frameworks – the 1994 Programme of Action of the Cairo Conference, the *Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD)*, the 2030 Agenda, the GCM and many others – have underlined the opportunities inherent in aligning migration and development, and they have encouraged states to consider migration within the broader pursuit of sustainable development. However, they do not explicitly prescribe the use of official development assistance (ODA), i.e. government aid that specifically targets the eco-

conomic development and welfare of developing countries, to achieve migration policy goals. Instead, they have created a political space in which migration and development are increasingly articulated as mutually reinforcing agendas. The GCM, for example explicitly encourages states to draw on existing cooperation frameworks and finance instruments to advance its objectives (United Nations General Assembly, 2019). This discourse has arguably legitimised the use of ODA in connection with migration-related priorities – whether to facilitate remittances, support reintegration, or address the so-called “root causes” of irregular migration.

## **Box 2. The “root causes” of migration**

The concept of “root causes” refers to structural conditions in countries of origin that are understood to influence migration decisions, including poverty, inequality, lack of economic opportunities, political repression, weak governance, human rights violations, environmental pressures, and violent conflict.<sup>1</sup> The underlying assumption is that individuals may seek to migrate when such conditions constrain livelihoods, security, or prospects for a better future.

Efforts to manage migration by addressing root causes emerged in European policy debates from the 1980s onwards and gained prominence during the 1990s (Carling & Talleraas, 2016). These approaches typically combine humanitarian action — such as conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and protection of human rights — with development cooperation aimed at improving economic and social conditions, supporting democratic governance, and strengthening local labour markets. The “root causes” fram-

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<sup>1</sup> A distinction can also be made between root causes and drivers of migration. Carling and Talleraas (2016) define drivers as a broader concept encompassing the mechanisms and processes that produce migration outcomes (e.g. social networks and access to information). They also conceptualise migration as the outcome of both the formation of migration aspirations and the capacity to realise them, emphasising the interaction between structural conditions and individual agency.

ing later became a central rationale for several EU external migration initiatives, including the establishment of the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), which sought to address the drivers of irregular migration through targeted development and stabilisation interventions.

Research has, however, increasingly questioned the assumption that development aid aimed at addressing root causes reduces migration. Empirical evidence suggests that any reductions in irregular migration tend to be temporary, while over time improvements in income, education, and capabilities may increase mobility by enabling more people to migrate — often through regular channels — rather than reducing migration overall (Fuchs, Groeger, Heidland, & Wellner, 2023).

At the same time, the increasing scale and visibility of migration in Europe – particularly since the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015–2016 – has elevated migration to a central concern of both domestic and international policymaking. Within this context, international development cooperation has faced mounting pressures to respond not only to its traditional goals of poverty reduction and sustainable development, but also to the political national imperatives of migration management. This shift reflects the recognition that effective migration management cannot be achieved without the cooperation of governments in countries of transit and origin – a cooperation that is unlikely to materialize unless it is perceived as mutually beneficial (Castles & Delgado Wise, 2008, p. 3).

To achieve this perception of mutual benefit, the European Union (EU) has, over the last two decades, strategically leveraged both development aid and trade when cooperating with third countries on migration management. This trend has been particularly visible in the establishment of the *EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa* (EUTF) in 2015 and, more recently, the *Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument* (NDICI–Global Europe) for the period 2021–2027. Both instruments illustrate how development finance

has been mobilised to serve migration-related objectives: the EUTF was explicitly framed as addressing the root causes of irregular migration and displacement, while NDICI–Global Europe represents the first EU external financing instrument to explicitly target migration. It plays a central role in implementing the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which emphasises the importance of building comprehensive and mutually beneficial partnerships with third countries (Cassarino, 2025; Sida, 2025). Within NDICI–Global Europe, a guiding 10 per cent of the financial framework is earmarked for actions supporting the management and governance of migration and forced displacement, including measures addressing the root causes of irregular migration when directly linked to specific migration-related challenges (Sida, 2025).

### **Box 3. The Pact on Migration and Asylum**

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum is a comprehensive framework for managing migration within the EU and in cooperation with countries outside the Union. While it includes reforms to asylum procedures and responsibility-sharing inside the EU, the Pact also has a strong *external dimension* that is central to the migration–development nexus.

Under this external approach, the EU increasingly links development aid and other incentives to cooperation on migration control. Countries of origin and transit that help reduce irregular migration and accept returns are more likely to receive development funding, investment support, or visa facilitation. Limited cooperation, particularly on readmission, may instead lead to reduced aid or restrictive visa measures. Through new migration partnerships, the Pact combines development assistance with border management, return cooperation, and anti-smuggling efforts—making development policy an explicit tool for achieving EU migration objectives.

## Sweden's Reform Agenda in (brief) context

Against the backdrop of renewed political attention to migration–development linkages since 2015, Sweden offers a particularly interesting case. Long characterised by continuity, predictability, and a strong commitment to multilateralism and global poverty reduction, Swedish development cooperation is now undergoing a reform process in which migration management has become a more explicit and strategic objective. Understanding how this shift has emerged – and how it builds on earlier policy choices – is essential for situating the current reform agenda within both a national and a European context.

Historically, Sweden has been recognised as one of the world's largest donors relative to the size of its economy, with a development policy grounded in rights-based principles and a strong poverty orientation (Danielson & Wohlgemuth, 2003). Swedish aid policy has also been closely aligned with international frameworks on aid effectiveness and policy coherence for development. For decades Sweden consistently exceeded the UN target of allocating 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI) to official development assistance (ODA).

Although the one-percent-target was abandoned by the Kristersson government in 2022, Sweden's commitment to international development has remained comparatively strong and ranks among the top donors within the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) relative to the size of its economy. Together with Norway, Denmark, and Luxembourg Sweden still meet the UN target (OECD, 2024).

At the same time, Swedish development cooperation has gradually changed in purpose and direction. The integration of migration into development policy has largely mirrored broader international and European shifts. An early, primarily technical step occurred in 1988, when the DAC revised its rules to allow certain domestic refugee costs to be reported as ODA. Sweden adopted this approach soon after and, since 1991/92, has included first-year asylum-related costs

for migrants from low- and middle-income countries as ODA-eligible expenditures (Pettersson, Malm Lindberg, & Hårsmar, 2022). While not a policy priority in itself, this accounting change brought migration spending formally into the aid domain.

During the early 1990s, the link between migration and development was articulated more explicitly. Government Bill 1990/91:195 *About active refugee and immigration policy, etc.* framed forced migration as a consequence of underdevelopment and conflict, arguing that development cooperation could contribute to preventing displacement and supporting refugee-hosting countries. Refugee flows were described as “signs of failures” and global imbalances – problems that development policy should address at their source (Prop. 1990/91:195). This preventive logic was consolidated in the mid-1990s. In preparation for a comprehensive migration policy bill, the 1996/97 Budget Bill emphasized the need to highlight links between migration policy and other policy areas, particularly development cooperation, and noted that migration-related considerations should be integrated into aid policy where relevant (Prop. 1996/97:1). The subsequent migration policy bill – Government Bill 1996/97:25 *Swedish Migration Policy in a Global Perspective* – was adopted in December 1996 and formalised this approach. Migration thus entered development cooperation more proactively and introduced an early coherence agenda: migration and development policies should reinforce rather than undermine one another.

#### **Box 4. Whole-of-government approach and instrumentalisation**

In this anthology, the concept of a *whole-of-government approach* or *whole-of-government strategy* appears frequently. This concept refers to a collaborative approach in which different government ministries and agencies work across traditional boundaries to achieve common goals and address complex policy issues. In addition to collaboration within the public sector, external partners – such as NGOs or other actors – may also be involved.

Whole-of-government approaches are used to break down institutional silos in order to improve policy coherence and effectiveness, particularly in policy areas that span multiple jurisdictions or sectors. As institutional contexts differ across countries, the use of whole-of-government approaches or strategies also differs.

Instrumentalisation is another key concept that refers to the strategic use of aid. It is the practice of using development assistance as a tool to achieve political or strategic objectives that lie outside its core purpose of poverty reduction and sustainable development, in this case migration related objectives.

A decisive step followed in 2003 with the adoption of the *Swedish Policy for Global Development* (PGU), which arguably laid the foundation for a whole-of-government approach to promote a just and sustainable global development. Migration was identified – alongside trade, security, and environmental policy – as an area requiring coherence with development goals. The PGU emphasized both migration’s development potential, including labour mobility and remittances, and the need to address underlying drivers such as poverty and conflict (Prop. 2002/03:122; Fellesson & Román, 2016). From this point, Swedish policy formally required that migration decisions consider their effects on poverty reduction and global justice, while development cooperation should systematically consider migration dynamics.

### **Box 5. In-donor refugee costs and deductions from aid budgets**

In many donor countries, parts of the aid budget may be used to cover the domestic costs of receiving refugees and asylum seekers. Under OECD/DAC rules, certain in-donor refugee costs – primarily expenses incurred during refugees’ first year in the host country – can be reported as official development assistance (ODA). These costs typically include accommoda-

tion, subsistence, and administrative expenses related to reception and asylum procedures. When such costs are financed from the aid budget, they effectively reduce the funds available for other development cooperation activities and are often referred to as deductions from the aid framework.

In Sweden, deductions from the aid budget have been used to cover domestic refugee-reception costs, most notably expenses incurred by the Swedish Migration Agency. The scale of these deductions has varied over time, but during periods of high refugee arrivals—such as 2013–2017 and again in 2022—a substantial share of the aid budget was redirected towards domestic costs, primarily accommodation and administrative expenses linked to the reception system.

The 2008 “relaunch” of the PGU elevated migration to one of six global challenges, focusing on labour mobility, remittances and skills transfer, and protection and durable solutions for refugees (Skr. 2007/08:89). Migration was now framed both as a driver of development and as an area marked by inherent trade-offs, reflecting a dual logic that continues to shape policy debates. As migration gained prominence on global policy agendas in the early 2010s, Sweden’s 2014 follow-up to the PGU devoted particular attention to “the global challenge of migration flows” (Skr. 2013/14:154). The report highlighted both opportunities and goal conflicts, stressing the need for stronger coherence across policy areas.

The 2015–2016 refugee crisis exposed underlying tensions in the coherence agenda. In-donor refugee costs peaked at around 22 per cent of the aid budget in 2015 (Pettersson, Malm Lindberg, & Hårsmar, 2022). In absolute terms, these costs amounted to approximately SEK 6–9 billion, placing significant pressure on the aid budget and limiting the scope for other development cooperation activities. Following a renewed increase in refugee reception in 2022, linked to the arrival of displaced persons from Ukraine after Russia’s full-scale invasion, several donor countries considered or introduced caps on in-

donor refugee costs. In Sweden, for example, an 8 per cent cap was introduced as a means of preventing domestic refugee-reception costs from crowding out traditional development aid. Notably, the deductions involved are substantial in absolute terms and, in many cases, considerably exceed the volumes of aid allocated to migration-related initiatives in partner countries.

Politically, the 2015–2016 refugee crisis also contributed to discussions about using development aid in migrants’ regions of origin to “help closer to home” and thereby reduce the pressure of irregular migration towards Europe.<sup>2</sup> By the end of 2015 and into 2016, Sweden – like the rest of the EU – began establishing and contributing to special funds and initiatives to “address the root causes” of migration in Africa and the Middle East (Trawicki Anderson, 2024).

While framed as humanitarian and development-oriented, these initiatives signalled a clearer use of migration management as a motive for development interventions. This marked a shift from the period before the 2015–2016 crisis, when, as Felleson and Román (2016, p. 51) note, it had generally been easier to integrate migration into development policy than the other way around, since doing so posed fewer risks of institutional or policy conflicts within the Swedish context. Before the crisis, linking migration and development was mainly about finding synergies and mutual benefits. The refugee crisis, however, arguably changed this dynamic by opening a window of opportunity for a stronger integration of migration objectives into development cooperation frameworks and funding instruments – an approach that became increasingly seen as both politically legitimate and practically necessary.

In the years that followed, this logic became increasingly institutionalised. The change of government in 2022 further accelerated the

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, interview with then Minister for International Development Cooperation Isabella Lövin in Bergin, 2016.

shift. The *Tidö Agreement*<sup>3</sup> explicitly called for using development aid and diplomatic tools to promote return and readmission, including conditioning development assistance on cooperation from partner countries and focusing aid on countering irregular migration and increasing returns (Tidö Agreement, 2022, p. 44).

These ambitions were subsequently translated into a comprehensive reform of Swedish development policy. *The Reform Agenda for Development Cooperation (Bistånd för en ny era, 2023)* represents a clear break with Sweden's tradition of continuity, seeking to align aid more closely with foreign- and domestic-policy interests, strengthen coordination, and concentrate resources geographically (EBA, 2024). Within this framework, synergies between development cooperation and migration policies are emphasised, particularly reducing irregular migration and increasing return and sustainable reintegration, but also as a *foreign-policy lever* to advance Swedish interests (EBA, 2024; Swedish Government, 2023). This policy reorientation has been accompanied by a stronger emphasis on cross-government coordination, reflecting an explicit whole-of-government approach to migration governance. A concrete expression of this is the establishment of the *State Secretaries' Group for Coordination of Migration Issues* in 2023, aimed at aligning migration, foreign, aid, and justice policies across ministries (Vera-Larrucea & Luthman, 2024).

The most tangible operational expression of the reform, however, is the adoption of the *Strategy for Sweden's Global Development Cooperation on Migration, Return and Voluntary Return (2024–2028)*. With a total budget of SEK 3 billion, the strategy aims to counter irregular migration, support effective and sustainable return processes in partner countries (Swedish Government, 2024). Sida's implementation plan focus the return and reintegration efforts; and to strengthen institu-

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<sup>3</sup> The Tidö Agreement (Tidöavtalet) is the governing policy platform negotiated in October 2022 between the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, and the Sweden Democrats. It outlines the coalition's policy priorities for the 2022–2026 parliamentary term, including a more restrictive approach to migration and asylum, greater emphasis on return and readmission cooperation, and the use of development assistance and diplomatic measures to advance these goals.

tional capacity for migration and asylum management in eight priority countries – Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, Syria, Turkey. The work is aligned with EU instruments such as NDICI–Global Europe and is coordinated through the Team Sweden network, a collaborative framework established in 2015 to promote coherence between development cooperation, trade, and investment policy, bringing together Sida and other public agencies and state-owned actors (Sida, 2025).

Taken together, these developments place Sweden more firmly within a broader European trend of linking development and migration, while also marking a shift in emphasis: from a focus on “migration *for* development” toward using development cooperation as a means to achieve migration-related results. This makes implementation and governance the central test of reform—an issue that the next section, and indeed this volume as a whole, takes up through a comparative exploration of how similar linkages have been designed and managed across European donor contexts.

## **From policy ambition to practice: tensions in linking migration and development**

The growing political emphasis on linking migration management and development cooperation has generated new policy instruments and institutional arrangements, while at the same time intensifying debates about legitimacy, implementation, and values. Questions about *whether* and *how* migration and development should be linked are closely intertwined, and continue to be negotiated in both policy design and practice. It is against this backdrop that a set of recurring implementation challenges and normative tensions have become increasingly visible across European policy debates.

One of the central challenges in the migration–development nexus lies in implementation: the *how* of designing and adopting policies that generate synergies rather than trade-offs. Using development assistance to pursue migration-related objectives – such as strengthen-

ing return systems, supporting reintegration, or promoting voluntary repatriation – is inherently complex, as it brings together humanitarian considerations, foreign policy priorities, and domestic migration interests.

Across Europe, these complexities are compounded by political and institutional pressures along the policy chain. Policymakers often face strong demands to deliver rapid and visible results on migration, which can constrain the space for data- and evidence-informed approaches. This politicisation complicates efforts to implement sustainable policies, particularly in a public debate – both offline and on social media – that tends to privilege quick fixes over long-term solutions. As discussed in later chapters, this politicisation has transformed migration from a matter of *low politics* – previously a largely technocratic domain managed within administrative bodies by public agencies or experts – into an issue of *high politics* that now occupies a prominent place on political agendas and in public discourse, with the direct involvement of senior political actors. This shift has important implications for how migration–development policies are framed, justified, and operationalised.

### **Box 6. Conceptual clarification: development, development cooperation and ODA**

**Development** refers broadly to long-term processes of economic, social and political change aimed at improving living conditions, reducing poverty and inequality, and strengthening institutions and rights. Discussions about the “migration–development nexus” often operate at this general level.

**International development cooperation** refers to the policy field through which states engage internationally to support development in partner countries. It includes strategic frameworks, institutional arrangements, political dialogue, capacity-building, humanitarian assistance and financial transfers. In

this volume, the term is primarily used as an umbrella concept for state-led external engagement in the development domain.

**Development assistance or development aid** usually refer to public financial resources allocated for development purposes. In practice, these terms frequently overlap with Official Development Assistance (ODA), but are not always used with technical precision.

**Official Development Assistance (ODA)**, is a defined reporting category established by the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC). It includes grants and concessional loans provided by official agencies, including state and local governments, or by their executive agencies; where the main objective is the promotion of economic development and welfare. ODA is subject to agreed eligibility criteria and reporting rules.

The distinction between these terms is relevant for the analysis in this anthology. While political debates often refer broadly to “development” in discussions on migration governance, the concrete instruments mobilised are typically specific components of development cooperation, often funded through ODA. When relevant, the chapters therefore distinguish between broader development policy objectives and the use of ODA as a financial and governance instrument.

Linking development aid to migration objectives has also brought normative tensions to the fore. The drive to “secure deals” on migration – such as enhanced border control or increased returns – has, in some cases, resulted in cooperation with authoritarian regimes in exchange for migration control, creating tensions with commitments to human rights and good governance. In the European context, for example, the EU allocated more than €150 million to Eritrea through the European Union Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), despite the country’s poor human rights record –arguably prioritising migration

deterrence over accountability (Le Coz & Ruiz Soto, 2021). Moreover, experience with the EUTF illustrates that job creation and development projects did not swiftly curb irregular migration as initially anticipated. On the contrary, improved livelihoods often initially expand people’s aspirations and capacity to migrate, a well-established finding in the migration–development literature (Lucas, 2019).

These debates also intersect with broader questions of policy coherence and coordination. Linking migration and development policies tests the principle of policy coherence for development, as ODA has traditionally focused on poverty reduction and recipient-country ownership. Redirecting aid towards donor-country migration priorities may strain this mandate, and critics have argued that earmarking development assistance for migration control risks diluting both the poverty focus and the effectiveness of development cooperation, as illustrated by experiences in countries such as Denmark (OECD, 2021)

Implementing migration-linked aid – whether conditional or not – also requires extensive coordination across government agencies in donor countries as well as with actors in partner countries. Migration and development span multiple policy domains, including foreign affairs, development cooperation, justice, and interior ministries, each characterised by distinct mandates, institutional logics, and time horizons. These differences can create coordination challenges and bureaucratic complexity, increasing the risk of fragmented implementation.

### **Box 7. Policy coherence versus coordination**

In this anthology, the concepts of *coherence* and *coordination* recur frequently. Although sometimes used interchangeably, they refer to distinct but related dimensions of policymaking.

**Policy coherence** concerns the alignment of objectives across different policy areas – for example migration and development – so that policies do not undermine one another and

ideally reinforce shared goals. It is primarily about the consistency and compatibility of policy aims and outcomes.

**Coordination**, by contrast, refers to the practical organisation of collaboration across government ministries, agencies, and levels of governance to ensure that policies are effectively implemented and connected in practice. While coherence focuses on policy alignment, coordination concerns the institutional processes through which such alignment is pursued.

As noted earlier in this chapter, many donor countries, including Sweden, have therefore sought to strengthen cross-government coordination through various forms of “whole-of-government” approaches. These arrangements aim to connect actors and policies across institutional boundaries, but research suggests that achieving effective coordination in practice remains challenging (Le Coz & Ruiz Soto, 2021). At the same time, the design of coordination mechanisms – and the ways in which tensions between migration management objectives and development principles are navigated – vary considerably across national contexts. Examining these differences, as well as the outcomes associated with different approaches, can offer valuable lessons for balancing humane and effective migration governance with the core objectives of development cooperation.

## **Purpose, guiding questions, and analytical framing of the volume**

As discussed in the preceding sections of this chapter, the past decade has seen a gradual reorientation of European and Swedish development cooperation, with migration objectives becoming increasingly embedded in aid policy and programming. Sweden’s ongoing reform agenda and its *Strategy for Sweden’s Global Development Cooperation on Migration, Return and Voluntary Return (2024–2028)* exemplify this broader shift. Against this backdrop – and taking the tensions and implementation challenges outlined above as a point of depar-

ture – the volume situates Sweden in comparative perspective by examining how other European donor countries have navigated similar developments.

The aim of the volume is to deepen the understanding of how migration governance and international development cooperation have been linked in other European donor countries and to identify lessons relevant to Sweden’s ongoing reform process. In particular, the comparison examines how national governments have integrated migration objectives into development cooperation and how these linkages are implemented in practice. While these developments unfold within a broader European policy environment – including EU frameworks and cooperation – the analytical focus lies on domestic policy shifts, institutional arrangements and implementation practices.

By focusing on implementation and governance, the analysis moves beyond policy rhetoric to examine how migration objectives are operationalised in practice, how institutional arrangements shape outcomes, and how actors balance development effectiveness with migration-management priorities.

Through empirical analyses from Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and Germany, the volume highlights both common patterns and key differences in governance arrangements, engagement with EU frameworks, and approaches to reconciling political pressures for migration control with the normative and operational commitments of development cooperation. The experiences of these countries thus provide a valuable reference point for Sweden and other donors seeking to design and implement migration–development policies.

The analysis is guided by four interrelated questions:

1. **Integration:** How have migration objectives been incorporated into development cooperation frameworks, priorities, and programming?

2. **Governance:** What institutional and inter-agency arrangements underpin these efforts, and how have they evolved?
3. **Principles and coherence:** To what extent do these practices align with core development principles, such as ownership, poverty reduction, and policy coherence for development?
4. **Outcomes, impact, and implications:** What have been the observed effects of linking migration objectives to development cooperation, and what lessons do these experiences offer for Sweden and other donors?

## **Why compare Sweden with Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway?**

The selection of Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway as comparative cases reflects both shared structural characteristics and meaningful institutional variation, making them particularly relevant for situating Sweden's ongoing reform process in a broader European context.

First, all five countries are stable parliamentary democracies with advanced welfare states, strong donor traditions, and well-functioning public administrations. They maintain close economic and political ties and operate within broadly similar governance environments, enabling meaningful comparison while limiting structural noise. Within this group, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway share a particularly close Nordic development cooperation tradition characterised by strong multilateral engagement, and historically strong normative commitments to poverty reduction and international solidarity rather than strategic or commercial interests (Hammarstedt & Luthman, 2025). Comparing how these closely related donor models have responded to growing political pressures to link migration and development therefore provides a particularly useful lens for understanding Sweden's current policy shift.

Second, each country represents a significant development cooperation donor within the OECD DAC framework. Sweden, Norway, and Denmark have consistently met or exceeded the 0.7 per cent ODA-to-GNI target between 2004 and 2024, with Sweden and Norway often approaching or exceeding one per cent. The Netherlands exceeded this target during the 2000s but fell below it in the following decade, while Germany has demonstrated a notable upward trajectory, increasing its ODA levels substantially in recent years (OECD; Donor Tracker).

Third, all five countries have experienced substantial immigration and asylum inflows over the past two decades, including a pronounced peak during the 2015–2016 refugee crisis and renewed inflows following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These shared migration dynamics provide a comparable policy context for examining how migration objectives have become linked to development cooperation (Pew Research Center, 2016; Eurostat, n.d.).

The cases also display several institutional differences that are relevant for the comparison. In relation to the EU, four of the countries are EU member states, while Norway constitutes an exception. However, as a member of the EEA and the Schengen area, Norway largely follows EU rules on immigration. Among the EU member states, Denmark has a unique legal opt-out from EU justice and home affairs policies, allowing it to maintain greater autonomy in immigration and asylum policy outside the *Common European Asylum System (CEAS)*. Germany and the Netherlands, by contrast, represent large and influential European donors whose approaches to linking migration governance and development cooperation have often been closely connected to EU-level initiatives and funding instruments, providing important reference points for Sweden as it navigates similar policy debates.

In terms of administrative structures, Germany is a federal state composed of 16 largely autonomous *Länder* (“federal states”), each with its own constitution, parliament, and government. The remaining countries are unitary states, although national governments dele-

gate significant responsibilities to regional and local levels. Within the Nordic context, Denmark and Norway are often described as following a West-Nordic administrative model characterised by hierarchical organisation and ministerial rule, whereas neighbouring Sweden has a state administration marked by a comparatively high degree of agency independence (Wenander, 2022).

Taken together, this represents a classical comparison of broadly similar countries that share key structural features—particularly in development cooperation and migration governance—while allowing for meaningful variation in institutional arrangements. All chapters respond to a common set of analytical questions, enabling comparisons that are intended to inform Swedish and European policymakers and practitioners.

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# Solidarity at a distance: Denmark's migration-development nexus in policy and practice

Jesper Bjarnesen, Frowin Rausis and Anja Simonsen

## Introduction

This chapter examines how the Danish government has used development aid to curb unwanted migration flows; identifies the key actors involved in this strategic linkage; and highlights some of its main consequences. Denmark's use of development aid has primarily aimed to minimise the inflow of people seeking protection, reflecting a focus on addressing the so-called root causes of migration. Beyond this approach, the Danish government has also tried to leverage development aid to foster international cooperation, particularly to secure agreements that aim to externalise asylum processing and refugee protection. Danish policy also envisions the use of development aid to bolster intergovernmental return frameworks and enforce the return of rejected asylum applicants. Over the past decade, the Danish government has also sought to use refugee resettlement more strategically as a means to reduce spontaneous arrivals of people seeking protection and to scale up international cooperation on migration control. This approach can be described as “solidarity at a distance” – prioritising protection and assistance in regions of origin while limiting protection in Denmark, and emphasizing financial contributions over the physical hosting of refugees.

To some extent, this approach may be understood as a Danish interpretation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum's third pillar on an “effective system of solidarity and responsibility” (European Commission, 2024a), reflecting an overall strategic shift at the EU level. At the same time, while many liberal democracies in Europe

and beyond have integrated migration control aims in their development policy over the past few decades, the Danish approach presents an interesting case in several respects. Denmark was among the first signatory states of the 1951 Refugee Convention and one of the pioneers in the legal codification of refugee protection at the national level. At the same time, Denmark was also one of the first countries to introduce procedural barriers to asylum (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017), and the first European state to pass a law that allowed a shift of responsibility for asylum processing and refugee protection to a non-European country (Vedsted-Hansen, 2025). Since the 1980s, many European countries have followed a similar path and adopted comprehensive national asylum frameworks as well as procedural barriers to refugee protection (Rausis, 2022). More recently, the idea to outsource asylum has gained traction across Europe states, with the UK concluding an agreement with Rwanda, Italy striving to delegate responsibility to Albania, and the EU paving the way for establishing *return hubs* in third countries. In this way, paradoxically, Denmark may be seen as a pioneer in both inclusive and restrictive asylum and immigration policies (see Pace, 2025), with development aid playing an increasingly important role in the latter trend.

As one factor enabling this pioneering role, Denmark's opt-out from CEAS (the EU's Common European Asylum System) has provided greater manoeuvring space for experimenting with new bilateral approaches. At the same time, Denmark has shifted some of its priorities from the national to the EU level, thereby broadening its influence on policy frameworks such as the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. In December 2025, under the Danish EU Presidency, the Council of the EU agreed on legislation that would allow Member States without opt-outs to follow the path of Denmark and the UK and pursue agreements that outsource asylum to countries with which applicants have no prior connection (Council of the EU, 2025). Despite moving in a more restrictive direction, in line with other Northern European countries, Denmark has shown limited activity in bilateral return diplomacy in comparison with countries such as France, Italy, or Switzerland, which have invested in more inter-

governmental return frameworks with non-European countries (Cassarino, n.d.).

The chapter proceeds by outlining broader transformations in Danish strategic priorities related to unwanted migration, with a particular emphasis on the past twenty years, and on the effects of the 2015–16 European refugee protection crisis. The subsequent section elaborates on the more specific policy initiatives and their implications. Next, we highlight a series of key initiatives that illustrate how the Danish policy approach has been implemented in practice. We conclude with observations on the implications and consequences of Denmark's shift towards *solidarity at a distance*, which serves both as a means of migration control and as a way of mitigating reputational costs arising from its restrictive asylum policy.

## **Data sources and methods of analysis**

The chapter draws on a wide range of primary and secondary sources. Essentially, it builds on three types of data sources to investigate the nexus between Danish development aid and migration policy.

First, to gain a bird's-eye perspective on the evolution of Danish development aid and migration policy, we use multiple datasets and employ descriptive-comparative statistics. We analyse trends in Denmark's contributions to Official Development Assistance (ODA) based on the Nordic Statistics Database and trace the evolution of asylum applications based on Statistics Denmark and Eurostat. Furthermore, we employ the UNHCR Refugee Data Finder for establishing the number of refugee resettlement intakes and the UN Refugee Agencies Funding (URAF) dataset (Rausis, Bachelet, and Lutz, 2026) for the yearly financial contributions to UNHCR.

Second, to examine the substance of Danish foreign, development, and migration policy, we primarily rely on content analysis of legal documents as well as key policy documents from the Ministry of Immigration and Integration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This

analysis of legal and policy documents is complemented by a close reading of parliamentary debates, press releases, and newspaper reports that refer to the migration–development nexus.

Third, the chapter is informed by expert interviews with Danish officials from the Ministry of Immigration and Integration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as representatives of UNHCR and Danish NGOs that were conducted in 2022 and 2023. Secondary sources are used to contextualize and triangulate the insights derived from document and statistical analysis as well as the expert interviews.

## **The “paradigm shift” in Danish foreign and development policy**

Over the past few decades, migration policy in Denmark has undergone two major transformations that mirror broader developments across Western liberal democracies. First, migration has shifted from being a matter of *low politics* – a largely technocratic domain handled within administrative branches – to an issue of *high politics* that occupies a central place on the political agenda and in public discourse (Rogers, 1992; Russell, 1992; Lavenex and Lahav, 2012). Second, migration policy has evolved from a primarily domestic concern into a key element of foreign affairs (Teitelbaum, 1984; Zolberg, 1983; Geiger and Pécoud, 2013).

Together, these developments have given rise to a vision of international engagement that can be characterised as a form of “strategising solidarity” (see Vaagland and Zaun, 2024) or “strategic humanitarianism” (see Snyder, 2011; Salehyan and Sahun, 2025). These approaches rely on extensive international cooperation and the strategic use of development aid alongside other diplomatic and foreign policy instruments to serve national interests. The Danish version of this strategic approach, which we characterise as *solidarity at a distance*, rests on two core elements: an emphasis on providing protection in regions of origin while minimising refugee intakes and protection in

Denmark, and a prioritisation of financial solidarity over admission-based forms of solidarity. These principles are a central part of what is often referred to as a “paradigm shift” in Danish foreign and development policy since the 1990s (Kjær, 2022; Rytter et al., 2023; Vedsted-Hansen, 2022).

## **The gradual politicisation of migration**

Traditionally, Denmark has been regarded as a pioneer in both refugee protection and development aid. It was one of the early signatory states of the 1951 Refugee Convention and one of the first states to legally codify refugee protection within a detailed national asylum framework. The 1983 Asylum Act was viewed as one of the most progressive asylum laws worldwide and strengthened the country’s image as a liberal frontrunner (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017)<sup>4</sup>. Denmark’s approach to refugee protection has not been limited to legal codification or protection within the state, but has also included financial contributions and responsibility-sharing between states. Over the past few decades, Denmark has been consistently ranked among the top ten donors to UNHCR worldwide (URAF dataset; Rausis, Bachelet, Lutz, 2026). Moreover, Denmark was at the forefront of refugee resettlement, establishing its first official resettlement programme in the 1970s (Sypli Kohl, 2015).

At the same time, already in 1995, the Social Democratic Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen signalled a new policy connection between development aid and domestic migration interests, declaring at the World Summit on Social Development: “If you don’t help the Third World ... then you will have these poor people in our society” (Migration News, 1995). This line of reasoning anticipated an increasingly close linkage between migration policy and development aid in subsequent years. The early connection between development aid and migration policy was reiterated in 2015, when Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen of the liberal-conservative party *Venstre* ar-

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<sup>4</sup> Interview, former senior executive of the Danish Refugee Council, 2022.

ticated a similar vision before the Danish Parliament. In this speech, he declared: “We must focus our development assistance where it serves our interests. Where we promote the values we believe in. And where we combat the causes of poverty and migration” (Rasmussen, 2015).

The political linking of migration and development took a new and more explicit form following the change of government at the end of 2001 – from a Social Democratic-led coalition government to a Venstre-led coalition government with support from, among others, the right-wing populist Danish People’s Party<sup>5</sup>. Just two months later, in January 2002, the new Venstre-led government announced its intention to strengthen the synergy between aid and refugee policy within the framework of the previous overarching priority – poverty reduction. From this point on, statements linking migration and development became a recurring feature in Danish policy documents.

This increasing interconnectedness of migration policy and development aid coincided with an increasingly restrictive approach to asylum. Particularly since the early 2000s, a flurry of amendments to the Danish Asylum Act have continuously transformed Denmark from a liberal frontrunner in refugee protection into a pioneer of refugee deterrence (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017). Recent examples include the “jewellery law”, which was intended to enable the confiscation of valuables from people seeking protection in Denmark upon their arrival (Noack, 2015), and the construction of tent camps as part of an ambition to create “infrastructures of deterrence” (Whyte et al., 2020, p. 144). The shift from durable to temporary protection (Vedsted-Hansen, 2022; Rytter et al., 2023; Sandberg et al., 2025) also entailed a move away from *integration* – a key political priority in

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<sup>5</sup> This shift was reflected in the ministerial portfolios and the powers of their departments. The position of “Minister for Development Cooperation” was abolished and a new Ministry for Refugees, Immigration and Integration Affairs was established (later renamed as the “Ministry of Immigration and Integration”), took over issues from several ministries and dealt with everything related to foreigners in Denmark, regardless of whether they were asylum seekers, immigrants or second-generation immigrants.

the 1990s – and towards *deportation* (Rytter, 2023). Arguably, the most controversial policy was the adoption of a law allowing Denmark to transfer responsibility for asylum processing and refugee protection to another country (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019).

## **Changes in governmental structures and coordination**

The central responsibility for coordination and implementation within this policy area has shifted significantly over time. During the 2000s and 2010s, power was vested mainly in the Prime Minister's Office, rather than in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This division of labour illustrates how aid and development policy gradually became more subject to domestic political considerations during this period. The growing connection between migration policy and development aid not only changed policy priorities and objectives but also affected governmental structures within Danish public administration. Overall, the changing political role of migration policy has prompted a shift from a *sectoral approach* to a *whole-of-government approach*. The sectoral approach was based on a vertical governance structure in which the issue of migration was predominantly managed by the government and the Ministry of Immigration and Integration, with limited coordination with other ministries. A whole-of-government structure, by contrast, is characterised by extensive horizontal communication across ministries and shared policy objectives.

This shift is illustrated by the establishment of an inter-ministerial task force in 2020, mandated to put the externalisation of asylum into practice. While previous exchanges between ministries on migration had been rather sporadic, the task force was headed by the newly established position of Special Envoy on Migration and included representatives from the Ministry of Immigration and Integration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Justice to ensure a more streamlined and structured inter-ministerial coordination. Task force members from all three branches agreed that

they had seen a significant shift in daily coordination routines<sup>6</sup>. This close coordination was particularly useful given the cross-cutting strategic importance attributed to migration policy, as summarised by the former Special Envoy himself:

*“I’m going to recommend to everyone I meet, and also in our own system, that when you have agendas like this, that have a strong foreign policy element, and a very strong domestic element, this type of approach where you sit together permanently has been more successful than I thought. In terms of actually sort of knowing each other’s way of thinking, knowing each other’s priorities. Because, of course, for me, it gives a much greater understanding of domestic issues that I sit together with my immigration colleague.”*  
(Interview, Special Envoy on Migration, Anders Tang Friberg, 2022)

While cooperation on migration across different ministries has steadily increased in Denmark, allowing for the incorporation of the migration–development nexus into government structures, the politicisation of migration has also limited the influence of certain branches of government. In some cases, it has even led to a partial decoupling of government decisions from administrative structures.

The decision-making process regarding the selection of suitable cases for refugee resettlement serves as a clear example. This process became aligned with the Social Democratic Minister of Immigration and Integration Mattias Tesfaye’s idea of using refugee resettlement to serve a more strategic aim, rewarding countries which were seen as showing responsiveness to Danish interests in migration management abroad (Tesfaye, 2020). As a result of the centralisation of decision-making authority within the minister’s office, the Danish Immigration Service, which had been responsible for suggesting suitable profiles based on exchanges with the UNHCR, was com-

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<sup>6</sup> Interview, representatives Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2022.

pletely removed from the process after the temporary halt of resettlement intakes between 2015 and 2019. When Denmark resumed the resettlement programme, the Immigration Service was neither consulted nor allowed to provide any suggestions regarding suitable profiles, as refugee resettlement shifted from a primarily technocratic matter to a political priority<sup>7</sup>.

The costs of the programmes increased rapidly after 2017, when migration became a central part of Denmark’s foreign and aid policy. Initially, DKK 50 million was allocated to “flexible return and readmission funds”, which increased to DKK 110 million annually in the following years<sup>8</sup>. The *Fair and Humane Asylum System* (FHAS) programme began funding in 2020 with a budget of DKK 80 million, which increased to DKK 190 million annually in 2021–2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023, pp. 10–11). A significant portion of the portfolio was concentrated in Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and the Western Balkans. Four countries or regions (Turkey, Rwanda, Iraq, and the Western Balkans) accounted for over 50 per cent of the total budget (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023, pp. 4-5).

In 2024, the government set aside DKK 400 million for policies seeking to prevent irregular migration with the stated intention of devoting DKK 1.1 billion to such practices over a five-year period between 2024-2029 (Ministry for Immigration and Integration, 2024), financed under the Regions of Origin and Migration Fund (‘Nærområde- og Migrationsfonden’) under the Finance Act. The fund will provide support for three regional migration programmes.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview, representative of the Danish central administration, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> According to Christina Jespersen, Senior Advisor on migration issues within the Ministry of Immigration and Integration from 2017 to 2022, the funds “were DAC [Development Assistance Committee] funds, so essentially ODA [Official Development Assistance]” (Hammarstedt & Luthman, 2025, p. 92), placing explicit eligibility requirements on interventions, and primarily requiring that the main purpose and outcome of should be to improve conditions in the recipient country.

The first programme focuses on activities aimed at improving countries of origin's ability to deal with migration challenges and the return of their own citizens, including through reception and reintegration support, which may be done in cooperation with the immigration authorities. Activities will also support cooperation with countries on readmission.

The second programme steps up efforts in technical assistance and capacity building to counter irregular migration. It supports enhanced border and migration management and the development of asylum systems in neighbouring areas, along migration routes and in relevant third countries. The funds may also be used for related initiatives that address the root causes of irregular migration and displacement and support host countries for displaced persons and refugees in neighbouring regions.

The third programme consists of regional route-based initiatives along the main migration routes to Europe. It includes support for projects and programmes within the scope of Danish development cooperation, focusing on mixed migration flows and the prevention of irregular migration, including through support for civil society organisations (Setrana et al., 2024)<sup>9</sup>.

Having outlined some of the structural shifts within the state bureaucracy related to development and migration policy, the next section takes a closer look at the strategic approaches that inform the work that these state agencies carry out.

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<sup>9</sup> According to Christina Jespersen, Senior Advisor on migration issues within the Ministry of Immigration and Integration from 2017 to 2022, the funds “were DAC [Development Assistance Committee] funds, so essentially ODA [Official Development Assistance]” (Hammarstedt & Luthman, 2025, p. 92), placing explicit eligibility requirements on interventions, and primarily requiring that the main purpose and outcome of should be to improve conditions in the recipient country.

## **Redefining solidarity: from poverty reduction to strategic humanitarianism**

With the strategy *The World We Share*, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2021, the link between development aid and migration policy was embedded more deliberately in a broader strategic framework. According to the former Special Envoy at the time of its publication, Anders Tang Friborg, the strategy document represents the ambition to assign migration as a central pillar of Danish development policy<sup>10</sup>. Briefly put, development aid and foreign policy were envisaged as tools to influence irregular migration through prevention and control. The preventive dimension was articulated in the first objective of *The World We Share*, namely: “Prevent poverty, fragility, conflicts and violence and create sustainable alternatives to irregular migration and displacement” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021, p. 26). The underlying assumption is that reducing poverty, fragility and violence will also reduce incentives for international migration.

The second objective of *The World We Share* is the ambition to: “Fight irregular migration and help more people along key migration routes”. The overall aim is to step up international cooperation either to limit South–North movement or to ensure the enforcement of return decisions. To this end, cooperation is pursued at the UN and EU levels, with humanitarian organisations, but also with countries in North Africa and the Western Balkans that are expected to “handle irregular migration in accordance with human rights law” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021, p. 6). While the strategy does not specify how the tension between human rights and migration control is handled in a case of delegated responsibility, it stresses the need for “innovative approaches” (*ibid.*), while at the same time reiterating the idea of investing more in protection in the immediate region of displacement crises – a notion that has been present in Danish po-

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<sup>10</sup> Interview, former Special Envoy on Migration, 2022.

litical discourse since the 1980s (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019). By contrast, the provision of legal pathways and refugee resettlement is not mentioned as part of the fight against irregular migration.

These priorities were further developed in the proposal for the 2022 financial plan, in which the government proposed a comprehensive reform of Danish aid towards two focus areas: climate, nature and environment; and migration and fragile states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). The proposal announces that Denmark is seeking to reform existing partnerships in, for example, Uganda and Ethiopia, with a focus on irregular migration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021, p. 8). While international influences undoubtedly played an important role in shaping the language and logic of these policies, Denmark could have reacted by simply adjusting its instruments and objectives within the existing paradigm. Instead, the changes were more radical than in the other Nordic countries, such as Sweden, with which Denmark is usually compared, where poverty reduction and sustainability remained the primary goals of development cooperation.

While *The World We Share* was formally replaced by *A Changing World* in 2025 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.a), most guiding documents still refer to the former strategy. When it comes to the development–migration nexus, the new strategy seems to follow the route of the previous strategy. Preventing so-called “irregular migration” is still perceived as one of the core aims and one of the “greatest challenges of our time” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025b, p. 23). The primary means of preventing irregular migration are identified as mitigating its “root causes” and strengthening the EU’s external borders. The continued use of development aid as a tool to control migration flows is also evident in the expenditure framework for Danish development cooperation for 2025–2028, which sets out the government’s priorities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

Denmark’s Africa strategy, most prominently described in the policy document *Africa’s Century* (Regeringen, 2024), plays a key role in specifying how development aid should be used to curb irregular migration and in allocating the financial resources dedicated to this aim.

One new avenue in this regard is the deepening of collaboration with North African countries by strengthening and supporting their immigration and border authorities. The opening of a new Danish embassy in Tunisia, a strategic transit country for migration from West Africa to Europe, is a clear outcome of this strategic priority.

While Denmark's development strategies *The World We Share* and *A Changing World* as well as the Africa strategy *Africa's Century* lay out the broad strategic priorities integrating migration policy into development aid, the implementation note *Migration and a Fair and Humane Asylum System* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022) specifically outlines how the link shapes migration policy. In this document, the nexus between development aid and migration is specified through three *tracks* of influence: (1) preventing irregular migration by promoting legal pathways, (2) strengthening migration management in order to counter irregular migration, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking, and (3) promoting return and readmission using flexible funds as leverage (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022, pp. 6-12). The document also highlights the strategic importance of international cooperation, with particular acknowledgement of the global compacts for migration and refugees as important frameworks that align with Denmark's key concern: to "enhance coordination of international interventions that address the root causes of forced displacement and irregular migration as well as current issues on the migration agenda" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022, p. 16).

## **Integrating development aid and migration policy**

Based on our reading of the strategic priorities guiding Denmark's approach to integrating development aid and migration policy, we can differentiate between four approaches in which Denmark has used development aid to change human mobility: addressing the root causes of irregular migration, return cooperation, outsourcing asylum processing, and strategic resettlement.

First, a substantial part of Danish development aid can be seen as pursuing the *root causes approach*, aimed at reducing mobility aspira-

tions and encouraging immobility in regions that the Danish government associates with unwanted migration. The core idea of the approach is captured in the following quote from the *Foreign and Security Policy Strategy*: “Our efforts must contribute to political stability and security, sustainable economic development, and the strategic independence of the countries as well as curbing irregular migration” (Regeringen, 2023, p. 20).

The persistence of the root causes approach in development policy is notable, but not unique to Danish priorities. The approach is central in multilateral cooperation at both the UN and EU levels, with international organisations such as IOM, ICMPD, and UNHCR, but also with local NGOs as well as the World Bank. This persistence is surprising, given that leading academic research consistently shows that foreign aid is not an effective way to curb outward migration, and may even function as a driver of outward mobility (Engberg-Pedersen et al., 2023; de Haas, 2007). At best, some studies show that development aid has mixed effects and that the impact on migration largely depends on the type of aid provided (Gamso and Yuldashev, 2018a; 2018b).

A second approach is targeted towards using development aid as leverage in *return diplomacy*, aiming to strengthen Denmark’s position in bilateral negotiations over intergovernmental return frameworks that ensure return migration.<sup>11</sup> The rationale behind this approach is that development aid can serve as an incentive to countries that cooperate on return. This logic is articulated in *The Danish Migration Management and Return, Readmission and Reintegration Programme (DMRP) 2024–2029*, declaring that: “The programme positions Denmark to play a leading role in the use of development assistance to support a longer-term, more sustainable approach to programming addressing migration challenges, and particularly in relation to migration management, as well as returns, readmission and sustainable reintegration”

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<sup>11</sup> Bilateral negotiations can be viewed as particularly relevant for Denmark given that the country’s opt-out from the EU asylum framework also implies that EU Readmission Agreements do not apply (Billet, 2010).

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.b). In the new return programme, the Danish government also stresses its cooperation with IOM and ICMPD, allocating DKK 190 million to each organisation over a period of five years to step up the effectiveness of its return policy.

In 2025, this politics of conditionality and its related dilemmas surfaced in the debate on proposal B 151 for a parliamentary resolution on withholding development aid from countries that refuse to readmit their own citizens. Through this proposal, the Danish People's Party advocated the strict use of development aid as a conditional instrument and also suggested using the threat of shutting down development aid as potential leverage in negotiations (Folketinget, 2025). Lars Løkke Rasmussen, in his capacity as Minister of Foreign Affairs, expressed understanding for the proposal and its underlying principle but ultimately called for its rejection. He argued that it would damage the relationship with third countries and diminish Denmark's influence abroad. While he also emphasised that the Danish government provides long-term development aid only to states that cooperate on return and readmission, he warned that a rigid application would hinder Danish strategic leverage. In sum, Denmark's foreign policy appears to involve conditionality and sticks in principle, while relying more heavily on relationship-building and carrots in practice.

Third, development aid has been used for pursuing the *externalisation of asylum*, intended to allow Denmark to shift its responsibility towards people seeking protection to another country, thereby deterring or deflecting migration flows. This idea was embraced by the Danish Social Democratic Party; first while it was an opposition party under the previous government and later as it tried to introduce the approach into policy during the first government of Mette Frederiksen between 2019 and 2022 (Tan and Vedsted-Hansen, 2021; Rausis, 2025). In contrast to return diplomacy, which can be based on the principle that the return of a country's own nationals is a legal obligation grounded in international law, accepting asylum seekers from another country is purely voluntary. Therefore, development

aid can only serve as a carrot and incentive in international cooperation over externalisation. In this regard, the former Special Envoy on Migration expressed a sentiment similar to Lars Løkke Rasmussen's parliamentary response above. He insisted that Danish diplomatic leverage still primarily came from a long-standing commitment to high levels of ODA and that the more recent attempts to externalize asylum did not imply a backing down from these commitments:

*“But of course, it is also important for me to be able to say, look, I mean, we are one of the few countries that actually gives 0.[7] percent of GDP to development assistance. We're committed to this so far. So it's not a burden shifting.” (Interview, Special Envoy on Migration, 2022)*

The general hope has been that externalisation schemes would work as a symbolic deterrent, rather than through its practical implementation; in other words that it would mainly function through its nonuse<sup>12</sup>.

Finally, Denmark has sought to **use refugee resettlement strategically**, as a tool to facilitate bilateral return agreements or conclude externalisation schemes. The underlying idea is that by accepting refugees from another country, Denmark may incentivize that country to accept additional bilateral cooperation. However, since a temporary halt of resettlement intakes between 2015 and 2019 in response to the 2015-16 European refugee protection crisis, Danish policy-makers explored new ways of using the instrument of refugee resettlement more strategically (Tesfaye, 2020). This approach operates at two levels; through the strategic selection of resettlement countries, and through the targeted selection of the particular profiles of resettled refugees. In line with the overall shift already described, as refugee resettlement has become increasingly politicized, decision-making has shifted from the more bureaucratic level, that also involves the Danish Immigration Service, to a primarily political decision

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<sup>12</sup> This introduction for non-use is also expressed in the wish for hoping for “zero” asylum applicants by Frederiksen (McPartland, 2021; Whyte, 2022).

taken by the Minister of Immigration and Integration<sup>13</sup>. At the international level, the resettlement programme is closely coordinated with the UNHCR, which has to balance Danish interests with the agency's own priorities<sup>14</sup>.

The Danish attempts at introducing these four broad approaches into its development policy has added further complexity. As the only overarching evaluation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023) of these initiatives observes, the ambitious strategic aims, pursued through an equally broad portfolio that spans a broad range of countries, governance levels, and implementing partners, necessarily present serious implementation and coordination challenges.

In the evaluation, *Danish Migration Related Engagements 2018-2022*, which reviews a portfolio of 40 projects and a total budget of approximately DKK 664 million (2023, p. 2), funded under the Regions of Origin and Migration Fund (2023, p. 1), these challenges are summarised in three general points of criticism. Firstly, the report points to the general lack of strategic guidance, beyond broad statements reflecting the government's political priorities, which affects the coherence and sustainability of the interventions. As it summarises, quite blatantly, "The major factor influencing sustainability is that most of the projects are not designed to have sustainable results" (2023, p. 17)! This observation testifies to the tendency towards relatively ad-hoc working methods, in which symbolic political statements and signposting was the primary priority to underscore the government's deterrence messaging.

In practice, secondly, these priorities meant that most interventions in the portfolio were designed as relatively small-scale and short-term (with a budget below DKK 10 million, and 2-3-year timespans), reflecting an "experimental approach", which "would allow testing different projects through low-risk projects"; "... ease the administra-

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<sup>13</sup> Interview, representative Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Interviews, representative UNHCR, 2023; representative Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2023.

tive burden ...” (2023, p.17); and be more adaptive in relation to changing political priorities. This design model, however, also meant that conventional structures and routines for planning and implementing development cooperation were bypassed, which again underscored the ad-hoc approach. The problem of prioritising many small-scale projects was acknowledged by an official close to the planning of these processes, who reflected on the overall approach: “So the portfolio was around 80 smaller projects, I think a bit too scattered in terms of geography, also in terms of substance and also in terms of partners”<sup>15</sup>. The official referred to the 2023 evaluation, agreeing with the overall recommendation that fewer, larger, and more thematically delimited projects would be a more effective way of investing Danish development funds.

The third overall point of criticism concerned the Danish reliance on international organisations, and in practice primarily on IOM and ICM DP, as implementing partners, which was argued to undermine Danish strategic interests by allowing Danish funds to disappear within larger multi-country pools, and by leaving the interpretation and prioritisation of the broad Danish strategic agenda in the hands of actors with their own interests and agendas. This weakness was confirmed by the same Danish official: “What doesn’t work is giving UNHCR, IOM or ICMPD €100 million and a loose frame of doing something on migration and they just go and add it to whatever they are doing in other countries”<sup>16</sup>. These concerns reflect the ambivalence in reshaping Danish development cooperation to respond more explicitly to domestic political interests, while at the same time retaining international cooperation through the multilateral system, which necessarily tends to dilute the national interests of individual states. The next section explores the Danish approach to international cooperation further in this light.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview, representative of the Danish central administration, 2026.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, representative of the Danish central administration, 2026.

## A Danish approach to international cooperation

The current Danish approach to international cooperation contrasts with the traditional Nordic “do-gooder” model of development cooperation (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2021). In this earlier understanding, “solidarity” functioned as a key concept capturing the idea that poverty reduction and other development investments were driven by a moral obligation to redistribute wealth on a global scale. By contrast, the foreign policy-driven Danish approach redefines “solidarity” as a more transactional engagement with states deemed strategically significant for domestic national interests. In relation to migration policy, countries of origin for refugees and other people seeking protection in Denmark, or key transit states for such movements, have been most important, and targeted through financial contributions via development aid and in voluntary and interest-driven donations to humanitarian international organizations.

The profound scepticism against types of solidarity grounded in the principle of protection provided in Europe, alongside efforts to reconceptualize solidarity in more pragmatic terms, is well captured in the words of the former Special Envoy on Migration, Anders Tang Friborg<sup>17</sup>:

*“What is solidarity, actually? Are you thinking that you will solve or manage the refugee crisis that we have, and I mean the migration flows only by the numbers you allow into Europe? ...It’s not to say that everybody should totally agree on the Danish approach of solidarity, but at least just reflect once in a while on what it is. Because for us, yes, it does matter how much money you’re giving to assistance around Syria or in Rwanda.”*

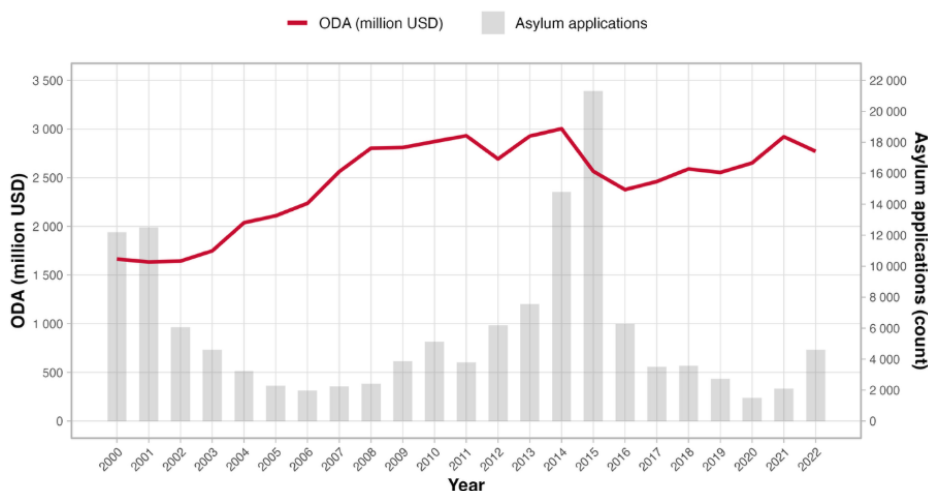
The effort to minimise the arrival of people seeking protection in Denmark while increasing financial flows to refugee protection and migration control in the main regions of origin or partner countries

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<sup>17</sup> Interview, former Special Envoy on Migration, 2022.

can be understood as part of a broader shift in Danish development strategy that has been described as “pragmatic idealism” (Engberg-Pedersen and Pedersen, 2024). Through this approach, one of Europe’s most generous development policies combines, paradoxically, with an increasingly restrictive migration and asylum policy (Figure 1). This shift from admission-based solidarity towards economic solidarity is expressed in the temporary halt between 2015 and 2019 and a slight decrease of refugee resettlement intakes over time (see UNHCR Refugee Data Finder) that stands in stark contrasts with the continuous increase of financial contributions to the UNHCR (see URAF dataset; Rausis, Bachelet, and Lutz, 2026).

**Figure 1. Total Danish ODA and asylum applications (2000–2022)**



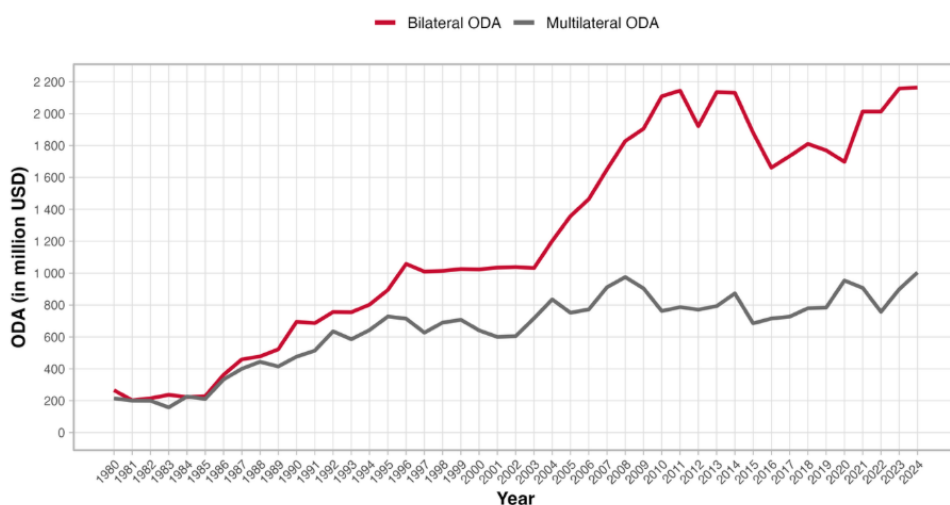
Data sources: ODA: Nordic Statistic database (OFDE02, Total Flow); asylum applications: Statistics Denmark (VAN5, gross appl. figure, 2000-2022) and Eurostat (migr\_asyapp, FRST, 2023-2024)

To summarise the Danish evolution in linking migration and development aid from an internationalist approach to strategic humanitarianism, three main shifts in relation to the migration-development nexus stand out. First, development aid has been marked by the increasing prominence of migration control objectives as broader development frameworks. Today, *Fragility and Migration* represents one of the three strategic pillars of Denmark’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025a). Thereby, Denmark began to partly finance the costs of hosting asylum seekers in Denmark through the budget previously dedicated to foreign aid. Consequently, a considerable part of the investments under the banner of “development” are now directed towards domestic expenses.

Second, development aid has increasingly prioritised bilateral aid over multilateral aid since 2003 (Figure 2), which signals the increasing engagement in bilateral cooperation as tool of migration governance. At the same time, the shift towards bilateralism does not mean a completely isolationist attitude. For example, representatives of immigration and integration services interviewed in 2023 emphasised that outright bilateral cooperation with third countries around resettlement agreements were gradually being replaced by the search for “EU-solutions”. From the Danish perspective, negotiations around the EU Pact for Asylum and Migration had suggested that the group of potential “like-minded” collaborators within the EU was expanding, arguably more so than for most other members states west of Poland.

**Figure 2. Evolution of bilateral and multilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA)**



Data Source: Nordic Statistic Database

Third, Denmark has continuously limited its portfolio of target countries for development aid, reflecting its ambition to provide more help in less countries (see Danida reports 2000-2024). While this selection may be perceived as driven mostly by effectiveness considerations, the regional focus and the country portfolio strongly overlaps with the main countries of origin of asylum applicants in Denmark and Europe (see also Kjær, 2022). Denmark has prioritised aid to countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and parts of North and West Africa, where many asylum seekers come from or pass through.

## **The migration-development nexus in practice**

In this section, we examine how Denmark has put the migration-development nexus into practice. We highlight three key policy fields for the Danish case: refugee resettlement, asylum externalisation, and bilateral agreements. While other policy fields, such as the use of development aid as leverage in return diplomacy, or as a means to strengthen cooperation with key countries along migration routes aiming to prevent onwards migration, have also been pursued, these fields have become standard practice across the EU. The Danish use of development aid in both return diplomacy and the enforcement of return decisions in its bilateral engagements has been rather limited. Compared to other European states such as Italy, France, or Sweden, Denmark has comparably few intergovernmental return frameworks with non-European countries<sup>18</sup>.

Denmark also concentrated its support for neighbouring countries receiving many refugees such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, with the aim of improving local conditions and reducing further migration to Europe, the so-called ‘region-of-origin efforts’. In the Govern-

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<sup>18</sup> According to the inventory of the bilateral agreements linked to readmission (Cassarino, n.d.), Denmark has only concluded such frameworks with Afghanistan (in 2004), Iraq (in 2009), Somaliland (in 1997), and Sri Lanka (in 1998).

ment's report from August 2016, it proposed to allocate a total of DKK 1 billion to strengthen its efforts in the Middle East. A large portion of this budget was to be taken from the money otherwise spent on hosting asylum seekers, and receiving quota refugees in Denmark (Regeringen, 2016, p. 7). Concretely, the report suggested that “efforts in the Middle East could, for example, include initiatives to help destitute population groups in Syria as well as refugees and affected local communities in the neighbouring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq” (2016, 8). Denmark's focus on controlling the influx of refugees continues as the Danish Government's Expenditure framework for Danish development cooperation, 2025-2028 allocates DKK 700 million for the Migration and Regions of Origin Fund, through which it supports initiatives which halt irregular migration. Concretely, this also means investing in bilateral agreements focused on issues of migration and refugee resettlement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). We proceed by considering three examples of how Denmark has sought to implement the integration of development aid and migration policy in practice.

## **The changing logic of Denmark's quota refugee policies**

According to the international refugee convention, a quota refugee, or resettled refugee, is a person living abroad having been forced to flee as a result of war, crisis and persecution and who has been nominated by the UNHCR for resettlement in a safe third country. Denmark accepted its first official quota refugees in 1979 (from Vietnam), and began regularly accepting quota refugees in agreement with the UNHCR. From 1989, Denmark allocated an annual budget for approximately 500 quota refugees per year. The quota refugees were generally selected by the UNHCR and then screened by Danish officials<sup>19</sup>. Denmark's initial resettlement programme prioritised refugees rejected by other states or deemed as having better prospects

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<sup>19</sup> Interview, representative UNHCR, 2023; representative Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2023.

elsewhere, but a 2005 legislative reform shifted selection toward an assessment of the *integration potential* (see Syppli Kohl, 2015).

In addition to the strategic shifts already discussed above, the European refugee protection crisis in 2015-16 also marked a turning point for Denmark's practice of receiving quota refugees (Sørensen, 2016). The increased number of asylum applications in 2015 gave rise to a political discussion of whether Denmark should continue to accept quota refugees at all (Thomassen, 2019). This political scepticism eventually led to a temporary suspension of Denmark's uptake of quota refugees adopted by the government and several political parties. Norway and Sweden, in contrast, increased their uptake of quota refugees in that period.

The following year, the Danish Parliament passed an amendment to the Aliens' Act, which to this day leaves the decision on whether Denmark accepts quota refugees up to the Minister of Immigration and Integration. Since 2020, Denmark has budgeted for 200 quota refugees annually (Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2024a). The selection is described by the Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration on their official website – [nyidanmark.dk](http://nyidanmark.dk) – as based on criteria that emphasise the candidate's potential for assimilating into Danish society rather than, say, the urgency and gravity of their needs for protection. Among other requirements, applicants "... must sign a declaration accepting the conditions for resettlement in Denmark, including the importance of working and learning Danish".

In practice, Denmark has accepted quota refugees primarily from Congo, and a few from Burundi living in refugee camps in Rwanda, since 2020, adding quota refugees from Eritrea and Afghanistan in 2023 and 2024 who were living in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Denmark has focused mainly on UNHCR's category "Women at Risk"<sup>20</sup> and on people fleeing persecution due to their

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<sup>20</sup> Women at risk refers to adult women (and their children) who are defined by the UNHCR as particularly at risk (Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2024b).

sexuality. Since 2023, the Danish Refugee Appeals Board (*Flygtning-enævnet*) has recognised all women and girls from Afghanistan as entitled to asylum under Section 7(1) of the Aliens' Act solely on the basis of their gender, due to the general situation facing women and girls in Afghanistan.

The Danish government's overall goal of its continuous support for the UN quota system for refugees is to stop what they call spontaneous refugee flows and mass migration, and make the quota system the only legal way for refugees to arrive in Denmark (Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2024b). However, while Denmark is praised by the UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council for its commitment to resettling quota refugees, the number it accepts does not correspond to the actual need.

By shifting decision-making regarding the selection of quota refugees from a multilateral forum to the Ministry of Immigration and Integration; by emphasising the perceived “integration potential” of quota refugees as a key selection criterium; and by linking the UN quota system directly to the fight against irregular migration towards Europe, the Danish approach to accepting quota refugees has changed significantly since the abrupt and momentary rise in asylum applications around 2015-16. This shift has added to the overall tendency to treat refugees and other migrants from low-income countries as a high priority issue for Danish domestic politics, with an increasing centralisation of decision-making at the political, rather than bureaucratic, level of ministries, and a more explicitly instrumental understanding of multilateral commitments. In sum, Denmark's quota program, traditionally a humanitarian contribution, is now tightly interwoven with its migration-control strategy – a clear manifestation of the migration-development nexus in practice.

The following two sections reflect on two other examples of how Denmark has implemented its strategic approach to the migration-development nexus, in which the intersections between refugee and migration policies are similarly blurred. We first discuss the much-debated “Rwanda deal” through which the Danish government at-

tempted to establish an agreement for Rwanda to receive and host people who had sought asylum in Denmark, and then turn to the more recent agreement with Tunisia as a key strategic partner in migration control around the Mediterranean Sea.

## **The “Rwanda deal” – Denmark’s attempt at asylum externalisation**

On 3 June 2021, the Danish parliament passed Bill L 226, which aimed to halt irregular migration and prevent potential asylum seekers from reaching Denmark through dangerous journeys (Folkettinget, 2021). The amendment introduced the possibility of externalizing asylum by allowing Denmark to transfer the responsibility of processing and refugee protection to a third country outside of the EU. The transfer should align with Denmark’s international agreements and be supplemented by an international agreement between the third country and Denmark (Tan and Vedsted-Hansen, 2021).

Following the adoption of the law, Danish officials engaged with several African countries to identify potential partners willing to host externally processed asylum seekers. This stated interest led to a prompt response from the African Union who, in August 2021, criticized the idea as being in violation of the 1951 convention for refugees, an attempt at burden shifting, while emphasising that 85 percent of the world’s refugees are already located in Africa; and condemning such bilateral agreements as “xenophobic and completely unacceptable” (African Union, 2021).

Cooperation with Rwanda was being prioritised on such grounds before the possibility of outsourcing the responsibility for refugee protection and asylum processing to a non-EU country. In an online newsletter from 2021, the Minister of Immigration and Integration Mattias Tesfaye announced his decision to choose an additional 200 quota refugees from Rwanda, highlighting the priority given to a country with which Denmark also collaborates on migration management and development aid.

The strong collaboration with Rwanda continued in 2022, where Minister of Immigration and Integration Kaare Dybvad Bek and Minister for Development Cooperation Flemming Møller Mortensen met their Rwandan counterparts and agreed on a political declaration expressing the ambition to strengthen cooperation on asylum and migration. Kaare Dybvad Bek stated in a newsletter, “I am very pleased that we have agreed on a joint declaration with Rwanda, confirming our ambition to establish a mechanism whereby asylum seekers can be transferred from Denmark to Rwanda” (Ministry for Immigration and Integration, 2022).

Shortly thereafter, the two Governments adopted a Memorandum of Understanding stating that the international asylum system is dysfunctional and that new solutions are needed, including the ambition to establish a mechanism for transferring asylum seekers from Denmark to Rwanda. The MoU is stated to “overall be focused at strengthening Rwanda’s Refugee Status Determination (RSD) including the appeal process”, with Denmark pledging “to provide funding from its dedicated asylum and migration funds for the identified cooperation activities”, which include, “Investigation in immigration matters, return and repatriation, post entry management, border management, combating illegal migration, combatting human trafficking, human smuggling and terrorism, detection of fraudulent documents and information sharing on criminal fugitives” as well as the facilitation of repatriation programmes and technical assistance (Rwanda and Denmark, 2022).

While both countries stated their interest in pursuing an extended cooperation around the externalisation of asylum, through which Danish strategic support through development cooperation would be combined with targeted funding for asylum processing and migration management, however, international laws and standards slowed the momentum of these efforts considerably. In addition to the criticism by the African Union already mentioned, the UNHCR warned that:

*“... such arrangements could be in violation of Denmark’s international obligations under international human rights instruments and EU law ... [and] ... may lead to a gradual erosion of the wider international protection system which is in place for refugees – and under which millions of refugees are able to be assisted and protected.” (UNHCR, 2022)*

Similarly, the European Commission stated in 2021 that processing asylum applications outside the EU was “a bad idea” and “not part of the European way of life” (2021). In the end, the Danish authorities were unable to finalize a more substantial agreement on the transfer of asylum seekers from Denmark to Rwanda, and Denmark has increasingly pursued such externalisation strategies at the EU level. Interviews with task force members nevertheless indicated that national plans could be reactivated should EU-level initiatives fail<sup>21</sup>.

The “Rwanda deal” nevertheless marked a watershed: Denmark became the first European country to adopt legislation explicitly allowing the transfer of asylum responsibilities to a non-EU country. Despite early resistance from multilateral actors the idea of outsourcing asylum has gained traction across European governments. Famously, the UK has made attempts to implement similar agreements, and initially concluded its own externalisation agreement with Rwanda. This deal, however, could not be put in practice due to legal challenges and was abandoned following the change to a Labour government in 2024. More broadly, EU-level resistance to externalisation has softened. In 2025, the EU Council agreed on a proposal that would allow other EU states to introduce such a policy by dropping the “connection requirement” between the arriving state and the country to which applicants are sent for asylum processing (Council of the EU, 2025), effectively allowing EU states follow the Danish path.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview, representatives Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2023.

The Danish “Rwanda deal” exemplifies Denmark’s strategy of “solidarity at a distance,” combining strategic bilateralism with the outsourcing of asylum processing to third countries outside the EU. Rwanda was selected largely due to limited alternatives, but the choice fits well with the Danish political discourse of prioritizing help to refugees in the immediate vicinity of their country of origin as stated outright by the Minister of Immigration and Integration, Mattias Tesfaye. In the wake of the 2015-16 refugee protection crisis, Europe has become increasingly aware of the role of the North African coastal states as transit zones for irregular migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, which led Denmark to pursue its strategic bilateralism with Tunisia, as we detail in the following section.

## **Denmark’s agreement with Tunisia – strategic bilateralism in practice**

Tunisia serves as a major transit country for irregular migration due to its geographical location bordering Libya, Algeria and the Mediterranean Sea. While the EU spent €1.4 billion to overall bilateral cooperation with Tunisia between 2014 and 2020 (European Union, 2023), the sharp increase in migration through the Central Mediterranean Route in 2023 made Tunisia an attractive partner for the EU in combating irregular migration. Such engagements were consolidated as a strategic priority under one of the four pillars of the new migration and asylum policy under the EU Pact. In July 2023, the European Commission and Tunisia signed a MoU, with particular emphasis on migration and mobility governance (European Commission, 2023; 2024a). In the MoU, the signatories agreed on a migration-development nexus approach reflecting the “root causes” logic discussed above, through which they aimed to promote sustainable development in disadvantaged areas with high migratory potential by supporting the empowerment and employability of Tunisian people in vulnerable situations, in particular through support for vocational training, employment and the private sector (European Commission, 2023). In September 2023 the European Commission budgeted €60 million for Tunisia and an additional €67 million

through an operational assistance package on migration (Liboreiro, 2023). However, the agreement quickly stalled when president Kais Saied rejected the deal, arguing that it fell short of the promised €1 billion in support and objecting to EU interference in Tunisian affairs. In protest, he transferred the €60 million back. In 2024, after extensive diplomatic efforts and negotiations, the collaboration was re-established (France 24, 2023; Roggero, 2024).

Denmark followed in the footsteps of the European Commission by supporting the EU-led collaboration with Tunisia. This has been a way, according to the Ministry of Immigration and Integration, to support Tunisia's border authorities and their efforts to combat irregular migration while also supporting bilateral collaborations on issues of migration. In practice, Denmark has donated DKK 26 million over a period of three years, alongside countries such as Germany, France, Netherland and Austria (Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2020)<sup>22</sup>. The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes in an online fact sheet how the Danish Minister of Development has approved the DKK 26 million budget for Danish support in the form of a training centre in Nefta, in southern Tunisia, implemented by the ICMPD, with the aim of making it "... a regional centre of excellence in border management training" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.c)<sup>23</sup>.

In addition to the training centre and as part of Denmark's new Africa-strategy, Denmark also opened its first embassy in Tunisia in August 2025 expecting an increased dialogue and collaboration focusing especially on job creation, green transition, and combatting irregular migration (Nordvang Jensen, 2025).

While Denmark is investing in a new partnership with Tunisia to curb irregular migration, Human Rights organisations describe a de-

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<sup>22</sup> The funds were drawn from the DKK80 million budget reserved through the Danish 2020 Finance Act for capacity building in prioritised third countries, under the government's *Fair and Humane Asylum System* (FHAS) programme.

<sup>23</sup> It has not been possible to find any documentation or evaluation of the Nefta centre's training outcomes or the actual experiences of Tunisian border guards trained at Nefta.

cline of democratic rights which, in the context of migration, has translated into a lack of human and legal rights for migrants, attacks against migrants, and a lack of access to registering as a refugee with the UNHCR. In addition, lawyers, journalists and NGOs working on the topic of migration are facing persecution in Tunisia (Nordvang Jensen, 2025; Khawaja, 2025).

The Danish willingness to cooperate overtly with countries such as Tunisia and Rwanda, whose governments face heavy criticism for restrictions on human rights and democratic freedoms may be partly understood in light of Denmark's recent foreign policy for Africa, "*Africa's Century*". The strategy promises to replace what is seen as an outdated and paternalistic insistence on conditionalities in development cooperation and foreign relations with more pragmatism and fewer questions asked (Bjarnesen et al. 2025). The preface of the strategy, signed by Minister for Foreign Affairs Lars Løkke Rasmussen and Minister for Development Cooperation and Global Climate Policy Dan Jørgensen, in this spirit, pledges to "... bring better offers, less moralism, and more equality to the table" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2024:10).

## Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how the migration-development nexus has become increasingly embedded in Danish policy and practice. During this process, Danish engagement has shifted from a more traditional Nordic self-image of "do-gooders" (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2021) toward what has been described as "strategic humanitarianism" (Salehyan and Sahun, 2024). In this process, the nexus has largely been interpreted in a unidirectional way, with development aid primarily used as a tool to control migration flows. The Danish migration development nexus has thereby been characterized by two main features regarding the place and nature of solidarity. First, it prioritizes assistance in regions of origin while seeking to minimize refugee admissions to Denmark. Second, it emphasizes financial contributions over the acceptance of refugees as the preferred form

of solidarity. Taken together, this approach can be understood as a form of strategic and economic solidarity at a distance.

The migration development nexus has had significant consequences for both international and internal cooperation in Denmark. Internally, it has reinforced a shift toward greater horizontal communication across ministries, which is typically associated with a *whole-of-government* approach. At the same time, the increasing politicization of migration has, at least in part, contributed to a decoupling between the political and administrative branches of government. In the field of refugee resettlement, the decision to focus almost exclusively on refugees hosted in Rwanda occurred at a time when Denmark was seeking to conclude an agreement that would have allowed the transfer of asylum seekers arriving in Denmark to the East African country. This narrow focus generated practical dysfunctions, as the restrictive eligibility profile meant that the programme had difficulty meeting even comparably modest resettlement targets.

In some cases, such as proposals to make development aid conditional on third countries' willingness to readmit their nationals, the idea was advanced in policy documents but abandoned when implementation became the object of parliamentary proposals. In other cases, including the root causes approach and Denmark's engagement in countries such as Tunisia, systematic evidence of effectiveness remains scarce. Overall, the reliance on development aid to stem unwanted immigration through such a logic seems to disregard the bulk of existing research, which argues against the viability of the root causes logic (e.g., Engberg-Pedersen et al., 2023; de Haas, 2007). In this way, this approach can be understood as another example of the lack of evidence-based policy-making that has been observed in other areas of Danish migration policy (Jørgensen, 2011).

In combination with the observation that most interventions under the Regions of Origin and Migration Fund between 2018 and 2022 were found to have been designed without consideration of how to ensure that their effects would be sustainable, and the fact that barely any substantial follow-up or evaluation has been conducted over the

past four years, it seems undeniable that aid effectiveness is, at best, a secondary priority in the Danish approach. In the Danish case, in other words, the nexus between migration policy and development aid appears to serve not primarily as an instrument to shape migration flows but as a means of influencing international perceptions. On the one hand, this priority implies projecting an image of deterrence towards potential unwanted migrants, to the extent that some aspects of the Danish approach have drawn condemnation from key international actors such as the African Union, UNHCR, and the EU. On the other hand, the Danish approach intends to project an image of continued commitment to high levels of ODA and support for international cooperation.

While Danish asylum policy, rooted in deterrence, has been described as a form of *negative nation branding* (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017), the continued commitment to development aid at a time when many states are reducing international aid may function as a form of *positive nation branding* and reputational compensation. This nation branding balancing act, we would argue, is reflected in the overall approach of solidarity at a distance, through which Denmark is attempting to shape its foreign policy and development agenda to be more responsive to domestic political priorities, while not entirely abandoning the image of an internationalist role model.

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# Development aid as a tool in migration governance in the Netherlands: uses, effects, and trade-offs

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## Introduction

### Development aid and migration governance

Development aid has increasingly been used as a tool of migration governance and control for major aid donors around the world. It has been gradually repurposed to influence migration flows, for example, to reduce irregular migration, enhance returns, and address “root causes” of migration. According to Czaika and Mayer (2011), donors respond to all types of migration pressure but are most sensitive to the number of asylum-seekers at their borders. Post-2015, the EU has increasingly externalised migration management to neighbouring countries, using development aid to deter irregular migration (Szymańska & Kugiel, 2020) – both unauthorised migration and lawful asylum seeking. Development aid is progressively tied to partner countries’ cooperation on migration control, including readmission and return of irregular migrants. This conditionality aims to leverage aid as a bargaining tool to secure migration management commitments, although it has raised concerns about the instrumentalisation of aid and potential conflicts with traditional development goals focused on poverty alleviation (Cassarino, 2025; Lebon-McGregor et al., 2025). In this chapter we delve into the relationship between migration governance and development aid in the context of the Netherlands.

In the Netherlands, the amount of Development Aid has historically been tied to Gross National Income (GNI). The idea behind this was

to ensure that development aid scaled with the economic capacity of the Netherlands to give continuity and predictability. Between 1975 and 2012, the development financing target was set at 0.7 per cent of GNI (Fic, Kennan & te Velde, 2014). This changed with the formation of a new government in 2013 and has been slowly eroded ever since. A new development aid policy announced in February 2025 reduced funding even more from an estimated 0.62 per cent of GNI in 2024 to 0.44 per cent by 2029 (OECD, 2025).

Development aid has been formally linked to migration policy in the Netherlands since 2004 (Hamburger, 2006), but this link has become significantly more explicit under the policy direction of the new conservative government coalition that took office following the November 2023 elections. The new orientation, that started to take shape in 2024-2025, places stronger emphasis on prioritising Dutch national interests—with a particular focus on migration control—and includes a geographical refocusing of aid in the neighbouring regions of Africa and the Middle East (Donor Tracker, 2025).

This shift was formalised through a new Policy Memorandum in 2025. The Minister for Foreign Trade and Development, Reinette Klever, announced that national interests—including trade, security, and especially migration—will now take precedence in development policy. The new policy openly states that programmes must contribute to "promoting trade, enhancing security and reducing migration". The Netherlands plans to use migration partnerships to make agreements with other countries on managing migration and combating human smuggling (Donor Tracker, 2025; Government of the Netherlands, 2025). More funds will be directed to supporting refugee-hosting countries, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. Programmes like PROSPECTS<sup>24</sup> will be expanded to provide job training, education, and basic services for refugees in their home regions. Stronger cooperation with transit and origin countries aims to reduce

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<sup>24</sup> PROSPECTS is a partnership that aims to improve the access of refugees and host communities to education, social protection and decent work. It is funded by the Kingdom of the Netherlands and implemented by IFC, ILO, UNHCR, UNICEF and the World Bank.

irregular migration and enhance return policies, while migration agreements with countries like Morocco and Tunisia will tie development aid to better cooperation on deportations and border control. This can be seen as an element of what we call the *development-for-migration-governance turn*—the strategic repurposing of aid resources to influence migration decisions and strengthen cooperation with third countries (on the gradual incorporation of development instruments into migration governance also see Cassarino (2025)).

The Government of the Netherlands website explicitly stated that “development aid plays a role in reducing migration flows to Europe” (Government of the Netherlands, 2025). Areas in which the Netherlands engages around the topic of migration are: reception in the region, cooperation with countries of origin and transit, and solutions for migration control. Reception in the regions is meant to address displacement “at [the] source”. The Netherlands prioritises improving conditions for refugees within their regions of origin or first asylum (e.g., Horn of Africa, Middle East, Afghanistan/Ukraine peripheries) as a core strategy. This involves significant investment through multilateral frameworks like the PROSPECTS Partnership (with UN agencies and local actors) to enhance protection, access to education, and livelihood opportunities (work). Complementing this, Dutch aid supports broader development initiatives in food security (e.g., training farmers, better seeds) and water management (efficiency, disaster preparedness). The underlying rationale is clear: “by improving reception and enabling self-reliance near home, refugees are less likely to embark on dangerous journeys towards Europe”.

With regard to cooperation with countries of origin and transit (externalisation of migration governance), the Netherlands actively engages in bilateral partnerships with key countries of origin or transit. This centres on shared interests defined largely by Dutch/EU priorities: (1) Facilitating returns: Ensuring the practical and diplomatic pathways exist to return individuals from the Netherlands without legal status to their countries of origin. (2) Combating irregular migration: Supporting partner countries’ efforts to prevent undocu-

mented migration flows directed towards the Netherlands/EU, often involving border management capacity. (3) Providing protection: Offering support for the protection of vulnerable migrants within these partner countries.

For solutions for migration control, beyond immediate reception and cooperation, the Netherlands is exploring new and structural approaches to enhance control over migration processes: Investigating the use of “return hubs” – dedicated facilities to accommodate individuals awaiting removal from the Netherlands – aiming for more efficient and secure return procedures.<sup>25</sup> These approaches are actively seeking synergies with EU-level initiatives where the government aims to “align Dutch efforts” with broader EU partnerships and migration deals with third countries. The goal is to amplify Dutch objectives (“achieve more”) by pooling resources and leveraging the EU’s greater political and economic weight, ensuring national efforts are embedded within a cohesive European framework (Government of the Netherlands, 2025).

In general, development aid is linked to migration governance through one or more of three approaches. Tsourdi and Zardo (2025) elaborate a simple typology of funding-based migration governance, distinguishing between earmarking, conditionality, and a “whole-of-government” approach. Earmarking refers to linking financial contributions to specific goals, projects, or regions (Graham, 2015). Earmarking gives donors influence over priorities (Michaelowa, 2017). In migration governance, earmarked funding dominates, especially for agencies like UNHCR and IOM (Lebon-McGregor & Micinski, 2021). Earmarking often targets specific activities or regions. Conditionality links aid to compliance with policy goals, using either incentives or sanctions. It is widely used by destination countries to influ-

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<sup>25</sup> In 2025 the European Commission published a proposal for a new “Return Regulation”, which controversially proposes to establish “return hubs” in countries that are not the migrant’s country of citizenship or another relevant country of origin, such as a transit country (therefore tentatively called “fourth countries” in the literature (Pulvirenti, 2025)). Dutch policymakers proposed the idea to the European Commission.

ence migration policies in origin and transit states (Cassarino, 2005, 2014).

The EU prefers a “more for more” approach, though instances of negative conditionality exist (Lebon-McGregor et al., 2025), such as threats of aid cuts to Afghanistan, Ghana, Nigeria, and Pakistan. The 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy marked a shift toward migration-linked conditionality, requiring cooperation on border controls and readmission (Cassarino, 2025). The 2016 Migration Partnership Framework further institutionalised conditionality and incentives (Collett & Ahad, 2017; Strik, 2017). Conditionality allows donor governments to demonstrate control and accountability in aid spending making it politically attractive (Zardo, 2025). Additionally, using a “whole-of-government approach”, migration governance through aid now often involves integrated multi-sectoral cooperation linking migration with broader policy areas such as security, trade, digital and environmental transitions. For example, EU cooperation frameworks with countries like Egypt and Lebanon combine migration management with economic and governance reforms, reflecting a comprehensive strategy to influence migration flows through development funding (Tsourdi & Zardo, 2025).

This chapter argues that while Dutch development aid has increasingly been mobilised as a tool of migration governance, its capacity to achieve core migration-control objectives remains limited, and its use entails significant legitimacy and effectiveness trade-offs. Across four empirical cases, we show that development-funded interventions have produced, at best, modest and indirect migration effects, while often generating unintended consequences and normative tensions. We further demonstrate that Tsourdi & Zardo’s (2025) typology of earmarking, conditionality, and whole-of-government approaches captures only part of this dynamic. A recurring pattern is what we term *institutional drift*, whereby development instruments formally retain developmental mandates but are functionally repurposed toward migration control through new implementing actors and governance arrangements. Together, these findings call into

question expectations that development aid can serve as a very effective or sustainable lever for migration governance.

In this chapter we specifically dig into four cases where Dutch development cooperation financing has been used as a strategic tool to manage and control unwanted migration: return initiatives (Reintegration assistance AVR (R), CD4D), information campaigns, and mobility partnerships. The cases were selected because they are (1) key elements of the Dutch development aid–for–migration governance turn and (2) relatively well researched, allowing us to assess their effects using existing evidence. We reconstruct both explicit and implicit policy aims underlying these interventions and assess their intended and unintended effects, drawing on insights from realist evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

The information on the four cases is based on an analysis of existing academic studies and policy evaluations conducted by universities or by the Research and Data Centre (WODC), an independent policy research institute at the Ministry of Justice and Security. The methodologies of the studies included in the analysis differ across cases. While the evidence for cases 1 and 2 is primarily based on advanced quantitative analyses using administrative data, case 3 relies mainly on qualitative interviews complemented by survey data. Case 4 draws on a heterogeneous literature consisting of systematic and narrative reviews, survey-based evaluations of knowledge, attitudes, and migration intentions, and qualitative studies based on interviews, ethnographic observation, and discourse analysis. More detailed information on the methodologies can be found in the referenced studies (all of which are in English or include English summaries).

In the next section, we first give some more contextual information about irregular migration and irregular migration policies in the Netherlands. We then go into the four cases, and end with some key cross-cutting observations and reflections.

# Irregular migration and irregular migration policies in the Netherlands

## Discouraging irregular migration

In the Netherlands, irregular migration—defined as entry, stay, or employment without a valid residence status—has long been addressed primarily through measures that discourage irregular residence rather than through extensive border controls or large-scale regularisation schemes. The Dutch state operates within the Schengen Area, which removes systematic checks at internal land borders. As a result, its direct capacity to prevent irregular entry is limited. Instead, Dutch authorities have concentrated on discouraging irregular stay and promoting return.

The Dutch approach exemplifies what Leerkes and Van Houte (2020) describe as a thick enforcement regime, a system in which multiple layers of administrative control restrict access to services and opportunities for those without legal status.<sup>26</sup> The 1998 Linkage Act (*Koppelingswet*) is central to this logic: it links access to housing, social benefits, and health insurance to legal residence. Combined with employer sanctions and intensified identity checks, it makes everyday life without papers increasingly difficult.

To manage irregular migration, the Netherlands relies heavily on policies that seek to encourage departure. These include both assisted voluntary return programmes (officially termed independent return) and forced return operations coordinated by the Repatriation and Departure Service. While participation in voluntary return programmes is incentivised through counselling and modest financial

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<sup>26</sup> While some countries have traditionally employed migration enforcement policies more “thinly” (e.g., Spain and Italy) or more “selectively” (e.g., Germany and Sweden), states are increasingly pursuing deterrence strategies aimed not only at unauthorised migration (e.g., economic migrants) but also at lawful asylum seeking (see Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan 2017).

support, forced return remains a prominent tool of enforcement, especially for rejected asylum seekers.

Because direct border control options are limited, Dutch policy has also turned outward. The Netherlands participates actively in EU-level migration partnerships and return agreements with countries of origin and transit. It has co-financed information campaigns in African and Middle Eastern countries that aim to deter irregular migration by highlighting the risks of unauthorised journeys and the limited opportunities in Europe. These efforts align with broader EU attempts to externalise migration management beyond European borders.

The institutional landscape in the field of irregular migration governance is quite complex. It includes various domestic governmental organisations (e.g. the national police and the Return and Departure Service (DT&V) at the Ministry of Asylum and Migration), governmental actors in other states (e.g. in countries of origin and transit), and intergovernmental organisations (e.g. the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)). Additionally, a host of non-governmental organisations are, more indirectly, involved in post-arrival migration control measures (e.g. employers who are required to check the residence permit of prospective employees). The DT&V, which is responsible for ensuring that rejected asylum seekers and apprehended irregular migrants return to their country of citizenship or to a third country (see Sinnige, Van Houte and Leerkes, 2023), primarily partners with the IOM to organise assisted voluntary return - and with Frontex for forced return.<sup>27</sup> To our knowledge, there are no studies that systematically detail the institutional landscape behind Dutch policy initiatives that use development aid for migration governance purposes. Based on our own involvement in the migration governance field, we know that there has been intensive collaboration between the Ministry of Justice and Security and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and that the Dutch government has partnered with

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<sup>27</sup> In recent years, the DT&V is also increasingly partnering with non-governmental organisations and Frontex for “voluntary return”, but this is less relevant for the cases that we analyse in this chapter.

IOM Netherlands as well as with various non-governmental actors. For example, in certain information campaigns aimed at discouraging irregular migration, the government partnered with social media influencers in selected source countries.

Despite the investments in migration enforcement, irregular migration persists. Many migrants remain in the Netherlands after the rejection of asylum claims, apprehension or loss of legal status, often finding informal work in sectors such as cleaning, logistics, agriculture and the ethnic economy (Leerkes, Varsany and Engbersen, 2012; Siruno and Leerkes, 2024). Conditions for return are also generally unfavourable, especially for rejected asylum seekers, whose countries of origin tend to be relatively unsafe, authoritarian and poorer. Additionally, many rejected asylum seekers and other irregular migrants emigrated at a relatively young age, and therefore have somewhat weaker ties to the country of origin, with less to return to (on the relationship between age of outmigration and the probability of return see for example Leerkes, Van Os and Boersema, 2017). Local governments and NGOs sometimes provide humanitarian assistance, creating a dynamic of formal exclusion and informal inclusion.

Overall, Dutch irregular-migration policy combines restrictive internal governance with external cooperation. It seeks to sustain the credibility of migration control through dense administrative enforcement and return mechanisms, while relying on European and international partnerships to prevent irregular entry.

## **Case analysis: uses and effects of aid in Dutch migration governance**

### **Introduction to the Empirical Cases**

This section examines four empirical cases that illustrate how development aid has been used as a tool of migration governance by the Netherlands and the European Union: (1) the *Herintegratie Regeling Terugkeer* (HRT) (Return and Reintegration scheme) established by

IOM Netherlands in 2004; (2) financial contributions to the EU’s Mobility Partnerships with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cape Verde, Georgia, and Morocco; and (3) the Connecting Diaspora for Development (CD4D) programme and its successor, CD4D2 and (4) the financing of campaigns to deter potential irregular migrants. The first and fourth case illustrate how development aid was used, both explicitly and more implicitly, to affect individual migrant behaviour (return migration for case one, out-migration for case four). The second and third cases illustrate the use of such funds to increase the willingness and capacity of origin or transit states to cooperate on migration control. While the EU mostly began to use development aid as an instrument to promote migrant return and reduce irregular migration since the 2010s onward, individual Member States, including the Netherlands, already implemented such policies in the early 2000s. For this reason, we analyse cases from 2004 onwards.

## **Case 1: Herintegratie Regeling Terugkeer (HRT) (Return and Reintegration Scheme)**

### **Policy content and rationale**

The HRT was introduced by IOM Netherlands in 2004 and cofunded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, drawing partly on the development-cooperation budget. It expanded existing Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) schemes by adding reintegration assistance—up to €4,000 per returnee—for small business start-ups, education, or housing support (Leerkes, Van Os, & Boersema, 2017). It illustrates a classic case of *earmarking*, as funds from the Dutch development budget were redirected to IOM Netherlands to strengthen return incentives.

Although officially framed as a reintegration programme, the HRT also sought to increase the number of “voluntary” returns among rejected asylum seekers and (other) irregular migrants by making departure more attractive to migrants who might otherwise remain in the Netherlands without state permission. This corresponds to the notion of soft deportation—using incentives, persuasion, and bu-

reaucratic pressure rather than force to meet migration-control goals (Leerkes et al., 2017). As such, this type of DMG policy also illustrates a form of *institutional drift*: while the administrative purpose of the development aid funds officially remained developmental, its function gradually shifted toward migration control, and different organisations, such as IOM, became involved.

## Effectiveness

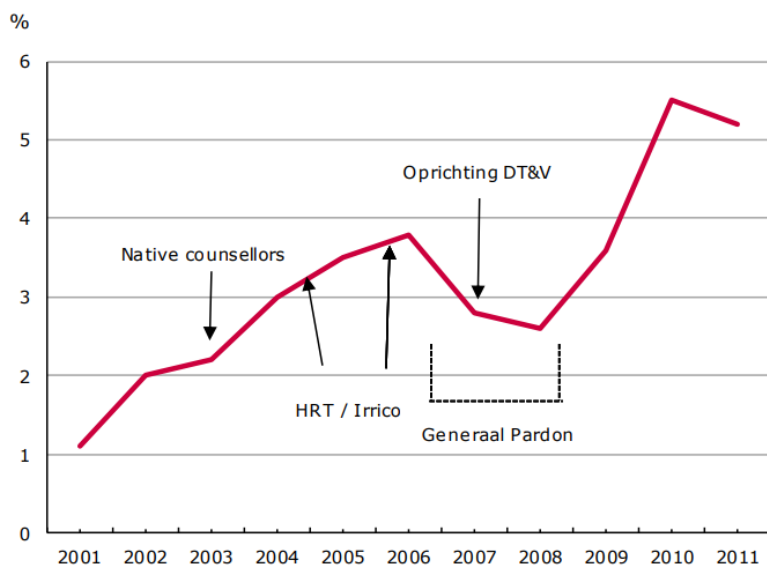
The HRT coincided with a marked rise in voluntary returns facilitated by IOM (see figure 1, taken from Leerkes et al., 2014). However, it could not be established with certainty whether HRT contributed to the increase: there were no good individual level data before 2005 that would have allowed researchers to compare the probability of return compliance before and after 2004, while controlling other factors. Quantitative analyses of 15 682 rejected asylum seekers between 2005 and 2009 nonetheless provided indications that HRT had unintendedly contributed to the increase by attracting asylum seekers from nearby European countries (see hereafter in the section on unintended and contested consequences). The same study did find residual period effects for 2008, 2009 and 2010: for these years, the probability of rejected asylum seekers returning via IOM was higher than could be explained by a host of individual and contextual factors (e.g. differences in the composition of the rejected asylum seeker population in terms of age and political and economic conditions in their countries of origin). These residual effects may have been caused by HRT, but other factors may also have contributed (for example, in 2007 the Netherlands decided to institute the DT&V).

The evidence on whether HRT promoted sustainable reintegration is mixed. Van Houte (2014) found that many returnees still struggled to rebuild livelihoods and some re-migrated. Reintegration grants offered temporary relief more than long-term inclusion. Thus, the programme may have increased the quantity of returns to some extent, but only modestly improved their *quality*.

## Unintended and contested consequences

The generous assistance created perverse incentives: migrants from nearby European states such as Belarus, North Macedonia and Georgia reportedly sought to access the aid (Leerkes et al., 2017). For example, while the three nationalities mentioned represented 9.5 per cent of all asylum seekers whose asylum requests were rejected in 2005, their share was 20.7 per cent among those rejected in 2009. The Dutch state began to suspect that nationals from Eastern European countries in particular—from where it is relatively easy to reach Western Europe—had begun to apply for asylum in the Netherlands in order to profit from the increased assistance. Because of these suspicions, Georgians and Macedonians were excluded from the HRT programme in 2010, while Belarussians were excluded in 2011.

**Figure 1. Percentage of rejected asylum seekers returning via IOM (2001–2011)**



This figure shows the percentage of rejected asylum seekers that return to their country of citizenship via IOM. The timing of four policy developments is shown in the figure. In 2003, the IOM began to use native counsellors (who can communicate with potential returnees in their mother tongue), which has been found to be associated with higher returns, including in multivariate analyses. In 2004, HRT was introduced, which was followed by the IOM Information on Return and Reintegration in Countries of Return (Irrico) programme in 2006 (in multivariate analyses the programme was not found to have a significant independent effect on the rate of assisted return). In the period 2006-2008 a large regularisation programme for rejected asylum seekers was carried out in the Netherlands, which is assumed to have caused a temporary 'dip' in assisted returns. In 2007, the DT&V was founded. From 2008 onwards, all rejected asylum seekers were required to conduct "return talks" with DT&V case workers, and the organisation also began to coordinate forced return. The introduction of the DT&V may have increased assisted returns, even if the case workers are not very optimistic about the effectiveness of the return talks as such (see Sinnige et al, 2023).

The use of development funds for return assistance also provoked criticism from NGOs and scholars who viewed it as the instrumentalisation of aid for domestic control objectives (cf. Van Houte, 2014). Development resources earmarked for poverty alleviation were redirected to migration management. The HRT thereby exemplifies the ethical and political tension within the migration–development nexus.

## Case 2: Dutch involvement in EU Mobility Partnerships

### Policy content, rationale and funding sources

The EU's *Mobility Partnerships* (MPs), launched in 2008, sought to deepen cooperation with select non-EU countries under the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM). The Netherlands is an important contributor: it participated in the partnerships with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cape Verde, Georgia, and Morocco, contributing financially via its annual share of the EU external-aid budget. Dutch Development Assistance (ODA) thus helped finance MP-related projects through the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), European Development Fund (EDF), and later the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI). In recent years, additional implementation support has come from non-ODA internal-security instruments such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), Internal Security Fund (ISF), and Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI) (OECD, 2024). Nevertheless, the original—and still predominant—funding for MPs derives from development cooperation and is managed by the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), previously the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO).

The EU's Mobility Partnerships combine elements of *conditionality*, *whole-of-government* coordination and *earmarking*. The MPs were designed to balance facilitation of legal migration with enhanced cooperation on irregular migration and return, operationalising a form of *positive conditionality*: partner countries received financial and technical assistance in exchange for improved border management and readmission (Reslow, 2012, 2015). It also illustrates attempts towards a whole-of-government approach because the Ministry of Justice and Security, responsible for migration policies at the time, partnered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is responsible for development aid. It also includes elements of earmarking as the EU re-

quired partnering countries to use the funds to strengthen their border control capacities.

## Effectiveness

The effects of the Mobility Partnerships on out-migration (and especially irregular inflows into the EU) remain under-researched: while the partnerships are designed to reduce irregular migration via capacity-building, readmission and conditionality, the empirical literature contains few rigorous studies that establish causal links between participation in a Mobility Partnership and a measurable decline in irregular migration flows to the EU. However, empirical evidence shows little measurable impact on return rates. The WODC memorandum *From Paper to Practice* (Leerkes, Maliepaard, & Van der Meer, 2022) found that enforced-return rates were no higher for countries involved in MPs than for comparable non-participant countries. Similarly, Torres, Chedraui, Leerkes, Maliepaard, and Van der Meer (2025) demonstrated via fixed-effects Poisson regression that non-binding EU-wide frameworks—including MPs—had no statistically significant positive effect on enforced-return rates, whereas legally binding readmission agreements linked to visa facilitation exhibited modest positive effects (also see Stutz and Trauner, 2022).

Hence, while Dutch ODA indirectly contributed through EU external-aid instruments, the effectiveness of this spending in achieving either development or migration-control outcomes remains questionable. Moreover, MPs failed to generate the promised “mobility.” Few new legal pathways emerged, and most funding was channelled into border-control capacity and migration-management institutions (Reslow, 2015). For this reason, several analysts have sarcastically labelled them *Immobility Partnerships* (cf. Poli & Cinelli, 2017).

## Unintended and contested consequences

MP-related border-control support in Morocco has been associated with rights violations against sub-Saharan migrants (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, 2014) and with displacement of irregular migration routes to less-controlled territories such as Libya.<sup>28</sup> In Eastern Partnership states, the frameworks strengthened administrative alignment with EU migration norms but yielded few tangible benefits for citizens.<sup>29</sup>

Academics and NGOs criticised the instrumental framing of MPs as development partnerships despite their control-oriented practice (Reslow, 2015; Poli & Cinelli, 2017; Cardwell & Dickson, 2023). The use of ODA to pursue conditionality blurred the boundary between development and security policy, arguably undermining the EU's normative credibility and reinforcing perceptions of asymmetry between donor and partner states.

### **Case 3: Connecting Diaspora for Development (CD4D and CD4D2)**

#### **Policy content, rationale and funding sources**

The *Connecting Diaspora for Development* (CD4D) programme, implemented by IOM Netherlands, ran from 2016–2019 and 2019–2023 (CD4D2). Both phases were directly funded by the Dutch Ministry

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<sup>28</sup> [https://ecfr.eu/publication/road-to-nowhere-why-europes-border-externalisation-is-a-dead-end/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://ecfr.eu/publication/road-to-nowhere-why-europes-border-externalisation-is-a-dead-end/?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

<sup>29</sup> The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is an initiative launched by the European Union in 2009 to strengthen political association and economic integration with six countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Belarus's participation is currently suspended following the 2020 elections and subsequent repression. The partnership seeks to promote democracy, rule of law, and economic development, and has become a key framework for EU external migration governance. Through it, the EU has negotiated Mobility Partnerships and Readmission Agreements—notably with Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova—to enhance cooperation on return and readmission in exchange for limited mobility or visa facilitation measures.

of Foreign Affairs from the development-cooperation budget (Mueller & Kuschminder, 2019; Cleton & Vanore, 2023).

The programme connected skilled diaspora members living in the Netherlands with institutions in their countries of origin—Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Ghana, Iraq, Somalia, and later Nigeria—to support capacity building through short-term assignments. The initiative, building on the earlier *Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals* (TRQN) project, was framed as a development intervention promoting knowledge transfer and institutional strengthening. At the same time, it may have been aimed at improving the relations with origin-country embassies and ministries—relations also essential for cooperation on return and readmission.

Like the HRT programme, CD4D illustrates development for migration governance via earmarking, and, between the lines, institutional drift. While CD4D can be expected to have made stronger contributions to development than the HRT programme, between the lines it still repurposes development aid towards migration governance.

## Effectiveness

Evaluations indicate that CD4D largely achieved its immediate objectives. In the first phase, 86 diaspora experts completed assignments in five countries, contributing to local capacity development and professional networks (Mueller & Kuschminder, 2019). The final evaluation of CD4D2 (Cleton & Vanore, 2023) reported similar positive outcomes: 95 participants undertook 212 assignments, and host institutions highlighted improvements in technical and organisational capacities.

Beyond direct knowledge transfer, the programme enhanced IOM's and the Netherlands' reputational capital, improving relations with partner-country institutions—an outcome with potential spill-over effects for migration cooperation, including irregular migrant return. Although not an explicit goal, CD4D thus generated *soft power* bene-

fits that indirectly supported Dutch migration-governance interests (Leerkes, Van der Meer, Paasche, & Brekke, 2022).

## Unintended and contested consequences

The dual identity of CD4D—as development cooperation and migration diplomacy—created ambiguity. Some diaspora participants voiced concern that if the programme were perceived as serving return or control purposes, it could undermine trust within diaspora networks (Cleton & Vanore, 2023). Scholars similarly warn that hidden instrumentalisation of development programmes for migration control risks eroding legitimacy (Christensen & Simon, 2024).

Nonetheless, CD4D illustrates how ODA can promote relational forms of governance by building goodwill rather than enforcing conditionality. The key challenge, as Cleton and Vanore (2023) argue, is transparency: sustainable cooperation requires open acknowledgment of mixed policy objectives rather than their concealment behind a purely developmental narrative.

## Case 4: Migration information campaigns

### Policy content and rationale

A broad and varied portfolio of Migration information campaigns is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sometimes together with other European partners. Migration information campaigns aim to raise awareness of potential migrants about the risks of irregular migration and the reality of life in the countries of destination with the aim of reducing irregular migration. Campaigns try to achieve these goals by correcting misperceptions, tackling misinformation, reducing smuggling and human trafficking, and preventing fatalities during migration. As such, campaigns are seen as tools to uphold human rights and protect potential migrants from harm. However, some consider the campaigns as an instrument in governmental actors' toolbox for externalising migration control blurring

humanitarian and securitisation discourses (Schans and Optekamp, 2016; Brändle; 2022).

Campaigns vary widely in terms of the design used, the amount of funding involved and the target audience. The form of a campaign can include film screenings, awareness-raising events, TV or radio programmes, peer-to-peer communication, and various forms of counselling for would-be migrants. They can be implemented by organisations such as IOM or UNHCR, or by private companies, and often the work on the ground is outsourced to local partners. Countries in which campaigns are launched also vary widely from sub-Saharan African countries such as Nigeria and Senegal to Afghanistan and Kurdistan and countries closer to Europe such as Albania.

## Effectiveness

The increase in the use of migration information campaigns has far outpaced any rigorous assessment of the effects that different campaigns may have on their respective target groups (Caso and Carling, 2024). There is a lack of robust impact evaluations and in the absence of reliable evidence, the debate on the potential of this policy tool often relies on largely anecdotal evidence (Tjaden et al. 2018). It has proven to be extremely difficult to measure the impact of migration information campaigns on the actual behaviour of people. There is some evidence campaigns reduce people's intention to migrate, but results vary substantially across countries suggesting context matters (Dennison 2022).

A common issue is the lack of a clearly defined campaign objective and/or target group and the lack of rigorous impact assessment. Most campaign evaluations are done by the implementers themselves, and campaigns are often deemed “successful” in inducing a change in knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and – to a lesser degree – (intended) behaviour based on very limited feedback from few respondents.

The Dutch MFA commissioned an evaluation of 3 different awareness-raising campaigns funded by the Netherlands to comparatively study and draw conclusions about the extent to which different designs and approaches have been effective and efficient to change the awareness, knowledge, intention and behaviour of potential migrants to irregular migration. Their findings show that the effectiveness of an awareness-raising campaign is highly dependent on its design, which includes the choice of messengers, the choice of communication channels, and the choice of messages to be used in the campaign (Kamta et al. 2022).

## Unintended and contested consequences

Some research suggests that awareness campaigns can, in some contexts, increase intentions to migrate (Caso & Carlin, 2024). There is a possibility, for example, that such campaigns add to the cultural salience of emigration. When campaigns claim the journey to be dangerous or Europe to be an unattractive place for irregular migrants, their messages then compete with positive images of Europe provided through other channels and information sources. To a large extent, perceptions of Europe among migrant communities are defined by positive impressions through social media accounts of individual ‘success stories’ of diaspora members.

Migration information campaigns for (potential) migrants have also received their share of criticism from a more ethical point of view. Several authors point out the negative rights-based impacts of such campaigns in the context of deterrence, containment, and securitisation of migration (Schenetti, 2025). In some cases, campaigns downplay existing rights to asylum and the provided information aligns more with restrictive policy interests of destination regions which points at a gap between the communicated content (deterrence) and the explicitly stated goals of such information campaigns (awareness-raising). Campaigns often amplify the dangers of irregular migration and implicitly shift responsibility to migrants themselves, despite governments’ role in defining irregularity.

Campaign messages are often viewed with suspicion, especially if it is clear they are funded by European governments. Watkins and van Dessel (2025) describe that for this reason funders of campaigns (member states) often try to hide their involvement, using NGOs and community leaders as a front. They refer to this as *covert border-work* where varying forms and temporalities of secrecy in the design, implementation, and/or performance in migration campaigns are adopted. Schenetti (forthcoming) points out the social injustice felt by audiences in sub-Saharan Africa, where people are aware that they are unwanted by European governments, that legal pathways that are promoted do in fact not exist and that the opportunities at home that are described are not available to them. Finally, Schenetti describes that campaigns are often a preferred tool for European policy makers since they view them as ‘do no harm’. However, Schenetti shows the emotional violence that audiences (but also performers such as returnees who share their traumatic journeys) experience when they have to view (or perform) suffering and death of migrants during campaign events (Schenetti, 2025).

## Comparative Reflections

Several cross-cutting patterns emerge.

1. **Instrumental integration of aid and control.** In all cases, development resources were explicitly or implicitly used to advance migration-control objectives—whether by incentivising individual return (HRT), securing partner-country cooperation (MPs), discouraging irregular migration (information campaigns) or cultivating diplomatic goodwill (CD4D). The key difference lies in funding modality: HRT and CD4D were **directly financed from Dutch ODA**, while MPs relied on **EU development instruments** to which the Netherlands contributes indirectly.
2. **Limited effectiveness in core objectives.** The HRT increased voluntary returns but not sustainable reintegration; MPs had little measurable impact on return cooperation or mobility; migration campaigns had little measurable effect on irregular migra-

tion; CD4D achieved developmental outcomes but only indirect migration effects.

3. **Unintended consequences.** Each case generated side-effects that complicated policy aims: HRT encouraged opportunistic migration and ethical debate; MPs may have displaced irregular flows and drew criticism for rights violations; CD4D risked credibility loss if seen as instrumental and migration campaigns can provoke debates about social justice and trustworthiness of the sender and even cause emotional violence.
4. **Legitimacy tensions.** The blending of development and migration-control goals has provoked criticism from NGOs, scholars, and partner governments for conflating humanitarian and securitarian logics.

## Conclusion

The four cases analysed in this chapter shed light on the complex and often contradictory dynamics of the development-for-migration-governance turn. They reveal that while development aid has increasingly been mobilised to influence migration outcomes—through incentives, conditionalities, covert borderwork and soft diplomacy—its effectiveness remains limited and its legitimacy contested.

Empirically, the cases demonstrate that development aid can sometimes marginally increase the number of voluntary returns, as in the case of the HRT, or improve diplomatic relationships with third countries, as seen in CD4D. Yet these effects are modest, and in some cases, as with the Mobility Partnerships, the intended outcomes—enhanced cooperation on return and reduced irregular migration—have not materialised. Studies on the Morocco Mobility Partnership (Carrera et al., 2016; Reslow, 2017; Stutz & Trauner, 2022) show no sustained decrease in irregular inflows; rather, strengthened control capacities may have displaced migration to more dangerous routes, notably through Libya (also see Casas-

Cortés et al., 2015). Similarly, evaluations of information campaigns suggest limited behavioural effects among potential migrants, whose decisions are shaped by complex social networks and expectations of opportunity rather than by exposure to official deterrence messages.

The decision to use development aid funds for return and reintegration initiatives such as HRT was possibly also motivated by the assumption that the returnees would then be likely to migrate again as their financial problems upon return are diminished to some extent. This enduring “root causes” narrative, which underpins much of the development-for-migration-governance turn, has been criticised in the literature. As Engberg-Pedersen et al. (2024) and De Haas (2020, 2021) argue, migration is not simply a reaction to poverty but part of broader processes of social and economic transformation. Empirical evidence supports the “migration hump” hypothesis: as economies grow and diversify, emigration initially increases before it gradually declines once countries reach upper-middle-income levels (Clemens & Postel, 2018). Given that most African migration is intra-continental rather than directed to Europe (IOM, 2020; ACSS, 2023), and that official development assistance amounts to only about USD 25 per capita annually (World Bank, 2023), expectations that aid can significantly reduce irregular migration are unrealistic.

Beyond this structural limitation, there are also more proximate reasons why the policies discussed in this chapter have had limited effects. First, migration decisions are shaped by a complex interplay of factors—including political and economic conditions in countries of origin, social networks, and perceived opportunities abroad—that these development-for-migration-governance instruments cannot meaningfully alter. Individual and collective migration aspirations are deeply embedded in family and diaspora ties and are only marginally responsive to policy incentives. Furthermore, policies that link aid to migration control may lose legitimacy both domestically and internationally. When such policies are perceived as instrumental or coercive, they risk undermining trust and cooperation. Governments in

partner countries may formally agree to sign a readmission arrangements or other intergovernmental return frameworks but fail to fully implement them in practice—a pattern observed in the case of the Mobility Partnerships. The same dynamic can apply to migrants themselves: when return programmes are seen as externally imposed, migration campaigns as an unjust perception of reality or development aid as a tool of control, participation and compliance are unlikely to improve.

While Tsourdi and Zardo's typology is useful for analysing how development aid and migration governance have become linked, our analysis shows that institutional drift operates alongside these mechanisms. Earmarking, conditionality, and whole-of-government approaches are clearly visible. At the same time, many initiatives—especially HRT, CD4D, and the migration campaigns—also exhibit forms of institutional drift, where the objectives of development programmes shift, either explicitly or more implicitly, toward migration control, while new organisations enter the picture. In these cases, development funds are functionally repurposed as they move through new implementing channels, such as IOM. This blurring of mandates can undermine both development effectiveness and policy legitimacy. More research would be warranted to reconstruct the precise institutional landscape behind the development-for-migration governance turn.

Sustainable return and effective migration partnerships depend on legitimacy and reciprocity. Migration control policies only work in the long term when they are perceived as fair by relevant actors in partner countries. We thus argue for a recalibration of the development–migration nexus toward more trust-based cooperation. This involves moving beyond transactional conditionality and prioritise arrangements that genuinely recognize the interests and agency of actors in origin countries. On both sides, governments – both national and local governments -, NGOs and migrants themselves should be included in collaborative policy design and implementation. A consensual whole-of-government approach can work to

some extent if cooperation on return can be combined with opportunities for legal migration, circular mobility, and mutual development benefits. And above all remain realistic about what migration control can achieve, without overburdening development policy with unattainable objectives, and without losing sight of the importance of international collaboration beyond migration control interests.

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# Germany's "Whole-of-Government" approach to linking migration and development cooperation

Anna Knoll and Pauline Vernon

## Introduction

Since 2015, migration has become a central and contested issue within Germany's development cooperation, reshaping priorities, instruments and inter-ministerial relations. This chapter examines how Germany has sought to link migration and development through a whole-of-government approach, focusing on the interaction between the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI), the Federal Foreign Office (AA), and key implementing actors such as GIZ. In this chapter, a whole-of-government approach is understood as the coordinated involvement of multiple ministries and agencies with distinct mandates in the design and implementation of migration-related policies, without the creation of a single unified authority or strategy.

Rather than treating migration as a single policy field, the chapter traces how migration objectives have been integrated into German development cooperation across distinct but interlinked areas: migration partnerships, return and reintegration, and labour migration. It analyses how coordination has evolved in practice, where tensions persist between development-oriented and control-driven logics, and how German actors have adapted institutionally to sustained political pressure around migration. The German case illustrates both the potential and the limits of whole-of-government approaches in reconciling long-term development objectives with short-term migration management demands.

## Methodology

This chapter is based on a qualitative desk review of policy documents, legislation, strategy papers, budgetary material, evaluation reports, and relevant academic literature on Germany's migration and development policy. The document analysis is complemented by insights from earlier qualitative analysis conducted for a case study on Germany's whole-of-government approach to migration and development, including semi-structured expert interviews carried out in 2019, as well as a small number of additional interviews with German development and implementation actors conducted in 2025. Interview material is used selectively to contextualise policy developments and to inform the analysis of implementation dynamics, rather than to generate representative findings.

## The political context: Coalition agendas and government-wide strategies on migration and development cooperation

Germany does not have a single, comprehensive migration strategy. Instead, it relies on multiple policies and initiatives that address different aspects of migration. These are governed by distinct laws, regulations, and administrative processes, reflecting a decentralized approach (EMN, 2024).

Given its status as a cross-cutting theme, migration appears in several thematic strategies of the German government and its ministries. However, while they usually emerge out of a coordinated process, migration objectives are included from a specific angle, which does not necessarily reconcile the objectives of all *Ressorts (Ministries)*<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Here the '*Ressortprinzip*' as departmental principle is maintained by which each leading *Ressort* devises strategies while coordinating with relevant actors.

During the early 2000s, German policymakers began to address migration and development in a more integrated way, aligning with global discussions on the topic. This shift prompted the BMZ to launch the Migration and Development project in 2006, which aimed to institutionalize migration issues within Germany's practical development cooperation. It was carried out by the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), as Germany's central implementation and service agency for development cooperation (Baraulina , Hilber, and Kreienbrink 2012; Schneider, 2024).

While the link between migration and development had been evident in the activities of the BMZ and reflected in a range of speeches, position papers, and guidelines (ICMPD and ECDPM, 2013, p. 98), the 2013 CDU/CSU–SPD coalition agreement<sup>31</sup> and the refugee situation after 2015 catalysed the formulation of shared objectives and guidelines for Germany's external engagement on displacement and migration.

The issue of migration assumed growing significance within Germany's development cooperation following the so-called *2015 migration crisis*. In 2016, the German government adopted the *Strategy and Action Plan on Migration and Development* (Bundesregierung, 2016), thereby introducing a whole-of-government approach. Prior to this, no central policy document had articulated a coherent framework for Germany's external action on migration across the various responsible actors. This strategy has however not been updated and currently there is not a more recent strategy across ministries (Evaluierung Sektorvorhaben Migration).

While the 2016 strategy did not necessarily introduce fundamentally new policy elements, it consolidated existing approaches and presented them in a more structured manner and within a new political

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<sup>31</sup> The 2013 coalition agreement included a political commitment to work on a whole-of-government approach to migration questions and to anchor migration more strongly in German development cooperation and to provide incentives for origin and transit countries to cooperate on migration management. It explicitly called for devising a Migration and Development strategy (German Bundestag, 2014).

context (Interview 1<sup>32</sup>). It explicitly articulated the aim of establishing a coherent and comprehensive approach, with the overarching objective of addressing the root causes of irregular migration and substantially reducing irregular migration and forced displacement globally.<sup>33</sup> In practice, the strategy strengthened political coordination and framing, yet structural tensions between policy logics continued to shape policy dynamics (Interview 3 and 4).

According to the *Strategy and Action Plan*, achieving these objectives requires close coordination among foreign, interior, development, economic, research, education, and security policies to improve conditions for stability and sustainable economic development in partner countries<sup>34</sup>. The strategy is structured around four pillars: addressing the causes of displacement and irregular migration; enhancing protection in regions of reception; enabling legal pathways; and supporting return and reintegration (Bundesregierung, 2016).

In the 2018 coalition agreement of the CDU/CSU and SPD, addressing the root causes of displacement was elevated to a central migration objective across multiple policy domains. The agreement pledged a range of measures, including enhanced development aid, expanded humanitarian and peace missions, fairer trade, stronger climate action, and a moratorium on arms exports to crisis regions, in

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<sup>32</sup> See Annex 1 for the List of Interviews.

<sup>33</sup> A discussion on the notion of using development cooperation to ‘reduce migration’ took place within the government and with development actors has led to a nuancing of the language used. The focus on ‘fighting the root causes of displacement’ or ‘reducing migration’ has been replaced by the aim to ‘reduce root causes of displacement and migration pressures’ – a small difference in terminology which nonetheless communicates a greater level of understanding and awareness of complexity (see Knoll and Sherriff, 2016, p.147).

<sup>34</sup> The 2016 strategy noted as priority countries in the West Sahel, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, Syria, countries along transit routes as well as Sub-Saharan countries hosting many refugees. Regarding the legal migration element, the focus countries are those that do not have challenges with dynamics of brain drain.

order to avert another migration surge similar to that in 2015 (Coalition Agreement 2018).<sup>35</sup>

Under the 2021–2025 “Ampel” coalition (SPD–Greens–FDP), the German Government committed to what it described as “orderly and controlled migration”, promoting regular labour-pathways while simultaneously emphasising stricter returns. These commitments also framed coordination among the BMZ, the Federal Foreign Office (AA) and the Interior Ministry (BMI), and underpinned the BMZ’s subsequent feminist and Africa-strategy initiatives, in which migration, as well as addressing root causes or irregular migration and displacement, played a strong role (Coalition agreement 2021).

The 2025 coalition agreement between the CDU/CSU and SPD under Chancellor Friedrich Merz represents a marked departure from the more liberal migration stance of the previous government. It sets out a stricter framework for migration management, focusing on control, return, and conditional cooperation with countries of origin. The agreement places emphasis on “ordering and steering” migration flows, expanding border protection, and curbing irregular entries while preserving selected legal labour pathways. It foresees the expansion of readmission and migration partnerships, the extension of the list of safe countries of origin, and the temporary suspension of certain humanitarian admission and family-reunification programmes (Coalition Agreement 2025).

For development cooperation, the agreement signals a more instrumental approach: external and development policies are increasingly tied to migration objectives, particularly to facilitate returns and ad-

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<sup>35</sup> Following the commitments set out in the 2018 coalition agreement, the Federal Government established an independent *Fachkommission Fluchtursachen* (Expert Commission on the Root Causes of Displacement) to examine structural drivers of forced migration and to develop policy recommendations for preventive action. The commission consisted of 24 experts from academia, civil society and government. It presented its final report in May 2021 under the title *Krisen vorbeugen, Perspektiven schaffen, Menschen schützen*, outlining strategies to strengthen policy coherence across development, foreign and security domains and to anchor displacement prevention in long-term development cooperation. The report was welcomed by the Government as confirmation of its existing approach but also as an impetus for further refinement. See *Fachkommission Fluchtursachen der Bundesregierung* (2021).

dress so-called “root causes of displacement.” Development assistance, visa policy, and trade relations are positioned as levers to encourage origin countries to cooperate on return and reintegration, an approach described as a government-wide “return offensive” (Rückkehr Offensive).

Compared with the 2021–2025 “Ampel” coalition, which framed migration within a humanitarian and integrative paradigm, the new agreement re-balances priorities towards stronger deterrence and conditional engagement. Development cooperation, previously emphasised as a means of partnership and global solidarity, is now more explicitly linked to domestic migration-control objectives. This represents a structural and normative shift in how Germany integrates development policy within its overall migration strategy (Nguyen, Jansen and Lindner, 2025).

These trends take place within a broader shift in the national debate on development cooperation, where Germany’s *development cooperation* (Entwicklungszusammenarbeit (EZ)) is increasingly expected to align with domestic and geopolitical priorities. Germany’s aid budget is facing mounting scrutiny from the political right, which argues that aid should serve German national interests more explicitly, especially in relation to security and migration, rather than being guided primarily by humanitarian or development objectives.

At the same time, migration has become central to this conversation, prompting development policy to demonstrate its relevance by contributing to managed mobility, returns and reintegration. Consequently, German development cooperation is not only tasked with poverty reduction or the SDGs, but is increasingly expected to help restrain irregular flows, support readmission agreements and foster viable “stay-home” prospects in origin countries. This dynamic has turned development policy into a contested field: whereas development practitioners emphasise partnership, human rights and long-term benefits, public and political discourse is shifting toward viewing development funding as an integral part of a broader migration-

control framework (Furness, 2025; Welthungerhilfe, 2024; Interview GIZ, 2025).

## **The institutional set-up: competences and decision-making on migration and aid**

In the political system in Germany, legislative and executive authority is shared between the Federal Government and 16 Länder. Germany is a federal state in which legislative, administrative, and fiscal competences are divided between the Federal Government and the 16 Länder, with significant variation across policy fields and a strong role for intergovernmental coordination in both policy formulation and implementation.

At national level, policy formation and implementation is characterized by 3 principles:

- The Chancellor principle: the chancellor sets policy guidelines and manages affairs of the Federal government. The chancellor can take decisions in cases of disagreement between *Ressorts*<sup>36</sup>.
- The collegiate (cabinet) principle, issues of general political importance must be decided by a majority of ministers
- The departmental principle ('Ressortprinzip'): gives ministers the responsibility for and the authority to run their departments. (EMN und BAMF, 2017).

The political competences and responsibilities for migration (and also those that touch on migration and development related questions) are currently spread widely among various ministries.<sup>37</sup> A joined approach of several German ministries exists in a number of thematic sub-fields related to migration policy. Since migration is

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<sup>36</sup> The German term "Ressort" denotes a defined area of ministerial responsibility within government administration.

<sup>37</sup> In comparison for Canada or Australia where the political competences are concentrated in a specialised resort.

a cross-cutting topic it is common practice that several *Ressorts* are involved and approaches are coordinated. Specific coordination efforts take place in the areas where policy domains have a stake – yet following the ‘departmental principle’ it is usually one ministry that has the competence in devising strategies and leading coordination. Coordination takes place both horizontally as well as vertically with the Länder. Yet, coordination does not automatically lead to a coherent set of strategies.

The competence for most of the activities related to migration are with the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI), the federal Länder as well as the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), which is subordinated to the BMI. However, next to the BMI, the Foreign Ministry (AA) and the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) are involved when external relations with partners on migration (be it labour migration, return & reintegration or displacement) are concerned and in particular when it comes to humanitarian and sustainable development questions of government migration related agendas.

At the federal level, two Commissioners are noteworthy with responsibilities on migration and its partially also its external dimension. They have advisory and coordinating roles, but are often endowed with little resources or political power (Ohliger and Mesghena, 2018).

- Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration; also Minister of State at the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (currently held by Ms Natalie Pawlik). This position focuses more strongly on German integration policy covering cosmetic dimensions of migration rather than the external migration and development link.
- Special Commissioner of the Federal Government for Migration Agreements, appointed in February 2023 (currently held by Joachim Stamp). This position also mandates the connection of migration agreements with German economic cooperation and links migration and development elements.

Concerning the administration of financing of the external and development aspects of migration policy, the budget lines for humanitarian aid is administered by the Foreign Office (AA), that for longer-term development cooperation by the Ministry for Economic cooperation (BMZ). The stronger focus on supporting better governance of displacement and migration as well as addressing the root causes of forced displacement and irregular migration that developed after the 2015 refugee crisis is also reflected in increased spending on these issues. After 2015, both humanitarian aid spending on refugee situations has increased as has financing through special initiatives of the BMZ ('Fluchtursachen bekämpfen, Flüchtlinge reintegrieren (Fighting the causes of flight, reintegrating refugees)).

Efforts to develop a coherent, cross-ministerial migration policy in Germany date back to 2014. At that time, a State Secretaries' Working Group on 'International Migration' was established under the joint chairmanship of the Federal Foreign Office (AA) and the BMI, with participation from the BMZ and the Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration. Its purpose was to enhance policy coherence across key areas such as migration and development, protection of refugees, legal migration and cooperation with third countries. Despite the group's broad mandate and five specialised sub-working groups, its impact remained limited. When Germany experienced a sharp increase in asylum arrivals in 2015, the body was overtaken by crisis-mode coordination under the Chancellery, and its outputs (in the form of drafted reports and strategy inputs) were never published or operationalised (Bundesregierung 2016; Interview 2019).

During the crisis, the Chancellery took the lead in migration coordination, while the BMI retained operational responsibility through a steering committee (Lenkungsausschuss) linking other ministries. The period saw the rapid institutionalisation of emergency measures but limited strategic deliberation on long-term migration governance. Once the immediate pressures eased, coordination gradually normalised: the Chancellery's refugee unit was integrated into its

general structure, and ad-hoc inter-ministerial consultation between the AA and BMI resumed. The Advisory Council on Migration and Integration (SVR) subsequently recommended the government consider establishing a permanent, higher-level coordination mechanism for migration and asylum to ensure whole-of-government coherence (SVR 2019). While a high-level discussion circle at State Secretary level was set up in 2019, it met only once and did not produce a formal strategy, remaining largely consultative (Interview 2019).

Since the 2015 refugee crisis, Germany has faced a complex challenge in ensuring effective inter-ministerial coordination on migration, especially between the Federal Foreign Office (AA), the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI). As outlined in the 2021 report from the Fachkommission Fluchtursachen, there was a clear recognition that the reduction of the root causes of migration required greater policy coherence across ministries. The report emphasised the importance of continued cooperation between the departments to align their migration and development agendas, proposing the establishment of annual summits to monitor and enhance coordination (Fachkommission Fluchtursachen 2021). While the German government has made efforts to foster closer collaboration through mechanisms like the *Gemeinsame Analyse und abgestimmte Planung* (GAAP), which facilitates coordinated analysis and planning between the AA and BMZ, the process remains a work in progress. GAAP has been successfully implemented in some contexts, such as in Iraq, but its impact remains limited by the persistence of divergent goals across ministries, which hinders the development of a unified migration development strategy (BMZ 2024; Auswärtiges Amt 2022).

In response to these challenges, Germany has increasingly relied on practical, instrument-driven mechanisms rather than permanent high-level coordination bodies. The Fachkommission recommended the continuation and expansion of inter-ministerial collaboration, particularly through strengthened migration partnerships and return programmes. The government's willingness to pursue migration-re-

lated objectives through concrete instruments, such as migration agreements and development aid linked to return and reintegration (BAMF/BMI 2023), reflects the evolution of Germany's migration policy. While the previous crisis-mode coordination structures have scaled back, the principles of a "whole-of-government" approach are being maintained, albeit through more ad-hoc, project-specific collaborations rather than overarching, permanent bodies. This shift towards operational, instrument-based coordination highlights the growing emphasis on practical migration management, but also points to the ongoing challenge of integrating long-term development goals with short-term migration control objectives (BMZ 2024).

While coordination across ministries has often faced structural and political challenges, recent years have witnessed gradual improvements in mutual understanding and collaboration. Inter-ministerial exchanges since 2015 (e.g. migration has been one of four permanent agenda items in the federal cabinet, see *Evaluierung SV Migration*, p.46) have contributed to a more nuanced appreciation of migration's complexity across portfolios, even though institutional interests and priorities continue to differ.

Earlier analyses found that, in 2012, German political actors lacked a common view of migration's development potential and that the policy field of "migration and development" occupied only a marginal and weakly coordinated position within broader migration policymaking (Baraulina, Hilber and Kreienbrink 2012; Angenendt 2012). According to several interviewees, the refugee situation helped broaden awareness of the multidimensional nature of mobility across ministries, encouraging more frequent and substantive cross-ministerial dialogue - though not fully resolving competing goals. More recent strategy documents and reporting indicate a stronger alignment of external instruments (such as migration partnerships and return-and-reintegration programming) with development and foreign-policy agendas, even as debates persist over the extent to which development cooperation should be instrumentalised for migration management (BMZ 2024; BAMF/BMI 2023).

Recent evaluations suggest that the BMZ, as the main actor advancing development-led responses to migration, has faced difficulties in articulating a clear public stance on migration-related goals within the German political context, particularly amid growing domestic polarisation around both migration policy and development cooperation. A DEval report (2025) attributes this in part to the ministry’s dual mandate—balancing long-term development objectives with increasingly visible migration-control imperatives—an inherent tension that complicates its internal positioning and external visibility. Complementary findings from the evaluation of the Sector Project on Migration further note that BMZ has struggled with how to communicate on migration, often responding to political enquiries in a reactive and cautious manner, marked by a high degree of risk aversion and a desire for institutional self-protection (GIZ, 2025). Together, these findings illustrate how the politicisation of migration has constrained BMZ’s ability to publicly frame migration as a legitimate development issue, reinforcing a defensive rather than proactive communication posture.

Although numerous evaluations and studies inform Germany’s migration and development policy field, their influence on strategic adjustment remains limited. Interview and evaluation evidence suggests that policy direction is more strongly shaped by domestic political pressures than by research findings, contributing to a gap between analytical insights—such as critiques of “root causes” approaches—and dominant political narratives (Interview 4)

## **Migration in Germany’s development cooperation strategy**

BMZ has over time broadened its approach to migration within German development cooperation, encompassing support for regular migration, return and reintegration, and migration partnerships. In doing so, the ministry has during the past years contributed to strategic migration-related goals while walking the tightrope of keeping

a development-focused approach to migration amid pressure to show results for specific migration related objectives that do not inherently follow a development logic.

The BMZ explicitly links Germany's development cooperation to migration in supporting a policy that *"aims to enable safe, regular and orderly migration that benefits everyone"*. It views migration not only as a challenge but also as an opportunity and a thematic field of cooperation. One of the key elements during past years has been its alignment with the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>38</sup> Amongst its objectives it lists the promotion of legal migration routes (including regional mobility), the reduction of irregular migration, the return of people without residence permits and their effective reintegration into the society and economy of their home country as well as the creation of employment and income opportunities in partner countries. Cooperation with people of migrant origin (diaspora) living in Germany is also an integral part of BMZ's work." (BMZ 2024a, BMZ 2024b, BMZ 2023).

### **Box 8. In-Donor Refugee Costs and German ODA Accounting**

A brief budgetary clarification is warranted at this point. While the BMZ's migration-related agenda is often discussed in terms of development programming and strategic priorities, Germany's overall ODA figures are shaped by accounting rules that extend beyond the BMZ's own budget and direct control. Under OECD Development Assistance Committee rules, donors may report certain first-year refugee-hosting costs incurred domestically as ODA, even though these ex-

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<sup>38</sup> The BMZ deliberately engaged in efforts to take international leadership on migration and development. For instance, it supported the implementation of the GCM and took a lead position for the GCM Migration-Multi-Partner-Trust Fund, (GIZ, 2025). A recently published evaluation found that the BMZ successfully positioned itself as a relevant actor in international processes.

penditures do not constitute overseas development programming (OECD, n.d.).

Unlike donor systems that earmark a fixed share of aid budgets for external development spending, Germany's ODA is calculated by aggregating all expenditures that qualify under DAC criteria, including in-donor refugee costs reported to the OECD (Knoll and Sherriff, 2016; OECD, 2025). These costs are **not part of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development's (BMZ) core budget**, which is appropriated separately and focused on bilateral and multilateral development cooperation abroad, and they are often administered outside BMZ, including at *Länder* level. In 2023, Germany reported USD 7.3 billion in in-donor refugee costs, accounting for 24.7 % of its gross bilateral ODA (OECD, 2025). As domestic refugee-related expenditures vary in response to migration dynamics, headline ODA levels can therefore change substantially even when overseas development programming remains broadly stable, while BMZ's budget is shaped by separate fiscal and political constraints.

Since 2017, the BMZ has increasingly supported return and reintegration of migrants living in Germany without a right to stay or prospects of permanent residence (Deval, 2025). BMZ's strategic documents however also make clear that regarding migration governance, legal pathways need to be developed next to fighting irregular migration and smuggling and providing opportunities at home (BMZ, 2017a and BMZ, 2017b).

The BMZ also aimed to counter-balance the national as well as international debate about migration, which is often characterised by security-related topics such as border management, return and questions around asylum by strengthening a development-oriented approach to migration governance and positioning itself more strongly with its own approach in these debates (*Evaluierung Sektorvorhaben Migration*).

Especially since 2022/23 the German government turned more attention to linking migration with job creation, development and legal pathways beyond a focus on return and reintegration. The development minister Svenja Schulze's remarks at the opening of the Ghanaian-German Centre for Jobs, Migration and Development in 2023 exemplifies this development:

*“The German government has decided to bring about a paradigm shift in Germany’s migration policy. This also relates to our development cooperation. Properly managed migration offers enormous potential for economic development in our partner countries, but also in Germany. While many countries, like, for example, Ghana, are faced with the challenge of creating jobs for their young and growing population, demographic change in Germany means that we are desperately looking for labour in many areas. The example of Ghana is an illustration that we can find good joint solutions to address both the situation in our partner countries and the situation in Germany. The existing Ghanaian-German migration advice centre has so far mainly assisted Ghanaian returnees with regard to reintegration. We want to turn this one-way street into a two-way street and further develop the centre for our mutual benefit. We want the centre to stand for a modern, holistic understanding of migration, with Germany not just training and attracting workers for our labour market but also helping to foster economic development in Ghana and create jobs there.” (BMZ, 2023).*

Since 2016, migration has become increasingly visible within BMZ's strategic architecture, attaining its most explicit operational expression in the 2024 *Frieden & Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt* (Peace and Societal Cohesion) strategy, which approaches migration and displacement through a human rights-based, gender-responsive and transformative framework (BMZ 2024). Earlier, the BMZ 2030 reform package (2020) had introduced “Displacement and Migration” as a

sub-theme aligned with crisis prevention, governance and employment, embedding migration within the Sustainable Development Goals rather than treating it as a standalone policy domain (BMZ 2020a). Other thematic strategies, such as those on sustainable economic development and on health, social protection and population dynamics, integrate migration primarily through inclusion and access: refugees and migrants are recognised as priority target groups for vocational training, reintegration and social services (BMZ 2023a; BMZ 2023b). The *Perspektive Heimat (Future at Home)* position paper (2019) and subsequent policy interfaces, particularly those concerning legal migration and return cooperation, anchor BMZ’s role within broader federal migration governance and international commitments, notably the Global Compact for Migration (BMZ 2019; BMZ 2023c).

Analytically, migration thus emerges not as a discrete aid sector but as a cross-cutting governance concern, instrumentalised to advance objectives of stability, inclusion and employment. This positioning reflects BMZ’s strategic shift from conceiving migration primarily as a social challenge towards framing it as a managed driver of sustainable development.

The BMZ lists 7 key focus areas of German development cooperation concerning migration (BMZ, 2023):

1. **Strengthening possibilities for a safe, orderly and regular migration:** Under its focus area of strengthening possibilities for safe, orderly and regular migration, BMZ highlights the developmental potential of migration as a “triple win” for migrants, origin countries and destination countries (BMZ 2024). The ministry collaborates with partner countries to design migration policies that maximise developmental benefits while mitigating negative effects such as the loss of skilled labour in critical sectors. Its initiatives include pilot programmes that promote development-oriented labour and training migration—such as the “THAMM” scheme linking North Africa and Europe, and “PAM” in Nigeria and Vietnam—as well as regional cooperation

to support mobility frameworks through organisations like the African Union and IGAD in the Horn of Africa. BMZ also facilitates voluntary return and sustainable reintegration, with an emphasis on ensuring that reintegration enables future mobility as a choice rather than a necessity (BMZ 2024c).

2. **Supporting Centers for Migration and development:** Since 2017, BMZ has supported a network of Centres for Migration and Development (Zentren für Migration und Entwicklung, ZME) in partner countries including Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Pakistan, Indonesia, Ghana and Nigeria (BMZ 2024d). These centres consolidate migration, employment, training and reintegration services under one roof, offering counselling for regular labour and training migration, supporting the social and economic reintegration of returnees, and cooperating with partner governments, the private sector and training institutions to strengthen systems for legal and circular migration (GIZ 2024). Functioning as one-stop hubs, the ZME provide information on migration opportunities and risks, align training and qualifications with labour market needs, and promote employment or self-employment for returnees. The initiative follows a “triple win” logic—benefiting migrants, origin and destination countries—and is co-financed by the European Union in several partner states. Evolving from earlier migration-for-development centres, the ZME have broadened their scope from reintegration assistance to comprehensive migration-cycle support, with an increasing focus on sustainability, institutionalisation and national ownership (BMZ 2024d; GIZ 2024).
3. **Migration and climate change:** BMZ frames migration within its climate and development agenda as both a risk and an adaptation strategy, recognising mobility as a legitimate and planned response to climatic stress (BMZ 2025a). Its work centres on strengthening urban resilience through planning that integrates migration scenarios, promoting seasonal labour migration as an adaptive livelihood strategy, and reducing migratory pressures via employment opportunities in climate-sensitive sectors such

as agriculture and fisheries. Where adaptation is no longer viable (such as in small island states) BMZ supports voluntary, planned relocation and contributes to global processes like the UNFCCC Task Force on Displacement. This reflects a shift from reactive crisis management toward integrated mobility governance linking adaptation, livelihoods and safe migration pathways (BMZ 2025a).

4. **Migration and Gender:** The BMZ supports development-oriented migration initiatives that integrate gender perspectives, aiming to enhance the rights, protection and participation of women, LGBTIQ+ individuals and other vulnerable migrants in transit and destination contexts (BMZ 2025b). Examples include the “Making Migration Safe for Women” initiative in Niger and Ethiopia, which provides information on safe, regular migration and strengthens government capacity to address the needs of migrant women. Domestically, BMZ’s programme *Migration entwicklungspolitisch gestalten* engages women with migration backgrounds in Germany to unlock their development potential for their countries of origin. Together, these efforts reflect BMZ’s commitment to feminist development cooperation that situates gender equality at the core of migration governance (BMZ 2025b).
5. **Shaping migration policy together with multilateral partners:** The BMZ financially supports bilateral and multilateral initiatives to shape migration policy in cooperation with partner states, regional organisations and UN agencies (BMZ 2023). It contributes to the UN’s Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund, complements the *Leuchtturminitiative Zentren für Migration und Entwicklung* with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in partner countries, and funds advisory programmes that assist governments in developing national migration strategies (such as Serbia’s labour migration policy) as well as regional mobility frameworks, for example with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the Horn of Africa. These efforts underline BMZ’s commitment to a cooperative, rule-based approach to migration governance aligned with interna-

tional frameworks, such as the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) or the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) (BMZ 2023) and they are part of its strategy for multilateral development cooperation established in the 2010s (Heucher, Ihl & Reinstädler, 2025). While international organisations play an important role in implementation, BMZ retains commissioning and strategic responsibility within these arrangements (ibid., BMZ, 2023e; GIZ 2024c).

6. **Facilitating remittances:** The BMZ supports initiatives aimed at making remittance transfers faster, safer and more affordable while enhancing their developmental impact (BMZ 2023b). It funds projects that promote digital and innovative transfer systems, strengthen financial literacy among migrants and their families, and channel remittances into small businesses and sustainable investments. Working with partners such as GIZ, central banks and international organisations, BMZ also contributes to improving financial and regulatory frameworks in partner countries. At the global level, it participates in initiatives like the Global Forum on Remittances and the Global Partnership for Financial Inclusion to reduce transfer costs and expand inclusive financial systems (BMZ 2023b).
7. **Supporting engagement in the area of cooperation of diaspora in Germany:** The BMZ promotes the development-oriented engagement of people with a migration background in Germany by supporting initiatives that leverage their skills, networks and expertise for sustainable development (BMZ 2023c). Through programmes such as *Migration & Diaspora*, it facilitates knowledge exchange, diaspora entrepreneurship and short-term expert assignments to countries of origin. These efforts aim to strengthen the contribution of diasporas while advancing social inclusion, political participation and equal rights in Germany. To coordinate and communicate these activities, BMZ—through GIZ—operates the online platform *diaspora2023.de*, which showcases opportunities for involvement in development cooperation (BMZ 2025d).

One explanation emerging from the findings is that BMZ's wide-ranging migration agenda (spanning reintegration, labour mobility, gender, climate migration and diaspora engagement) has enabled the ministry to operate across competing political migration demands and developmental expectations. According to one BMZ official interviewed, this breadth should however not be understood as a deliberate technocratic strategy to legitimise the BMZ working on restrictive working on migration measures. Rather, it reflects a politically contingent choice, shaped by partisan configurations and normative preferences at particular moments, notably a commitment to foregrounding regular labour migration pathways (Interview 3).

Nevertheless, the resulting portfolio structure has the effect of situating more restrictive or interest-driven activities, such as return or readmission cooperation, within a wider narrative of promoting "safe, orderly and regular migration" and sustainable development. Analytically, this resembles what policy scholars describe as *agenda buffering* (Howlett 2019; Zahariadis 2008). In this case not necessarily as an intentional tactic but as an institutional outcome through which contentious issues are embedded within broader normative frameworks. This enables BMZ to gain both internal legitimacy and external policy coherence. The ministry's wide portfolio thus provides a strategic equilibrium between domestic political demands and long-term development priorities. This seems to create a degree of institutional resilience and flexibility that may be less accessible to development actors with narrower mandates.

Evidence from recent evaluations and comparative cases lends preliminary support to this interpretation. DEval (2025) and GIZ (2025) assessments note that BMZ's approach to migration has been "cautious, reactive and risk-averse," yet still framed through development cooperation rather than security logics, demonstrating a form of negotiated adaptation rather than simple instrumentalisation. This aligns with broader academic observations that European development ministries increasingly internalise migration-control objectives through reframing rather than coercion, integrating them into devel-

opment rationales such as “addressing root causes” or “creating prospects” (Castillejo 2019; Koch 2021; Lundsgaarde and Engberg-Pedersen 2021).

Taken together, these patterns indicate that BMZ’s institutional positioning, which is rooted in a broad and normatively anchored migration and development agenda, may have afforded it greater flexibility to balance political and developmental imperatives than in systems where development cooperation is asked to focus on a set of more narrowly defined migration interests. Evidence from interviews and recent evaluations suggests that this flexibility has supported pragmatic adaptation, but that it has translated into only limited and uneven policy coherence, with underlying tensions largely managed rather than resolved (Interview 3; GIZ 2024c).

## **Policy into practice: GIZ and the implementation of germany’s migration–development agenda**

This section illustrates how whole-of-government coordination is translated into practice through the BMZ–GIZ relationship, highlighting the tension between political steering and operational autonomy, and between policy coherence and flexibility for implementation.

At the core of Germany’s approach to migration and development lies the working relationship between the BMZ and its principal implementing agency, GIZ.<sup>39</sup> In 2023, GIZ’s business volume was approximately EUR 3.96 billion, with BMZ commissions accounting for roughly EUR 3.27 billion, making BMZ the main commissioning party for the organisation (GIZ 2024b). Within the topic of migration and displacement, this translates into a network of interlinked

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<sup>39</sup> As BMZ’s largest implementing agency, GIZ executes the majority of Germany’s official development assistance (ODA) and is commissioned almost entirely through direct “in-house” contracting mechanisms (GIZ 2024a). This structural arrangement gives BMZ significant steering authority while ensuring GIZ remains closely embedded in the ministry’s policy and communication architecture.

programmes (beyond those that are integrated in country portfolios), such as the

- **Sector Project on Migration and Development** (*Sektorvorhaben Migration und Entwicklung*), which provides policy and technical advisory support to BMZ. The current phase advises on development-oriented migration policy (2024–2028; 7.2 million) and follows on from three previous projects (2021–2024, approx. 4 million; 2019–2022, approx. €5 million and 2016–2019).
- **Programme Migration & Diaspora (PMD)**. This programme supports the engagement of diaspora actors and promotes knowledge exchange and skilled migration; assessed as *having mixed to moderately positive results* in a 2022 evaluation<sup>40</sup>, though the report highlighted fragmented activities and a need for clearer country selection criteria.
- **Partnership Approaches for Development-Oriented Training and Labour Migration (PAM)**. This programme implements pilot initiatives on fair and skills-based labour migration in Ecuador, Jordan and Vietnam (2024–2028).
- **Promoting Fair Labour Migration and Reintegration after Return**. This programme operates through the *Centres for Migration and Development* in 14 partner countries; focuses on fair recruitment, skills transfer, and sustainable reintegration (2023–2028).
- **Supporting the Global Compact for Migration – Programme “Shaping Migration in Development Policy Terms” (MEG)**. This programme aims to operationalise BMZ’s commitments

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<sup>40</sup> The assessment of the Programme Migration & Diaspora as “moderately successful” refers to its performance against OECD DAC criteria, particularly effectiveness and impact. The evaluation finds that PMD largely achieved its project objective of strengthening development-oriented migration and diaspora engagement capacities among key actors, including through improved advisory structures, diaspora engagement mechanisms, and migration governance support. But results were uneven across countries and fields of action, with limited strategic integration and challenges to sustainability. While the programme contributed to developmental goals linked to regular migration and diaspora engagement, these contributions remained context-specific and only partially scalable, justifying the mid-range (‘moderately successful’) rating (GIZ, 2024c).

under the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2023–2026).

- **Global Project on Climate and Migration** (*Improving Responses to Climate Migration – Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change II*) – Strengthens partner countries’ capacity to address climate-induced mobility through adaptation and policy advice (2023–2027).

Together, these initiatives cover nearly the full migration–development nexus, ranging from labour mobility to return/reintegration, climate migration and diaspora engagement. Together they demonstrate the operational breadth of Germany’s development-oriented migration agenda (GIZ 2023; BMZ 2024).

Yet this density of initiatives has also generated challenges of coordination and role differentiation. A 2025 evaluation of the *Sektorvorhaben Migration* identified recurring thematic overlaps and unclear divisions of labour between projects, especially as new priorities such as climate-induced migration emerged (GIZ 2025, 32). For instance, both the Sector Project and the Global Project on Climate and Migration were mandated to advise BMZ, leading to duplication of advisory competences. The evaluation notes that, over time, the Sector Project’s thematic priorities also shifted in line with political attention (initially focusing on reintegration and return, later expanding towards labour migration, skills partnerships and, more recently, migration linked to climate change (GIZ 2025, 34–35). To address the resulting coordination challenges, BMZ and GIZ agreed on a joint *Jour fixe* and clearer topic assignments: the Global Project would take the technical lead on climate-related issues, while the Sector Project would concentrate on providing overarching policy advice. These iterative adjustments illustrate how Germany’s migration-development portfolio evolves through continuous internal negotiation, as both institutions adapt to shifting political priorities and emerging global debates on migration.

Externally, blurred boundaries between BMZ and GIZ and the various programmes of GIZ sometimes complicated cooperation and

visibility. Several international partners have reported difficulties distinguishing between the Sector Project on Migration, the Sector Project on Displacement, and other GIZ programmes operating under BMZ's migration portfolio (GIZ 2025, 46). Furthermore, evaluators found that external stakeholders were often uncertain about the distinction between BMZ as a commissioning ministry and GIZ as an implementing organisation (GIZ 2025). In such cases, GIZ's position as both technical implementer and policy advisor requires it to navigate dual accountability: maintaining operational independence and credibility with partners, while reflecting BMZ's politically sensitive messaging.

Internally, the relationship between BMZ and GIZ is characterised by what the evaluation calls "tight coupling." The *Sektorvorhaben Migration* has played a particularly instrumental role in providing BMZ with policy input, ad-hoc analysis, and public communication material, including briefings, talking points, and speech drafts (GIZ 2025, 46). This arrangement enables BMZ to respond rapidly to political enquiries or debates. For the BMZ this is an important function given the ministry's cautious and reactive communication style on migration. The flexibility and technical expertise of GIZ, as well as of other implementing partners, thus serve as an informal extension of BMZ's policy capacity, bridging the gap between the political and operational spheres. However, this high degree of interdependence also makes both institutions vulnerable to disruption when coordination mechanisms falter. Periods of leadership change or restructuring have occasionally strained communication and trust, as documented during the 2020 reorganisation of BMZ's Division 500 and a six-month leadership vacancy within the Sector Project. Trust was only restored after new management structures and clearer communication channels were introduced (GIZ 2025, 47).

The degree of BMZ oversight extends beyond strategic direction to procedural controls. Evaluations of the *Migration & Diaspora* programme show that GIZ must submit major financing contracts for BMZ approval and provide quarterly impact summaries, reflecting

the ministry's strong emphasis on accountability and measurable results (GIZ 2025b, 67). While this oversight can slow decision-making, it also ensures that politically sensitive migration projects maintain alignment with BMZ's overarching policy objectives and communication strategy. The relationship is therefore not merely hierarchical but symbiotic: BMZ relies on GIZ's operational agility and field presence to implement politically sensitive initiatives, while GIZ depends on BMZ's mandate and funding to legitimise its work and access diplomatic channels.

Analytically, the BMZ–GIZ interface exemplifies the tension between political control and operational expertise that characterises contemporary development governance. On the one hand, close coupling allows Germany to project a coherent migration–development approach internationally, drawing on GIZ's extensive implementation network, co-financing partnerships with the EU and UN agencies, and adaptive project structures such as *ZME* and *BMM* in the Horn of Africa (GIZ 2025c). On the other hand, the same proximity can limit institutional innovation and blur accountability, especially when politically sensitive objectives (such as returns or labour migration linked to German interests) require careful framing.

This dynamic suggests that GIZ's role is less that of an autonomous policy entrepreneur than that of a *policy translator*—an actor converting broad, and sometimes contradictory, political signals into actionable development practice. The institutional equilibrium between BMZ's cautious political mandate and GIZ's flexible technical execution is therefore both a strength and a source of ongoing tension, one that future interviews could probe further to assess how Germany's migration–development apparatus balances responsiveness, coherence and autonomy.

## Germany's development engagement across key migration themes

Migration partnerships exemplify the whole-of-government trade-off since they bundle restrictive and facilitative measures, thus forcing development and interior policy logics to converge.

Similar to other EU member states or at the level of the European Commission, Germany's current approach foregrounds broader migration partnerships that bundle cooperation on returns and readmission with measures for legal mobility, skills, and reintegration. This shift has been institutionalised by the creation of the Federal Government's *Special Envoy for Migration Agreements* in February 2023, tasked with concluding "practical" agreements that enable regular migration and curb irregular channels (Bundesregierung 2023; BMI 2023). The 2021 coalition agreement already set out a comprehensive template (explicitly linking mobility and labour-market measures, visa facilitation, economic and technology cooperation, and cooperation on return) signalling that future arrangements should move beyond narrow readmission deals (SPD/Greens/FDP 2021, 141).

Within this architecture, BMZ has accompanied and underpinned the broader packages through its development portfolio: skills partnerships and TVEIT, employer linkages, Centres for Migration and Development (ZME) for counselling and reintegration, and capacity support for partner institutions across the migration cycle (BMZ n.d.; BMZ 2023). Following the change in federal government in 2025, the position of the Federal Government's *Special Envoy for Migration Agreements* was discontinued and its responsibilities were folded back into existing ministerial structures, primarily within the BMI. This step formed part of a broader reorganisation aimed at reducing the number of special representative roles and streamlining coordination arrangements, rather than signalling a fundamental departure from migration partnerships as a policy instrument. At the same time, the decision has attracted criticism, with observers noting that the abolition of the envoy may reduce visibility, continuity, and

political traction in partner countries, particularly in contexts where migration cooperation relies on sustained high-level engagement beyond routine inter-ministerial processes.

In practice, Germany's migration partnerships are embedded in a differentiated institutional landscape and take various forms<sup>41</sup>. Separate and only partially overlapping country priority lists are maintained by BMI, BMZ, the Federal Employment Agency (BA), and the former Federal Government's Special Envoy for Migration Agreements. For example, for the BA, the international placement activities reveal a set of operational focus countries that recur across recruitment programmes, particularly in health care, technical occupations, and skilled trades. These include the Philippines, Vietnam, India, several Western Balkan states, and selected North African countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco (Interview 3). These countries do not all fully overlap with the countries that the BMZ's ZMEs (as successors of PME)s are implemented in (Egypt, Ghana, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan and Tunisia) (BMZ, 2023f). And these may again be different from the countries with which the Special Envoy negotiated partnerships with or which are important from a return perspective. Coordination across Germany's actors and joint delivery thus depend heavily on partner context and existing inter-ministerial arrangements and priorities. The mandate and work of the *Special Envoy* since 2023 has according to one interviewee contributed to stronger coherence in those countries where priorities overlap (Interview 3).

Three recent examples illustrate how these partnerships operate in practice and where development cooperation adds value. First, the India–Germany Migration and Mobility Partnership (finalised in 2022 and entered into force in 2023) does not create new legal categories for migrants coming to Germany but aims to improve imple-

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<sup>41</sup> For some countries like India, Georgia, Kenya and Uzbekistan, Germany's Special Envoy for Migration Partnerships has negotiated binding bilateral agreements. For other countries (e.g. Morocco or Colombia) they are "designed as informal agreements for improved practical cooperation" (Biehler, Kipp and Koch, 2024).

mentation, notably by speeding visa processing, easing mobility for students, trainees and skilled workers, and providing a joint coordination platform (SWP 2025; Bundesregierung 2022; MEA India 2022). Here, BMZ-type accompaniment in the form of skills ecosystems, recognition support, and employer matching, helps ensure that mobility commitments translate into actual placements rather than promises on paper (BMZ n.d.).

Second, the Georgia–Germany migration agreement (December 2023) is explicitly tied to reducing irregular migration while opening regular routes, and was paired with the “safe country of origin” classification. This partnership underlines how control and mobility incentives are negotiated together (BMI 2023b; AP 2023). In such settings, BMZ funded ZME counselling and reintegration support can stabilise outcomes for returnees while skills programmes build confidence that legal channels exist and function (BMZ 2023). A BMZ interviewee cited Morocco as a partner context characterised by comparatively close inter-ministerial coordination in the migration field.

Third, in the Moroccan case, BMZ and BMAS were described as jointly chairing a sub-working group on legal employment and migration (Unterarbeitsgruppe legale Beschäftigung und Migration), facilitating alignment between labour migration, skills cooperation, and development instruments. The interviewee further pointed to regular coordination with BMI in the Moroccan context, contributing to a relatively coherent external posture across policy fields. While not eliminating all institutional differences, this configuration was characterised by the interviewee as coming closest to a “*Migrationspolitik aus einem Guss*” (Interview 2).

At the level of partner-country selection, Germany’s bilateral migration cooperation broadly overlaps with the EU’s external migration priorities, but coherence remains incomplete. Many countries prioritised by Germany (such as India, Morocco, Georgia, Tunisia, and Egypt) also feature prominently in EU migration partnerships or related cooperation frameworks, reflecting a shared focus on key origin

and transit states (SWP 2025; European Commission 2023). Parliamentary scrutiny and policy analysis suggest, however, that this overlap is largely implicit rather than the result of formal joint prioritisation: Germany's agreements are negotiated bilaterally and according to national interests, while EU migration partnerships follow their own sequencing, instruments, and political dynamics (Bundestag 2024; SWP 2025).

Germany's approach further diverges from EU-level practice in its comparatively restrained use of hard conditionality. Whereas the EU has institutionalised visa-based leverage as a central tool to incentivise readmission cooperation, Germany's bilateral engagement, particularly under the former Special Envoy, has been framed more as partner-oriented bargaining based on incentives and mutual interests (European Commission 2023; BMI 2023). As a result, overlap in partner countries does not automatically translate into coordinated strategies on the ground. In countries that are strategically important for Germany's labour market, recruitment has generally been treated as a policy objective in its own right rather than as a bargaining chip in return or readmission negotiations (SWP 2025).

### **Box 9. Box: Conditionality in the German context**

Officially, the German government continues to present migration partnerships as arrangements of mutual interest and fairness. In practice, however, these agreements at times link cooperation on returns and readmission with mobility and development incentives (such as visa facilitation, skills partnerships, or targeted cooperation projects) forming a system of positively conditional cooperation (BMI 2023a; BMI 2023b).

The 2025 coalition agreement under Merz places migration partnerships at the centre of Germany's external migration policy. It commits the government to conclude additional migration and mobility partnerships with countries of origin and transit, combining cooperation on returns, legal labour migra-

tion, and reintegration. Development cooperation, trade, and investment instruments are explicitly identified as levers to incentivise compliance in migration management and the prevention of irregular migration. This marks a harder line on conditionality and a clearer alignment of aid and foreign policy with migration objectives than under previous governments (CDU/CSU/FDP 2025). While the agreement frames these partnerships as mutually beneficial, their design reflects a stronger emphasis on control, readmission, and conditionality compared with the more humanitarian and integration-oriented approach of the 2021 coalition (SPD/Greens/FDP 2021, 141).

Comparative policy analysis supports this trend: European actors increasingly use visas, development aid, and trade access as levers to secure cooperation on migration management. According to DGAP (2023), the effectiveness of such conditionality depends less on sanctions and more on credible, well-implemented incentives. Within this structure, BMZ provides much of the “positive conditionality”, the development components that make partnerships sustainable: skills training, institutional capacity building, and reintegration systems that offer tangible benefits to partner countries (BMZ n.d.; BMZ 2023). Such measures seldom operate in isolation but are instead embedded within a wider constellation of policy instruments, rendering it difficult to isolate the effects of individual components, including forms of aid conditionality, whether positive or negative.

Interview evidence suggests that, in the German case, conditionality to date is applied primarily in indirect and negotiated forms rather than through explicit sanctions or aid withdrawal (negative forms). BMZ actors describe negative conditionality as largely ineffective and politically counterproductive, and note that harder leverage has been used only selectively in specific country contexts, such as the Gambia (Interview 3), fa-

vouring incentive-based arrangements embedded in broader partnership packages.

In a formal government response in 2018, the German government explicitly rejected the premise that there were partner states for which development assistance was reduced as a consequence of refusing readmission cooperation (Bundestag Drucksache 19/3150). At the same time, Germany has relied primarily on alternative leverage instruments. Until 2023, it had listed only The Gambia under the EU's Article 25a visa leverage mechanism in order to apply visa restrictions as a form of pressure (Bundestag Drucksache 20/5466).

Yet, this does not mean that pressure in negotiations was not applied by the German government. Negative or positive aid conditionality may not always be labelled explicitly as such given political sensitivity in partner countries and the aim to provide entry points for cooperation. Beyond formal policy instruments, **statements by partner-country officials suggest that German engagement in migration cooperation can be perceived as implicitly linked to development assistance**, even where such linkages are not publicly acknowledged by the German government. Reporting on negotiations between the EU and Afghanistan in 2021 cites Afghan officials describing significant pressure from European states, including Germany, during talks on return cooperation, with migration agreements portrayed as intertwined with expectations regarding continued financial and development support (Bjelica 2016). Such accounts indicate that **recipient-country actors interpret migration negotiations with Germany as carrying explicit or implicit aid-related expectations**, particularly in politically asymmetric negotiating contexts.

Emerging lessons from these broader partnerships stress that success depends less on treaty text and more on administration and coordination: visa throughput, targeted skills matching, employer en-

agement, recognition procedures, and reliable reintegration services (SWP 2025). Advisory bodies (e.g., joint working groups) help to overcome bottlenecks. However, sustained gains depend on joined-up implementation across ministries and levels of government, a point also raised by SVR in its call for clearer strategies and coordinated delivery (SVR 2024). From the standpoint of development cooperation, the effectiveness of migration partnerships depends on linking the different stages of the migration process (mobility, skills development, diaspora engagement, and reintegration) into a coherent framework. BMZ's programmes are designed to bridge these stages, but interview evidence suggests that coherence remains uneven and highly context-dependent, reflecting differences in partner capacities, inter-ministerial coordination, and administrative follow-through (Interview 1, 3 and 4; BMZ n.d.; BMZ 2023).

## **Development-led approaches to return and sustainable reintegration**

Return and reintegration represent a particularly sensitive domain of Germany's whole-of-government approach, where development objectives and migration-control priorities intersect and require continuous coordination and negotiation.

As in other EU member states, the governance of return and reintegration in Germany illustrates persistent tensions between development-oriented and enforcement-driven policy logics. As an SWP study shows, the objectives of the BMZ and BMI often diverge (Biehler, Koch & Meier 2021). Whereas the BMZ prioritises sustainable reintegration and the developmental impact of return programmes, the BMI focuses on enforcement, deterrence and the political visibility of return statistics. This institutional dualism produces a certain incoherence: return assistance designed to promote long-term stability and reintegration is frequently subordinated to short-term migration-control imperatives. The study describes how the drive to demonstrate "returns" as policy success creates

trade-offs that can undermine both development effectiveness and foreign-policy coherence. While this institutional dualism continues to shape return and reintegration policy, interview evidence suggests that it has increasingly been managed through negotiated adaptation rather than simple subordination of development objectives to enforcement imperatives, particularly as BMZ has sought to more clearly delimit its mandate in recent years (Interview 3; Interview 4).

The coordination between the BMZ and the BMI on return and reintegration has evolved into one of the most prominent examples of a whole-of-government approach in German migration policy. The joint initiative *Perspektive Heimat* (BMZ and BMI 2017), implemented with strong involvement of the BAMF, links (voluntary) return and reintegration more closely by connecting return counselling with economic development activities in countries of origin. The programme's stated aim is to provide returnees with future prospects through advisory centres and counselling services that also target local communities in origin areas. It thus seeks to inject dignity and sustainability into a politically sensitive process. Initial focus countries included Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Tunisia, Morocco, Ghana, Senegal and Iraq, with Gambia and Pakistan added in 2019. Early results were mixed: in its first six months the programme placed relatively few returnees in employment while providing more support to local populations in partner regions (Prössl and Mallinckrodt 2018). Since then, the network of advisory centres has expanded and become the backbone of BMZ's reintegration architecture. Interview evidence suggests that these early shortcomings reflected structural tensions in the programme's design, which in turn informed a subsequent reorientation of BMZ's reintegration approach towards a clearer development mandate, notably through the establishment of the Centres for Migration and Development (ZME) as distinct from return counselling functions (Interview 3; Interview 4).

Cooperation between BMZ and BMI dates back to 2015, when both ministries began bridging their mandates. Early debates centred on the risk of subordination, namely, whether development cooperation

might be used as leverage to promote readmission and returns. Over time, however, the relationship evolved towards greater mutual recognition of complementary roles (BMZ and BMI 2018). Senior political leadership was essential in fostering this rapprochement. Interviewees in 2019 emphasised that improved coordination began at ministerial level and was later institutionalised through technical exchange structures, including coordination meetings, secondments, joint conferences, and mutual data exchange (Interview, 2019). These mechanisms enabled information flow without the need for new joint budgets or administrative bodies, demonstrating that interministerial cooperation can advance within existing institutional frameworks, albeit in a politically contingent manner. Interview evidence from both 2019 and 2025 suggests that while these mechanisms improved information flow and day-to-day coordination, they did not eliminate underlying asymmetries in political priorities, with development-oriented considerations remaining more vulnerable to shifts in domestic migration politics (Interview 1,3 and 4).

Vertical coherence was also strengthened. Because the Länder are responsible for executing return decisions through their *Ansländerbehörden*, they were included in coordination structures to link return processes with reintegration opportunities financed by BMZ. The joint programme and communication efforts helped BMZ reach subnational actors with whom it traditionally had limited contact. Regular meetings involving BMZ, BMI and Länder representatives (for example, on Gambia-specific issues) helped align operational practices (Interview, 2019). Interview evidence suggests, however, that such vertical coordination remains highly context-dependent and does not necessarily translate into a coherent or easily intelligible governance structure for partner countries, which often perceive Germany's engagement as fragmented across overlapping mandates and country priorities (Interview 3).

A second guiding principle concerns the delineation of competences and mutual respect for each ministry's mandate. The cooperation succeeded because BMZ and BMI clearly defined who leads on

which component (developmental reintegration versus migration control) thereby allowing each to connect its work to the other's without institutional overreach. Within Germany's *departmental principle*, such clarity is essential for a functional whole-of-government approach (Interview, 2019).

This division of labour also raises the question of whether return and reintegration should be implemented primarily through development cooperation or through migration administrations. In the German case, a substantial share of assisted voluntary return and individual reintegration support is already operationally anchored within the interior portfolio: the BAMF, as an agency of the BMI, is responsible for planning and implementing voluntary return and reintegration programmes such as REAG/GARP and StarthilfePlus, and for coordinating Germany's participation in EU-level reintegration instruments (BMI/BAMF 2023; BAMF 2024). At the same time, BMZ retains a distinct development-policy role where reintegration is framed as longer-term, sustainability-oriented support and embedded in broader cooperation with countries of origin. Evaluations suggest that this hybrid arrangement reflects an attempt to balance domestic return-management priorities with development objectives, rather than a wholesale transfer of reintegration responsibilities to migration authorities, although tensions between short-term return logics and longer-term reintegration goals persist (DEval 2025; Kipp and Koch 2024).

Evaluations and interview evidence alike indicate that smooth working relations alone cannot substitute for clear political direction; sustained cooperation requires not only administrative coordination but also sustained ministerial commitment to shared objectives.

Recent evidence, however, shows that the initiative continues to face structural tensions. A comprehensive evaluation by the *Deutsches Evaluierungsinstitut der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit* (DEval 2025) found that, while institutional achievements, such as the establishment of advisory centres and improved coordination, were “partially or largely achieved,” individual-level reintegration goals were “hardly or

at best partially achieved.” Many returnees experienced only limited improvements in economic or social reintegration. The evaluation highlights a persistent duality between domestically motivated return-management objectives and the development-policy orientation of reintegration programmes, confirming that political and developmental logics are not easily reconciled. These findings update earlier assessments that described *Perspektive Heimat* as a pragmatic compromise between ministries with different incentives but shared operational platforms.

These evaluation findings echo broader policy debates. A recent SWP study argues that German development cooperation should not be reduced to a supporting function for migration enforcement but should instead prioritise sustainable reintegration and partnership-based cooperation with countries of origin (Kipp and Koch 2024). The authors recommend establishing a stronger evaluative framework that weighs the costs and benefits of return policy across foreign, security and development dimensions, as well as a more coherent institutional arrangement linking BMZ, BMI and the Federal Foreign Office (AA). Improved interministerial coordination, they argue, would allow development programmes to strengthen local reintegration capacities and social infrastructure rather than serving primarily as incentives for compliance in readmission negotiations. In essence, the report calls for a recalibration of German development cooperation: away from an instrumental, control-oriented model towards one that foregrounds sustainability, rights and mutual interests within migration partnerships.

From a development-policy standpoint, critics continue to question whether linking reintegration assistance to return promotion risks aligning German development cooperation too closely with migration-control objectives (Feneberg 2019). Some argue that a more sustainable approach would be to expand opportunities for skill acquisition and employment, even for rejected asylum seekers, before return, enabling them to reintegrate with greater assets. BMZ officials, by contrast, maintain that integrating developmental support

into the return process is essential: since return is a legal and social reality, neglecting its developmental dimension would overlook an integral part of human mobility (Interview 1). Interview evidence from 2025 suggests that this position has increasingly been operationalised through efforts to reframe reintegration support away from short-term, numbers-driven approaches towards more differentiated, development-oriented interventions, including attention to vulnerable groups and psychosocial needs, separated from enforcement-related functions (Interview 3 and 4).

Overall, Germany's experience shows both the promise and the limits of a whole-of-government approach to return and reintegration. Political commitment at the top and a clear division of responsibilities have helped overcome earlier silo thinking and made practical cooperation between BMZ and BMI possible. Yet, tensions remain where the two ministries' underlying mandates and rationales diverge. Collaboration seems to work best when framed as complementarity (each contributing its strengths within a shared framework) rather than as one side serving the priorities of the other. Maintaining this balance is an ongoing task, and the success of Germany's development-oriented return and reintegration efforts will depend on how well both ministries can continue to navigate that delicate middle ground between policy coherence and institutional autonomy in a politically volatile field.

## **Labour migration as a development instrument: the “triple win” narrative**

German development cooperation has long framed labour mobility as a “triple win” benefitting countries of origin, destination, and migrants. Introduced in 2008, this approach assumes that well-managed migration simultaneously alleviates labour shortages in Germany, provides migrants with income and skills, and benefits for countries of origin through remittances, skills circulation and knowledge transfer (Angenendt 2014a; Schneider 2023). The concept gained traction

with Germany's skilled immigration reforms the European Commission's skills mobility partnerships. Within this logic, development actors (especially BMZ and GIZ) are positioned as key enablers: tasked with ensuring that labour recruitment from abroad remains compatible with development objectives and ethical standards rather than becoming a narrow labour-market instrument (Schneider 2023).

Over the past decade, this framing has translated into a dense landscape of numerous pilot projects and bilateral schemes linking labour migration to development cooperation. *Triple Win*, launched in 2012 by GIZ and the Federal Employment Agency, pioneered ethical recruitment in healthcare, while programmes like THAMM (Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa) and PAM extended the approach to vocational training, and skills development in Africa and Asia. By 2021, Germany had become the EU member state with the largest number of skills mobility partnerships (EMN 2022). Most of these initiatives invoke the "triple win" logic, promising benefits for migrants, origin countries, and Germany. However, evaluations and interview evidence underline that these schemes have largely been conceived as pilots rather than scalable recruitment channels, with success measured in terms of institutional learning, and partnership-building rather than placement numbers.

Systematic evidence on long-term developmental impact remains limited, findings point to uneven outcomes due to short project cycles, coordination challenges, and varying partner-country context (Schneider 2023; Sauer 2023; Interviews 3 and 4). Evaluations and learning-oriented reviews from 2023 to 2025 confirm improvements in training quality, institutional cooperation, and governance frameworks, but also highlight difficulties in attributing broader development outcomes, such as employment creation or skills circulation, to small, short-cycle migration pilot projects (ILO, 2024; GIZ 2024d; Schneider 2023, BAMF 2025).

A recurring theme in literature and interviews is the fragmented governance of Germany's labour migration initiatives. Responsibilities

for recruitment, development cooperation, visas, and integration are divided among multiple federal ministries and agencies, including BMZ, BMAS, BMI, the Federal Employment Agency, and GIZ. Coordination has improved but overlapping pilot schemes, funding lines, and reporting requirements lead to competing priorities. Interviewees emphasised that development-oriented labour migration programmes have clear mandate boundaries: BMZ and GIZ officials stress that they do not act as recruiters or labour brokers, but focus instead on structural measures such as skills development, institutional capacity-building, and advisory support. This boundary-setting is seen as essential for preserving development principles and ODA eligibility, but it also limits the speed and scale at which labour migration initiatives can expand (Sauer 2023; Sauer, Volarević and Meyn, 2023; Interviews 3 and 4).

Policy developments suggest that labour migration is gaining prominence in Germany's development cooperation. BMZ's Reform Plan *Zukunft zusammen global gestalten*, which explicitly commits the ministry to supporting the potential of fair labour and training migration through closer cooperation with economic actors, market-based approaches, and engagement with the private sector (BMZ 2026). From a BMZ perspective, this stronger focus is framed not as a departure from development principles, but as an effort to concentrate resources on areas where development cooperation can plausibly contribute to partner-country capacity-building alongside Germany's long-term labour-market needs (Interview 2).

Experience underlines the importance of clear boundary-setting and realistic expectations. Labour migration schemes appear most viable where they are embedded in broader skills and training ecosystems rather than designed as stand-alone recruitment channels. At the same time, BMZ and GIZ actors interviewed stressed that development cooperation cannot substitute for labour-market institutions or private recruitment, even as cooperation with employers is intensified. Administrative bottlenecks, particularly in visa processing and

recognition, remain binding constraints that limit scale and speed and lie largely the development actors control (Interviews 3 and 4).

The expansion of labour migration raises unresolved development policy tensions. The Skilled Workers Immigration Act, reformed in 2023–24, was primarily designed to address Germany’s labour shortages, but it also embeds ethical and development considerations, echoing BMZ’s position that recruitment should focus on countries not suffering from critical skills shortages. In principle, labour migration is expected to contribute to development in origin countries through investment in education, skills formation, and institutional capacity. In practice, however, implementation has been uneven, and critical analyses suggest that the developmental benefits of ethical recruitment programmes are often assumed rather than systematically demonstrated, with recruitment initiatives in sectors such as healthcare coexisting with concerns about local workforce shortages in origin countries (Hanrieder & Janauschek 2025).

Reflecting these concerns, the German government has repeatedly emphasised that regular migration routes should be further evaluated and, where appropriate, expanded in ways that are compatible with regional development frameworks, including initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (Bundesregierung 2023). Ultimately, the German case illustrates that while labour migration can function as a development instrument under certain conditions, balancing domestic labour-market demand with development-oriented migration governance remains a central and ongoing challenge.

## **Conclusion**

Germany’s experience illustrates both the possibilities and the limits of aligning development cooperation with migration objectives through a whole-of-government approach. A first central lesson is the importance of high-level political commitment combined with a clear division of roles. Sustained engagement by political leadership, alongside explicit delineation of responsibilities between ministries

such as BMZ and BMI, has been essential in enabling cooperation without collapsing distinct mandates. Where such clarity was lacking, tensions between development-oriented and control-driven objectives became more pronounced.

A second lesson concerns the value of operational coordination mechanisms. Regular inter-ministerial meetings, information-sharing arrangements, and flexible coordination formats proved crucial in translating political intent into practice. These mechanisms facilitated day-to-day cooperation across policy areas such as return and reintegration, labour migration, and migration partnerships, even as underlying priorities continued to diverge.

A third insight relates to how development actors have navigated politically sensitive migration issues. Rather than reflecting a deliberate strategy of agenda buffering, interview evidence suggests that BMZ's broad migration and development framing emerged primarily from substantive policy choices about what constitutes meaningful and legitimate development engagement in this field. Embedding return, reintegration and mobility measures within wider development portfolios was seen by practitioners less as a tactical response to political pressure and more as a coherent extension of BMZ's mandate and long-standing approach. At the same time, this framing has had the practical effect of preserving development-policy legitimacy and room for manoeuvre, while not fully resolving underlying tensions between control and development objectives.

A further lesson emerging from the interviews concerns the limited role of evidence in a highly politicised migration policy environment. Interview evidence suggests that, while evaluations and research are formally acknowledged, their influence on strategic direction remains constrained where migration debates are dominated by domestic political imperatives. Practitioners noted particular frustration that findings questioning the effectiveness of certain approaches, such as an excessive emphasis on addressing "root causes" as a means of reducing migration, struggle to gain traction in political narratives that prioritise symbolic reassurance over empirically

grounded policy adjustment (Interview 4). At the same time, evidence in this field rarely translates into clear-cut policy prescriptions, suggesting that the core challenge lies less in generating knowledge than in the political conditions under which it can be meaningfully taken up.

Overall, Germany's approach underscores that whole-of-government coordination can mitigate, but not eliminate, tensions between migration management and development objectives. Its experience suggests that coherence depends less on institutional integration than on political backing, mandate clarity, and pragmatic coordination, while accepting that certain conflicts between policy logics are structural and must be continuously managed rather than conclusively settled.

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## List of Interviews

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<b>Interview 1</b>	Government Official, BMZ, Return and Reintegration	February 2019
<b>Interview 2</b>	Government Official, Foreign Ministry (AA)	March 2019
<b>Interview 3</b>	Government Official BMZ	November 2025
<b>Interview 4</b>	Senior Staff member, GIZ	November 2025

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# Holistic, conditional or strategic support? The ambivalent interplay of Norwegian migration policy and development aid

Jessica Schultz and Cathrine Talleraas

## Introduction

The overall goals of Norwegian aid policy are to fight poverty, save lives, alleviate suffering, and support economic development and welfare.<sup>42</sup> Providing assistance and protection to displaced populations is the most prominent arm of the migration-aid nexus, supported by Norway's leading norm-setting role in global displacement debates.<sup>43</sup> In addition to addressing the humanitarian needs of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), aid is understood to reduce migratory push factors by supporting conditions for political stability and by enabling viable livelihoods. Less prominently, migration is recognised as a facilitator of development; in this regard, the Norwegian aid budget has supported both regional mobility initiatives in Africa and diaspora engagement in countries of origin.

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<sup>42</sup> These are set out in government White Papers including Meld. St. 24 (2016-2017), p. 29; Meld. St. 27 (2018-2019), p. 50.

<sup>43</sup> For example, Norway sponsors the biannual UN General Assembly resolution promoting assistance and protection to IDPs, it promotes uptake of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in national law, and it funds the UN Secretary General's Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement. Already in 1998, the Norwegian Refugee Council (with government funding) established the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) – now the leading global provider of data and analysis on internal displacement. With regard to climate- and disaster-related displacement, Norway launched and co-chaired the Nansen Initiative in 2012 (together with Switzerland), a state led consultative process that produced the Protection Agenda on cross border disaster displacement and shaped emerging policy on climate and disaster related mobility.

Interests in domestic migration control have also, over the years, influenced development aid policy. Already in the 1980s rising asylum claims submitted by ‘spontaneous’ arrivals prompted efforts to link domestic reception with humanitarian and preventive measures abroad. In line with debates elsewhere in Europe and within UNHCR circles, Norwegian policymakers began to explore a ‘holistic approach’ that tied refugee protection to assistance in countries of origin and, implicitly, to future returns once protection was no longer needed (Bølstad et al. 1995; Brekke 2001). This global perspective, set out in a government White Paper *On Refugee Policy* (Meld. St. 17 (1994-1995)), introduced the logic that since refugee status is not meant to be permanent, promoting the returns of refugees who no longer need protection would preserve Norway’s capacity to receive new arrivals (NOAS 2013).

During the past two decades, migration-related aid has expanded and diversified - particularly in response to growing political attention to the challenge of irregular migration from Afghanistan, the Middle East and Africa, and the increasingly important role of EU return policies. The active use of aid to facilitate the return of migrants without authorised stay and to deter future arrivals has been promoted in government coalition platforms on both sides of the political spectrum since 2009 (see Annex 1). At the same time, and in contrast to some EU-level approaches, Norway has generally approached these linkages with caution and without fully embracing aid conditionality tied to migration control. Migration – especially since 2015 – has nonetheless been recognised as a security issue and therefore increasingly – although not without significant resistance - the subject of a ‘whole-of-government’ approach involving different ministries and directorates.

This chapter offers a bird’s-eye view of Norwegian migration-related development aid<sup>44</sup> focusing particularly on return, reintegration, mi-

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<sup>44</sup> For the sake of simplicity, we use the term ‘development aid’ to encompass the ‘triple nexus’ approach including humanitarian, development and peacebuilding support and cooperation.

gration management and efforts to address the ‘root causes’ of irregular migration. The next section outlines the evolution of migration-related objectives in Norwegian aid spending, policy frameworks, and focus areas over time. Thereafter we examine the key actors in the institutional landscape, and organisational shifts surrounding migration-related aid spending. This is followed by an analysis of aid flows and reporting practices, highlighting how migration-related activities are identified and classified. This primarily covers aid spending in *low- and middle-income* recipient countries in Africa and the Middle East, as well as Afghanistan. As such, it does not include refugee-related aid in Norway or to migration-related funding in other European countries, provided for example through EEA grants.<sup>45</sup> The next section presents case studies from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan to illustrate how migration and development objectives intersect in practice. The chapter concludes with a discussion of dilemmas and future developments.

## Methodology

Our methodology combines three complementary components: 1) a review of Norwegian development aid statistics and budgets; 2) a review of strategic and policy documents outlining various priorities of relevance; and 3) semi-structured expert interviews with thirteen institutional actors involved in the planning and implementation of migration-related development cooperation in Norway, representing different ministries and directorates. Together, these methods were applied to map the institutional architecture, financial flows, and political framing of migration-related aid in Norway, and to assess how this field has evolved and been implemented in practice.

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<sup>45</sup> EEA grants aim to reduce social and economic differences in Europe and constitute a significant percentage of overall aid spending on migration in Norway. For example, between 2014-2021, Norway provided 33 million Euros in support to asylum management in Greece (Utrop 2019). Poland is currently the largest beneficiary of Norwegian aid, with 925 million Euros allocated for the period 2021-2028 (MFA 2024). A significant portion of these funds (46.8 million Euros) are allocated to help deal with the consequences of Russian’s invasion of Ukraine, including the reception of refugees.

First, the review of aid flows and budgets covers publicly available statistics on aid, as gathered in the official portal for statistics on and results of Norwegian development aid, as well as the annual budget proposals for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Ministry of Justice and Security (MoJ), which have responsibility for different dimensions of the migration-related aid budget. While Norway has collected aid statistics since the 1960s, there are key challenges in specifying the migration-related aid flows, as discussed later. Rather than reviewing all available ministerial budgets, we focused on selected budget years to confirm and elaborate on insights gained from the policy review and expert interviews.

Second, the review of strategic and policy documents includes all government platforms (*regjeringsplattformer*) from coalition governments after 2005, as well as relevant strategic frameworks, such as the National Return Strategies, government policy documents ('White Papers'), and, where available, country partnership strategies. Taken together, these documents, along with the annual budget proposals, form the basis for tracing how migration has been articulated, prioritised, and institutionalised within Norwegian aid policy.

Third, we conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with key actors from the MFA, the MoJ, the Immigration Directorate (UDI), Norad, and the National Police Immigration Service (NPIS), including former and current Immigration Liaison Officers (ILOs, also referred to as migration officers or return officers) stationed at Norwegian embassies in key partner countries. The interviews were conducted mostly online, with some in-person meetings, and lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. Most were carried out jointly by Schultz and Talleraas. The interviewees included individuals currently or formerly responsible for managing or coordinating migration-related aid, providing in-depth institutional knowledge and first-hand experience. Several had held multiple positions across agencies or embassies, while others had long-standing experience in a single role.

## The evolution of Norway’s migration-focused aid

As described in the introduction, the first voices in Norwegian policy discourse linking migration management with development aid emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s in response to changing patterns of displacement, geopolitical developments such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Balkan wars, and the increasing numbers of ‘spontaneous’ refugees who were less likely to be political dissidents than victims of war and widespread rights violations. The emerging holistic approach centred on humanitarian aid to refugees and support in countries of origin, and the facilitation of voluntary returns for those with legal residence in Norway (Meld. St. Nr. 17 (1994-1995)). The first repatriation programme, managed by the UDI in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), was introduced in 1990 for Chilean refugees. By 1992, this initiative had broadened to include individuals from other countries granted asylum or humanitarian residence.

By the late-1990s, in connection with the limited collective protection regime for Kosovars, the idea of “forced repatriation” took root, for refugees who no longer had a need for protection (Brekke 2010). An effective return policy was understood to grease the revolving door of asylum, permitting a better reception of new refugee arrivals with presumably more urgent needs for protection. It was also during this period (1994) that OECD’s DAC regulations permitted the first year of refugee reception expenses to be included as development aid (Bølstad et al. 1995: 93).

Taken together, these early developments illustrate how shifting policy rationales were accompanied by the gradual introduction of new instruments—ranging from assisted return programmes to changes in aid reporting rules—that would later become more systematically embedded in Norway’s migration-related aid architecture.

## **2000–2008: Migration as a positive force for development**

In the early 2000s, events such as 9/11 and emerging concerns about irregular migration and security prompted new reflections not only in Norway but globally, on how to restrict and control migrant arrivals. At the same time, debates on remittances, diasporas, and transnational engagement created new openings for framing migration as a potential driver of development.<sup>46</sup> With the Soria Moria I government platform (2005-2009), there was a notable if short period during which migration was framed positively in Norwegian foreign policy and aid discourse.

Against this backdrop, a joint working group appointed by the Norwegian MFA and the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion (AID) delivered a report, titled “Migration and development – better coherence and coordination” in 2006, the same year as the first global summit on this topic (MFA and AID 2006; discussed in Horjen 2020). The group, composed of representatives from the ministries, Norad, and the Immigration Directorate (UDI), recommended measures related to expanding circular migration pathways and temporary labour opportunities, the prevention of brain drain, leveraging diaspora communities in development efforts, increasing the development effects of remittances, the strategic use of resettlement quotas, and the strengthening of migration administration in partner countries using development aid. The report also suggested drawing on MFA and Norad expertise to better connect assisted return with reintegration support for refugees and IDPs in neighbouring countries. These ideas were supported also in Norwegian research environments (interviewees 01;02;09). Different aspects of the 2006 report were developed further during the next few years in various policy documents and in diaspora-oriented initiatives, includ-

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<sup>46</sup> This corresponds to the international discourse on migration and development, which can be seen to have “swung back and forth like a pendulum”, from the 1970s and 1980s “neo-Marxist optimism”, swung back to more optimistic views, highlighting the developmental potential of migration, in the 1990s and early 2000s (de Haas, 2010).

ing efforts to reduce remittance costs and to increase immigrant representation in international aid organisations (Horjen 2020).

## **2008–2014: A sharper focus on return policy**

The priority given to refugee returns was sharpened in 2008, when an unexpected increase in asylum seekers led the Stoltenberg government to propose thirteen measures restricting access to asylum and facilitating returns to third countries.<sup>47</sup> The centre-left coalition's platform from 2009 (Soria Moria II) was the first government platform to mention a direct connection between aid spending and migration, saying it sought to “use development aid and cooperation policy to support efforts to facilitate return and reintegration”. Immigration Liaison Officers (ILOs) based at Norwegian embassies, who had previously supported authorities making decisions on asylum, family reunification or other bases of residence, were now deployed in some countries primarily to work on return. The first platform under a conservative and right-wing coalition, Sundvolden (2013), redoubled on the efforts of its predecessors to use “Norway's position to secure more (return) agreements” and make “more active” use of Norway's diplomatic missions.

## **2015–2020: Crisis mode and the mainstreaming of migration management in development aid**

The Norwegian approach to migration-related concerns, and its links to development cooperation and aid, shifted significantly following the asylum crisis<sup>48</sup> in Europe in 2015. A harder line on deterrence

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<sup>47</sup> These were published as a Press Release, ‘Instramming av asylpolitikken’, available at: [Innstramming av asylpolitikken - regjeringen.no](http://Innstramming_av_asylpolitikken_-_regjeringen.no). The number of asylum seekers rose from 6500 in 2007 to ca 15000 in 2008.

<sup>48</sup> We adopt the term ‘asylum crisis’ to describe the political and institutional response to the arrival of approximately 1.3 million asylum seekers, mainly from Syria and Afghanistan, in Europe during 2015. Norway received approximately 31,000 applications during this time (MoJ 2015).

and returns was fronted by the right-wing Progress Party, which led the Ministry of Justice from 2013-2020.

Norway participated in the Valetta Process to strengthen migration governance coordination between Europe and Africa, and supported the European Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) to address root causes of irregular migration (see Box 1). By 2023 Norway's contribution to EUTF totalled more than 260 million NOK.<sup>49</sup> In response to political pressure, the Foreign Minister also established a Section on Migration within the Department for Regional Affairs in 2016, to coordinate the work within the MFA (European, bi- and multilateral affairs, legal affairs, development, and humanitarian support) as well as to liaise with the Ministry of Justice on migration control (section 3). The MFA led the Norwegian delegation which negotiated the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees in 2017-2018. The Ministry of Justice advocated strongly for language reflecting the duty of states to cooperate in the readmission of their own nationals, and a state's right to return migrants without a legal basis for residence (interviewee 03). This became established Norwegian policy before the final adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in December 2018.

The return focus was reinforced by the development of 'return action plans' for a number of partner countries,<sup>50</sup> and by a series of restrictive measures introduced in late 2015 targeting different phases of the asylum process: from early verification of identity to accelerated procedures for people unlikely to qualify for protection, and enhanced collaboration with IOM on assisted return (MoJ 2015). The policies introduced also expanded the scope of exceptions from refugee status in Norway and mandated the revocation of residence permits after the need for protection is deemed to have

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<sup>49</sup> Skriftlig spørsmål - stortinget.no.

<sup>50</sup> Currently there are eight return action plans, for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Morocco, Ethiopia and Somalia (interviewee 11).

ended.<sup>51</sup> These changes meant that fewer people qualified for protection to begin with, and those who did were subject to withdrawal of their refugee status as soon as conditions in the country of origin changed. Norway became a regional leader in returns, implementing for example 65 percent of all forced returns from Europe to Afghanistan in 2016 (NOAS 2020). This period marked renewed discussions on conditionality, and, specifically, whether and how aid might be used as an incentive for cooperation on returns. The threat of leveraging aid for returns and even denying aid to countries that do not comply was explicit in the political discourse, fronted strongly by the Minister of Justice Sylvi Listhaug from the Progress Party (Kveinå 2017). Other actors, including in the MFA and Norad, resisted this line, worrying that conditionalities would compromise other Norwegian interests (see section 3; Paasche 2022).

### **Box 10. Norway and the ‘Root Causes’ approach: limited uptake in practice**

Following the 2015 asylum crisis, the European development and migration agenda became increasingly marked by the so-called ‘root-causes approach’, i.e. the idea to use development aid as a tool to influence migration drivers and hence deter irregular migration. The increased reliance on the root-causes approach occurred even though academic research – both before and after – largely questions the assumption that aid will effectively reduce migration. While a handful of studies finds that aid may be able to decrease migration in specific cases, most studies suggest that increasing aid in low-income countries will initially raise migration, as higher income levels enable people with the means to move (see e.g. Nyberg-Sørensen et al. 2002; Agenda 2019; Talleraas 2025).

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<sup>51</sup> One measure was the expanded scope for applying the ‘internal protection alternative’ as a basis for refusing asylum, in which the reasonableness of relocation within a person’s country of origin would no longer be a consideration for returns.

Interestingly, the root-causes agenda did not fully filter into Norwegian policy or practice. A comparative study found that Norway, unlike Poland or the EU, never fully embraced the root-causes framework (Kugiel et al. 2019). Yet, in 2016 there was some interest in the approach, as reflected in an MFA-funded study examining its relevance. However, the resulting report (Carling and Talleraas 2016) highlighted that the logic of the approach was empirically and conceptually weak, and highlighted the complexity of migration ‘drivers’, aspirations and capabilities.

The requested report was received with mixed reactions within the MFA, and some rhetorical and political support for the approach existed in the first years after 2015, as e.g. visible in the government platforms in 2018 and 2019, stating that the government would ‘intensify efforts for development and democracy’, in order to ‘address the causes of migration’ (emphasis added). Yet, despite this, many of our interviewees said that Norwegian aid practices were not substantively shaped by the approach (Interviewees 01, 02, 03, 03, 07, 09). While some individual projects may contain elements consistent with this reasoning – such as vocational training or livelihood programmes – there is little evidence that they have been guided by a deterrence rationale. Through its contributions to EU initiatives such as the EUTF for Africa, Norway has supported projects within the root-causes framework, but it does not appear to have initiated such programmes on its own, even despite the continued popularity of the root-causes approach also in newer EU frameworks, such as NDICI Global Europe (Talleraas 2025).

## Recent developments

Following the parliamentary elections in 2021, a new government – a coalition of the Labour Party and the Centre Party – was formed under Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre. The government platform (Hurdal) built on earlier return-oriented strategies by committing to “maintaining trust in the asylum system through effective return work”. At the same time, it introduced a stronger emphasis on supporting durable solutions for displaced persons in their countries and regions of origin (as opposed to in Norway), through the establishment of a targeted ‘Solidarity Fund’ (see Box 2) within the MFA budget. Interestingly, the ‘Solidarity Fund’ was described in the chapter of the platform regarding the Ministry of Justice, not Foreign Affairs or development. However, the establishment of the Fund would be within the mandate of the MFA and the development budget. A post as Special Representative for refugees, displaced people and host communities (*Spesialrepresentant for flyktninger, fordrevne og vertsamfunn*) was established in the Section for Humanitarian Affairs in MFA in 2022 to oversee the creation and use of the fund.

The current Labour-led government plan (2025–2029) similarly promises “strengthened return work” and “increased international cooperation on new solutions and measures”, including to ensure a more “sustainable immigration to Europe”. This includes close cooperation with the EU in implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, which opens the door for extraterritorial processing and ‘return hubs’ outside the country of origin.

### Box 12. The Norwegian Solidarity Fund

The Labour Government’s 2021 Hurdal Platform introduced a new initiative under the theme of ‘immigration and integration’ aimed at fostering sustainable solutions for refugees, IDPs, and host communities abroad. Through this Solidarity Fund (*Solidaritetspotten*), 5 billion NOK would be spent over four years to support displaced populations and to enhance

host societies' capacity to accommodate them together with non-displaced citizens. By improving conditions in origin and host countries, the intention was to reduce drivers of onward movement and mitigate irregular migration. The Fund would be managed by the Special Representative in the MFA, through an MFA-MoJ working group.

Instead of creating new funding, the initiative compounded existing projects and budget lines which supported the UNHCR, the World Food Programme and projects related to stabilisation and reduced vulnerability. Funding came from both the humanitarian and the development budgets to underscore a more holistic approach to durable solutions.

Momentum behind the initiative fizzled out especially with the invasion of Ukraine and the reallocation of funds and attention. The Fund's 2024 portfolio included however earmarked funding to UNHCR for projects in Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and its neighbours; IOM activities in Yemen, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh; UNRWA programs in the West Bank and Gaza; Norwegian Refugee Council interventions in Sudan, Gaza, Lebanon, and Afghanistan; and contributions to the UN's Special Adviser on durable solutions (MFA 2025). From 2026, the Fund will no longer have a distinct budget line; its mandate for holistic management of migration-linked development aid will be incorporated into the humanitarian and regional aid budgets.

While the Fund did not generate sustained political momentum, some of our interviewees found that its working group to set priorities provided a useful forum for the MFA and MoJ to discuss their distinct interests and to identify countries where interests converged, such as with Syria and Somalia. Hence the entire budget of the Fund was ODA eligible, but focussed in many cases on countries where the MoJ had a particular interest. They also noted that the Fund's ambiguous aims and the absence of clear outcome benchmarks allowed

for a more open dialogue and dampened potential conflicts. While it is not clear that this ambiguity was intentional, the consequences resonate with research on the EU Trust Fund revealing how the emphasis on “root causes” served to depoliticise migration control and provide a consensus-oriented middle ground among EU institutions and member states (Anderson 2024).

## The institutional landscape

The MFA has overall responsibility for development policy, which is implemented and administered by Norad and the embassies. In addition to providing aid oversight, the MFA leads on multilateral and regional processes on migration, through its Special Representative for migration, and plays a key role in negotiating and collaborating on bilateral return arrangements in close collaboration with the MoJ and the relevant embassies. The MoJ and its subsidiary agencies are responsible for immigration administration, including voluntary, assisted and forced returns.<sup>52</sup> Since 2016, MFA and MoJ have developed joint country return strategies for specific origin states (interviewee 11); there are also currently 12 ILOs placed at various embassies to assist with immigration cases, and to collaborate with partners on the ground on returns. Seven of these are deployed by UDI while the others are recruited by the National Police Immigration Services (NPIS) (interviewee 11).

Since 2023, UDI has been responsible for implementing the approximately 20-25 million NOK per year allocated to ‘international co-operation’ in support of returns (Post 76 in the MoJ budget). Other government ministries (Education, Children and Families, and

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<sup>52</sup> The government’s immigration and asylum/refugee policies have been positioned within different ministries over time, from the (then) Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (2001-2005) to the new Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion (October 2005-2009) before being moved to the Ministry of Justice where it remains today.

Labour and Social Inclusion) also play important roles, e.g., in the reception of refugees in Norway.

## **The ‘asylum crisis’ as a catalyst for a whole-of-government approach**

While there were previous coordination mechanisms for migration and refugee policy within the MFA, the creation of a dedicated Migration Section within the MFA and its Department of Regional Affairs in 2015 marked a watershed in attempts to advance a ‘whole-of-government’ approach. The Section consisted of five staff members, and its mandate covered negotiations on the Global Compacts for Refugees and Migration, engagement with the EU’s Valletta/EUTF framework, general coordination within MFA. It also collaborated with MoJ and UDI on migration governance and issues such as the allocation of quotas for resettled refugees, and it negotiated bilateral return agreements with countries such as Ethiopia and Morocco. Although the Section was meant to ‘show action’ in response to pressure during the crisis, no new budget lines accompanied its work which continued through existing foreign, development and humanitarian allocations. The MoJ was, however, drawn into MFA’s policy planning through regular consultations, with a view to aligning MoJ country priorities with MFA policies and tools (interviewee 07).

The closer collaboration between the MFA and MoJ clarified some tensions in terms of policy priorities. The MoJ, led at the time by a minister from the Progress Party, pursued a stricter control-oriented line, while MFA officials sought to preserve diplomatic balance (interviewee 03). Internally, the Section faced “*berøringsangst*” – reluctance to engage openly with migration control agendas for fear of damaging Norway’s international reputation, especially during Norway’s UN Security Council candidacy (interviewees 03; 07). Some embassies were hesitant to collaborate on return-related tasks, although there was a push from this at the time, even directly from the Prime Minister Erna Solberg (Conservative Party) (interviewee 03). Efforts to use aid to secure return cooperation also met resistance

within other parts of the MFA (interviewees 01; 03; 12). Yet, while differing institutional logics persisted, collaboration between MFA and MoJ improved gradually. The Section had little cooperation with Norad at that time, as relevant funding was managed by the MFA (interviewee 03).

Ultimately, the Section was disbanded in 2019, primarily due to resource constraints. Positions were reallocated to support the UN Security Council position process, leaving too few posts to maintain the section's formal structure (interviewee 03).

## **2019 onwards: shifting priorities and coordination models**

After the Section's dissolution, tasks and work responsibilities were returned to their original MFA departments' mandates, such as the UN department, the Humanitarian Section and European department. MoJ lost a clear MFA contact point and found collaboration increasingly difficult (interviewees 07; 12; 11). One of the responsibilities of the Special Representative for refugees, displaced people and host communities created in 2022 was hence to head inter-ministerial coordination, with a focus on MoJ in addition to coordination within the MFA. (interviewee 07). The Solidarity Fund working group (2022-2025) provided a specific arena for dialogue between the two ministries (interviewee 07).

The MoJ developed a new National Return Strategy (2023-2029) which proposed greater collaboration between the MoJ and development actors to support the "reintegration ability" of specific return countries. This strategy was published unilaterally, triggering political pushback within the MFA and, to some extent – self-censorship: migration language was weakened or removed from subsequent MFA strategies (especially the Africa Strategy and Humanitarian Strategy) to avoid being seen as endorsing conditionality (interviewee 07). A reworked Return Strategy 2025–2030 was subsequently developed with MFA inputs (interviewees 07; 12). This

document reiterates the importance of sustainable return and reintegration, emphasising that grants and other forms of support to achieve this must comply with principles on development aid and guidelines on ODA spending (MoJ 2025).

So far, there is limited collaboration on the return and/or reintegration agendas. Norad has provided training to UDI in the management of international cooperation grants, but it is not involved in the design or evaluation of such projects. There is still significant fragmentation of aid in this area, as both the MFA and MoJ provide support to the same institutions (for example IOM) for work related to return and/or reintegration, but they do so through separate contracts (interviewee 01). In terms of current collaboration, interviewees from Norad noted a continued lack of coordination between return projects funded through the MoJ and broader development efforts in return communities. Several interviewees stressed that effective cooperation with partner countries – in the field of migration and development aid, but especially in terms of return – depends on individual expertise, continuity, and diplomacy/language/cultural competence, while frequent turnover among staff and weak local knowledge may undermine progress. Coordination within Oslo also depends on functional ties between regional and other departments (within the MFA), and between the MFA and MoJ and UDI.

## **Overview of aid flows**

Norwegian migration-related development aid comprises a wide range of objectives, sectors, and implementing channels. It spans from humanitarian and emergency assistance to longer-term development cooperation, and includes activities implemented through a variety of partners, including Norwegian and international NGOs, such as DRC and NRC, partner governments, and multilateral organisations such as the EU, UNHCR and IOM.

The scope of migration-related aid is therefore broad: it covers different types of migration and displacement, from forced and volun-

tary migration to internal displacement, transit, return and reintegration. The overview excludes ODA allocated to hosting refugees within Norway, aid provided to EU countries according to EEA – Norway grant agreements, and aid spending on the budget chapter 153 on refugees, IDPs and host societies.<sup>53</sup>

However, it is important to note that migration-related spending within Norway – particularly expenditures spent the first year on the reception and integration of refugees – has accounted for a substantial share of Norway’s total ODA. In 2015, Norway spent 18.3 percent of its aid budget in 2015 on supporting refugees in Norway, making itself the single largest recipient of Norwegian aid that year (Agenda 2019). This trend intensified the year after with refugee-related spending in Norway rising from 3.7 billion NOK in 2015 to 6.7 billion in 2016. After a few years of a steady decrease, it rose again following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, to 5 billion in 2022, and has since decreased to 4 billion in 2024.<sup>54</sup> In 2022, refugee related spending accounted for 10 percent of the total aid budget, with 83 percent of the support for Ukrainian refugees (OECD 2024).

## **Migration-related aid: difficult to map**

A key challenge with the available data is the difficulty of identifying and mapping migration-related projects beyond costs related to refugees. Such efforts would need to include, for instance, mobility-oriented initiatives, labour-migration programmes, or projects addressing migration-development linkages in different ways (basically any other expenditure on humanitarian aid and long-term develop-

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<sup>53</sup> While aid for refugees represents a key aspect of migration-related assistance, it is excluded from this overview since the purpose of the chapter is to examine migration initiatives beyond refugee support - that is, programmes explicitly aimed at managing migration, facilitating return and reintegration, or addressing the challenge of irregular migration. By focusing on migration-related aid beyond refugee support, the analysis highlights the less visible but increasingly important areas where migration and development intersect within Norway’s aid portfolio.

<sup>54</sup> These statistics are available here: <https://resultater.norad.no/bistands-tall/sektoer/kostnader-i-norge-og-usespesifisert/flyktninger-i-giverland> Accessed 24.10.2025.

ment). However, these are not tied to a specific code, recipient, or budget post. In the Norwegian statistics which follow OECD DAC reporting guidelines, there is therefore no explicit overview or systematic way to capture migration-related projects. Many potentially relevant activities are instead classified under other sectoral categories, such as “governance, civil society and conflict prevention,” “environment and energy,” “health and social services,” or “education.” These may include projects on “agriculture,” “life skills for youth,” “disaster risk reduction,” or “education facilities and training” – all of which could hypothetically be migration-relevant without being registered as such. Consequently, it is impossible to estimate the total volume of migration-related ODA, as relevant projects are reported under other thematic headings.

While a new code for migration management was introduced later (as discussed below), OECD guidelines explicitly note that “activities addressing the root causes of forced displacement and irregular migration should not be coded here, but under their relevant sector of intervention.” This means that these types of migration-related objectives are still embedded – and thus reported – under a wide range of sectoral codes.

Yet, one way of identifying migration-targeted projects is to sort data by relevant recipients, such as with IOM as implementing partner. Doing so reveals that IOM has been a major channel for migration-related funding, deriving from different ministries, since 1995. Thematically, IOM-administered projects have covered a wide range of objectives. In the early years, most projects focused on humanitarian support to refugees and returnees, counter-trafficking, and reintegration assistance, gradually expanding into migration and border management, governance capacity building, protection of vulnerable migrants, and support for regional cooperation. The total amounts allocated through IOM have risen from a few million NOK annually in the 1990s to well over a hundred million NOK per year after 2015, reflecting a broader Norwegian engagement with migration and

IOM's growing role as an implementing partner for humanitarian and development-oriented migration assistance (Pécoud 2018).

## **Migration-management spending since 2017**

An important milestone occurred after 2015, when migration was explicitly included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 10.7). This legitimised migration management as a field of development cooperation and paved the way for its inclusion in international ODA reporting (see e.g. McGregor 2020, Martens et al. 2020, Talleraas 2025).

In line with this, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) adopted a dedicated sector code for migration-related assistance in 2018, which allowed donor countries, including Norway, to report some migration-related spending more systematically as ODA. For Norway, the new sector code was introduced in 2018 (code 151.90), with retroactive effect for 2017, with some projects also registered for 2015 and 2016. Older agreements with disbursements in 2017 were recorded for their entire duration to reflect this change. However, as noted by Norad<sup>55</sup>, reporting remained incomplete these first years, since the ministries managing funds under budget chapter 179 – Refugee costs in Norway (particularly MoJ) continued to report aggregated data. More detailed reporting was introduced from 2019, following a government decision establishing a revised methodology for classifying refugee-related ODA.

From 2019 onward, the MoJ began distinguishing between projects implemented in developing countries and refugee-related costs in Norway, reporting the former under sector 151.90 rather than as domestic refugee expenditures. This change has enabled a more systematic approach to identifying migration-related development spending in Norwegian aid statistics since 2019, and Norad has or-

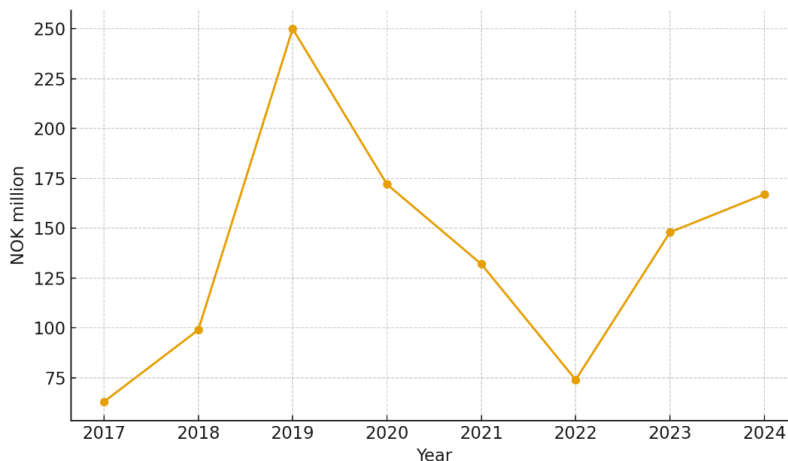
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<sup>55</sup> Email correspondence with the Section for Statistics and Analysis in Norad, in October 2025.

ganised training sessions for the MoJ and UDI on the DAC eligibility criteria.

Since the new code was introduced, Norway has spent a total of 1.1 billion NOK on 107 different migration management initiatives under the code, in the years from 2017-2024 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Total allocations for code 151.90 on “Facilitation of orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration”**



The sharp increase in 2019 is partly explained by the inclusion of agreements managed by the MoJ and UDI, but also by projects administered by MFA, including a sharp rise in spending at the Norwegian embassies. Disbursements from the EU Trust Fund for Africa, managed by the MFA, continued until 2020 and help explain the subsequent decline. The MFA, which had dominated spending in earlier years, assumed a more limited role after 2019, while Norad only has contributed smaller and more sporadic amounts. It should also be noted that these figures cover ODA-eligible countries in all geographical regions, and thus not only low- and middle-income countries.

To get a more detailed understanding of the projects supported by the MoJ and the UDI in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, since 2019, we can see that total allocations under the migration management

sector have increased from NOK 36.2 million in 2019 to NOK 52.5 million in 2024. Among the 34 projects reported during this period, several have focused on return and reintegration assistance – particularly in Afghanistan, Algeria, and Morocco – alongside migration management and institutional capacity building in Somalia and Iraq. Other projects have addressed information-raising on migration, counter-trafficking and prevention of irregular migration, for example through initiatives in Sudan (in 2019 only), Djibouti and Pakistan. Geographically, the projects have targeted nine specific countries, and Somalia, Afghanistan and Morocco have been recurring priority countries throughout the period.

A brief look at the MFA supported projects for the same regions, in the same period of time, reveal that the MFA in Oslo supported two EUTF projects in the Horn of Africa and one IOM project for Afghan returnees, while the Embassies supported two projects on reintegration for IDPs in Iraq, and two projects related to the construction of a headquarters for the Directorate of Immigration in Somalia.

Taken together, these developments illustrate how migration management has become a distinct and increasingly institutionalised area of Norwegian development cooperation over the past ten years. While the total volumes remain modest compared to humanitarian or sectoral aid for refugees, the growth and diversity of activities under the migration management code reflect how Norway’s approach has been affected by evolving political priorities, and the institutionalisation of the topic within the DAC reporting framework.

## **Does the strategic priority of return come at the expense of “traditional” aid?**

The evolution of migration-related ODA in Norway reflects broader international and domestic trends: a growing emphasis on migration, including return, management, expanding reporting practices under DAC rules, and continuing ambiguity over what constitutes devel-

opment-relevant spending. The inclusion of aid spending by the MoJ (reimbursed by MFA) contributes to sustaining the Norwegian government's 1 percent aid target, albeit to a modest degree. At the same time, the expansion of ODA-eligible migration spending – which in Norway has centred on hosting refugees, return, reintegration and capacity-building in partner countries to facilitate return – raises questions about the boundaries between external humanitarian, development and migration control objectives.

Interviewees from both Norad and the MFA underscored that determining ODA eligibility for migration management remains challenging. Indeed, when the OECD/DAC reviewed activities reported under sector code 151.90, they also highlighted one project reported by the MoJ as difficult to assess against the ODA criteria due to an incomplete project description. However, this project was not removed from Norway's ODA statistics, as the MoJ confirmed that it complied with ODA regulations. Indeed, no MoJ-reported projects have been excluded from Norway's ODA reporting.<sup>56</sup>

## **Lessons learned from efforts to facilitate migrant returns**

In this section we move from aid flows to implementation experience. The focus is on three countries where Norway has had particularly strong interests in return cooperation: Afghanistan, Somalia, and Ethiopia. While the limited scope of this study precludes an evaluation of their 'success' over the medium or long term (e.g., through an increase in the number of assisted returns and/or forced returns; the reduction in the number of new arrivals without valid grounds for residence; or positive outcomes in terms of reintegration), these snapshots give a sense of how different strategies have been leveraged and what factors may have shaped the partner countries' cooperation incentives.

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<sup>56</sup> Email correspondence with the Section for Statistics and Analysis in Norad, in October 2025.

## **Somalia: Aid to migration management for return cooperation**

Cooperation with Somali authorities on returns was initiated in 2012, when conditions in Somalia after decades of civil war had improved with a new government and a new constitution. This meant that more Somali asylum seekers in Norway received a negative decision, and were quartered in reception centres pending return. An information campaign in 2014 was launched through IOM to inform potential migrants about Norway's changed asylum policies (*Utrop 2014*), and the Danish Refugee Council came on board as a partner to UDI for assisted return and reintegration support. A return agreement covering forced returns, meanwhile, was signed in 2016.

In 2012, the ILO with responsibility for Somalia needed a stronger return partner in the Somali Immigration and Citizenship Agency (ICA), which was tasked with broad federal responsibilities for migration under the new Constitution (interviewees 07; 10). Funding was provided to the agency under MFA's humanitarian budget at first, before becoming part of the MoJ's portfolio several years later. In the beginning, just knowing who worked at the different offices was a priority, so support to human resources was a first step. In the years since, both MFA and MoJ have funded the Somali migration authorities for various purposes, including training on identity management (together with UDI, the NPIS and the National ID Centre) and a new headquarters building (through UNOPS, together with Denmark, Finland and the UK). Because ICA also issues Somali passports, the Norwegian National ID Centre visited to verify that the identity systems in place meet international standards. This meant that even if a person's identity from birth was unknown, receipt of a passport provided a fixed identity which could not be subsequently changed. Since 2024, Norway has accepted Somali passports as valid identity documents, whether issued in embassies or at the regional level. The cooperation was highly valued on the Somali side, with partners expressing how important it was to travel on their

own passports even if, as dual nationals, many had an alternative (interviewees 6;12).

While the number of Somalis claiming asylum in Norway has reduced, Somalis comprise a significant percentage of the individuals affected by the increased focus on revoking residence permits that has characterised Norwegian immigration policy since 2016. The ‘Somali project’ from 2016 to 2020 involved the review of refugee status for Somalis from Mogadishu on the grounds that they may no longer have a need for protection. In addition, strengthened ID controls mean that a number of Somalis have faced revocation of their residence rights on grounds of fraud (i.e. by giving false information about their identity and/or area of origin).<sup>57</sup> Compared to people refused asylum, revocation cases are more challenging to accept for Somali authorities; from their perspective it is hard to understand why the Norwegian government wants to deport a head of family who has lived in the country for decades (interviewee 12). Despite the reluctance on the Somali side in some cases, the return of people who made false claims in their asylum application - even if considerable time has passed – remains an important priority. The complexity of revocation cases may explain why the return and reintegration programme in Somalia cost 4.4 million NOK in 2024 and facilitated seven returns (MoJ 2025).

According to our interviewees, the long-term presence of an immigration liaison officer helps give credibility to the return agenda and enables a better understanding of the practical barriers to repatriation. As in other countries, the topic is still politicised, with authorities facing backlash for permitting particular returns. All in all, how-

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<sup>57</sup> As part of the Asylum Agreement in 2015, the government mandated UDI to withdraw refugee status when conditions in the country of origin had improved, in accordance with the cessation provision in §37 of the Immigration Act. 1600 cases involving Somali refugees were opened, but only a small number resulted in return. Most Somalis who had been in Norway for some years received residence on other grounds, i.e. their family attachments to Norway or the risk of female genital mutilation (FGM) for girls upon a potential return. Hundreds of cases were set aside in 2020 because of the long processing time and because they were unlikely to result in a revocation decision (Schultz 2025). Since that time, the focus of revocation has been on cases of fraud.

ever, cooperation on migration in Somalia is considered a positive case in both ministries; the country was also singled out as an example of a 'whole-of-government' approach in the Solidarity Fund (interviewee 11).

The MFA is a major contributor to the UN's multi-donor fund which has enabled the national ID authority, NIRA, to expand the population registry. This is seen as an "important step in development work, the state building process, and the implementation of elections" (MFA 2025). Further, Norway supports the World Bank's multi-partner fund to improve financial management and to provide basic services, including education and health. Improved governance and living standards, as one interviewee said, "make Somalia a place where people want to stay and contribute" (interviewee 9).

While initiatives to engage the diaspora in local investment initiatives (e.g. the Nordic Horn of Africa Opportunities Fund) were not considered successful from a development perspective (Horjen 2020), members of the Somali diaspora including those with Norwegian citizenship have had important roles in the Somali government as well as in major NGOs receiving Norwegian development aid. The Somali case shows the potential of closer alignment between migration management, state-building support and return cooperation through durable partnerships with the relevant authorities.

## **Ethiopia: When aid to migration management is not enough**

While a return agreement was signed with Ethiopia in 2012, the path to effective return cooperation has been considerably bumpier than in Somalia. For years authorities in Ethiopia refused as a matter of principle to accept citizens who did not return of their own will; this was problematic for Norwegian authorities because Ethiopians comprised one-fifth of the population of long-staying migrants without a right to remain. As part of the bilateral dialogue to secure an agreement on forced returns, the carrot of development aid was leveraged

in the form of a 5 million NOK contribution channeled from the MoJ through IOM to the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) to provide advice, education, job referrals and reintegration assistance (Zachrisen 2019).

However, this institutional support has not had the hoped for effects; until recently only a handful of Ethiopian nationals were returned from Norway. According to one interviewee, arrangements for cooperation made during negotiations on the return agreement between Ethiopia and the EU, which Norway was obligated to follow, have made implementation more challenging (interviewee 06). In contrast to the Somali Immigration and Citizenship Agency, the ARRA is not a constitutionally mandated interlocutor on return issues, and the role of IOM created more distance between partners. Research also points to deeper conflicts in terms of norms and interests between the two states (Kefale et al. 2025).

While Norwegian authorities emphasise the duty of countries to readmit their nationals and the sovereignty of states to deport those without a lawful right to remain, Ethiopian authorities strongly defend mobility rights including the decision by their own nationals not to return. Forced returns from Europe can also face opposition in Ethiopian communities, where migration has long been a way to earn income and status; remittances are important for both families and for the state (ibid.). The government has therefore been mindful of how domestic and diaspora audiences view its migration policy, including returns from Europe which seem like a marginal issue compared to the dire circumstances facing far larger numbers of Ethiopian migrants in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Libya. During the last two years, cooperation has improved, motivated by the visa restrictions imposed on Ethiopian nationals in April 2024 by the EU as a sanction for non-cooperation on returns (interviewees 04 and 06). In this case, then, aid-based incentives and institutional support have proven insufficient in the face of deeper normative, political, and societal constraints on return cooperation.

## **Afghanistan: Prolonged, multi-pronged efforts to deter (youth) migration**

Afghan youth have historically been the largest group of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) seeking asylum in Norway, representing 45 percent of the UAMs who received residence between 1996-2022 (SSB 2024). Concern about the high representation of UAMs among asylum seekers in Norway in 2008 led, in addition to the generalised measures to deter new arrivals to specific tactics targeting youth.<sup>58</sup> The Soria Moria II government platform of 2009 included provisions for “*care and education*” of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in their countries of origin. Plans to open reception facilities for minors had been floating in European policy circles for several years; despite unsuccessful pilot initiatives by the Dutch government in Angola and the DRC since 2004, the idea was indirectly endorsed by the EU Returns Directive (Art. 10.2, see Lemberg-Pedersen 2015). In 2011, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Belgium launched the European Return Platform for Unaccompanied Minors (ERPUM), supported by funds of the European Commission. The ERPUM project, which ran between 2011 and 2014, was meant to enable the deportation of unaccompanied Afghan minors from Europe either to their families or to an ‘adequate’ reception facility in Kabul. The idea was that such facilities would be a stopgap measure only until families were located, and children’s right to family reunification and therefore a ‘durable solution’ to their displacement was realised.

However, insurmountable problems ensued. First, the family tracing element proved impossible due to a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, poor communications infrastructures, and the limited resources of ERPUM governments’ embassies (Lemberg-Pedersen 2015). Minors themselves were unwilling to assist in identifying

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<sup>58</sup> In a reply to the Committee on the Rights of the Child concerning Norway’s Fourth Periodic Report, the government referred to a “massive influx” in applications from unaccompanied children in the last three years (from 403 UASC in 2007 to 1647 by 30 September 2009). CRC/C/NOR/C/4/Add.1.

their families, perceiving such cooperation to undermine their chances to receive asylum. Second, there were no reliable partners on the ground. The Afghan authorities were less than enthusiastic about the return project (Schuster 2013), perceiving it as a politically sensitive issue. One European official remarked that their interlocutor from the Ministry for Return and Repatriation (MoRR) showed “no interest” in ERPUM (ibid.: 13), while the Deputy Minister of MoRR responded in a more pragmatic manner, noting that “we cannot spoil our relationship with Norway for the sake of a 100 children, when we have millions here that need their help” (ibid.: 14). However, disputes about which ministry would control how much of the budget derailed the Afghan involvement. Meanwhile, potential implementing partners outside the government withdrew due to security concerns (IOM) or were dropped because they lacked an understanding of the legal responsibilities involved, including those regarding children’s rights. Eventually, in June 2014, the pilot was discontinued.

Following the asylum crisis in 2015 and the relatively large number of unaccompanied minors (ca. 5300) among these new arrivals, return centres reemerged on the political agenda. The Asylum Agreement reached by six of the eight parties represented in Parliament mandated the government to renew efforts to establish ‘care centres’ for UAMs in their countries of origin (Norwegian Government 2015). The aid budget for 2017 indicated that “large parts of Norwegian aid to Afghanistan in 2016 and 2017 will continue to prevent migration and children from being sent on a dangerous journey through Europe by contributing to the goal of stabilisation and development of the country” (MFA 2016: 166). Discussions around an institution in Kabul relaunched in 2016, and by 2018 Norwegian authorities, together with their Danish colleagues, were reportedly in the final stages of talks with Afghan authorities (Foss and Olsen 2018). The aim was to serve both local youths as well as those refused residence in Norway and Denmark. Two of the activities potentially supported by the project, education and vocational training, were consistent with Norway’s existing priorities. These renewed ef-

forts met similar challenges faced by the earlier ERPUM endeavour: rumours of corruption among potential institutional partners, difficulties meeting requirements regarding child protection, and travel restrictions for Embassy staff in Kabul making it difficult to physically evaluate proposed sites (interviewee 05).

Meanwhile, from a high of 7000 applications in 2015, far fewer asylum seekers from Afghanistan, including UAMs, sought protection in Norway during the following years even though elsewhere in Europe they remained the second biggest applicant group (Afghanistan Commission 2025). The importance of migration, and return cooperation, placed by Norwegian authorities is illustrated by the fact that while aid personnel at the Norwegian Embassy were sent home in 2015 on security grounds, two new ILOs joined the staff in Kabul (ibid.). Besides having on-the-ground officers, former embassy employees attribute the success of return policies to the deliberate use of low-key tactics to avoid too much public attention and potential escalation of pressure on Afghan authorities (i.e. the use of private flights rather than chartered jets, and the deployment of an Afghan staff member to quietly facilitate returns at the airport). An information campaign in Afghan newspapers and Facebook warned of Norway's stricter asylum regulations. Finally, in dialogue with Afghan counterparts, Norwegian officials emphasised that the aid budget spent on Afghanistan included asylum reception costs in Norway; less cooperation on migration would likely mean less funds to initiatives in-country (ibid., referring to a conversation between President Ghani and Prime Minister Solberg, and a visit to Kabul by state secretaries from MoJ and MFA in 2015). Despite facing occasional resistance (especially concerning families) on the part of Afghan authorities, Norway was able to return more Afghans than other countries in Europe.

Meanwhile, anchored by an action plan against migration developed by the MFA, (*“handlingsplan mot migrasjon”*), support in rural villages was geared towards dampening the desire to migrate, and efforts were made to direct multilateral funds towards job creation pro-

grammes (ibid.). The conclusion from a review of Norway's engagement with Afghanistan suggests that the coordination between MoJ, MFA, UDI, NPIS and the Norwegian Embassy was effective in deterring migration (ibid.). However, it is worth noting that between 2018-2023 Afghans still comprised the majority of UAMs who received residence in Norway (SSB 2024), unseated from this top position only by Ukrainians in 2022. In the absence of forced returns following the Taliban takeover, efforts to deter youth migration have returned to the domestic sphere, with proposals to limit family reunification and other restrictive measures making asylum in Norway less attractive.

## **Lessons from the country cases**

The important role of remittances to individual families as well as communities, political pressure not to cave to a seemingly marginal European agenda, and the lack of capacity to support returnees have posed considerable challenges for return cooperation. Where efforts to secure return cooperation were successful, interviewees highlighted the importance of relationship building by immigration liaison officers to identify and address specific barriers to readmission and reintegration. This work was embedded in dedicated 'return action plans' for the countries in question, which are updated every two years. In Afghanistan, the threat of reduced aid was part of a larger deterrence strategy which also included vocational support, information campaigns, and efforts to establish a care centre for minors. A final observation is that mobility-related benefits (i.e. passport verification in Somalia) facilitated cooperation on returns, as did mobility-related sanctions (i.e. visa restrictions in Ethiopia).

## **Conclusions**

In addition to providing humanitarian support to refugee and IDP populations, the facilitation of returns has been an increasingly visible objective in Norwegian development cooperation – particularly in the countries from which migrants to Europe tend to originate.

The MoJ has been the main driver of the returns agenda, while the MFA has played a more ambivalent role, balancing development-policy integrity and foreign policy priorities with growing expectations in the field of migration management. Several of the bureaucrats we talked with underscored the traditional divide between the altruistic goals of development aid and strategic, migration and return-related mandates. One interviewee referred to this as “the elephant in the room,” (07) capturing the bureaucratic and political discomfort surrounding how far development cooperation should be used to advance domestic objectives.

Views on this differed across the administration. Norad staff emphasised the importance of a clear boundary between aid and domestic objectives, and adhering to the OECD-DAC principles that require development to be the primary objective, stating e.g. that there is “no development-policy argument for limiting migration,” and that “return should not be an aid objective”, while noting that reintegration support in return areas could be relevant (interviewees 01; 05; 07; 08; 09).

In contrast, representatives from MoJ and UDI stressed the practical need for cooperation on return and underscored targeted support - such as capacity building and identity systems - as legitimate instruments as long as they were aligned with partner-country priorities. The views of MFA officials tended to straddle both camps. In practice, country-level partnership strategies and return action plans focused on leveraging “all of our portfolio to create a favourable environment for [partner countries] to take back their own citizens” (interviewee 07). Positive incentives which may or may not be aid-related were favoured over explicit conditions or sanctions. As many also noted, positive incentives tended to work best in contexts where Norway had long-standing relationships and institutional trust, such as Somalia.

While there are certain advantages to maintaining clear boundaries between the MoJ and the MFA’s work on migration there are also opportunities for greater cooperation. One area of work concerns

aid to enable the “sustainable reintegration” of returnees, anchored in the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) as well as the National Return Strategy. Here, collaboration across government entities could support local and national development plans in countries such as Syria and Ukraine, and ensure that aid-funded programmes in returnee communities are implemented in an impartial way in keeping with humanitarian and development principles. Meanwhile, using aid to support asylum externalisation measures (e.g. through extraterritorial processing centres for asylum claims or ‘return hubs’ in third countries), as foreseen in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, would likely intensify existing tensions between development principles and migration control interests.

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# Annex 1

**Table 1. Overview of migration- and development-related shifts in the Norwegian government platforms 2005–2025**

Platform	Relevant shifts in migration-related aid priorities
2005 Soria Moria 1 (The Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party)	Committed to “strengthening the work on deportation of foreigners with illegal residence and intensifying efforts to secure return agreements with more countries”, while also calling for closer European cooperation on visa, border control, and asylum issues.
2009 Soria Moria 2 (The Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party)	Pledged to “use development aid and cooperation policy to support efforts to facilitate return and reintegration of persons without legal residence in Norway” and to “strengthen return cooperation and identity verification”. Emphasised addressing the “causes that force people to flee,” and providing support for displaced populations in regions close to their home countries, and stated that the government would “establish care and education services for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in their countries of origin”.
2013 Sundvolden (The Conservative Party and the Progress Party )	Committed to “work for more return agreements, and use Norway’s position to secure more agreements”, “strengthen return efforts, and identity work in the Police”, and “make the foreign affairs services more active in regions with the highest numbers of unfounded asylum seekers to inform about limited opportunities for residence”

<b>Platform</b>	<b>Relevant shifts in migration-related aid priorities</b>
2018 Jeløya (The Conservative Party, the Progress Party and the Liberal Party)	Framed migration and integration as “challenges facing Norwegian society, regardless of their causes,” noting that “population movements put the welfare state’s sustainability to the test.” It called for “a foreign policy that safeguards Norway’s interests and promotes international cooperation on cross-border challenges [...] such as people on the move,” and pledged to “conclude more return agreements to prevent individuals from staying in Norway without legal residence.” To “address the causes of migration,” the government would “intensify efforts for development and democracy.
2019 Granavolden (The Conservative Party, the Progress Party, the Liberal Party and the Christian Democratic Party)	Reiterated the aims to “conclude more return agreements” and to “address the causes of migration”. It also pledged to “continue work to establish care centres in countries of origin,” to “link Norway more closely to European processes toward a common asylum system, including the possible establishment of joint asylum centres outside the EU,” and to “use Norway’s position, including as a donor, to secure more return agreements and promote acceptance of the principle that all countries must receive their own citizens”.
2025 The Government’s Plan for Norway (The Labour Party)	Prioritises a more effective immigration administration, strengthened return work and increased cooperation on “new solutions and measures”. Norway to take an active role in European migration cooperation to ensure a more “sustainable immigration to Europe”.

# Linking migration governance and aid: comparative perspectives and implications for Sweden

Henrik Malm Lindberg and Iris Luthman

Over the past decades, all four countries examined in this anthology have taken steps to link development cooperation more directly to migration objectives. The intensification of this shift following the large refugee arrivals in 2015 has contributed to a more instrumental understanding of development cooperation, with growing expectations that aid should deliver migration-related outcomes, most notably by facilitating returns, but also by addressing the so-called “root causes” of displacement.

The experiences of Denmark, Norway, Germany and the Netherlands demonstrate, however, that this has not produced a single European “model” for merging migration and development policy. Rather, it has taken the form of partially overlapping practices: re-prioritising within existing aid portfolios, strengthening coordination across ministries and agencies, and – in some cases – seeking to tie development funding more explicitly to cooperation on migration.

This synthesis chapter distils the comparative findings from the four cases. Its focus is practical and institutional: how migration objectives have been integrated into development cooperation; how these linkages are governed and coordinated in practice; how they interact with core development principles; and what the available evidence suggests about outcomes and effects.

The chapter uses the typology introduced in the Dutch chapter, based on Tsourdi and Zardo’s (2025) conceptualisation of funding-based migration governance, to distinguish between three recurring approaches: *earmarking* (allocating aid to migration-related purposes),

*conditionality* (linking aid to cooperation on migration), and *whole-of-government approaches* (aligning objectives across ministries, agencies, and instruments). It also draws on the concept of *institutional drift*, also introduced in the Dutch chapter, to capture more gradual processes through which existing development instruments are repurposed for migration-related objectives without formal changes to mandates. Taken together, these analytical tools help clarify how similar policy ambitions can lead to different operational pathways – and different trade-offs – across donor contexts.

The structure follows the four research questions introduced in Chapter 1. Each section addresses one question in turn, using the typology and the concept of institutional drift to compare experiences across Denmark, Norway, Germany, and the Netherlands. The chapter concludes by synthesising the main policy lessons and outlining their implications for Sweden’s current reform agenda – particularly the challenge of translating strategic ambitions into operational priorities, effective coordination routines, and measurable results.

## **How have migration objectives been integrated into development cooperation?**

Across all four cases, migration has featured in development policy for several decades, reflecting the broader migration–development nexus that gained prominence in the 1990s and 2000s. What has shifted more recently, particularly after 2015, is not the recognition of this relationship, but the position migration occupies within it. Migration has increasingly become an explicit organising reference point for development cooperation – shaping priorities, funding allocations, and political expectations – rather than primarily being framed as an inherent dimension and driver of development.

## **Norway: Gradual repositioning within existing mandates**

In the Norwegian case, migration–development linkages date back to the 1990s, notably through the holistic refugee policy and the emphasis on repatriation as part of development engagement. What has changed in the past decade is less the recognition of these linkages than their political salience and institutional positioning. The refugee arrivals in 2015 acted as a catalyst, bringing migration more firmly into the centre of cross-government coordination and Norway’s external engagement. Migration became more explicitly integrated into foreign policy discussions and whole-of-government frameworks.

At the same time, this did not amount to a fundamental reorientation of development cooperation. Migration-related allocations have been introduced and expanded, particularly in areas such as return, reintegration and migration management. However, these remain relatively modest in scale and are typically framed in terms of humanitarian protection or addressing “root causes,” rather than as instruments of migration control. The 2021 Solidarity Fund illustrates this dynamic. On the one hand, it signalled a clearer political articulation of migration-related expectations within development cooperation. On the other, it relied on existing instruments and maintained considerable ambiguity regarding objectives and outcomes.

The Norwegian case thus illustrates a cautious and gradual repositioning of migration within development cooperation, where migration objectives have been incorporated without formally redefining the core mandate of development cooperation. Integration has taken place largely within existing institutional and normative frameworks, and migration-related priorities have typically been framed in terms of humanitarian protection and broader development objectives rather than as explicit instruments of migration control.

## **Germany: Institutionalised instrumentalisation**

In the German case, migration–development linkages have also been present for some time, but the past decade marks a more deliberate and institutionally embedded shift. After 2015, migration became a central – yet contested – issue within development cooperation, reshaping both aid priorities and instruments. Unlike Norway’s cautious repositioning, Germany moved towards a more structured and clearly articulated whole-of-government approach, with inter-ministerial coordination anchored in concrete instruments and programmes.

Development policy was increasingly positioned as a complimentary pillar within broader migration partnerships, encompassing return, reintegration, labour migration, and capacity-building in countries of origin. Initiatives such as *Perspektive Heimat* from 2017 illustrate how existing development instruments were more explicitly aligned with return objectives. In this sense, the German case suggests a clearer instrumentalisation of development cooperation, where migration objectives are embedded in formal coordination structures and dedicated programmes, and where expectations that aid should contribute to migration-related outcomes have become more pronounced. While this approach has contributed to clarity of purpose and strengthened political steering, it also appears to generate tensions between development and migration policy communities, not least in reconciling short-term migration objectives with longer-term development goals.

## **The Netherlands: Explicit political articulation**

The Dutch case illustrates a comparatively forthright and explicit linkage between development cooperation and migration governance, particularly in recent years. While migration-related objectives have long been present in Dutch development policy, the explicit articulation of development cooperation as a tool for migration governance has intensified. Most notably, the 2025 *Policy Memorandum*

states that development programmes are expected to contribute to reducing or managing migration.

This shift has been accompanied by a geographical refocusing of aid towards regions neighbouring Europe, justified by the assumption that stabilisation and development in these regions will reduce migratory pressure towards the Netherlands and the EU. Compared to Norway and Germany, the Dutch approach is characterised by greater discursive clarity regarding the migration-related objectives of development cooperation.

### **Denmark: Long-term consolidation and political steering**

At the other end of the spectrum, Denmark stands out as an “early mover” and the most pronounced example of a long-term consolidation of migration objectives within development cooperation. Unlike the other cases, this development did not primarily emerge in response to the 2015–2016 refugee crisis, but reflects a longer trajectory of gradual and cumulative reorientation. Already in the mid-1990s, political leaders explicitly framed development aid as a means of preventing migration. This linkage was further institutionalised following the change of government in 2001–2002, when strengthening the “synergy” between development assistance and refugee and migration policy became an explicit objective.

What distinguishes the mid- to late 2010s is therefore not the introduction of migration considerations into development cooperation, but their intensification and political consolidation. Driven by top-level political decisions, Danish development cooperation has increasingly been framed as a tool to prevent irregular migration and to support the externalisation of protection responsibilities, often articulated through the notion of “solidarity at a distance.” This reorientation has been described as a move towards “strategic humanitarianism,” where humanitarian and development assistance are

expected to contribute directly to managing migration pressures outside Europe.

These developments have had tangible implications for aid portfolios and priorities. Denmark has increasingly prioritised bilateral over multilateral channels and concentrated development cooperation on regions and countries deemed particularly relevant from a migration perspective, aligning geographic focus and aid instruments more closely with migration governance objectives. The Danish case can accordingly be seen as an example of how migration objectives have become deeply embedded in development policy through sustained political steering and institutional consolidation.

### **Institutional drift as a cross-cutting mechanism for integrating migration objectives into development programming**

Across all four cases, *institutional drift* emerges as a central – though not exclusive – mechanism through which migration objectives become embedded in development cooperation. Rather than formally redefining aid mandates, governments have often repurposed existing instruments.

In Norway, the overall architecture of development cooperation has remained largely intact. At the same time, established instruments have increasingly been oriented towards return, reintegration, and migration-management objectives. A concrete example is the redeployment of immigration liaison officers at Norwegian embassies: roles previously focused on asylum and family reunification were increasingly reoriented towards return-related tasks.

A similar pattern can be observed in Germany. While the mandate of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) continues to centre on sustainable development, substantial resources have been channelled into return and reintegration initiatives (e.g. *Perspektive Heimat* in 2017). The instruments themselves – such as GIZ-run centres and bilateral programmes – have

not been fundamentally redesigned, but their operational focus has shifted.

Elements of institutional drift are also visible in Denmark, albeit alongside more explicit political steering and earmarking. Even where migration objectives have been clearly articulated at the strategic level, implementation has often relied on adjustments within existing funding mechanisms and country programmes rather than comprehensive institutional overhaul. This suggests that gradual adaptation has accompanied the more pronounced political consolidation of migration objectives.

In the Netherlands, programmes such as HRT (2004) and CD4D (2016–2023) were formally embedded within the development cooperation budget and framed in developmental terms, yet functioned in practice as instruments to incentivise voluntary return and manage irregular migration. Here, too, the formal mandate remained unchanged, while the practical orientation of funding evolved.

## **What do the cases tell us about integration?**

Taken together, the four cases demonstrate that migration objectives have been integrated into development cooperation through different pathways: gradual repositioning (Norway), structured institutionalisation (Germany), explicit political reframing (the Netherlands), and long-term consolidation under strong political steering (Denmark). In all cases, the shift concerns not the recognition of the migration–development nexus, but the growing expectation that development cooperation should deliver migration-related outcomes.

The comparison suggests that the degree of explicitness and institutional restructuring matters for how integration unfolds. More cautious approaches, such as Norway’s, tend to preserve continuity with established development principles and reduce overt political tension. However, they may also render migration objectives less transparent and more difficult to evaluate.

More explicit and politically steered approaches, as seen in Denmark and increasingly in the Netherlands and Germany, provide clearer signalling of priorities and stronger coordination. At the same time, they make trade-offs between development and migration-control objectives more visible and potentially more contested.

Integration, in other words, is not a binary shift from “development” to “migration control,” but a spectrum of strategies. Each approach involves different governance dynamics, degrees of transparency, and potential tensions between short-term migration goals and long-term development objectives.

## **How are migration and development linkages governed and coordinated?**

This anthology has repeatedly emphasised the role of coordination and implementation mechanisms. The reason is straightforward: linking migration and development policy is inherently cross-ministerial and involves multiple agencies in all four countries. Effective governance arrangements are therefore central to how migration objectives are translated into development practice.

The concept of a whole-of-government approach has featured prominently across the cases. However, the examples presented in this volume illustrate considerable variation in how such approaches are designed and implemented. Coordination ranges from highly centralised and politically steered models to more pragmatic, ad-hoc and incremental forms of inter-ministerial cooperation.

### **Denmark: Centralised political steering**

Denmark represents the most centralised coordination model among the four cases. Inter-ministerial task forces and the appointment of a *Special Envoy on Migration* in 2020 strengthened structured coordination between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Immigration. Another feature underscoring this centralisa-

tion is the strengthened role of the Prime Minister's Office, which gradually assumed a more prominent coordinating function, partly at the expense of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This model reflects a high degree of centralisation and political control over migration-related development policy. While it has enabled clear prioritisation and alignment of objectives, coordination at the macro level has not necessarily eliminated implementation challenges across agencies and programmes – an issue that will be revisited in later sections.

### **Germany: Structured but contested coordination**

The German case combines a deliberate whole-of-government ambition with more instrument-driven and project-based forms of coordination in practice. Since the mid-2010s, migration and development have been linked through inter-agency steering committees, state secretaries' working groups, and formal strategies such as the *2016 Action Plan on Migration and Development*.

At the same time, coordination has often been operationalised through specific programmes and initiatives rather than through permanent, centralised structures. At the implementation level, tensions between BMZ and implementing actors such as GIZ have occasionally resulted in overlaps and blurred divisions of labour, illustrating the challenges of aligning development and migration priorities within a complex federal system.

### **The Netherlands: Inter-ministerial pragmatism and EU alignment**

In the Netherlands, coordination has largely taken the form of inter-ministerial collaboration, particularly between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice and Security. Joint efforts in shaping policies such as the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement and the EU Trust Fund for Africa illustrate how migration, foreign policy, and development perspectives have been aligned.

Dutch engagement with the EU's *Mobility Partnerships* provides a concrete example of this approach, bringing together development and migration authorities in external engagement. Dutch coordination is also closely intertwined with EU frameworks, with diplomatic and development efforts frequently operating in tandem with EU-level initiatives.

## **Norway: Pragmatic cooperation within established structures**

Norway's coordination model reflects pragmatic cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice. The MFA retains responsibility for development policy and funding – implemented through Norad and embassies – while also leading international migration dialogues through a dedicated migration representative.

Joint country-specific return strategies and working groups have aligned diplomatic engagement with development and return objectives in selected partner countries. Rather than establishing highly centralised coordination bodies, Norway has relied on incremental adjustments within existing institutional structures.

## **Coordination strategies: models and trade-offs**

Taken together, the four cases demonstrate that coordination arrangements range from highly centralised political steering (Denmark), through structured but multi-layered systems (Germany), to inter-ministerial pragmatism with strong EU alignment (the Netherlands), and incremental cooperation within established mandates (Norway).

The comparison suggests that while whole-of-government approaches have become a common feature across cases, their design and operation differ substantially. More centralised models may enable clearer prioritisation, whereas more decentralised or pragmatic arrangements may preserve institutional autonomy. At the same

time, all models face coordination challenges, reflecting the inherent complexity of linking development cooperation and migration governance across policy domains.

## **How do migration linkages affect coherence and core development principles?**

Whether migration–development linkages are considered successful depends on the objectives prioritised. For actors primarily concerned with migration governance, leveraging aid to achieve migration objectives – such as improving return rates or reducing irregular migration – may appear effective. For those who prioritise poverty reduction, partnerships, and long-term institutional development, the same alignment may raise concerns. Policy coherence therefore becomes a key analytical lens for examining how competing objectives are balanced in practice.

Across the four cases, migration governance and development cooperation are generally approached as interconnected and, in many instances, mutually reinforcing policy areas. However, the chapters indicate that maintaining coherence between these objectives in practice is demanding. Migration-control priorities are often driven by short-term political considerations, whereas development cooperation is structured around longer-term goals and established normative frameworks.

Whole-of-government approaches aim to align these objectives across ministries and agencies. However, coordination does not automatically translate into coherence. Different institutions operate with distinct mandates, accountability structures, and performance logics. In several cases, the use of conditionality has further exposed these tensions, at times placing different parts of government at odds over priorities and strategy.

## **Germany: Instrumentalisation and policy-community tensions**

As already highlighted, Germany has moved towards a more institutionalised and structured integration of migration objectives within development cooperation. From a coherence perspective, this has made underlying tensions more visible. Development actors have expressed concern that increasing expectations on aid to deliver migration outcomes risk subordinating long-term development goals to short-term return objectives. At the same time, migration authorities have sometimes questioned the effectiveness and pace of development interventions.

These debates reflect structural differences in mandate, accountability, and time horizon between policy communities. The German case thus illustrates how stronger institutional integration may clarify objectives, but also intensify inter-ministerial tensions.

## **Denmark: Political alignment and strategic coherence challenges**

Denmark's strong political steering, as discussed in the preceding sections, has created a high degree of alignment between migration and development objectives at the strategic level. However, the 2023 evaluation of migration-related programmes (2018–2022) identified weaknesses in strategic coherence, including limited guidance and a tendency toward politically driven signalling.

This suggests that clear political prioritisation does not automatically translate into coherent implementation or measurable developmental outcomes. The Danish case therefore highlights the distinction between political coherence and operational coherence.

## **The Netherlands: Explicit trade-offs and normative debate**

In the Netherlands, the more explicit integration of migration objectives into development policy has brought potential trade-offs with traditional development principles more clearly into view. The stronger emphasis on managing migration may imply a reduced prioritisation of poverty alleviation as an end in itself. In addition, linking aid to migration cooperation raises questions about the principle of country ownership, as such arrangements may create asymmetries in partnerships.

Debates about policy coherence remain ongoing in the Dutch context. Civil society organisations and academic commentators have raised concerns regarding instrumentalisation, while political decision-makers have largely maintained their course. The evaluation of the CD4D programme highlights a related challenge: so-called “hidden instrumentalisation” may undermine legitimacy if migration-control objectives are embedded within development initiatives without sufficient transparency (Cleton & Vanore, 2023).

## **Norway: Negotiated coherence and institutional contestation**

Norway has generally pursued a cautious approach to linking migration and development, and explicit instrumentalisation has largely been avoided. Nonetheless, the chapters indicate that tensions between migration objectives and development principles have surfaced at various points. One illustrative example concerns the development of the *National Return Strategy* (2023–2029), which proposed closer collaboration between the Ministry of Justice and development actors to strengthen “reintegration ability” in selected countries—an initiative that generated political pushback from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and prompted adjustments to strategic language in subsequent MFA documents, partly to avoid signalling endorsement of conditionality.

The revised *Return Strategy* (2025–2030), developed with MFA input, reaffirmed that return and reintegration support must comply with development aid principles and ODA guidelines. This episode illustrates how coherence is actively negotiated between institutions. While formal commitment to development principles has remained intact, the boundary between migration governance and development cooperation has been subject to ongoing recalibration.

## **Aid conditionality as a coherence test**

Across the four cases, aid conditionality has emerged – though to different degrees – as a tool for aligning development cooperation with migration objectives. In practice, this ranges from incentive-based approaches to more explicit signals that cooperation on migration may influence aid allocations. As Tsourdi and Zardo (2025) argue, conditionality has become a central funding-based governance tool in the externalisation of migration control.

From a coherence perspective, conditionality makes underlying trade-offs more explicit. It brings into focus the extent to which development cooperation is expected to contribute to migration-control objectives, and how this expectation interacts with principles such as poverty reduction, long-term sustainability, and country ownership.

In Norway, explicit conditionality has largely been avoided. While policy statements have acknowledged linkages between aid and return cooperation, practice has relied primarily on diplomatic engagement and positive incentives. Institutional resistance within the MFA and Norad to hard conditionality reflects concern that overt linkage could undermine development effectiveness and long-term partnerships. In coherence terms, this approach seeks to shield development cooperation from being subordinated to short-term migration objectives.

Germany has traditionally framed cooperation in terms of mutual benefit. Programmes such as the Triple Win labour mobility initia-

tive and Migration and Mobility Partnerships combine development assistance with migration objectives without formally tying aid to compliance. However, more recent political developments indicate a gradual move toward clearer expectations regarding migration cooperation. Here, coherence tensions emerge when development policy is expected to contribute more directly to return outcomes while maintaining its long-term development mandate.

Denmark has articulated a more explicit linkage between aid and migration cooperation at the strategic level. Although the stick-and-carrot logic has often been emphasised politically, implementation has relied primarily on incentives rather than systematic aid withdrawal. Conditionality thus functions as a signalling mechanism of political priorities, while remaining calibrated in practice. From a coherence perspective, the Danish case highlights how a strong political emphasis on migration objectives influences the overall prioritisation within development cooperation and brings potential tensions with established development principles into sharper focus.

In the Netherlands, conditionality has been more visibly integrated into bilateral relationships. In cases such as Morocco and Tunisia, migration cooperation has been linked to aid incentives, with the possibility of reduced support in cases of non-cooperation. Here, conditionality operates as an openly acknowledged governance tool. This clarity enhances transparency but also brings potential tensions with the principle of country ownership into sharper relief.

Taken together, the cases suggest that conditionality functions as an important indicator of how migration and development objectives are balanced in practice. While approaches differ, from cautious avoidance to clearer strategic signalling, none of the countries examined has systematically applied explicit negative conditionality in the form of withdrawing development aid due to non-cooperation on migration. Even where political rhetoric has highlighted leveraging aid to achieve migration objectives, implementation has generally relied on incentives, dialogue, and adjustment within existing cooperation frameworks rather than punitive aid cuts.

This pattern may indicate that governments are mindful of the potential implications such measures could have for long-standing commitments to partnership, poverty reduction, and policy coherence for development. Conditionality thus reveals not only how migration objectives are integrated into development cooperation, but also where governments draw boundaries in order to preserve the core legitimacy of development cooperation.

## **What do the cases tell us about coherence with core development principles?**

Taken together, the four cases demonstrate that linking migration objectives to development cooperation does not automatically undermine core development principles. However, it does reshape how these principles are interpreted and balanced in practice. The key variation lies not in whether governments formally remain committed to poverty reduction, partnership, and long-term sustainability, but in how explicitly migration priorities are allowed to influence aid allocations, strategic guidance, and cooperation frameworks.

The comparison suggests that the degree of explicit conditionality and political steering matters for how coherence tensions unfold. More cautious approaches, such as Norway's, tend to protect established development mandates and avoid overt subordination of aid to migration control. However, this may also render trade-offs less transparent and coherence tensions more implicit.

More explicit and strategically steered approaches, as seen most clearly in Denmark and increasingly in the Netherlands and Germany, provide clearer signalling of migration-related expectations. At the same time, they bring potential tensions with principles such as country ownership, long-term development focus, and poverty orientation more directly into view.

Conditionality, in particular, provides a useful entry point for understanding how migration objectives are reflected in development cooperation. Although none of the countries examined has systemati-

cally applied hard negative conditionality through aid withdrawal, the growing use of incentives and signalling mechanisms illustrates how migration objectives are increasingly factored into development partnerships.

Policy coherence in this field is therefore not a fixed state but an ongoing process of balancing objectives. The incorporation of migration concerns does not necessarily replace established development principles, but it may influence how they are interpreted, prioritised, and operationalised. What varies across countries is not the existence of linkages, but their degree of formalisation, the instruments used (e.g. incentives, earmarking, coordination mechanisms and conditionality), and the extent to which they are embedded in institutional routines.

## **Central outcomes and implications of linking migration to development**

Linking migration to development cooperation is commonly justified both in terms of migration-related outcomes – such as reducing irregular migration, facilitating returns, or strengthening migration management – and in terms of potential development gains, in line with the broader migration–development nexus. However, the evaluations and case material reviewed in this anthology suggest that while certain initiatives show promise on a limited scale, the overall impact of using development aid to shape migration outcomes remains modest, context-dependent, and difficult to measure. Clear causal relationships are often hard to establish.

Importantly, assessments of “impact” depend on the objectives against which policies are evaluated. As Tsourdi and Zardo (2025) note, effectiveness in this field is partly defined by political perspective. If short-term migration-management goals are prioritised, certain initiatives may be regarded as effective in steering cooperation or reducing arrivals. If the benchmark is long-term development transformation or structural change in migration dynamics, conclu-

sions tend to be more cautious. What counts as success is therefore not neutral, but reflects underlying policy priorities.

Across the cases, migration-related development initiatives frequently pursue multiple – and sometimes loosely defined – objectives. In some instances, aims are intentionally framed broadly or ambiguously to accommodate political sensitivities, preserve flexibility, or reconcile competing mandates. While such flexibility may facilitate agreement and implementation, it complicates the development of clear theories of change, i.e. articulated causal assumptions linking planned interventions to expected results. When end goals are vaguely articulated, it becomes difficult to define measurable indicators, attribute outcomes, or determine whether programmes have achieved their intended effects.

### **Return and reintegration support: individual gains, limited systemic impact**

Return and reintegration support has become a central component of migration–development linkages across the cases. These programmes typically include counselling, vocational training, cash grants, and business start-up support aimed at facilitating sustainable reintegration in countries of origin. Evaluations reviewed in this volume suggest that such measures can generate tangible short-term benefits at the individual level. Reintegration assistance may ease the immediate economic and psychosocial challenges facing returnees, and there are documented cases of improved income prospects or successful small-scale entrepreneurship.

However, the broader systemic impact appears more limited. Evidence indicates that while reintegration support can improve individual outcomes, it does not necessarily translate into sustained return, reduced re-migration, or measurable community-wide development effects. As discussed in the German chapter, the “dual objectives” of return programmes – meeting domestic return targets while simultaneously achieving longer-term development outcomes

– are difficult to reconcile. In practice, programmes often succeed more clearly on the individual reintegration dimension than on the migration-management dimension.

A concrete example is Norway’s long-term engagement in Somalia, where development funding has strengthened migration-management and identity systems while facilitating cooperation on readmission. Although the partnership is described as a generally positive example of cross-government coordination and durable trust, the measurable return outcomes remain limited in scale. In 2024, the return and reintegration programme in Somalia cost NOK 4.4 million and facilitated seven returns. The case thus reflects a broader pattern identified across the volume: while cooperation may support capacity building, individual reintegration and operational dialogue, its aggregate impact on overall return figures appears modest.

Taken together, the cases suggest that return and reintegration initiatives may be most effective when understood as targeted support measures rather than as instruments capable of significantly altering broader migration dynamics or supporting long-term development.

## **Information campaigns: awareness raised, behavioural effects limited**

Information campaigns targeting prospective migrants constitute another commonly funded instrument within migration – development cooperation. European governments, including the Netherlands, have supported radio, social media, and community-based initiatives aimed at correcting misinformation and warning of the risks associated with irregular migration. Such campaigns are often framed in humanitarian terms, but are also understood as part of broader migration-governance strategies.

The Dutch case illustrates both the breadth of these initiatives and the limits of current evidence. A wide range of awareness-raising campaigns has been funded through the development-cooperation budget, yet evaluations point to weak and uneven evidence of be-

havioural impact. Many initiatives lack clearly defined objectives and robust impact assessments, and most measure changes in knowledge or perceptions rather than actual migration outcomes.

Germany reflects a more institutionalised variant through its Centres for Migration and Development (ZMEs), which provide counselling and information on legal pathways, risks, and reintegration. While not evaluated in terms of migration impact in the German chapter, the centres demonstrate how information provision has been embedded within longer-term development cooperation structures.

Overall, research cited across the chapters suggests that migration decisions are deeply embedded in social networks, economic conditions, and long-term aspirations. Information campaigns may improve awareness and contribute to safer migration practices, but their capacity to substantially reduce irregular migration appears limited and highly context dependent.

### **Addressing “root causes”: complex and time-dependent effects**

Addressing the so-called “root causes” of migration represents the most indirect form of linkage between development cooperation and migration objectives. The underlying assumption is that investments in job creation, education, governance, or health systems may reduce the pressures that compel people to migrate. However, the relationship between development and migration is complex and highly context-dependent – varying between low- and middle-income countries – and time-dependent, differing in the short and long term. A broad consensus in the literature suggests that increased development may actually lead to higher levels of migration, as more people gain the resources, capabilities, and aspirations to move. In the longer term, development may contribute to reducing forced migration if stability and prosperity take hold, but the evidence remains mixed. (Carling & Talleraas, 2016) (UNESCO, 2017) (Latek, 2019)

Academic studies reflect this ambivalence. Some find little evidence that development aid reduces migration from middle-income countries, noting that migration decisions are shaped by complex economic, social, and political factors. (Carling & Talleraas, 2016) Stability and economic improvements *can* reduce certain forms of forced migration but do not consistently reduce overall mobility. (Andersson & Siegel, 2020) Others suggest that targeted interventions in high-emigration communities may, under certain conditions, temporarily slow outflows. The chapter on the Netherlands concluded from four cases that Dutch-funded interventions produced, at best, “modest and indirect migration effects”, often accompanied by unintended consequences as well as normative tensions. For example, an employment initiative may have provided meaningful opportunities for several hundred young people – a positive outcome in itself – yet its measurable impact on overall irregular migration remained limited in the face of broader structural drivers.

From the perspective of assessing impact, these findings underscore the difficulty of attributing migration outcomes to development interventions. While such programmes may generate tangible development benefits, their effects on migration dynamics are often indirect, delayed, and difficult to isolate. As a result, expectations that development cooperation can rapidly or predictably reduce migration pressures risk overstating what the available evidence can support.

## **Labour mobility and diaspora initiatives**

A related set of initiatives concerns the use of legal migration pathways, skills partnerships and diaspora engagement as part of migration–development cooperation. While typically presented as mutually beneficial arrangements, these initiatives can also be understood as forms of *positive, incentive-based conditionality* through which donor governments offer tangible benefits that may facilitate broader cooperation on migration governance. Labour mobility and diaspora programmes thus serve not only development aims, but can also advance underlying national objectives related to migration manage-

ment – functioning, in practice, as the “carrot” rather than the “stick”.

Germany provides the most developed example of this approach. Building on the “triple win” narrative, German actors have supported both EU-level Mobility Partnerships and bilateral migration and mobility agreements with third countries. Labour mobility schemes – including THAMM, with Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, and PAM, with Ecuador, Jordan and Viet Nam – are framed as simultaneously addressing German labour shortages, improving migrants’ livelihoods, and generating development benefits in countries of origin. Development actors, notably BMZ and GIZ, play a central role in aligning these schemes with development standards and institutional capacity-building.

At the same time, as the German chapter indicates, most initiatives remain pilot-based and limited in scale. Evaluations highlight institutional learning, improved training systems, and strengthened cooperation frameworks, but provide more cautious conclusions regarding broader development outcomes or measurable effects on migration dynamics. The approach illustrates how incentive-based instruments can be embedded within development cooperation, yet also how their structural impact remains constrained.

The Netherlands has likewise engaged in mobility-oriented initiatives through EU Mobility Partnerships and national pilot schemes implemented with partners such as IOM. The Connecting Diaspora for Development (CD4D) programme, funded through the development-cooperation budget, illustrates this dynamic. While framed as a knowledge-transfer and capacity-building initiative, evaluations suggest that CD4D also generated relational and diplomatic benefits, strengthening ties with origin-country institutions – ties that are relevant for broader migration cooperation. In this respect, CD4D combined development objectives with softer forms of migration diplomacy. At the same time, its dual character generated some ambiguity, and concerns were raised that insufficient transparency about mixed objectives could affect legitimacy.

Norway is a case where the aid budget has supported both regional mobility initiatives and diaspora engagement in some countries of origin. However, not all initiatives to involve the diaspora in local investment were considered successful from a development perspective. Finally, the Danish experience in diaspora involvement is rather limited and seems often NGO-driven. Danida has for example funded diaspora action through programs run by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

Taken together, labour mobility and diaspora initiatives show that migration–development linkages are not confined to restrictive or leverage-based instruments. They also encompass cooperative, incentive-driven approaches that seek to align migration governance with development objectives. However, as with other instruments examined in this section, expectations need to remain calibrated: while such initiatives may strengthen institutional cooperation and governance capacity, evidence of large-scale or structural effects on migration flows or development trajectories remains limited.

## **What do the cases tell us about outcomes and impact?**

Across the cases, a recurring pattern is a gap between political expectations and empirical evidence. Migration-related development initiatives are frequently justified in terms of effectiveness – whether reducing irregular migration, strengthening returns, or improving development outcomes – yet available evaluations point to uneven and often limited results. The Danish evaluation of migration-related development engagements between 2018 and 2022 illustrates this challenge: initiatives were found to be fragmented, shaped by short-term political pressures, and insufficiently designed to deliver measurable or sustainable outcomes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Similar tendencies towards weak outcome frameworks and limited impact measurement appear elsewhere in the material.

At the same time, what counts as “effectiveness” depends on the benchmark applied. If short-term migration-management goals are prioritised, certain initiatives – such as the EU–Turkey Statement or aspects of the EU Trust Fund for Africa – may be perceived as effective in steering cooperation or reducing arrivals. If the benchmark is long-term development transformation or structural change in migration dynamics, conclusions are more cautious. This divergence underscores that assessments of “success” are not neutral but reflect underlying policy priorities.

From a learning perspective, two lessons stand out. First, effectiveness depends on clarity of objectives and realistic assumptions about causal pathways. Where programmes pursue multiple or ambiguously defined goals, the underlying theory of change – that is, the articulation of how specific interventions are expected to lead to defined outcomes – often remains underdeveloped. Without clearly specified end goals and causal assumptions, it becomes difficult to define indicators, assess attribution, or evaluate results in a meaningful way.

Second, opportunity costs matter. Allocating ODA to migration-management initiatives inevitably affects the resources available for other development priorities, making prioritisation choices explicit and reinforcing the need for transparent justification and systematic evaluation.

When examining specific instruments across the cases, the overall pattern remains consistent. Return and reintegration programmes may generate tangible individual benefits but show modest systemic impact. Information campaigns can raise awareness yet rarely alter behaviour at scale. Efforts to address “root causes” may contribute to development gains, but their migration effects are indirect, time-dependent, and difficult to attribute. Labour mobility and diaspora initiatives offer more cooperative, incentive-based approaches, but likewise operate at relatively modest scale.

Importantly, the evidence points to modest effects not only on migration dynamics but also on broader development trajectories. While many initiatives produce meaningful outputs – such as improved skills, strengthened institutions, or enhanced cooperation frameworks – their contribution to structural development change appears limited and difficult to isolate from wider economic and political dynamics.

In sum, the cases indicate that development cooperation can influence migration-related outcomes at the margins, but it is neither a rapid nor a predictable instrument for reshaping broader migration dynamics – nor does it automatically generate transformative development change. Expectations therefore need to remain calibrated. Clearer objectives, stronger theories of change, and more systematic monitoring and evaluation are essential if migration–development linkages are to be assessed in a transparent and policy-relevant manner.

## **Summary and implications for Sweden**

The comparative analysis of Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway shows that linking migration objectives to development cooperation has become an established feature of European policy. While the intensity and style vary – from Norway’s more incremental and development-framed approach to Denmark’s more explicit use of aid as leverage – all four countries have, to differing degrees, earmarked resources for migration-related purposes, experimented with whole-of-government coordination, and explored forms of conditionality. In terms of Tsourdi and Zardo’s (2025) typology, the cases illustrate different configurations of funding-based migration governance – ranging from softer incentive-based instruments to more explicit strategic signalling – rather than a single, uniform model.

A common turning point was the 2015–2016 refugee situation, which catalysed a stronger political focus on migration control and return. Since then, development cooperation has increasingly been

viewed not only as a tool for poverty reduction and institutional capacity-building, but also as an instrument within broader migration governance strategies. Yet the cases also show that translating political ambition into measurable and sustainable results remains challenging. Effects are often limited in scale, context-dependent, and difficult to attribute. Tensions between short-term migration-management objectives and long-term development goals recur across all cases. In several instances, this shift has taken the form of what can be described as institutional drift: development instruments remain formally anchored in poverty reduction mandates, but are gradually reoriented to accommodate migration-control objectives.

In Sweden, these developments are particularly salient in light of recent policy shifts towards leveraging aid to achieve migration objectives. The *Tidö Agreement* set out a new political direction by stating that parts of development assistance should be conditioned on cooperation in return and readmission, and that aid policy should function as a tool to reduce irregular migration and promote return – an orientation subsequently operationalised through the Government’s Reform Agenda for development cooperation and the *Strategy for Sweden’s Global Development Cooperation on Migration, Return and Voluntary Repatriation (2024–2028)* (Sweden Democrats, Moderate Party, Christian Democrats and Liberals, 2022; Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2023; Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2025).

As highlighted in the introductory chapter, these ambitions place Sweden within a broader European trend. At the same time, the comparative cases suggest several implications that merit careful consideration.

First, the use of conditionality in migration-related aid requires careful and context sensitive calibration. While incentive-based approaches (“more-for-more”) may strengthen cooperation frameworks, more coercive forms of aid suspension or overt diplomatic pressure risk undermining long-term partnerships, local ownership, and development effectiveness legitimacy of development efforts.

The Norwegian case provides an illustrative example of a gradual and institutionalised approach. Norway has, for example, over many years embedded migration cooperation with Somalia within broader support to public administration and identity systems. This approach has facilitated operational dialogue on return and readmission, yet measurable return outcomes remain modest in scale. The partnership has been framed primarily as long-term institutional cooperation rather than as an explicit transactional exchange.

Recent developments in Sweden illustrate a somewhat different dynamic. In 2024, Sweden channelled funding through UNDP to the Office of the Somali Prime Minister, in parallel with assurances regarding Somalia's cooperation on the readmission of its nationals, although such return-related objectives were not formally articulated within the programme's stated development objectives (Roxwall & Persson, 2025; Sida, 2025). The arrangement, which became subject to public debate, raised questions about transparency, corruption risks, and the reallocation of funds from other development programmes. Compared to Norway's more incremental model, the Swedish case reflects a clearer coupling of financial support and return cooperation within a context of intense domestic political focus on migration governance. These cases thus highlight both the potential steering capacity of aid and the political and reputational risks involved when development resources are perceived to serve migration-control objectives.

From a policy-coherence perspective, the key issue is not whether migration cooperation can legitimately form part of development partnerships, but how clearly the objectives are articulated and how safeguards are maintained. OECD DAC guidelines emphasise that ODA should not primarily serve the donor country's migration-policy objectives. For Sweden, where adherence to international commitments and poverty-reduction principles has historically been central to aid legitimacy, maintaining clarity about primary objectives is particularly important.

Second, the cases underscore the importance of transparency and institutional coherence. When migration objectives are embedded within development cooperation, dual aims should be openly articulated rather than informally pursued. This includes clear theories of change and explicit justification of trade-offs. Making the underlying funding logic visible – whether framed as partnership, incentive, or leverage – reduces the risk of unintended institutional drift, where development instruments gradually shift function without corresponding adjustments in mandate or evaluative criteria.

Third, the comparative cases underline that governance structures matter. Germany’s more institutionalised whole-of-government architecture illustrates both the potential and the limits of formal coordination: while shared strategies and cross-ministerial platforms can strengthen coherence on paper, they do not automatically resolve underlying tensions between development and migration logics. Norway’s experience shows that gradual adjustments within existing structures may preserve development principles, but can also render migration objectives less visible and harder to evaluate. For Sweden, where coordination increasingly takes place within a *Team Sweden* framework and across the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Sida, and the Swedish Migration Agency, the key question is not only whether migration objectives are integrated, but how mandates are clarified, trade-offs are managed, and accountability is ensured across institutional boundaries. Without clear governance arrangements, there is a risk of fragmentation, ad hoc decision-making, or informal shifts in priorities – what the literature describes as institutional drift.

Fourth, stronger emphasis on monitoring and evaluation appears essential. Sida’s sub-strategy for migration and development (2024–2026) already recognises the need to deepen theories of change and improve evidence on what works (Sida, 2025). The comparative analysis reinforces this priority. Migration–development initiatives frequently suffer from weak evaluability: objectives are multiple, causal pathways unclear, and indicators insufficiently specified. If Sweden is to expand migration-related objectives within its aid portfolio, sys-

tematic learning mechanisms will be critical to avoid fragmentation and ad hoc implementation.

Finally, the Swedish approach will need to balance its sharpened migration focus with longstanding commitments to poverty reduction, human rights, and international protection frameworks. The OECD DAC guidance also set boundaries for what can legitimately be financed as development assistance. Ensuring that migration-related interventions demonstrably contribute to the economic development and welfare of partner countries is therefore not only a technical requirement but central to preserving policy coherence and legitimacy.

In sum, the cases indicate that development cooperation may shape migration-related outcomes in specific contexts, but its effects are generally modest, difficult to attribute, and unlikely to translate into rapid or large-scale shifts in migration dynamics. The key challenge however, as highlighted by Tsourdi and Zardo's framework, lies not only in effectiveness but in accountability and transparency regarding how funding instruments are used. For Sweden, the key task is therefore not whether to engage in the migration–development nexus, but how to do so in a manner that is transparent, evidence-informed, legally sound, and consistent with the overarching goal of creating better living conditions for people living in poverty and under oppression.

## Recommendations

Drawing on the comparative insights from the four country cases, the following recommendations are directed at policymakers and practitioners in Sweden and elsewhere seeking to navigate the migration–development nexus in a coherent and evidence-informed manner.

- **Use aid conditionality cautiously and strategically**  
The cases suggest that “harsh” forms of conditionality – such as cutting aid to force cooperation on return or readmission – risk

undermining long-term partnerships and diplomatic relations. Evidence instead points towards the relative effectiveness of incentive-based approaches (“more-for-more”), where credible development cooperation, mutual commitments, and clearly articulated benefits form part of the offer. Such approaches are more likely to foster goodwill, ownership, and sustainable cooperation than ultimatums or direct threats.

- **Invest in strong coordination mechanisms**

Policy coherence requires institutionalised coordination. Development, foreign affairs, justice/interior, and other relevant actors should be involved in planning, decision-making, and, where appropriate, implementation. Clear mandates, defined roles, and regular information-sharing help manage tensions between differing policy logics and reduce the risk of fragmentation or contradictory objectives.

- **Balance national and development interests transparently**

Integrating migration objectives into development cooperation inevitably involves trade-offs. An excessive focus on migration control may crowd out poverty reduction and longer-term development priorities. At the same time, development assistance has always been shaped, to varying degrees, by national interests. The key is transparency. Dual objectives should be openly articulated and debated rather than pursued implicitly. Clear justification of trade-offs strengthens legitimacy and preserves credibility for both migration and development goals.

- **Strengthen monitoring, evaluation, and learning**

Migration-related development initiatives should be evaluated against both migration and development outcomes. Clear objectives, measurable indicators, and independent evaluation mechanisms are essential. Where possible, governments should publish systematic reporting on objectives, costs, and results. An iterative learning approach – testing new models, scaling up what demonstrates results, and discontinuing ineffective measures – can reduce fragmentation and improve effectiveness over time.

- **Safeguard rights and protection standards**

Migration–development interventions must remain consistent with international human rights and protection frameworks. Certain policy tools – particularly in the areas of border management, return, and migration control – risk unintended rights violations if safeguards are weak. Independent monitoring mechanisms and explicit “do-no-harm” assessments should therefore be built into programme design and implementation.

- **Anticipate unintended consequences**

Migration-management initiatives funded through development assistance may generate side effects, including rent-seeking behaviour, governance distortions, or the displacement of migration routes to more dangerous paths. As highlighted in the literature, financial incentives can alter partner-country behaviour in ways that are not always development-oriented. Systematic risk analysis and corruption safeguards should therefore accompany migration-related funding decisions.

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Development aid is increasingly used for migration purposes. Policy objectives are clear: support return and reintegration, and counter irregular migration. Implementation may, however, turn out to be cumbersome given previously untested coalitions and intervention types. This anthology compares, and draws lessons from, experiences in four northern European donor countries who all have made sharp migration turns within their development cooperation.

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Bistånd används i ökad grad för migrationsändamål. De politiska målen är tydliga: Stöd återvändande och återintegration, motverka irreguljär migration. Men genomförande kan visa sig krångligt, med nya samarbetspartners och oprövade insatser. Denna antologi jämför, och drar lärdomar från, erfarenheter från fyra nordeuropeiska givarländer som alla har styrt om sitt bistånd till att också stödja migrationspolitiska mål.