

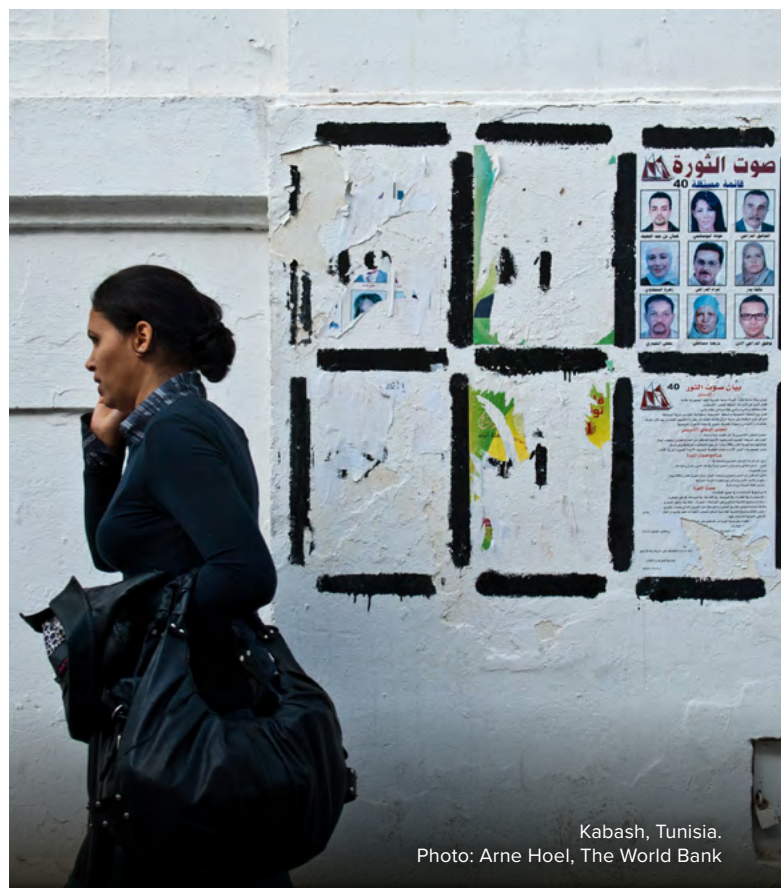
# LINKING MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT AID – EUROPEAN EXPERIENCES

Migration has long been one of the most prominent political issues in Europe. Recently, international aid has increasingly been used to advance migration-related objectives. This raises an important question: what do we know about how this policy link has been implemented in practice in European countries comparable to Sweden?

SUMMARY **01**  
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## MAIN CONCLUSIONS

- Migration has become a strategic priority within international development cooperation in Europe. Countries such as Denmark, Norway, Germany and the Netherlands have all, in different ways, linked aid to migration policy objectives. Sweden is now moving in the same direction through the Government's reform agenda and the strategy for migration, return and voluntary repatriation (2024–2028).
- This approach requires coordination across policy areas with differing, and sometimes conflicting, objectives. Differences in mandates, tools, timeframes and organisational cultures create tensions and make coordination challenging.
- In practice, incentives and partnerships are used more frequently than strict conditionality. It is uncommon for aid to be withdrawn due to insufficient cooperation on migration-related issues. Instead, countries rely on diplomacy, reintegration support, institutional capacity-building and partnerships aimed at achieving mutually beneficial outcomes.
- There is limited evidence that development aid reduces migration flows. However, aid can strengthen institutions, support reintegration, facilitate legal migration pathways and contribute to long-term stability. Evidence of clear effects on irregular migration or return rates remains weak.



Kabash, Tunisia.  
Photo: Arne Hoel, The World Bank

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## More on the report's main findings

Over the past decades – particularly following the large influx of migrants in 2015 – migration has become one of the most central political issues both in Sweden and across Europe. At the same time, the relationship between migration and development aid has evolved at different speeds and in different forms across countries, offering opportunities for comparative learning.

The Government's ongoing reform agenda for development aid and the specific strategy for Sweden's global development cooperation on migration, return and voluntary return 2024–2028, signals a clear shift: migration is now recognised as a strategic area within development cooperation. This shift entails new demands on governance, coordination, implementation and results reporting. This EBA anthology, "Linking Migration and Development: European Experiences and Policy Lessons for Sweden", produced in collaboration with Delmi and EMN Sweden, examines how migration has been integrated into development cooperation in selected European countries over recent decades.

### Experiences from other countries

Several European countries have already implemented similar changes. Denmark, Norway, Germany and the Netherlands have, in various ways, linked migration and development cooperation. Their experiences are therefore relevant to Sweden, particularly with regard to how policy objectives can be translated into practical application – which institutional solutions appear to work? What conflicts of interest arise, and what results can realistically be expected?

**"Linking migration and development requires cooperation between many different actors."**

In all the countries studied, migration has gained increased significance within development cooperation. The differences lie primarily in how far this linkage has gone and how clearly migration policy objectives guide the focus of aid. Denmark is the country that has gone the furthest. There, migration objectives have influenced geographical priorities, the allocation of funds and the overall direction of aid policy. Aid is clearly framed as a tool for preven-

ting irregular migration and strengthening cooperation on migration control.

The Netherlands has also established a clear link between aid and migration policy. Development cooperation is expected to help manage migration flows, and aid has increasingly been directed towards regions deemed strategically important from a migration perspective. This has led to a clearer prioritisation of countries and areas where migration policy interests coincide with development policy initiatives.

Germany has adopted a more institutionalised model in which migration and development are linked through specific programmes, coordination mechanisms and partnerships. The German model often emphasises mutual benefit, or "win-win" outcomes. Development cooperation is used, among other things, to support reintegration, build institutional capacity, establish migration partnerships and promote legal channels for labour and skills migration.

Norway, on the other hand, has opted for a more cautious and gradual approach. Migration objectives have been incorporated into development policy but are often formulated in humanitarian or development policy terms rather than as explicit objectives of migration control. This has preserved policy continuity but has also made the link between migration and aid less explicit than in, for example, Denmark and the Netherlands.

A common pattern is that changes rarely occur through comprehensive institutional reforms. Instead, migration objectives are often integrated gradually through the adaptation of existing aid instruments, reprioritisation and new forms of coordination.

### How to manage coordination?

Effective coordination is a major challenge. Linking migration and development requires cooperation between many different actors: various ministries, aid and migration authorities, the judiciary, the police, diplomatic missions and sometimes even labour market and integration agencies. All countries studied have therefore developed some form of whole-of-government approach.

Denmark relies on a centralised model with strong political leadership, with key decisions elevated to higher political levels and allowing the Prime Minister's Office to take charge of certain issues. Germany relies more on inter-ministerial processes, often on an ad hoc basis. The Netherlands combines cooperation between ministries and agencies with close alignment with EU frameworks. Norway takes a more pragmatic and flexible approach, having made only incremental institutional and administrative changes. Despite these differences, a common

Hamza Yassin has returned to Ethiopia.  
Photo: IOM, International Organization for Migration



lesson is that clear mandates, defined responsibilities and sustained cooperation are critical for effective coordination.

#### **Balancing objectives and ensuring coherence**

Coordination does not automatically ensure policy coherence. Development actors often focus on long-term goals such as poverty reduction, sustainable development and institutional capacity building. Migration authorities, on the other hand, tend to operate under more short-term political premises, with an expectation to deliver rapid and visible results, such as more returns or reduced irregular migration. Differences in time horizons, responsibilities, mandates and institutional culture therefore create recurring tensions.

The link between migration and aid also raises important normative issues. When development cooperation is increasingly used for migration policy purposes, there is a risk that fundamental development principles will be disregarded. This applies in particular to poverty reduction, recipient country ownership, institutional capacity building, human rights, gender equality and long-term policy coherence.

The Danish and Dutch cases show that a stronger emphasis on migration management can influence both geographical and thematic priorities. Aid may be directed to a greater extent towards countries

”When development cooperation is increasingly used for migration policy purposes, there is a risk that fundamental development principles are set aside.”

that are strategically important for migration control, rather than towards the poorest countries or the longest-standing development partnerships. This may strengthen the link between aid and foreign policy, but at the same time increase the risk of development policy objectives being sidelined.

Germany demonstrates that it is possible to design initiatives that combine development and migration objectives, for example through skills partnerships and reintegration support. At the same time, there is a concern among development actors that aid will be instrumentalised and subordinated to short-term migration policy demands. Norway’s more cautious model shows that a more gradual and humanitarian approach can contribute to continuity, but also make the objectives less clear.

## Conditionality versus incentives

A key policy question concerns the use of conditionality—linking aid to cooperation on migration issues such as return, readmission and border control.

The study shows that ‘hard’ conditionality, where aid is explicitly withdrawn or drastically reduced if a country fails to meet migration policy objectives, is relatively uncommon. In practice, incentives, partnerships and diplomatic engagement are more frequently used.

”Aid can contribute to better migration management, reintegration, and long-term stability, but it should not be used as a “quick fix” to reduce migration.”

Denmark and the Netherlands have been more inclined to use stricter political conditionality, whilst Germany has placed greater emphasis on positive incentives and partnership-based solutions. Norway has largely avoided explicit conditionality. Experience shows, however, that there is limited evidence that conditionality in itself leads to significant effects in the field of migration policy. Cooperation with partner countries is often influenced more by diplomatic relations, administrative capacity, domestic political conditions and broader geopolitical interests than by the scale of aid.

## Conclusions and recommendations for Sweden

Experience from the selected countries suggests that outcomes depend less on formal strategies and more on effective coordination, institutional capacity and long-term partnerships. An important conclusion

is that migration and development cooperation are already interlinked in the countries studied, but in ways that are tied to the countries’ existing administrative structures and history. Sweden should, given these conditions, build its model on clear mandates, a clear division of responsibilities and effective coordination between the relevant ministries and agencies.

Expectations must also remain realistic. Development aid can support better migration management, reintegration and long-term stability, but it is unlikely to produce rapid reductions in migration flows. Sweden should also avoid allowing short-term migration objectives to undermine the goals of poverty reduction, human rights and recipient countries’ ownership.

Overall, Sweden should aim for a balanced approach in which migration and development objectives are linked through partnerships, positive incentives, long-term perspectives and policy coherence.

Three lessons stand out as particularly important:

1. **The issue of governance is absolutely crucial.** A whole-of-government approach may be necessary, but is at the same time demanding. Clear mandates, well-defined responsibilities and long-term cooperation between ministries and agencies are key elements in avoiding fragmentation and internal tensions.
2. **Expectations must be realistic.** Development cooperation can strengthen institutions, support reintegration and contribute to long-term stability. However, it is unlikely to quickly reduce irregular migration or increase returns.
3. **The legitimacy of the policy depends on policy coherence.** If migration objectives can be integrated and harmonised with a credible development logic, tensions become easier to manage. When aid is primarily framed as a tool for migration control, conflicts of interest intensify and the risks of a lack of coherence increase.

The summary is based on the EBA report 2026:01: *Linking Migration and Development: European Experiences and Policy Lessons for Sweden*. The anthology is a joint project between Delmi, EMN Sweden and EBA.

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The full report can be downloaded at [eba.se/en/reports](http://eba.se/en/reports)



**THE EXPERT GROUP  
FOR AID STUDIES**

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*The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA) is a government committee with a mandate to independently analyse and evaluate Swedish international development aid.*