



The European Union Trust Fund for Africa: What Implications for Future EU Development Policy?

Summary

The European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) is a central part of the EU's engagement on migration. It has generated both high aspirations and serious concerns regarding its aims, activities, and relationship to broader trends in migration and development policy.

The EUTF's stated goal is to "address the root causes of destabilisation, forced displacement and irregular migration", an aim that is widely seen as unrealistic. However, key actors have other ambitions for the fund. These include demonstrating action on migration in response to political pressure, incentivising African cooperation on migration management, and using the fund's flexibility to develop innovative programming. It is arguably through such innovation that the EUTF could add most value.

The EUTF is perceived by many African partners as part of a European-imposed migration agenda that prioritises EU interests over African ones. While experiences vary between countries and projects, African ownership within the EUTF is undoubtedly weaker than within traditional European cooperation instruments. The EUTF risks alienating African partners and overlooking local priorities, knowledge and capacities.

The selection of EUTF projects and partners has been criticised as ad hoc and untransparent. Member states' implementing agencies play the largest role in implementation, and some clearly see the fund as a source of

finance for their regular programming. This raises concerns over whether EUTF projects add value to existing programming and are the best fit for either the trust fund's goals or local context.

The most controversial aspect of the EUTF is its potential to divert development aid in service of the EU's migration agenda, including in ways that contradict EU development and human rights commitments. This appears to be part of a broader trend towards the securitisation of EU development assistance. The EUTF also undermines EU development commitments by skewing aid allocations towards countries based on their migration profile, and by abandoning aid effectiveness principles such as alignment.

There are several measures that could improve the EUTF and make the most of the opportunities that it offers. These include: more transparent and consultative project development; stronger engagement with local actors and needs; greater emphasis on seeking out "best fit" implementers; and drawing on existing lessons, evidence and approaches. However, if the EUTF is ultimately an indication of the future direction of EU development cooperation, this does not bode well for the EU's prioritisation of development principles, its long-term interests, or its relationship with Africa.

Several processes lie ahead that will influence the future of EU-Africa relations. These must be used to examine how Europe and Africa can work together more constructively to address migration in ways that meet both their interests.

EUTF goals and aspirations

The European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) was launched in November 2015 to support implementation of the Valletta Summit on Migration Action Plan. The fund currently stands at around EUR 2.5 billion (bn), EUR 500 million of which are for implementation of the recently agreed “migration compacts”. Since its launch, the EUTF has generated both high aspirations and serious concerns regarding its aims, its governance and activities, and its relationship to broader trends in EU migration and development policy.

The EUTF’s stated goal is to “address the root causes of destabilisation, forced displacement and irregular migration” (EC [European Commission], 2015, p. 1). However, many actors involved with the fund recognise that this is an unrealistic ambition. The sum of EUR 2.5 bn is small compared to the scale of migration; the enormity of development, security and demographic challenges in these regions; and the large amounts of development assistance that they already receive. Moreover, a time-bound emergency fund is not well-suited to address the long-term and complex drivers of migration. Beyond this mismatch between the scale of the challenge and the EUTF’s limitations, the theory of change that underpins the fund – that migration can be stemmed through development – is also questionable. Indeed, research suggests that out-migration increases as a country’s economy grows. So why did EU leaders push for this trust fund?

The EUTF was established in response to intense political pressure for European leaders to respond to the “migration crisis” and its effectiveness is arguably secondary to the political message that it sends. This is evidenced in the EU’s strong emphasis on return and readmission – primarily for European public consumption – compared to the very small numbers of migrants eligible for return.

Beyond the aim of being seen to act, different actors do have varying aspirations for the fund. Some – particularly EU and member state officials responsible for interior or security issues – want the fund to leverage greater cooperation from African partners on migration management, including through the use of conditionalities. However, given the complexity of internal and external political, economic and security factors that shape African governments’ responses to migration, it seems unlikely that EUTF funding will incentivise alternative responses. Others – including some development officials – see the EUTF as an opportunity to experiment outside the limitations of standard development programming. They accept that the fund cannot make a substantial impact on “root causes” or purchase African co-operation, but believe it could help generate new ways of working.

Imposing a European agenda?

The Valletta process was European-driven and its outcomes, including the EUTF, are seen by African actors as reflecting

Box 1: Potential for innovation

Some development officials see the EUTF’s more flexible procedures as an opportunity to experiment with different ways of working on mobility and migration issues, as well as to work in areas where it has previously been difficult to engage. It is arguably through such experimentation and lesson learning that the trust fund could add the most value.

However, realising this potential will require resisting pressure to fund “business as usual” projects; seeking out of opportunities to innovate; developing robust feedback and learning mechanisms; facilitating adaptation throughout project cycles; and involving local actors deeply at all stages. The establishment of regional research facilities to inform the EUTF’s work, as well as the contracting of expert organisations to support the development of the fund’s monitoring and indicators, are welcome in this regard.

European interests. The EU prioritises containing irregular migration flows, reducing arrivals, and ensuring African compliance on returns and readmissions. Meanwhile, African countries prioritise facilitating legal migration into Europe, building resilience and employment, and harnessing remittances for development. African diplomats express frustration that the EU has offered little space to incorporate African interests.

Despite the fact that a core principle of EUTF intervention is local ownership, African partners have had limited input into the EUTF’s design, management or implementation. There are fewer provisions for African ownership within the trust fund than within the traditional development instruments from which its money comes. In particular, while the European Development Fund (EDF) (which provides the majority of the EUTF budget) has a formal co-management requirement, the EUTF has no such requirement. Moreover, the new migration compacts, which are an incentives-based mechanism for reinforcing third countries’ cooperation on migration management, appear even less partnership-based and more transactional. EU officials argue that the removal of co-management requirements is necessary to ensure the speed and flexibility required for an emergency fund, and that African partners are still very involved in EUTF decision-making. However, there is serious disagreement among EU officials, member states and African recipients about whether the EUTF has sufficient African ownership.

African partners appear to have different degrees of influence at different stages of the EUTF project process. In terms of the identification of needs and potential projects at country level, the extent of African involvement depends on the approach of EU delegations and implementing agencies. Some countries, such as Egypt, have been very unhappy with the level of consultation, while others, such as Ethiopia, report that it has been adequate. At the Operational Committee stage – where projects are approved – there is a clearer structure for African inputs, as African ambassadors and representatives of regional economic communities participate in this committee as observers.

African involvement in implementation is extremely limited and most EUTF projects are implemented by European actors. This situation raises serious concerns about whether EUTF projects are grounded in local understanding of the challenges of migration; build on local knowledge and capacity; or respond to locally identified needs.

“Best fit” projects and implementers?

There has been strong criticism of the way EUTF projects and implementers are identified; in particular, that this process is ad hoc, untransparent, and based on implementers’ ability to access and lobby EU delegations or officials.

Member states’ implementing agencies have been most successful in getting projects funded by the EUTF. Indeed, it appears that some member states see the EUTF as an alternative source of funding for their regular programming. As one member state official interviewed put it, to “top up your activities from the fund”. This raises the question of whether the trust fund is adding value or is just supporting “business as usual” programming. EC officials confirm that some member states push very hard for “a return on their investment” from the EUTF.

There have been calls – including from some member states and the European Parliament (EP) – for a more rigorous, transparent and evidence-based system for project development, founded on clear and formalised consultation with local stakeholders; likewise, for the EUTF to work with a broader range of implementers, including those from Africa. European Commission officials admit that the project development process needs some adjustment. In making such adjustments it is important to learn from past mistakes in migration programming. For example, a recent European Court of Auditors report (2016) found that EU migration spending in the European neighbourhood suffered from a lack of strategy, complex governance, and poor monitoring and oversight – weaknesses that have also been raised in relation to the EUTF.

The EUTF is under pressure to deliver quick results and there are inevitable trade-offs between speed and rigorous and inclusive project selection. However, if the wrong projects and partners are identified, results are less likely to be achieved.

Contradicting core values and interests

The EUTF is intended to work in a complementarity with existing EU policies and instruments, neither duplicating nor undermining them. However, this does not always appear to be the case.

The EUTF is at the centre of a shift towards a politically prioritised, security-focused response to migration. It is intended to overcome fragmentation in EU migration funding, build on existing processes such as the Rabat and Khartoum dialogues, and facilitate the implementation of new initiatives such as migration compacts. Hence the EUTF is

clearly coherent with broader EU approaches to migration. However, there appear to be contradictions with EU development and human rights commitments.

The most controversial aspect of the EUTF is how it relates to the EU’s development policies. EU treaties state that the purpose of EU development policy must be to reduce and eradicate poverty. However, African partners, civil society and the EP have expressed concern that the EUTF diverts development aid in service of the EU’s migration agenda, and is part of a broader trend towards the securitisation of EU development assistance. Indeed, this intention seems clear in the communication establishing migration compacts, which states that “[p]ositive and negative incentives should be integrated in the EU’s development policy, rewarding those countries that fulfill their international obligation to readmit their own nationals, and those that cooperate in managing the flows of irregular migrants from third countries [...]. Equally, there must be consequences for those who do not cooperate on readmission and return” (EC, 2016, p. 9). African diplomats stress that this insistence on conditionalities related to return and readmission is unacceptable and undermines EU-African relations on migration.

Most of the EUTF’s EUR 2.5 bn comes from development instruments and must be spent in line with Official Development Assistance (ODA) criteria. However, the trust fund is not focused exclusively on development objectives, is not obliged to follow the same governance processes as traditional development instruments, and is under political pressure to deliver results on a securitised migration agenda. Given this, it is unsurprising that both EU and member states’ officials admit that some projects are stretching the definition of ODA. Indeed, the EP believes the EUTF seriously risks misusing development aid.

The EUTF also risks diverting development funds away from the poorest countries. While the criteria for allocating EU aid concentrate spending on lower income and least developed countries, EU and member state officials privately admit that the fund is skewing aid allocations towards countries with most relevance for the EU’s migration agenda. Likewise, there are concerns that the EUTF is abandoning core aid effectiveness principles, such as the need to align with government systems, provide budget support, and take programmatic approaches. Instead it is shortcutting the co-management process and funding standalone projects in which local partners play a limited role.

A range of actors have expressed concern that some EUTF activities undermine EU human rights commitments, by cooperating with countries with poor rights records, prioritising migration management goals over human rights, and failing to recognise that state actors have economic stakes in the exploitation of migrants. There has been particular controversy over one migration management project that involves working with the Sudanese border

forces. While these concerns are serious, they are not new. The European Court of Auditors found that within migration spending in the neighbourhood “respect for human rights [...] remains theoretical and is only rarely translated into practice” (European Court of Auditors, 2016, p. 3).

Indications that the EUTF may spend EU aid money in ways that contradict development or human rights commitments raise serious ethical problems, including in terms of accountability to EU citizens and African partners. They also suggest a prioritisation of short-term political interests – preventing migratory flows and reducing political pressure – over the EU’s long-term interests to reduce poverty and foster good governance in Africa.

Recommendations

There are several ways in which the EUTF could be strengthened. These include: more robust, transparent and consultative project development; stronger engagement with local actors and focus on locally identified needs; greater emphasis on seeking out “best fit” implementers; and building on lessons learned from previous migration and development programming. If the EUTF is to innovate and develop new approaches, it must draw on emerging knowledge in areas such as adaptive programming and

working politically, as well as ensure the systematic use of political economy and other analytical tools.

The EUTF may indicate the future direction of EU development cooperation, as closely linked to EU interests and using conditionalities to promote those interests. Hence, while specific EUTF processes can be improved, core concerns about the diversion of aid in the service of a securitised migration agenda are harder to address. However, there are some steps that could mitigate these concerns, including a clear distinction between EUTF funding envelopes for development and migration management activities, and project development processes that clearly demonstrate the rationale for project decisions in terms of development and/or security interests. Interestingly, some EU officials suggest that member states should drop their focus on return and readmission, which is damaging relations with African partners.

The EU must build a more open and constructive engagement with Africa on migration. Several processes lie ahead that will influence EU-Africa relations, from the revision of the European Consensus on Development to the negotiation of the post-Cotonou framework. These should be used to shape approaches to migration that meet both European and African long-term interests.

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Clare Castillejo

Associate Researcher

Department “Bi- and Multilateral Development Cooperation”

German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)