

# **FALSE MOVES: MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT AID**

**Shoshana Fine & Susi Dennison & Richard Gowan**

October 2019

## **SUMMARY**

- European policymakers have developed a strong interest in tackling the root causes of migration through development aid cooperation.
- Yet there is no evidence to support their premise that tackling poverty abroad will reduce the incentive to migrate.
- By increasing people's skills and aspirations, development aid is likely to encourage migration.
- European donors can have a greater impact by using aid to shape migration for the mutual benefit of Europe and countries of origin and transit.
- The root causes approach has helped maintain relatively high levels of European development aid.
- But this approach may prompt governments to use reduced migration rather than poverty alleviation as an indicator of success.
- Europe should not confuse development aid's role in reducing forced migration with that of reducing migration more broadly.
- European development aid should support migration as a choice, not a necessity.

## Introduction

The European Union has significantly changed since 2015. That year, Europeans were preoccupied with a surge in migrant arrivals by sea, and on land at the EU's external borders. Governments were more concerned about addressing this challenge than any other issue. Since then, the number of migrants arriving in Europe has dropped significantly. Although neither the number of arrivals nor demands for asylum have fallen to pre-2015 levels, the surge in migration is over. Policymakers are now adapting to a new normal in migration levels. As shown by data from surveys the European Council on Foreign Relations and YouGov carried out across 15 member states in 2019, migration is no longer voters' chief concern but only one of several main priorities (ranging from climate change and the economy to the threat of nationalism to the European project).

However, memories of the panic of 2015 persist among the elite and the public. The incoming leaders of the EU's institutions will pay particular attention to how the bloc can learn to live with this new reality, given that migration to Europe is now practically manageable but still politically explosive. In this context, European policymakers have developed a strong interest in the root causes approach to migration. This approach focuses on targeted investment in source countries, aiming to strengthen the local economy enough to discourage potential migrants from travelling to Europe.

Voters like this idea: ECFR's polling data show that more than 50 percent of people in each of the 15 member states surveyed wanted the EU to engage in greater investment of this kind – with the figure rising to 70-80 percent in countries such as Hungary, Italy, and Romania. As a result, policymakers also like the idea in principle: the German-led “Marshall Plan for Africa” is predicated on the concept, as is the commitment by member states to [dedicate](#) 10 percent of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (or around €8.9 billion) to “addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement” and to “supporting migration management and governance including the protection of refugees and migrants' rights”, as part of the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework. Yet, beneath this high-level commitment, there is much disagreement between member states as to how their migration

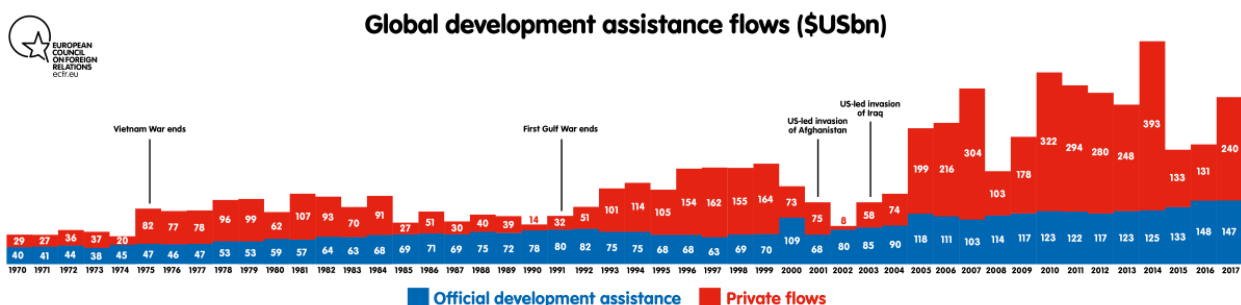
management objectives align with their development goals.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief examines the likely impact of the root causes approach on migration to the EU. It explores how the political crisis around migration has affected the European development aid agenda, and the extent to which the EU uses development aid to achieve migration governance objectives. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations for European institutions seeking to create a more productive relationship between migration and development.

## Source of the root causes approach

The EU and its member states provide more than half of global development aid. Yet the bloc's leadership in this area is not only about aid volumes, but also about its willingness to push for contributions from other donors. Indeed in 2015, when the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the EU delegation and key donor states – including France, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom – played a crucial role in framing the project.

The EU's commitment to global development and poverty eradication is also an important source of soft power for member states, individually and collectively. As in all areas of external policy, the EU's approach to migration has always been partly driven by political imperatives (which affect overall aid volumes) – from political cooperation with recipient countries on trade, energy, and security to reconstruction following wars EU states have been involved in, such as the conflict that followed the 2003 invasion of Iraq.



×

This history informs the EU's current debate on the root causes of migration, and on the potential use of aid to tackle perceived drivers of migration from Africa to

Europe. With the surge in support for anti-establishment, anti-European, and far-right European political parties in recent years, national politics across the EU is now intensely focused on issues such as security, employment, and migration. In a world in which tweets can influence policy and easy promises of change increasingly draw votes, arguments based on evidence alone are unlikely to succeed. Arguably, the ideas behind tight border management now have more appeal than those for a Europe that is cosmopolitan and openly engages with the rest of the world.

Nativist, anti-immigrant parties in some European countries (including Italy and France) made some gains in the May 2019 European Parliament election but, overall, performed worse than anticipated. The Greens, in contrast, significantly increased their share of the vote. While they take a more liberal view of development aid and migration, the Greens also [reinforce](#) the root causes narrative – which remains locked in a sedentary bias that sees migration as a problem, and that encourages people to stay where they are. In this political environment, member states have been unable to reach an agreement on sharing responsibility for hosting refugees and other migrants across the EU in a fair manner – despite several periods of severe political tension over migration since 2015, which have pushed the politics around the issue to the right in many countries (not least Germany, Greece, Italy, and Sweden). Having seen how German Chancellor Angela Merkel suffered political damage for her attempt to challenge this rightward drift with a more open approach in 2016, mainstream political leaders from these and other member states feel electorally vulnerable to anti-immigration populist parties. As a consequence, they are reluctant to challenge the nativist narrative on how migration flows to Europe can or should be stopped. Nonetheless, mainstream parties that have addressed the threat of the far right by accommodating anti-immigrant sentiment have often suffered electoral losses.

As a result, EU leaders have in recent years emphasised policy initiatives that demonstrate control over migration to Europe by focusing on countries of origin and transit. They have significantly stepped up their efforts to contain migrants through cooperation with governments in transit and origin countries, through a process known as “externalisation”. The EU’s external migration policy takes various forms, from political agreements such as its 2016 deal with Turkey to

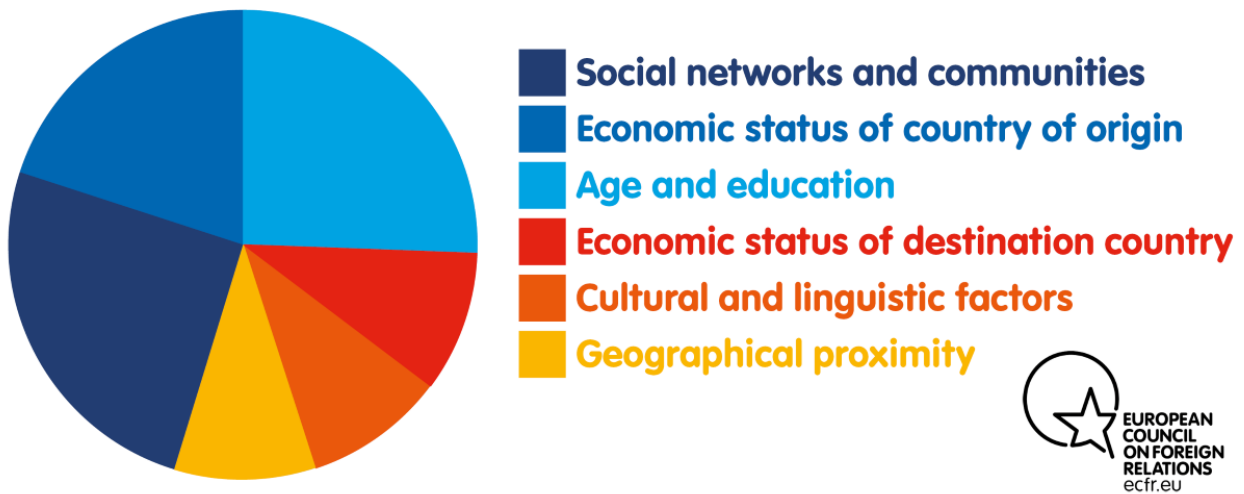
technical cooperation initiatives such as those to train Libyan border guards. While much of this work runs through national ministries of interior and the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, there is increasing pressure on development ministries and the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development to play a role in the effort too – by reducing perceived incentives to migrate to Europe. Since aid is one of the clearest ways in which EU states engage with source and transit countries, politicians and policymakers alike are asking how the billions of euros European governments spend on aid can help them achieve their migration objectives.

The problem is that, while EU governments may have created the impression that they are managing migration, there is little indication that their approach will have the desired effect on migrant flows. Although, for now, the root causes narrative maintains high levels of development aid and governments' focus on the issue, there is no evidence to support its premise that tackling poverty abroad will reduce migration. Indeed, the evidence suggests that, by raising capabilities and aspirations, development is likely to encourage migration.

## **Drivers of migration**

A close examination of the various drivers of migration flows from Africa to Europe reveals a different picture to that created by the reductive root causes narrative. The graphic below, based on data compiled by Eurostat and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), [illustrates](#) these drivers.

# Global predictors of migration flows



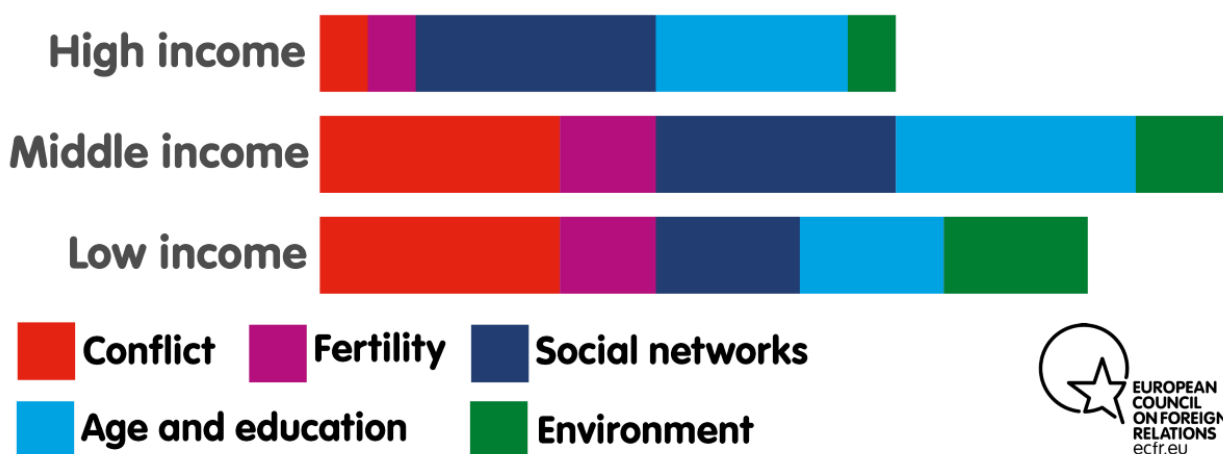
The three drivers shaded in red, orange, and yellow (the economic status of the destination country, cultural and linguistic factors, and geographical proximity respectively) provide relatively weak explanations of why people migrate. Shorter distances between the country of origin and the destination, and relatively low transport costs, are significant drivers of economic migration but not of flows of asylum seekers. More significant are the three factors shaded in blue:

- The presence of social networks or communities with a migration background in destination countries: this variable relates to family reunification, links established through post-colonial relationships, and the size of a diaspora in the destination country.
- Age and education: young adults are more likely to **migrate** than older people. This is particularly true of those in middle-income groups, some of whom will be trained in high-skilled professions – leading to significant levels of brain drain.
- Economic status of the country of origin: perhaps counterintuitively, people from low-income families are the least likely to migrate, while those from middle-income families are the most likely to do so (see graphic below). According to sociologist Hein de Haas, the poorest countries that experience relatively high levels of migration tend to be **characterised** by large-scale cross-border movements of people nearby, often in neighbouring countries. The evidence **suggests** that modest economic growth from development in support of job creation will increase emigration in the medium and long term.

Indeed, the evidence [points to](#) a “migration hump” in which migration only decreases when a country enters the upper-middle-income bracket – that is, reaches a GDP per capita of roughly \$8,000-\$10,000. If today’s poorest countries continue to grow based on past rates, they will not reach \$8,000 per capita until 2198. Even if development aid steadily [improved](#) their economic prosperity, these countries would take many years to achieve middle-income status.

Crucially, development initiatives can increase individuals’ skills and aspirations – which, as discussed above, has the [effect](#) of driving migration. Meanwhile, due to their lack of socio-economic resources, people in very poor countries (many of which have high fertility rates) tend not to move beyond their region or even home country unless they are forced to do so as refugees.

## Global drivers of migration by countries’ economic status



Two other key factors, conflict and the environment, affect forced migration but do not generate stable predictors of migration flows. Conflicts tend to occur in low- and middle-income countries. The effects of climate change are most evident in low-income countries (especially those in Africa).

Where conflict drives migration, this is invariably forced migration – as has [occurred](#) on an especially large scale in the Middle East and Africa in recent years. There are three common assumptions about the consequences of this forced migration. Firstly, for a variety of complex reasons (such as border security, the absence of safe passage, and a lack of resources), most people in conflict-affected areas tend to stay where they are. Secondly, when they have mobility, it is often

limited within national borders (and, therefore, constitutes internal displacement rather migration). Thirdly, most people who have been forced to migrate due to conflict **remain** in the global south, often in camps: 85 percent of displaced persons live in developing countries.

There is increasing **recognition** in Europe that climate change and environmental degradation have the potential to cause substantial forced population displacement. This raises questions about the lack of legal protection for environmental refugees. Evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change **suggests** that, in the coming years, climate change will affect Africa most – through droughts, desertification, and floods. All these events may lead to migration. For instance, cyclones and flooding often prompt sudden migration, potentially of a temporary nature, whereas drought tends to result in a more gradual and permanent process.

## **European development and migration drivers**

There are four issues of immediate relevance to the relationship between European aid and migration drivers. These are migration as a primarily economic issue; the interaction between border security and development aid; non-developmental humanitarian aid; and resistance to harnessing remittances for development purposes.

The root causes narrative is premised on the idea that all migration to Europe is driven by economic factors and, therefore, an increase in economic opportunities in countries of origin will reduce migration. This reasoning does not take into account the fact that many African migrants are fleeing conflict, persecution, and political repression, often at the hands of the state. In countries such as Eritrea, Mali, **Nigeria**, Somalia, and South Sudan, migration is driven above all by the search for security and protection – and, as such, is unlikely to be affected by development interventions, which primarily concern job creation or the improvement of local amenities. When countries funnel development aid towards border security, as is increasingly the case with the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), this may exacerbate migrants' vulnerabilities – leaving them with dangerous illegal crossings as their only alternative.



Security is often European countries' overarching concern. In [Niger](#), the EU's focus on border security has [led](#) to counterproductive outcomes for both development and migration management in west Africa. Funding from the EU has supported legal mobility in the region, notably through the development of the ECOWAS protocol. Yet, since the EU's 2015 crisis, European actors have pushed for a more restrictive, securitised approach to mobility, particularly through EUCAP Sahel Niger. These actors have funded and trained local security professionals tasked with cracking down on irregular migration. The EU has also pushed Niger to adopt its first anti-smuggling law, which criminalised cross-border movements, in 2015.

These developments [caused](#) a 75 percent decrease in migration flows through Agadez to Algeria and Libya. However, this has [had](#) two unintended consequences. The economy of northern Niger has long depended on intra-regional migration. Tightened border controls left those who relied on cross-border activities with no alternative source of livelihood, heightening their vulnerability. Moreover, smugglers forged new, dangerous routes through Chad and Darfur towards Libya, with foreign smugglers often replacing their local counterparts. Some ethnic groups have disproportionately suffered from this, likely adding to the climate of frustration and, in turn, increasing the risk of regional instability.

Thus, the securitisation of Niger's borders ran directly counter to the aims of the EU's Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015-2020, which calls for development that facilitates legal migration and stability. In reality, a focus on border security has limited development while heightening the risk of illegal crossings both within Africa and at the EU's external border. In this regard, the EU's deployment of development aid for humanitarian purposes seeks to solve a problem that it has partly created.

The EU's overriding concern for the securitisation of migration and borders has also reduced the political and economic benefits of intra-regional migration. Nonetheless, some states in Africa retain the political will to facilitate legal migration on the continent. Indeed, African nations have come together to address the need for free trade areas and to support the African Union Passport, [designed](#) to replace national passports across 55 African countries and eliminate the need for visas. Currently, Africans can [travel](#) to other parts of the continent without a

visa in just 22 percent of countries. Instead of facilitating this process – which is **necessary** to development in Africa – the EU seems to be much more concerned about helping African countries bolster their border security. An associated issue concerns the problematic relationship between humanitarian assistance and long-term development aid.

The EU's interactions with displaced persons in Africa commonly involve humanitarian assistance – which is essentially about meeting basic needs rather than investing in sustainable long-term goals. However, the bloc is beginning to address this limitation. In June 2017, the World Bank and UNHCR set up a programme for refugees under their international development aid expenditure planning. What came to be **known** as the IDA18 regional sub-window for refugees and host communities allocates \$2 billion to supporting low-income countries that host more than 25,000 refugees, or have a refugee population amounting to at least 0.1 percent of the population. In 2018 the organisations assigned funding to Cameroon, Chad, the Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Niger, Pakistan, and Uganda. This funding is intended to support policy reforms for long-term initiatives that benefit refugees and host communities. The integration of refugees into host societies is at the heart of this approach – through support for, inter alia, freedom of movement, identification documents, and formal labour force participation. While it is still in its infancy, the programme provides promising ways to support refugees and development in the global south.

There are other promising out-of-camp initiatives. For instance, in Uganda, where refugees are **permitted** to work, they can draw on aid from the private sector to participate in small businesses, thereby contributing to the local economy. In some cases, this has increased employment among Ugandans; in others, it has improved trade partnerships with countries of origin.

Another ambitious initiative, established in 2016 and partly funded by the World Bank, **allocates** €385m to the construction of two industrial parks, which will employ 30,000 refugees. This initiative – which includes integration into schools – **forms** part of the Ethiopian government's strategy to end its encampment policy and pursue out-of-camp and local integration efforts.

European migration policy often fails to account for the relationship between

development aid, migration management, and the investment potential of remittances. Therefore, European development projects need to improve the ways in which they deal with diaspora groups and remittances. Diasporas have proven to be major actors in development. Meanwhile, global remittances to low- and middle-income countries reached a record \$529 billion in 2018; around \$46 billion was sent to sub-Saharan Africa in 2018, including a record \$25 billion to Nigeria alone. Remittances, which directly serve their beneficiaries, tend to be relatively steady and long-term. In contrast, development aid mostly contributes to large-scale projects and tends to shift its focus over time. Nonetheless, the transaction costs involved in remittances can work against development objectives. And, in sub-Saharan Africa, the [average transaction cost](#) is 9.4 percent (compared to a [global average](#) of 7.1 percent). Remittances account for 2.5 percent of the region's GDP; in countries such as Comoros, Gambia, and Liberia, they account for more than 20 percent of GDP. European policymakers need to give more thought to how development aid can help alleviate such costs. European development aid designed to help African states strengthen their institutions for better migration management too often marginalises the issue of remittances.

## **The migration debate's impact on European policymakers**

As analysis ECFR's network of national researchers carried out in September 2018 showed, in 21 member states, the public debate on development has intensified since the refugee crisis. The most significant increases in levels of interest have occurred among policymakers in Greece and Italy – both of which have been deeply affected by increased arrivals of migrants since 2015 – as well as the Netherlands and Belgium. Meanwhile, 70 percent of member states have increased their focus on Africa, through their ministries of foreign affairs and development, during the period.

These trends are also reflected in a cluster of new policy initiatives on development and Africa in key European capitals. Germany's proposed Marshall Plan for Africa is perhaps the most high-profile of these initiatives. It has support across the EU but, to date, has received few new resources. Earlier this year, the French Comité Interministériel de la Coopération Internationale et du Développement published a report on international migration and development,

while President Emmanuel Macron tasked parliamentarian Hervé Berville with rethinking French development cooperation. Shortly after the publication of the report, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian announced that France would quadruple its grant assistance to Africa in 2019.

However, below the headline increase in interest, European views of migration are mixed. When asked how the policy debate on the refugee crisis is predominantly framed in their countries, 76 percent of respondents to ECFR's survey said that there was a strong call for greater European cooperation on external security and defence, and 56 percent for deepening cooperation on internal security and counter-terrorism.

There are increasingly divergent views within the development community on aid's role in managing migration. Some development experts advocate for a continued focus on the root causes of poverty, while treating migrants as a particularly vulnerable group, as part of a "leave no one behind" approach. Others favour adjustments in the geographical focus of aid to concentrate more on countries of origin and transit, or for "saving the European commitment to asylum" using aid as a tool to help decrease migration flows to Europe.

Since before the migration crisis, members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have tended to focus less on long-term development aid and more on humanitarian assistance in fragile regions and refugee routes. For example, as shown by SEEK Consulting's analysis of OECD data in the first half of 2017, humanitarian assistance from all 29 OECD donor countries increased by 80 percent in 2012-2016, while their development aid spending [increased](#) by 24 percent during the period. This pattern also emerges in specific national contexts. For example, in 2017, the UK allocated 50 percent of the Department for International Development's budget to fragile and conflict-affected regions, and created the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund to mitigate the spillover of the Syrian war. Donor countries with high numbers of refugees and other migrant arrivals have also redistributed aid towards hosting refugees both at home and in countries in regions that border conflict-affected states (Sweden's decisions on this led it to spend 34 percent of its development budget on refugee reception in 2015, a statistic that generated headlines at the time).

Countries have a growing tendency to **fund** initiatives that focus on border security and often lack both transparency and risk compatibility with EU laws and regulations, such as those on humanitarian aid and development cooperation. One prominent example of this is the EUTF, established following a summit between African and European leaders in Valletta in 2015. The fund currently provides €4 billion for cooperation with 26 African countries over a period of five years. Its declared aim is to “promote stability in partner countries and to address in a single instrument the root causes of migration”. In this way, for the first time, the European Commission has **brought together** EU funding channels for external relations, home affairs, development cooperation, humanitarian aid, and neighbourhood policy. The EUTF has paved the way for home affairs to increasingly affect the disbursement of European development aid – through its emphasis on the return and reintegration of migrants, and through anti-smuggling and anti-trafficking activities. Projects under the EUTF distance aid from its guiding principles and have limited concern for long-term goals such as promoting good governance and fighting high-level government corruption.

The development community is fast approaching a battle over the issue of “migration conditionality”. The principle of providing aid in return for reform is a long-standing part of the EU’s neighbourhood policy. Since the Valletta summit, the principle of providing European aid in return for support on migration management has begun to shape Europe’s relationships with countries beyond north Africa. ECFR’s research indicates that there are serious discussions on migration conditionality in many member states, not least Denmark, Italy, and the Netherlands. Collectively, these talks concern African states’ willingness to accept migrants whose applications to remain in the EU have failed; tackle people smuggling routes that pass through their territory; and host offshore reception and processing centres for migrants travelling to the EU. This raises questions about how these factors might reconfigure European development priorities in the future.

## **The future of the debate on migration and development**

While a general sense of crisis over migration is reshaping European development culture, it remains unclear how this will play out in the medium to long term.

Several additional factors are liable to influence development priorities: a further loss of faith in multilateral frameworks for addressing both migration and development, including the Global Compact on Migration (GCM) and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); new demands for development aid to address security crises outside the main migration routes through the Sahel, particularly reconstruction in Syria; and financial and political pressure from a new recession.

## **Multilateral frameworks**

While EU members increasingly use development aid to address the root causes of migration on the ground, policymakers in major donor states have attempted to tie this to pre-existing frameworks for poverty reduction. The EU's initial rush to stem mixed flows of refugees and migrants in 2015-2016 was offset by member states' effort to "internationalise" the problem at the September 2016 UN migration summit. While multilateral talks on migration had frequently stumbled on long-standing global north-south divides, migration expert Roderick Parkes [notes](#), European diplomats were pleasantly surprised by "support among emerging economies for migration control". Middle-income countries of origin and transit had become relatively willing to accommodate EU concerns and, at least rhetorically, take greater responsibility for migration management.

These countries' enthusiasm perhaps signalled their expectation that they would receive something in return. As political scientists Fiona Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas explain in their work on "migration diplomacy", a country's power to gain a strategic advantage through the manipulation of migration flows depends on its role in migration systems – as a country of origin, transit, or destination. For example, Niger has [become](#) the world's biggest per capita recipient of EU development aid due to its active role in stopping onward migration towards Europe.

The UN migration summit, and the lengthy New York Declaration that came out of it, also emphasised the link between migration and the fulfilment of the SDGs, particularly SDG 10.7 – which focuses on "safe, orderly and regular migration" (a provision designed to ensure that there would be UN discussions on all migration issues). Naturally, this was important for low-income countries. But it also allowed

European decision-makers to portray their security-led efforts to stem migration flows as part of the UN's 2030 Agenda. In conceptual terms, this conflation of securitised migration management with the SDGs provides European donors with a way to allocate funds to limiting migration flows while still claiming to maintain their focus on poverty, health, climate change mitigation, and other SDGs.

In practical terms, however, it has proved increasingly difficult to maintain the fiction that such migration management contributes to the SDGs. With the 2016 UN summit having established new negotiations on the GCM, the UN's secretariat and agencies, along with many developing countries, used the process to promote a liberal approach to migration that EU members have found difficult to accept. In January 2018, for example, Secretary-General António Guterres released a report on "making migration work for all" to guide GCM discussions that was firmly grounded in the SDGs and called for more pathways for migration. Virtually all EU countries, with the partial exceptions of Germany and Sweden, objected to this document, calling for a greater focus on migration control.

Nonetheless, most member states constructively engaged with the negotiation of the GCM in the first half of 2018. Only Hungary deliberately disrupted the talks throughout: when the UN General Assembly agreed on a draft GCM in July, Hungary quickly disassociated itself from the text. At the time, the country appeared to be isolated within the EU on this (even if the United States refused to engage in the negotiations at any stage). But, in the final months of 2018, as the UN prepared for a summit to endorse the GCM in Morocco in December, the EU split on the issue. Ultimately, right-wing parties in some European capitals – [backed](#) by an intense online campaign apparently associated with Russian trolls – led nine members of the EU to either reject the document outright or abstain from voting on it.

The Belgian government collapsed over the issue, and there were even protests against the pact in Brussels. Nonetheless, several EU member states decided to stand by the pact, mitigating the damage to it. Denmark led a small group of states that backed the GCM as a matter of principle, while putting forward a signed statement that outlined the limits of their commitments – a compromise that stopped even more EU members from abandoning the agreement. Merkel launched a [whole-hearted defence](#) of the GCM as an expression of multilateralism

at the Morocco summit, which its participants say helped reduce ill feeling over the intra-EU dispute.

With Hungary and fellow sceptics now explicitly refusing to [endorse](#) the GCM, it is clear that the UN bargain will not resolve fundamental divisions over migration in Europe. Indeed, the process has actually helped fuel the anti-immigrant and anti-globalisation rhetoric of leaders such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Nonetheless, the GCM still provides major donors with a broad framework for linking their migration management concerns to their wider commitments to the SDGs, which are points of reference throughout the document. African countries succeeded in persuading other parties to strengthen the GCM's language on development assistance in return for taking over destination countries' responsibilities for migration control.

The GCM is poorly suited to advocacy – partly due to the need for such compromises on language, and partly due to its length and complexity. Nonetheless, major donors should be able to use the SDGs-GCM framework to help link together their migration and aid priorities (divisions within the EU over the document notwithstanding).

Yet there are challenges to this multilateral approach. The first is that it may prove difficult to operationalise the GCM and demonstrate its impact. While UN officials emphasise that it is time to focus on GCM implementation, this process will inevitably take time. For example, it was not until May 2019 that UN agencies [established](#) the “start-up fund” to support projects on migration cooperation envisaged in the GCM. By early September, there [appeared](#) to be no money in the fund. Moreover, donor and recipient governments can cherry-pick commitments from this long multilateral document. As a broad statement, it is not an operational road map designed to respond to the next large-scale movement of migrants and refugees in the Middle East and north Africa. Meanwhile, border and internal security officials – even those from pro-GCM member states – have been largely uninterested in the process.

Therefore, there is a significant risk that the next migration crisis (real or constructed) on Europe's periphery will lead many sceptics to argue that the GCM is not relevant to Europe's immediate migration challenges; that attempts to tie



migration to policy to the SDG framework are irrelevant; and that donors should become even more hawkish in using aid to respond to migration challenges. In these circumstances, the fact that some EU countries – even if they are not major aid actors – have rejected the document altogether will empower aid sceptics. There is also a risk that distrust of the GCM will combine with a wariness of the SDGs and of the Paris climate change agreement in the next two to five years.

Predictably, there are growing signs that very poor countries are increasingly unlikely to achieve many of the SDGs by 2030 (just as they could not achieve many of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015). Simultaneously, the Paris climate change agreement [appears](#) to be unlikely to succeed in keeping global temperature rises within two degrees centigrade of pre-industrial levels. With such challenges likely to mount in the coming years, EU donors could respond by radically increasing their poverty reduction and climate change mitigation efforts. But there is a strong chance that European policymakers will react by publicly lowering their ambitions and quietly distancing themselves from commitments they recently championed.

This would have negative implications for development policy in general, which would bleed into discussions about the development-migration nexus. If large-scale multilateral initiatives in migration and development (and climate policy) fail to achieve their aims, officials who favour transactional, bilateral, and security-driven approaches to migration will gain even more influence.

## **Security**

Other factors may push European policymakers away from their focus on both development and security responses to migration flows. One of the most likely to do so is, ironically, the risk that they will marginalise the perceived security threat from migration, especially that through Africa, in favour of other security priorities. The most obvious of these priorities is the potential need to invest in reconstruction and refugee returns in Syria, which could be an enormous drain on development aid. In the last year, Russia has repeatedly called on the EU to put aside political differences over the Syrian war and invest in rebuilding the country. To date, major European donors (and the US) have refused to agree to this without political concessions from the Syrian government, such as drafting a new

constitution. Nonetheless, diplomatic observers broadly agree that at some point – whether because of a compromise by Damascus or a shift in European policy – EU donors will make major investments in Syria. In this scenario, Syria could act as a drain on overseas development aid for the next five to ten years, just as Iraq and Afghanistan did in the post-9/11 period. In a period of resource constraints, donors would almost certainly divert funds away from poverty reduction projects and other aid initiatives that did not have obvious security implications. This could cause them to reconsider the importance of projects that focus on migration.

It is likely that, in light of the events that followed the 2015 migration crisis, even a diplomatic opening with Syria would not entirely distract European donors from migration concerns. European governments' hope that some of the many Syrian refugees in Europe might choose to go home would overshadow other migration concerns. Indeed, European countries devoted enormous resources to facilitating refugee returns to Bosnia from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. However, the situation in Syria remains unstable and EU member states have, for now, suspended all forced returns.

And Syria is not the only conflict-affected country on the EU's periphery that could become a drain on development aid in the short-to-medium term. Peace agreements in Yemen and eastern Ukraine could also create demands for reconstruction funding (the 2-3 million internally displaced persons and refugees from Donbas do not feature much in EU migration debates, but they will require costly assistance). In these circumstances, there is no guarantee that European donors' focus on Mali, Niger, and other transit countries will last.

A further political and security factor that may affect European thinking about development aid – albeit one that is less pressing in the short term – is China's growing influence as a donor and an investor. The current international framework for development aid, including the SDGs, rests on the optimistic assumption that all countries will support such aid as a public good. But this should not be a given: as was especially apparent in the cold war, aid can be a political tool that major powers use to buy proxies. The US, increasingly disturbed by China's growing global reach, shows signs of retreating to this approach. President Donald Trump told the UN in September 2018 that he has ordered a review of whether American development aid should go only to countries that support America – a clear threat

to penalise those that lean towards China. European governments are yet to adopt such a hawkish tone.

China has markedly expanded its investments in the Middle East and north Africa in recent years, including in transit countries such as Mali. If this continues, and the US encourages its allies to take a hawkish view of their aid spending, it is possible that EU donors will channel more funds to countries where they believe they are in “aid wars” with China; possibly cut funding in cases where Beijing’s influence appears immovable; and place fewer restrictions on the use of their funding. It is hard to predict how such geopolitical decisions will overlap with migration-related priorities, but these new political factors could easily distort debates on migration and development aid.

### **The risk of a new recession**

A final “known unknown” in the development and migration debate is the effect of a European or global recession. Most economists agree that a new period of widespread economic strain is on the horizon. This could encourage populists to oppose development aid and complicate the policy discussions outlined above. Moreover, the 2008 financial crisis created a major rift between European donors. Some – including Italy and Spain – had little choice but to slash their development aid budgets, which have still not recovered. Others made a strategic choice to maintain or even raise spending. But this has not been without political cost. For example, many of the UK Independence Party and Conservative politicians who led the Brexit campaign have vocally opposed the UK’s commitment to spend 0.7 percent of GNI on development aid. It is likely that, if another recession strikes, even mainstream political leaders in reliable donor states will face pressure to either cut overall development aid or link it to national interests even more explicitly.

This threat to development aid combines with the other two main challenges to Europe maintaining its commitment to global poverty reduction and fulfilling the SDGs: a failure of the multilateral framework that EU members have helped develop around migration and development funding; and overriding security and geopolitical concerns that redirect development aid. Each factor is liable to intersect with and reinforce the others, shaking up the debate on aid.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The political crisis around migration in the EU has prompted the foreign policy and security community to renew its focus on development and the relationship with Africa. This provides space for Europeans to direct their strategic investments towards sectors and programmes that promote a productive relationship between migration and development. To this end, EU states should use dialogue with countries in the global south to explore approaches to migration that serve the interests of both sides rather than pursue simple alignment with a European political agenda. They should:

- Rename and reform the European Emergency Trust Fund to ensure that development aid interventions take account of the evidence of the diverse drivers of migration. The evidence suggests that European donors have a greater impact by leveraging aid not to deter migration but to shape it for mutual benefit. For instance, the EU should integrate remittances into its development aid strategies.
- Avoid policies that subordinate cross-border intra-regional mobility to European border security interventions along migration routes. Such mobility is necessary for development. Thus, the development and security communities need to collaborate with each other to produce complementary aims and practices. To limit people smuggling and migrant fatalities, governments should create safe migratory routes and develop new ways of thinking about development in areas such as circular migration flows.
- Align humanitarian assistance with development aid, where possible. For instance, such assistance should help countries in the global south with large refugee populations shift their attention away from short-term initiatives and towards sustainable ones, providing migrants with autonomy and the

opportunity to contribute to local economies. Development interventions should include support for out-of-camp strategies for refugees, especially that which promotes open regulatory environments in cases of protracted displacement.

The evidence suggests that development aid has little prospect of reducing migration flows. Pull factors (especially social networks that connect migrants with a destination country), together with migrants' middle-income status, are the strongest drivers of migration. For refugees, conflict is an important push factor. The EU's excessive preoccupation with border security has negative effects on development programmes and increases the number of dangerous and illegal attempts at migration, often with fatal consequences. European funding increasingly goes towards humanitarian assistance without accounting for development issues, resulting in measures that address short-term basic needs at the expense of sustainable solutions. And EU member states rarely harness the potential of remittances within development aid strategies. Therefore, it seems unlikely that there will be a united European response to development aid for migration management, as nations formulate their own responses. Meanwhile, there is no sign that European leaders have reduced their focus on security or effectively challenged popular objections to migration in member states.

Although the root causes approach has helped maintain high levels of European aid and attention to development – as is particularly clear in EU institutions – there is a risk that, over time, this focus on migration will change the definition of effective aid in negative ways: governments may increasingly use reduced migration flows rather than poverty alleviation as an indicator of success.

The scarcity of evidence to support the root causes approach has done little to discourage these trends. This suggests that development specialists should base their arguments to European policymakers on key donors' national political concerns, particularly in upcoming debates on issues such as the future of the EU-Turkey migration deal; reconstruction in Syria; competition with investors such as China in regions with large migration flows; and the economic outlook in donor states. All these debates are likely to affect European governments' attitudes towards development in the coming years.

Despite political pressure to provide ways to control migration, the development community should avoid raising political expectations to an unrealistic degree. It should champion the distinction in public discourse between different types of migration and should continue to push for evidence-based policies. Aid can have a far greater impact on forced migration than economic migration. As such, development programmes centred on conflict prevention are particularly valuable for their potential to make migration a choice and to reduce the likelihood of forced migration. A comprehensive approach towards migration in target regions, accounting for European foreign policy and security priorities, may also help reduce forced migration.

## **About the authors**

Susi Dennison is a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations and director of ECFR's European Power programme. In this role, she explores issues relating to strategy, cohesion, and politics to achieve a collective EU foreign and security policy. She led ECFR's European Foreign Policy Scorecard project for five years; since the beginning of this year, she has overseen research for ECFR's Unlock project.

Shoshana Fine is a visiting fellow with the Middle East and North Africa programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. She specialises in EU refugee and migration policies, with a particular focus on the external dimension of European migration governance. She holds a PhD in international relations from Sciences Po Paris.

Richard Gowan is an associate fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. He is currently UN director at the International Crisis Group, and was previously research director at New York University's Center on International Cooperation. He has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and Stanford in New York.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for funding this project. They are also greatly indebted to ECFR's national researchers, their interviewees, and participants in the workshop series "The political crisis on migration and commitment to development aid". We would further like to thank Swantje Green for her help in the organisation of some of the workshops on which the research draws. Finally, the authors would like to extend thanks to Chris Raggett for editing the paper and creating the graphics.

## ABOUT ECFR

The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) is the first pan-European think-tank. Launched in October 2007, its objective is to conduct research and promote informed debate across Europe on the development of coherent, effective and values-based European foreign policy. ECFR has developed a strategy with three distinctive elements that define its activities:

- A pan-European Council. ECFR has brought together a distinguished Council of over two hundred Members – politicians, decision makers, thinkers and business people from the EU’s member states and candidate countries – which meets once a year as a full body. Through geographical and thematic task forces, members provide ECFR staff with advice and feedback on policy ideas and help with ECFR’s activities within their own countries. The Council is chaired by Carl Bildt, Lykke Friis, and Norbert Röttgen.
- A physical presence in the main EU member states. ECFR, uniquely among European think-tanks, has offices in Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome, Sofia and Warsaw. Our offices are platforms for research, debate, advocacy and communications.
- Developing contagious ideas that get people talking. ECFR has brought together a team of distinguished researchers and practitioners from all over Europe to carry out innovative research and policy development projects with a pan-European focus. ECFR produces original research; publishes policy reports; hosts private meetings, public debates, and “friends of ECFR” gatherings in EU capitals; and reaches out to strategic media outlets.

ECFR is a registered charity funded by the Open Society Foundations and other generous foundations, individuals and corporate entities. These donors allow us to publish our ideas and advocate for a values-based EU foreign policy. ECFR works in partnership with other think tanks and organisations but does not make grants to individuals or institutions. [www.ecfr.eu](http://www.ecfr.eu)

The European Council on Foreign Relations does not take collective positions. This paper, like all publications of the European Council on Foreign Relations, represents only the views of its authors. Copyright of this publication is held by the European Council on Foreign Relations. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of the European Council on Foreign Relations. © ECFR October 2019. ISBN: 978-1-913347-03-1. Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 4th Floor, Tennyson House, 159-165 Great Portland Street, London W1W 5PA, United Kingdom.