The European Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) and the externalization of migration control

Joseph Trawicki Anderson

This policy brief presents findings from the project *Outsourcing Migration Control: Externalizing EU Borders to Africa*, which explores how the EU has sought to manage migration to Europe through various development and security interventions in Africa, in response to growing concerns over migration across the Mediterranean from the North of Africa. The project primarily focuses on the European Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), a major funding instrument launched by the European Commission in 2015 to address the "root causes" of irregular migration,[1] set to conclude in 2025. A key finding of the research is that while the merging of migration control and economic development objectives was politically advantageous for the European Commission, it resulted in a lack of focus, transparency, and contextual understanding within the EUTF. The research highlights issues such as the outsourcing of project implementation in

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[1] While the EUTF was focused on "irregular migration" as noted here, much of the policy brief uses the broader term of "migration." This is for two reasons. First, the EUTF itself also refers to migration as a broader category, for instance in the strategic objective of "improved migration management". Secondly, "irregular" is a political term which makes presuppositions about movement. Asylum-seekers, for example, may enter "irregularly" but then later be determined to be "regular" if their claims are approved. For more on the politics of labels and naming in migration see for example Sigona, 2018 and Hamlin, 2021.

EUTF initiatives, and how monitoring and evaluation processes have, rather than merely assessing outcomes, redefined the goals of the EUTF. While development funding in Africa is important and should remain a priority for the EU, significant concerns persist about linking this funding with migration control. This policy brief, while acknowledging the vast and complex nature of the EUTF, reviews key aspects of the fund, particularly focusing on issues related to migration and migration control. In doing so, it draws on both original research conducted as part of the research project as well as secondary literature.

Introduction

Established at the Valletta Summit on Migration in November 2015, the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) was designed as a tool to address the "the root causes of instability, forced displacement and irregular migration and to contribute to better migration management" (European Union, n.d.(a)). Enabled as a result of the 2013 Financial Regulation (Regulation No 966/2012), which allows the European Commission to create trust funds for certain emergency actions, the EUTF has had a budget of approximately €5 billion, with €4.4 billion coming from EU sources and an additional €634 million from member states and other donors (European Union, n.d.(b)). It was organized across three regional "windows" of the Sahel and Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa, and the North of Africa. Within each window, individual projects were aligned towards one (or more) strategic objectives: greater economic and employment opportunities, improved governance and conflict prevention, improved migration management, and strengthening resilience of communities. Explicitly migration related themes were therefore placed alongside broader development related goals. In total, EUTF money was used to fund almost 250 projects in Africa. While no new projects are being funded, some already funded projects will be running until the end of 2025 (European Union, n.d.(b)).

The EUTF has also been notable for how it was put together. As a trust fund responding to a defined "emergency" the European Commission was able to fund and administer the EUTF with relatively little oversight and with no formal involvement of the European Parliament. Member states which have contributed at least €3 million are given a seat on the operational board,

although the European Parliament itself only maintains observer status (Kipp 2018). As part of its more flexible construction, the EUTF has also been exempted from normal tendering process with much of the money being distributed through "delegated cooperation" (Kipp 2018). The speed and flexibility of its structure has meant that implementation has frequently been uneven with the three regional "windows" for example having had different processes for selecting projects (European Court of Auditors 2018).

One of the challenges that has been identified with the EUTF is the lack of clarity around its goals and the steps envisioned to achieve those goals (European Court of Auditors 2018). While the EUTF sought to address the "root causes" of irregular migration, exactly what those root causes were and how they were to be addressed, was not clearly defined. A focus on development played a large role in the funding and justification for the EUTF, but research suggests that economic development can lead to an initial increase rather than decrease in outward migration (De Haas 2010). Indeed, research suggests that those involved in putting together the EUTF were well aware of the lack of research support for this concept (Zaun and Nantermoz 2022) and they overall had low expectations that the EUTF would have a significant impact on migration flows (Castillejo 2016). Much of the framing of the project was therefore strategic, with the focus on "root causes" providing a way to depoliticize migration control and therefore reach a consensus middle-ground amongst different EU institutions and member states (Zaun and Nantermoz 2023). In this way, the EU could be seen as "doing something" about migration, without having to clearly define what that "something" was. Others have argued that although the EUTF was advertised externally as being about "root causes", in fact "statements by European leaders have repeatedly underlined that the main purpose of the EUTF is to secure the cooperation of third countries in reducing refugee flows and irregular migration and taking back irregular migrants" (Kipp 2018, 11). In that case, EUTF funded projects were not so much about their individual goals, but a broader visibility of engagement with partner countries. That it is uncertain which goal (or goals) the EUTF was meant to achieve means it is difficult to know if it achieved them.

As the "emergencies" that the trust fund is responding to are also not well defined, this has meant that a wide variety of activities have been included as falling under the remit of the EUTF. As noted by the EU Court of Auditors:

> Its objectives have been kept as broad as possible, so that most actions can be considered eligible. All kinds of development projects (e.g. food and nutrition, security, health, education, environmental sustainability, etc.) and implementation methods (indirect management, budget support, etc.) can be used and indeed have been used under the EUTF for Africa. While this has made it a flexible tool, it has come at the expense of having a strategy that is focused enough to ensure impact.
>
> <div align="right">(European Court of Auditors 2018, 12)</div>

This does not mean that the programs included in the EUTF were necessarily bad or poorly run. However, the lack of clear, consistent goals—and the mixing of potentially incompatible objectives—has made it difficult to assess the precise outcomes. As will be discussed in greater detail below, this flexible financing combined with poorly defined (and contradictory) goals has allowed the EU to embed migration control within the broader framework of development aid and cooperation. As a result, "Europe has succeeded in adding population management to the policy fields where the global North can legitimately intervene in the policies and practices of the global South" (Spijkerboer 2021, p. 2902), while frequently leaving it less clear what those specific interventions have been and will be.

Purpose

The main aim of our project was to expand knowledge about the externalization of EU migration control, by examining the outsourcing of migration management practices to Africa, with a particular focus on the EUTF. As funding for migration control becomes intwined with development aid, it raises questions over how such a twinning affects both processes. Africa serves as a crucial region to locate this inquiry due to the EU's particular concerns over Mediterranean migration from North Africa. The extensive outsourcing to implementing partners involved in funding mechanisms like the EUTF also brings into question not only what this funding is meant to achieve but also the transparency of these processes. Our research project therefore posed two broad sets of questions:

- What control and compliance mechanisms are in place to ensure that external actors (state, non-state; national, regional, international) implement EU migration management policies in Africa? To what extent do the migration management processes and

practices of EU agents in Africa conform with Europe's externalization policy objectives and plans?

- What oversight and monitoring mechanisms are in place to ensure the transparency and accountability of outsourcing arrangements? What do these monitoring and evaluation processes do and what kind of knowledge do they produce?

Given the massive scope of the EUTF and the sheer volume of projects included under its umbrella, the focus here is on the monitoring and evaluation processes within the EUTF and on selected projects dealing with migration management and control. Therefore, while this research speaks to particular issues and dynamics within the EUTF, it cannot speak to the totality of the fund and its many projects. Here, this policy brief draws upon both original research that was conducted by various members of the project research team as well as secondary material. Primary material gathered in this project included interviews with representatives from EU bodies, implementing partners, and monitoring and evaluation entities as well as reviews of policy documents and reports. For the purposes of this policy brief, this material has been supplemented by additional secondary sources.

Results

EUTF Projects and Migration Control

One of the other key questions asked by the project was how EUTF projects were outsourced to various actors. In one such EUTF project examined as part of this research project, it became clear that there were many actors involved and that their precise activities were not only difficult to trace but even sometimes intentionally obscured. For example, following the money spent in a EUTF project on supporting border control in Libya, which was administered by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, lead to numerous dead-ends. This was due both to the extensive outsourcing of activities to private companies and the Ministry of the Interior's decision to not make the contracts public (Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022). Indeed, such documents remained hidden even after formal requests under EU freedom of information rules. Therefore, companies with long-standing ties to the Italian Military ended up with large and valuable contracts for both services and equipment about which relatively little is known (Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022).

Research has long pointed to how the outsourcing of security functions to private companies tends to weaken both oversight and control over how those functions are exercised, making the lack of transparency particularly concerning (see for example Gammeltoft-Hansen 2016; Lemberg-Pedersen 2013). In the case of Libya, where equipment such as trucks and boats was provided, the unstable context further complicates efforts to monitor how this equipment is being used. Pacciardi and Berndtsson (2022) caution that projects implemented in "such environments" are at risk of infringing on migrants' rights, underscoring the need for greater clarity on how these migration control efforts are managed and by whom. Reliance on control logics means that the EU "prioritizes short-term security measures aligned with European interests" rather than broader democratic development or engagement with "socio-economic needs" (Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2024, n.p.).

This points to a broader issue which has come up frequently in research on the EUTF: the complexity of migration makes it difficult to predict the effects of control efforts. For example, while efforts to bolster border security around Agadez in Niger succeeded in reducing visible movements, they also disrupted border economies, pushed smuggling further underground, and increased regional instability (Abebe 2019; Bøås 2020). Thus, in both these cases there are concerns that EU funding, by focusing on logics of control, may be focusing on relatively short-term and narrow goals that might lead to additional problems in the future.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Because the EUTF lacked clearly defined goals, the monitoring and evaluation processes and actors faced challenges in assessing the projects' impact in relation to any specific objective (Vigneswaran et al. 2024). Instead, research done in this project demonstrated that monitoring and evaluation tools rather served legitimating functions—creating data that showed the "success" of the EUTF even if these particular results were unrelated to the original objectives.

The monitoring and evaluation systems of the EUTF relied heavily on statistical indicators through channels, such as the AKVO dashboard, to show the outputs of the different projects. Although these channels provided substantial data, their usefulness was limited by the absence of a baseline for comparison and a tendency to just track activities—such as the number

of workshops held or individuals reached by awareness campaigns—rather than assessing policy impact. Systems like the AKVO dashboard therefore gave a strong visual of activity, action, and transparency, even though little information was relayed about the actual effectiveness or impact of projects (Welfens and Bonjour 2023).

Monitoring and evaluation processes thus played a significant role in reinforcing the legitimacy of the EUTF itself. Despite the limited substantive information, the visual of activity provided by tools such as the AKVO dashboard, helped to "bolster the internal legitimacy of the EUTF vis-à-vis the constituencies of the EU and its Member States and to portray the EU as a savvy foreign policy actor that is influential across the African continent" (Welfens and Bonjour 2023, p. 962). By providing a sense of transparency it helped to enhance the sense that the EUTF was "doing something" in Africa and therefore increase support from stakeholders.

Moreover, monitoring and evaluating practices also served to justify the EUTF and its focus on migration control within the broader framework of the EU's development agenda. By highlighting "lessons learned" from EUTF-funded projects (though very little was in fact known about their impact), these practices sought to promote the idea of good migration management as a "key feature" of good governance, reinforcing the connection between migration control and development aims (Welfens and Bonjour 2023, pp. 963, 965). This was also done through monitoring and evaluation actors presenting the "lessons learned" from the EUTF as both justification for the fund and a way to feed into future rounds of funding (Vigneswaran et al. 2024). Therefore, the value of the EUTF is re-constructed as not so much being about addressing root causes of irregular migration, but about embedding migration control within the broader practice of EU development work in Africa, and the ability for those ideas to be carried forward in the future.

Narrow Engagement with Migration

The focus on both migration control and the promotion of "good migration management" has implicitly aimed not only to curb irregular migration but to discourage migration altogether. This approach reflects a form of "containment development" (Landau 2019), where economic growth and development funding are explicitly tied to the non-movement of people. Thus, although "better migration management" has been one of the EUTF's

strategic areas, few projects have interpreted this in a non-restrictive sense, and legal migration channels to the EU remain limited (Niemann and Zaun 2023).

One of the only projects to explicitly focus on Africa-EU migration, "Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa" (THAMM), has for instance been criticized for having a large focus on skills and skilling, despite resulting in relatively little actual migration (Jung 2022). Migration in these contexts is supported only in limited cases, specifically for people with narrowly defined skill sets, and even then, only for a small number of individuals.

Other kinds of migration and movement have also received inconsistent and contradictory support from EUTF funding mechanisms. Despite spending many years supporting the development of regional free movement in the ECOWAS region in West Africa, this money has dried up in the era of the EUTF and with the EU now emphasizing a more security-focused approach to borders in the region. At the same time, the EUTF has included money to support IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) in the Horn of Africa to promote free movement in the region (Castillejo, Dick, and Schraven 2019). However, in both cases, progress has been slow-going because some countries in both regions have been reluctant to embrace free movement. Under the rubric of the project "Better Migration Management" the EUTF for instance touted its achievements in helping Uganda to sign migration agreements with Gulf countries to "strengthen protections for Ugandans working abroad" (EUTF 2022). Yet, just eight months later, Uganda suspended its agreement with Saudi Arabia following widespread issues of migrant abuse (Mouillaud 2023).

Thus, despite the focus within the EUTF on migration and good governance, the actual projects focusing specifically on those topics have been few in number and received little financial support. As noted by an official EUTF evaluation report in 2021, the broad category of "labour migration and migration for development" had seen funding of €75 million, or "about 2% of total EUTF funding" (Davin and Rubira 2021, p.11). It is clear therefore that despite the migration focus of the EUTF, this funding has been primarily directed towards non-movement rather than on opening up or supporting legal migration opportunities for individuals in Africa.

Recommendations

1. Avoid short-termist approaches to migration control

Many of the migration control interventions funded within the EUTF have been both short-termist and implemented with limited understanding of the conditions on the ground. As detailed above, EUTF projects centred on migration control have shown a lack of understanding of the contexts in which they are operating, sometimes leading to worsening rather than improving the overall situation either politically or for migrants, or both. Migration is deeply embedded in political, social, and economic dynamics, and interventions driven by short-term EU interests, rather than a nuanced understanding of the local contexts, risk creating more problems than they solve. If future development funding is directed towards migration control, it should be more attuned to local political realities, migration patterns, and the longer-term promotion of rights and democracy in the targeted areas.

2. Define goals more clearly

While the focus on "root causes" may have been politically expedient for the creation of the EUTF, the lack of clearly identified or identifiable goals has made accountability challenging. The sheer size and scope of the EUTF makes it extremely difficult to both approach and assess, and future funding mechanisms should therefore be more clearly defined. This is not just to make formal monitoring and evaluations processes easier, but also to make such EU funding more democratically accountable. By being both everything and anything, it has been hard to pin down what exactly the EUTF is and does, making it difficult to hold it accountable for what it has (and has not) done. This arrangement has given a lot of power to both the European Commission and the consulting firms providing the monitoring and evaluation. Future funding mechanisms need to be clearly defined so that it is easier for the broader public to understand what is being done, how it is being done, and whether projects are meeting those goals (or not).

3. Provide greater transparency, especially around contracts

In addition to making the goals clearer, the public needs greater access to information about how these goals are being met. The

allocation of funding within the EUTF has been quite opaque. This has been true, both in terms of which projects get funding, but also in how the funding is spent by project partners. As research in our project showed, it has remained difficult to know how money is being spent or even which organizations or companies have been contracted, especially with security-related projects. Furthermore, even entities like the EU Parliament have been denied oversight over the EUTF. Future funding mechanisms need to include much more transparency around who is providing what services, and how money is being spent. Doing so will help support and enable the political and societal accountability mentioned above, giving greater insight into how money is being spent, by who, and on what terms.

4. **Expand the focus of interventions beyond restriction**

Despite "improved migration management" being one of the key focus areas of the EUTF, the trust fund has largely focused on the non-movement of individuals. As noted above, programs to support migration have received relatively little funding within the overall context of the EUTF. Future EU funding mechanisms and development approaches should have a broader understanding of migration, including support for legal migration opportunities for individuals. This should also include a more specific focus on supporting the rights of migrant workers abroad. If the EU is wanting to decrease "irregular" migration, it should also create opportunities for "regular" movements as well.

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