

The use of research and evidence in EU external migration policies: Insights from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) and its Member States increasingly mobilise the language of ‘evidence-based’ or ‘evidence-informed’ policymaking, on the premise that bringing scientific knowledge and evidence into policy decisions will lead to better outcomes.¹ Migration policy is no exception to this trend. Yet whilst there is a strong demand from policymakers for readily available research on the drivers and dynamics of migration flows, the integration of scientific research and expert knowledge into policies has been uneven at best - not least due to the high salience and politicisation of migration policy.

This brief focuses on the use of research and evidence in the adoption, implementation and evaluation of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF Africa). The EUTF Africa, established in 2015 to tackle the root causes of migration and instability in Africa, has indeed promoted the use of ‘an evidence-based approach in order to understand the drivers, dynamics of migration, and to map out responses’.² The brief draws on desk research and interviews conducted with policymakers in EU institutions, officials in the permanent representations of Member States and civil society organisations.

The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa

The EUTF Africa was established in November 2015 in the context of the so-called EU refugee crisis and amidst increasing political pressure placed on the EU and its Member States to curtail migration flows to Europe. The EUTF Africa aims to address the root causes of instability, forced displacement and irregular migration and to improve migration management in Africa. 251 projects have been approved so far under the instrument, amounting to €4.9 billion in total. These projects aim to contribute to four main pillars and objectives of the EUTF Africa: greater economic and employment opportunities; strengthening the resilience of communities (especially for vulnerable groups, such as refugees and displaced people); improved migration management in countries of origin, transit and destination; and improved governance and conflict prevention and reduction of forced displacement and irregular migration. These programmes are implemented in 26 African countries and across three regional windows (Sahel and Lake Chad, Horn of Africa, and North of Africa).

¹ See, e.g., the Knowledge4Policy initiative from the European Commission: https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/home_en

² https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/content/strategy_en

Designing and adopting the EUTF Africa: no space for evidence?

In November 2015, at the Valletta Summit, European and African heads of state and government committed to strengthen cooperation and find common solutions to migration-related challenges. The EUTF Africa was launched as the main deliverable of the Summit, demonstrating the EU's commitment to address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement in Africa. Whilst not completely new, this approach of framing development cooperation as an instrument to address migration flows has since become a mantra of EU external migration policy. This approach posits that by creating more favourable conditions in origin and transit countries, the EU can dissuade would-be migrants from leaving their country in the first place. Therefore, tackling the 'root causes' or underlying drivers of migration and forced displacement is expected to lead to a curbing of migration flows towards European shores. Based on this premise, the EUTF has sought to tackle a multi-faceted and wide-ranging set of challenges in African countries, including (but not limited to) poverty, unemployment and lack of access to resources, instability, uneven access to quality health services and education, and corruption.

Yet whilst this approach of addressing the root causes of migration through development aid is intuitively appealing and compelling, its underlying logic is flawed.³ There is a growing consensus amongst researchers that development tends to lead to more (rather than less) international migration, at least in the short term.⁴ This is assumed to be because economic development, and notably income-generating programmes, create new aspirations for would-be migrants and facilitate access

to the resources and capital needed to migrate.⁵ The relationship between economic development and migration flows tends to be reversed once a country reaches an upper-middle level of income — development then reducing emigration rates. However, for the countries where the EUTF intervenes, attaining this threshold would take decades — a timeline incompatible with the emergency nature of the instrument and with the need for quick results. Besides, the short-term mandate of the EUTF Africa creates important limitations in terms of its capacity to address the root causes of major societal issues, which require a long term and steady investment.⁶

The faultiness of the 'root causes' approach, however, does not make development assistance any less important or valuable. Indeed, many of the projects implemented under the EUTF Africa contribute to the traditional objectives of EU development assistance (poverty alleviation and fostering sustainable development and stability), which are valuable ends in their own right.⁷ Rather, the reliance on an empirically flawed approach illustrates the risks and limitations of the instrumentalisation of development aid for migration control objectives.

³ Zaun, N. & Nantermoz, O. (2021). The use of pseudo-causal narratives in EU policies: the case of the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. *Journal of European Public Policy*.

⁴ This phenomenon is often called the 'migration hump'. See for instance Angenendt, S., Martin-Shields, C., & Schraven, B. (2017). More development—more migration? The 'migration hump' and its significance for development policy co-operation with Sub-Saharan Africa (Briefing Paper 20/2017). German Development Institute; Fratzke, S., & Salant, B. (2018). Moving beyond 'root causes'—the complicated relationship between development and migration. Migration Policy Institute.

⁵ Ascencio, D. (1990). Unauthorised migration: An economic development response, report of the US Commission for the study of international migration and cooperative economic development. US Government Printing Office. Recent research suggests that improving the quality of and access to public services may lead to a small reduction of emigration rates (and therefore be more effective than income-generating projects). See MEDAM (2018). Foreign aid can dampen migration if it improves public services. <https://www.medam-migration.eu/publications/policy-papers/foreign-aid-can-dampen-migration-if-it-improves-public-services-14406/>

⁶ This was noted in a mid-term evaluation of the EUTF Africa: https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/sites/default/files/mtr_final_report_1.pdf

⁷ In fact, for some implementing actors (in the Commission and the Permanent Representations of Member States), the reduction of migration flows towards Europe was never an indicator of success of the EUTF Africa. What was crucial for these actors, instead, was preserving the core principles of development cooperation, and ensuring that the funding would not be predominantly directed towards migration control or migration management programmes.

An important investment in research in the implementation of the EUTF Africa

Contrasting with the limited mobilisation of research and evidence during the design of the EUTF Africa, the implementation stage gives more room to evidence-based interventions. The EUTF Africa invested in the creation of two Research and Evidence Facilities (one for the Horn of Africa and one for the Sahel/Lake Chad and North of Africa regions). These Research and Evidence Facilities are tasked with conducting research on the drivers of irregular migration, instability, insecurity and forced displacement and on migration routes in Africa. The research produced, in turn, is expected to inform policy interventions and operational approaches, by equipping the implementing team with the knowledge needed to maximise the quality and impact of the programmes. The two Research and Evidence Facilities are backed up with significant resources (€28.1 million in funding) and have produced a wealth of resources and research outputs.⁸ The Horn of Africa Research and Evidence Facility has generated fifty research reports, briefings and working papers. Its priority areas have been defined with a view to making ‘a concerted and valuable contribution to EU Trust Fund project implementation’⁹ and to generating ‘policy-relevant knowledge’.¹⁰ The Research and Evidence Facility for the Sahel/Lake Chad and North of Africa regions has meanwhile conducted thirty-seven field studies, surveys and other research initiatives.¹¹

This heavy investment in research reflects a genuine concern for obtaining a more granular understanding of displacement and conflict dynamics and for understanding the multiple, complex web of reasons and situations which lead individuals or groups to migrate. Whilst the EU has traditionally focused on migration patterns at the national level, these research initiatives have aimed at gaining a more fine-grained understanding of migration and displacement dynamics at the sub-national level (whether it be at the level of a region, or for specific communities).

Notwithstanding this, important barriers and challenges remain when it comes to using the knowledge generated by these Research and Evidence Facilities. The lack of clear guidelines on the relationship between the Research and Evidence Facilities and the actors charged with formulating and managing programmes has complicated the direct consumption and use of the research generated for programmatic purposes.¹² This shows the importance (for future EU instruments) of formalising from the start the relationship between research and operational entities, and of encouraging frequent and open communication between the two. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the temporal demands of research (which often requires months if not years before yielding results) complicate its use for programmatic purposes — even more so where there is pressure for immediate and fast-paced action (as was the case with the EUTF Africa). Besides, the proliferation of research initiatives and wealth of outputs generated by the Research and Evidence Facilities has made it difficult for implementers (especially in Member States) to keep up with and digest all the research being produced.

⁸ It is worth noting that such a heavy investment in research has not always been popular, not least because research funds are often seen as diverting money away from operational funds and projects on the ground.

⁹ <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/ref-hornresearch/files/2020/02/Migration-and-Conflict-desk-review.pdf>, p. 4

¹⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/content/research-monitoring-and-evaluation_en

¹¹ https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/cross-window/regional-research-and-evidence-facility-sahel-and-lake-chad-region-and_en

¹² <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/ref-hornresearch/files/2020/06/Rapid-Review-of-the-European-Union-Emergency-Trust-Fund-for-Africas-Research-and-Evidence-Facility-and-Web-and-Social-Media-Analytics-Report.pdf>

The EUTF Africa as laboratory for monitoring and evaluation initiatives

Through its monitoring and evaluation activities, the EUTF Africa has integrated a strong learning component. Departing from the traditional emphasis on programme-specific evaluations, the EUTF Africa's Monitoring and Learning system assesses how strategic priorities are addressed at the levels of an individual programme, of a regional window and of the instrument as a whole. This allows the EUTF Africa to measure the joint impact of bundles of programmes, which is particularly important given the multi-faceted and ambitious interventions undertaken under the instrument, and the interdependences between some of the 'root causes' targeted. To assess (and achieve) coherence across interventions (whilst also measuring the efficiency of individual projects), forty-one shared indicators have been developed.

The Trust Fund has further put the emphasis on external transparency and visibility. Its website (launched in late 2017) includes detailed information about every project funded as well as the expected and actual outcomes and indicators used for monitoring and evaluation purposes.¹³ Besides, the EUTF Africa has invested in generating and assimilating lessons learned, as well as identifying and sharing best practices. This has taken the form of case studies on specific thematic areas intersecting with the work of the EUTF Africa; of a mid-term evaluation of the Trust Fund; and of a 'Learning Lessons from the EUTF' exercise conducted in two phases (June 2019 to January 2020 and June 2020 to February 2021).

Notwithstanding the importance of these initiatives, there remains significant barriers and challenges to measuring the real impact of the EUTF Africa interventions. Measuring impact and assessing causality is indeed a complex exercise, even more so when it relates to dynamic, large-scale and

long-term phenomena such as the drivers of irregular migration and insecurity or resilience, which require enormous work. This is compounded by the difficulty of separating the effects of the EUTF Africa interventions from that of other development aid or government-led programmes and from external factors. Another challenge in evaluating impact relates to the choice of indicators. Monitoring and evaluation systems (including in the EUTF Africa) tend to rely on numbers and more easily quantifiable indicators, at the expense of more intangible structural results (which require considerable time and do not lend themselves to easily measurable outcomes).¹⁴

The experience of the EUTF Africa demonstrates the value, but also challenges, in promoting an evidence-based approach to EU external migration policymaking. In considering the investment in research and evidence as an integral component of its implementation, monitoring and evaluation strategies, the Trust Fund has paved the way for future initiatives. The commitment to experimenting and learning has generated important lessons, notably on the integration of the knowledge produced into the strategic approach and policy outputs of the Trust Fund. Besides, the EUTF Africa has demonstrated the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of the drivers of migration, at the individual, societal and structural levels. There are still many unknowns as to what affects the perceptions and aspirations of would-be migrants, and what shapes their decision to migrate (or not migrate). Further research along these lines could illuminate the extent to which migrants' decisions are affected and shaped by existing policies and provide the basis for a more efficient and humane approach to shaping migration journeys.

¹³ The EUTF's website can be accessed here: https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/index_en. Programmes outcomes can be accessed via the Akvo RSR platform: <https://eutf.akvoapp.org/>

¹⁴ This limitation is acknowledged by the EUTF Africa's Monitoring and Learning System: https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/sites/eutf/files/eutf_q2_2018_final_07112018.pdf, p. 111

The project

MARE, Research on European Management of Migration and Refugees, is a research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The project aim to produce better knowledge on how European policies for refugee protection and migration management shape the rights and opportunities of migrants and refugees, on the one hand, and how this is linked to political stability in host countries, on the other.

The researchers

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