

Development Aid as Migration Control:

The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa and the Constraints on African Agency

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For decades the EU has recorded a steady but contained flow of migrants to the continent, a number small enough not to attract the sustained public or political attention. However, in the mid-2010s things changed. Due to the conflicts in the EU's neighbourhood, Syria, Libya, Iraq, South Sudan, and many others, the influx of migrants and asylum seekers increased drastically. Due to tightening land border controls, these migration flows crossed the Western Mediterranean Route, which links Morocco and Spain, and the Central Mediterranean Route, which connects Libya or Egypt to Italy and Malta. The latter saw a 376 percent increase in sea crossings between 2013 and 2014¹, most of which were done in extremely perilous conditions, causing just over 3,000 drownings (over the approximately 4,000 reported worldwide) between January and September 2014, earning the Mediterranean the title of deadliest sea in the world². Within months, the EU was struggling under the extreme migratory pressure. Single member states could not handle the crisis alone, as each experienced different impacts. Italy and Greece received new arrivals, Croatia and Hungary acted as transit countries, and wealthier countries such as Germany and Sweden became the preferred final destination for many refugees³.

Migration securitisation also increased, a trend Bello describes as a socially constructed reality which frames migration as a threat⁴. The securitisation logic increasingly justified the use of development aid to address perceived security threats in the country's neighbourhood. This inevitably increased the attention on unstable emigration countries and blurred the line between development aims and migration control⁵.

In this context, there was a need for a collective and immediate response. This response materialised in the creation of the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), launched during the Valletta Summit on Migration in November 2015. The summit brought together European and African leaders to discuss the future of human mobility. The main goals were to “address the root causes of instability, forced displacement and irregular migration and to contribute to better migration management”⁶. With a budget of €5bn, projects funded by the EUTF are implemented across 26 countries in three critical regions: the Sahel and Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa, and North Africa. The activities focus on four main objectives: increase economic and employment opportunities, improve migration management in countries of origin, transit and destination, strengthen community resilience and improve governance and conflict prevention⁷.

This essay uses the EUTF as a case study to examine how development aid is operationalised through the “root causes” approach to advance EU geoeconomic and security objectives in Africa and how this framework structurally eliminates African agency. It then examines how African actors attempt to

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² LLM use declaration: ChatGPT (web-based version, OpenAI) was used selectively for minor sentence-level rephrasing during the editing stage; no AI-generated content was directly incorporated into the manuscript.

adapt to this framework within its political and institutional constraints, without achieving meaningful results. Although there are more recent funds which declare to have the same objectives and may reproduce similar power asymmetries, such as the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), this essay analyses the EUTF as it was the first of its kind, in size and ambition. Moreover, the EUTF is particularly suitable for analysis because no new projects have been approved since December 2021 and all ongoing initiatives will terminate on 31 December 2025, creating a timely opportunity for final assessment.⁸

The research methodology is primarily qualitative. The EUTF and partners' reports will be examined and compared with one another and to available data. The project case study will be evaluated based on available information on its outcomes provided by the implementing organisation and EUTF reports. Existing studies and impact evaluations will also be used to confirm findings and deepen the discussion.

The essay will proceed as follows. Part I will first address the “root causes” approach, its flawed logic and how it is used by the EU as a legitimising framework for the redirection of aid towards migration control. Next, the focus will shift on how the EUTF is institutionally designed, governed, and implemented. This section lays the ground for part II, where the essay dives deeper into the impacts of the functioning and rationale of the Fund on African agency. The analysis shows that African actors are passive recipients, with what appears as ‘agency’ limited to forms of alignment that do not translate into autonomous decision-making. It will become clear that although normally recipients do acquire some level of bargaining power in regular aid negotiations, this is not possible within the EUTF framework. Finally, the evidence presented will be supported by a case study focusing on the migration hub of the Agadez region in Niger and the impacts of EU (and EUTF) presence on local realities and agency.

Development Aid, Migration Control and Strategic Interests

The “Root Causes” Approach

The Action Plan produced at the Valletta Summit clearly states that the EUTF was created as a tool to tackle the root causes of irregular migration and displacement in Africa⁹. A clear and comprehensive discussion of the “root causes” of irregular migration was carried out at a meeting of the Rabat Process in 2018. The Rabat Process is a regional migration dialogue established in 2006, involving 57 countries in addition to the EU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The process has the aim of ensuring communication and consultation between all countries along the routes of migration from Northern, Central and Western Africa to Europe¹⁰. The report produced during this session offers a fundamental distinction between drivers and root causes of migration. The drivers are those mechanisms that produce “outcomes” in terms of migration, such as social networks that enable mobility towards a foreign country or region. Root causes have been defined by the European Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development as the structural causes of migration: negative political, economic, and social circumstances. These must not be confused with acute causes, which refer to forms of violence endangering lives in the origin country¹¹. Examples of root causes

include poverty, unemployment, and fragile job markets, especially regarding youth, political instability, and lack of rights protection¹².

The EUTF is based on the use of development aid to address the root causes of illegal migration, with the hope that this would consequently cause a decrease in irregular migrant flows¹³. Even though this chain of events seems logical, it is extremely debated. It is essential to understand the flaws and nuances of this discourse, as it represents the basis of the political and international legitimacy of the fund and all its projects. The first, and fundamental point to consider, is whether aid does have an impact on development, or more broadly, whether it is successful in its intended objectives. Literature on the effectiveness of aid is in fact mostly inconclusive on the subject, showing successes in some cases, and egregious failings in others. The difficulties in estimating causal relations between aid and economic growth or any other relevant indicator leave the relationship unclear at best¹⁴. For the purpose of this analysis, we proceed on the premise that the EUTF-funded aid will achieve the expected developmental goals.

The migration-development nexus policy makers rely on, is described in a series of scholarly articles on the matter. The seminal theory on this relationship is provided by Zelinsky's mobility transition theory. He argues that migration flows vary along with economic and social development, meaning that in early stages of development there is little migration, in the growth phase there is a spike in outward flows, and in mature economies there is a decrease in emigration and a possible reversed flow coming into the country. Essentially as countries develop, migration tends to rise before it falls. The same mechanism, referred to as the "migration hump" was later theorised by Taylor and Martin in 1996¹⁵. Based on these theories it is clear that an increase in development causes a decrease in migration only in specific circumstances.

Research by Clemens et al. adds to the theory. The authors point out that aid is insufficient, and the distribution timeline has been too short to observe changes in emigration patterns. They state that funds would need to account for at least 10 percent of recipient GDP for a sustained amount of time to reap significant results. This is rarely the case. Furthermore, aid, assuming it impacts growth, will have a positive effect on migration flows for low-income countries, increasing opportunities and aspirations for individuals. As the country grows and becomes middle-high income, emigration would decrease in the long run¹⁶. This plays on the classic drivers of migration, aspiration and capability. The first is intended as the individual's goals and hopes for better opportunities, and the latter as the availability of the tools to be able to migrate, such as money and information¹⁷.

Youth unemployment is also often considered a "root cause", as on average it is young, working age individuals who rely on emigration to access better job markets¹⁸. While this logic is sound, in practice research has found that the aid-employment relationship follows similar patterns to that of aid-GDP. In fact, when unemployment is very high, a marginal improvement of the job market, a change that could be brought by an aid funded project, would not decrease emigration. Only reaching a very high employment rate does slow emigration¹⁹.

The literature reviewed above suggests that the relationship between aid, development, and migration is more complex than implied by the EUTF's underlying assumptions. Rather than reducing migration,

development assistance may initially increase mobility by expanding both aspirations and capabilities. The "root causes" framework therefore appears less as an empirically grounded explanation of migration and more as a legitimising discourse for the redirection of development aid towards migration control. By framing migration management as development policy, the EU can pursue migration-control objectives while maintaining the image of a development-oriented actor. Patterns of aid allocation within the EUTF further reinforce this interpretation, as funding is disproportionately directed towards countries of origin and transit that are most relevant to European migration concerns. Such allocation patterns may reflect strategic donor preferences aimed at influencing migration flows, although lobbying by migrant communities may also play a role.²⁰ Other factors presented in the next sections will further elucidate this hypothesis.

The EUTF and its Rationale

This instrumentalisation of the 'root causes' discourse becomes clearer when examining how the EUTF is institutionally designed, governed, and implemented.

The EUTF was established in 2015 and funded almost entirely by the European Development Fund. Approximately €5 billion were pledged and disbursed to finance 248 programmes, distributed across the three target regions: Sahel & Lake Chad, North Africa, and Horn of Africa. The total projects are split across the regions as follows: 114, 40 and 94 respectively. Furthermore, the programmes are split into four thematic areas, each representing a clear objective: greater economic and employment opportunities, improved governance and conflict prevention, improved migration management and strengthening resilience of communities. The projects appear to be evenly distributed across these themes, which represent the "root causes" tackled by the fund²¹.

Projects aimed at improving employment and economic opportunities typically involve technical and vocational education and training (TVET). They also entail investment in local businesses, mostly targeting returnees, refugees, IDPs, and local communities. Migration management mostly entails providing assistance along key migration routes, return and reintegration processes. Additionally, governments are supported in the reduction of human trafficking and smuggling²² most notably through the EU-IOM Joint Initiative²³. While framed as protection-oriented, these interventions primarily operate along key migration corridors, reinforcing containment and return capacities. "Governance and conflict prevention" is operationalised through peace-building initiatives, programmes promoting social cohesion through local civil society organisations. Private property and basic rights are protected in unstable areas at risk of violence due to armed groups. Local police and authorities are trained to protect citizens and improve access to justice. "Resilience of communities" initiatives focus on providing basic services to communities. Importance is also given to food security and natural resource management²⁴. Notably, these development-oriented components remain largely targeted at migration-affected populations, reinforcing the migration-policy lens.

Projects are identified, devised and implemented following an internal procedure. The fund is steered by the Strategic Board and the Operational Committee²⁵. The first provides the global strategy of the fund, adjusting the EUTF's geographical and thematic scope and if needed amending the guiding

document of the fund. The Operational Committee, on the other hand, handles the review, approval, supervision and implementation of projects. The two main organs are chaired by the European Commission (EC) and composed of representatives of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and donors as full members, and representatives of the African countries involved and regional organisations as observers. The EU identifies projects based on a “bottom-up approach” that involves member countries and their development agencies, NGOs, local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), International Organisations and local stakeholders. However, it is not hard to spot unequal power distribution, starting right from the core of the EUTF²⁶.

It is in the very governance of the Fund that the asymmetries become notable. African diplomats have shown frustration at the lack of importance given to African interests, such as opening paths for legal and safe migration, ensuring resilience and a strong labour market, and exploiting remittances as a source of growth. At the same time, EU priorities are reducing migrant flows to member states and establishing migration cooperation agreements with origin and transit countries. Due to the uneven structure of the board, local and regional representatives do not have a voice in the decision-making process, leaving the beneficiary communities subject to the Operational Committee's deliberations. Furthermore, although the EUTF emphasises the importance of local ownership, it does not necessarily follow through. In fact, while main donor European Development Fund has a formal co-management requirement, the EUTF does not. EU officials justify this fault by stating that it guarantees the flexibility and speed required, as it is, technically, an “emergency” fund. Furthermore, the skewing of aid allocation towards countries with high emigration rates and relevance to the EU's migration agenda demonstrates the bias guiding the committee's decisions. This may undermine the effectiveness and core rationale of aid, as it inherently redirects funds away from the poorest, who generally do not have the means to migrate. Additionally, other fundamentals of aid giving are disregarded, such as alignment, budget support, and transparency²⁷. This is reflected in the major role often assigned to EU member state agencies which have been found to use EUTF funds as an alternative source of funding for their own projects²⁸. This behaviour threatens the abovementioned principles by promoting standalone projects, which have no links to the beneficiary's national agenda and are approved through opaque mechanisms²⁹. Although many aspects of the EUTF's functioning remain questionable, it did bring a significant innovation compared to previous tools. In fact, its status as an “emergency” tool accelerated communications between the EC and the Delegations, offered a greater opportunity to experiment on project area and issues, and avoided the need for the Parliament to supervise on EUTF spending³⁰.

It is not only through power asymmetries within governance that the EU's interests are prioritised; conditionality also plays a relevant role. In 2020, the “Pact on Migration and Asylum” confirmed border externalisation as the main European migration policy. The agreement proposed origin and transit countries to offer development aid and other incentives with the expectation of cooperation on readmissions and border control. Furthermore, “negative incentives” were developed by the EU to encourage migration cooperation. An example is using visa access to the EU as leverage to ensure collaboration on migration³¹.

In conclusion, the EUTF is a complex tool of EU migration policy, which sacrifices local ownership and participation in favour of flexibility and speed of implementation. The Fund represents a shift to

development aid used as leverage and a strategic geoeconomic tool, with asymmetry as a fundamental structural feature.

The Illusion of African Agency within the EUTF

Marginalisation by Design: African Actors in the EUTF Framework

By now it has become clear that the EUTF operates on the grounds of asymmetrical power and absent agency of its African partners. The following section examines how African actors have sought and failed to assert agency within this framework, and consequent illusions of participation that have emerged.

Although the governance structure of the EUTF is clearly asymmetrical, the summits and regional processes held before the establishment of the Fund sought to portray the EUTF as a partnership between European and African countries. The summit used to launch the EUTF was attended by both European and African heads of state and government. However, this “partnership of equals” discourse has not translated to the EUTF’s governance.

African voices are heard only at the earliest proposal and discussion stages. Experiences vary across countries, as the involvement of local actors is highly dependent on the EU agency operating in the area. For example, Egypt has reported unhappiness with its level of involvement at this stage, while countries such as Ethiopia have reported satisfaction. Regardless, African actors’ contributions are being diluted in the development and implementation processes, while EU interests and actors have taken the lead³².

Research suggests that aid recipients have bargaining power vis-à-vis their donors. Usually, leverage is represented by the presence of alternative modes of financing, or geoeconomic and political relevance of the state for the donor³³. When recipient governments recognise their favourable position, they may exercise agency to advocate their national interests in negotiations. This mechanism has been successful for some countries, which leveraged their position as transit or origin states to obtain significant funds from the EU. A notable example is the EU-Turkey 2016 Deal, where Turkey used its position as a transit state for Syrian refugees to receive billions of euros in aid, among other concessions³⁴. The Turkish experience proves that migration can in fact be used as a bargaining chip in aid negotiations, therefore increasing recipient agency throughout the process. However, this cannot be applied in the context of the EUTF for two main reasons. First, the EUTF gives no room for African leaders to join negotiations at the stages where it really matters, making it impossible to exploit their leverage. Secondly, even if they were able to do so, the fact that most projects are elaborated under EU control and often implemented by EU member state agencies, implies that African authorities would have no significant capacity to independently carry out projects devised based on their own interests and objectives.

Moreover, when considering interests, it is important to point out that the amount put on the table by the EUTF represents a mere fraction of the total remittances that flow to the region each year³⁵. This implies that migration may be more beneficial to origin countries than any migration-limiting EU

policy. However, while in typical donor-recipient relations, where local ownership is enforced, low compliance may be a way to exercise agency, this is not possible within the EU framework. In fact, the lack of recorded non-compliance or resistance should not be interpreted as evidence of partnership. Instead, it reflects the governance structure which manages all aspects of the aid-giving process, from planning, to disbursement and most of the time up until implementation. At the same time, African actors do not have the opportunity to exploit alternative opportunities. This limits their capacity to exert pressure “from below”.

What emerges from this discussion is that the absence of explicit resistance or selective compliance by African actors does not represent evidence of equal partnership but rather the result of the very structure and operationalisation of the Fund limiting these responses and relegating local actors to the sidelines.

Niger: A Case Study

Thus far this essay has adopted a macro-level approach, describing overall trends and mechanisms of agency and rationales within the EUTF framework. At this moment, an illustrative case study is needed to elucidate and show concrete evidence of the claims supported thus far. The case of Agadez, Niger will be used to achieve this. The Agadez region covers more than half of the Nigerien territory and is known for being a crossroads of multiple migration routes. Especially after the closure of the northern Malian route, flows have been funnelled through the region, mostly composed of migrants from the ECOWAS region travelling towards Europe. As of September 2016, a few months before the project was due to start, the IOM reported approximately 6,500 migrants per week passing through Agadez, with destinations Libya and Algeria. In an already highly urbanised region, the significant migrant flows strained the job market, which could not absorb excess demand. The local economy adapted to the ongoing situation which resulted in its almost complete reliance on migration-related activities, especially in the municipalities of Agadez, Bilma, Arlit, Dirkou, and Djado³⁶.

In response, the Nigerien government adopted Law No. 2015-36 criminalising migrant smuggling (repealed in 2023). This provision had disastrous effects on the region, causing unemployment and dissolving the very fabric of the local economy. This led to social unrest especially among young people, who felt betrayed by the government and were at risk of joining local armed groups³⁷.

The entry into force of this law has been generally viewed as an expression of the EU's will to control flows from the Agadez hub. This led to its reference as the “Valletta Law”. The law has been widely recognised as emblematic of EU migration externalisation strategies. This is reinforced by the fact that, especially in Agadez, cross-border trade including human trafficking was not recognised as a relevant security issue, therefore supporting the claim that the law carried out EU interests³⁸. Law No. 2015-36 illustrates how the Nigerien government, like others in similar contexts, aligned with EU priorities under external pressure. This reveals how such alignment reflects constrained responses to incentives rather than the exercise of meaningful agency³⁹.

It is in this context that the EUTF-funded, €8 million, “*Rapid Economic Impact Action Plan in Agadez (PAIERA)*” aimed to offer economic alternatives to migrant smuggling to provide a source of legal and sustainable growth for the region⁴⁰. The context of the programme suggests a compensatory rather than purely developmental aim vis-à-vis the negative socio-economic effects caused by the enforcement of EU-pressured migration legislation.

The project is implemented by the High Authority for Peace (HACP). The HACP is an institution attached to the Office of the President of the Republic of Niger established in 2011 as an evolution of previous bodies, to carry out peacebuilding and conflict prevention activities in the country⁴¹. *Karkara*, a Nigerien NGO, and the *Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli (CISP)*, an international NGO, were assigned to the project to support the HACP with their experience⁴².

In the implementation of the PAIERA project, local actors are more involved than in similar EUTF projects. The involvement of national authorities in implementation can be interpreted in light of broader findings showing that donors tend to delegate operational responsibilities to partner governments that have already demonstrated alignment with donor priorities, particularly in politically sensitive areas such as migration governance⁴³. This illustrates how African agency exists within the EUTF framework only as alignment with EU interests rather than autonomous decision making. Essentially, the adoption of the 2015 migration law, and the consequent role played in the implementation of the PAIERA project can be examples of “agency” which does not translate to autonomy but is merely a consequence of external pressures. Research proves that reliance on external international pressure in policy making, especially in migration policy, is a common feature in West African politics⁴⁴.

Nonetheless, the ownership granted to the Nigerien government and NGO is superficial. As illustrated in this essay, national actors lacked significant roles in policy negotiations or discussions before the final implementation stage. Local actors had limited space to exercise agency and adapt the project to regional priorities.

To assess whether PAIERA successfully translated its objectives into sustainable outcomes, we must examine the limited available information. The EUTF 2024 report depicts the project as a “Success Story”, earning this title by providing jobs and community infrastructure in the area. In fact, 3850 temporary jobs and 1795 sustainable jobs were created. Although this seems like a satisfactory result, it is important to understand exactly what these figures represent. First, the jobs created were mostly temporary, meaning that the beneficiaries would see improvements in their livelihoods only in the short-term⁴⁵. This strategy is in line with the EUTF’s tendency to prefer short-term projects and activities that deliver quicker results⁴⁶. Furthermore, the 1,795 “sustainable jobs” created are defined as cash-for-work opportunities, which refer to temporary public project jobs to rebuild infrastructure. These are inherently unstable in the long term⁴⁷.

Moreover, independent research shows that the project has been reported as largely ineffective. For example, access to grants was allowed to people who had not been in the “migrant business.” Moreover, funding to establish new businesses was only disbursed through goods and services, which often amounted to lower total value than promised⁴⁸. The mixed and unclear outcomes of the project

reinforce the broader argument advanced in this paper: when recipient agency is not ensured, development projects struggle to respond to local realities.

Conclusion

This essay has analysed how EU geoeconomic and security interests are advanced through the European Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), and how this framework effectively eliminates meaningful agency for African partners. It has shown how the ‘root causes’ discourse legitimises the use of development aid for migration control, while the EU-led governance of the EUTF embeds structural asymmetries that preclude autonomous decision-making by recipient countries. Section II has shown that the EUTF creates a framework in which agency is effectively absent, particularly in the most consequential decision-making stages.

This essay has demonstrated that what may appear as African agency is in fact limited to forms of alignment with EU priorities, shaped by external incentives and pressures rather than autonomous policy choice. The Agadez case study demonstrates that even when local ownership formally exists, it is surface-level and performative, excluding the possibility of a functional adaptation of projects to local realities. In this context, the absence of open contestation or non-compliance does not indicate the existence of an equal partnership but rather reflects a governance structure that limits the possibility of resistance.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the high political salience of migration control for the EU, combined with the ad hoc and flexible nature of instruments such as the EUTF, creates a policy framework in which no meaningful agency is left to recipient countries. The EUTF should therefore be understood not as an exceptional instrument, but as indicative of a broader shift in EU external action. As investments in low- and middle-income countries become increasingly strategic, despite a more competitive development finance landscape with a growing number of donors, EU instruments tend to become more, rather than less, dismissive of partner countries’ interests. In this sense, the EUTF provides a useful lens through which to anticipate the functioning of future frameworks under the Multiannual Financial Framework (Global Europe), and the continued marginalisation of partner countries’ interests within them.

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