

EU cooperation with third countries: rethinking concepts and investments

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Despite ‘externalising’ its immigration agenda, the EU has largely failed to develop a coherent and effective overall strategy, to the detriment of migrants and would-be asylum seekers.

Over the past decade, a range of dialogue initiatives and policy frameworks has been launched with ‘third countries’, that is, non-European Union (EU) countries, loosely gathered under the rubric of the EU’s Global Approach to Mobility.¹ They include the creation of mobility partnerships with privileged third countries, the maintenance of a long-standing (yet largely stationary) dialogue within the Euro-Mediterranean region (the Rabat Process), and considerable political capital expended on the development of EU readmission agreements with key sending and transit countries.

Despite the plethora of frameworks and initiatives with differing ambitions, target countries and resources,² their overall scope remains limited, consisting mostly of financial support with the occasional visa-related incentive. However, budgets have been relatively small and insignificant compared to mainstream financial support offered through EU multilateral engagement, notably development and ‘neighbourhood’ policy.

Historically, bilateral and multilateral relationships with third countries have tended to focus more concretely on migration and border management, with the greatest political capital expended on return and readmission while policy on protection has remained largely rhetorical. Over the past year, there has been renewed focus on the EU’s role in addressing refugee crises themselves, with a plethora of regional and thematic initiatives designed to ameliorate the situation for refugees as well as reduce the flow towards Europe. In reinvigorating these efforts, the EU has deployed a new set of initiatives, from a high-level dialogue involving countries in the Horn of Africa (the Khartoum Process) through to funding

mechanisms such as the 1.8-billion-Euro Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. Meanwhile, EU Member States have taken the lead on a series of Regional Development and Protection Programmes in the Middle East, North Africa and the Horn of Africa.

The intensifying dialogue between the EU and Turkey highlights the tenuous nature of this new balancing act in addressing refugee crises; while the EU has agreed large-scale financial support for Syrian refugees in Turkey in return for promises of increased management of the Turkish-EU border, it has yet to agree upon the sustainable protection of other nationalities now passing through Turkey – notably from Afghanistan and Iraq – or large-scale managed resettlement of displaced populations in the region.

Unclear goals and uncertain outcomes

The range of relevant EU funding sources is dizzying, resulting in administrative inefficiency and a lack of coherence vis-à-vis priorities and goals. The fact that EU-level funding is also complemented by frequently disparate bilateral budgeting from various interested EU Member States can compound this incoherence further. Since the onset of the refugee crisis – in effect, since the beginning of significantly increased numbers of arrivals in early 2015 – the European Commission has made an effort to create economies of scale through the use of Trust Fund mechanisms, allowing Member States to pool resources alongside the Commission for particular goals. However, the absence of clearly defined goals may be off-putting for national funders.

For example, a review of the core goals of the EU Regional Fund in Response to the Syria Crisis (Madad)³ reveals significant

overlap with the core goals of the Regional Development and Protection Programme in the Middle East.⁴ Both programmes envisage a strong focus on establishing sustainable livelihoods for refugee populations in the Syria region, yet are administered separately and with different key actors. Meanwhile, the UN-led Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) for the Syria region remains severely underfunded in the same area of sustainable livelihoods.⁵

Similarly, the goals articulated for the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa⁶ are broader than simply protection and incorporate many of the same objectives that have been set out for the Regional Development and Protection Programmes (RDPP) for the Horn of Africa and North Africa. The 1.8 billion Euros earmarked for the Trust Fund eclipses the 30 million Euros so far set aside for the two African RDPPs. Conversely, the 1.8-billion-Euro Trust Fund pales in comparison with the broader development funding that the European Commission and the EU Member States collectively apply to the Africa region. Yet overall the language of development actors on migration differs starkly from the language of the Emergency Trust Fund and the priorities set out during the November 2015 Valletta conference between the heads of state of the European and African Unions.

EU Member States are faced with a variety of demands on their budgets: humanitarian aid, development support, newly established migration management programmes, and increased spending needs within domestic asylum systems. With asylum costs spiralling at home, several governments have diverted overseas aid to domestic protection support, including stalwart donors such as Sweden and Norway. The need for efficient and effective deployment of resources has never been more critical for cash-strapped Member States.

Although the numbers seem large – 1.8 billion Euros in Africa, 3 billion Euros for Turkey – this is unlikely to be of sufficient scale. A robust assessment, based on needs rather than availability of funds, may be more useful if the goal of establishing sustainable livelihoods for significant refugee populations

at a level sufficient to minimise the desire for onward movement is to be realised.

Secondly, the EU has invested significant amounts in capacity building for protection and the development of asylum systems outside the EU, including in states that are now experiencing significant pressure on their asylum systems, such as Serbia. Thus far, however, the EU has failed to put in place defined benchmarks for progress in third countries where such support is provided. Output indicators are typically used – measuring, for example, the number of officials trained and the amount of information disseminated – rather than a substantive assessment of whether protection for those seeking asylum has improved.

A new era?

In the absence of strong outcomes, and ambivalence on the part of third country partners, the EU is beginning to consider more aggressive approaches to third-country cooperation.

In its original form, conditionality of foreign aid was focused on the promotion of human rights protection, good governance and rule of law. The new wave of conditionality that has been discussed in recent years – entitled ‘more for more’ – is more transactional, and focused on effecting specific donor policy outcomes. The offer is of greater financial support to those countries willing to cooperate more deeply, giving an incentive for behaviour on a broad range of migration issues from border management to counter-trafficking activities and accepting returns. To date, there has been little emphasis on applying conditionality towards improved protection outcomes, though the idea is gaining ground, even from exasperated NGOs working in third countries.

Conditionality will be hard for the EU to apply in practice, as it depends on the donor being the most significant player around; the idea that all EU Member States as well as the EU institutions will be able to maintain a unified position is far from clear in a context of strong bilateral national relationships and competing policy priorities.

Conditionality also gets in the way of a key element to successful cooperation: an in-depth appraisal of what third countries themselves actually need in order to improve outcomes for both their national and refugee populations. Frameworks and projects have typically been designed top down by donor countries and international organisations. Efforts to develop a more collaborative approach – as with the Mobility Partnership framework – have tended to become collections of small-scale projects with little coherent overview.

The EU and its Member States must consider the bigger picture. Global solidarity for protection – and the continued readiness on the part of states to admit and host refugees – demands a grand unspoken bargain that overcomes geography and proximity to instability. And if Europe is

unwilling to address the real outcomes of the Syrian crisis and share them equitably (whether through financial support or hosting populations), then a message is sent to other regions that refusing to support displaced populations is permissible. The long-term implications of this are far bigger than the short-term, though shocking, experience of the Syria crisis.

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1. Formerly known as the Global Approach to Migration.
2. European Commission (2015) *Addressing the Refugee Crisis in Europe: The Role of EU External Action*
http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/migration/docs/com-2015-40_en.pdf
3. <http://tinyurl.com/EU-Syria-Madad>
4. <http://tinyurl.com/RDPP-MiddleEast>
5. www.3rpsyriacrisis.org
6. <http://tinyurl.com/EmergencyTrustFund4Africa>

