

May 2016

www.fmreview.org/solutions

Development cooperation and addressing 'root causes'

Steffen Angenendt, Anne Koch and Amrei Meier

Development has its place in dealing with the roots of displacement but it is not an alternative either to important measures in the realm of foreign policy, trade policy and humanitarian assistance, or to taking responsibility for refugees coming to Europe now.

Following the significant increase in the number of refugees entering Europe, calls to address the 'root causes' of displacement through development cooperation have become louder across the European Union (EU), and several EU member states have dedicated substantial funds to this purpose. However, the increasing over-use of this terminology and the lack of clarity with regard to its meaning pose a number of risks. First, it is problematic if development funds are not primarily used in compliance with their actual purpose (to achieve sustainable improvement of the living conditions in recipient countries) but are used to prevent undesired migration to donor states. Second, the mantra of addressing root causes of displacement may raise unrealistic expectations about what development cooperation can achieve in situations of mass displacement. Third, a debate that focuses solely on tackling the root causes of displacement threatens to distract attention from the need to reform European asylum policy and to achieve greater responsibility sharing at the European level.

In order to clarify the added value of development cooperation in situations of mass displacement, we need both to differentiate between structural and acute causes of displacement and to identify the range of potential areas of intervention beyond the addressing of root causes.

Approaches to causes of displacement

Structural causes of displacement comprise a broad range of negative political, economic and social developments, including shortcomings in the rule of law, the marginalisation of and discrimination against minorities, widespread poverty,

inequality and the destruction of the environment. Acute causes of displacement can be armed conflicts, civil wars and other forms of generalised violence.

European development actors are well-equipped to address the former, for example through programmes to build up health and education infrastructure, through instruments aimed at improving resource governance, and through anti-corruption programmes. This also applies to the promotion of the rule of law and economic development as well as the fostering of social structures. Measures aimed at climate change adaptation, such as improved methods of cultivation and suitable forms of building and settlement, are of increasing importance. Through careful analysis of the causes of conflict and displacement, the role of development cooperation in the prevention of crisis or migration through desperation can be developed even further.

However, acute causes of displacement such as violent conflict or political persecution can only be marginally influenced by development policy. These scenarios require primarily diplomatic measures, humanitarian aid and crisis management. In cases like this, expanding development cooperation *per se* will not be able to prevent future forced migration. A comprehensive developmental approach to situations of forced displacement therefore needs to include other areas of intervention.

Other areas of intervention

Even though meeting the basic needs of refugees and integrating them into society currently present the EU with great challenges, it must not be forgotten that many developing countries face even

greater challenges regarding the reception of refugees. This is especially so for least developed countries, for example when refugees and the local population compete for jobs or scarce resources such as living space or health care.

Major refugee movements can, moreover, affect the internal security of states. There are situations, for example in Pakistan, the Sahel and East Africa, in which militant groups engage in helping refugees and at the same time try to mobilise them for their own goals. Young people, who usually form the majority of refugees, are especially vulnerable to such actions.

Therefore, one important task of development cooperation is the support of countries hosting large numbers of refugees. Humanitarian responses, though essential, typically fail to address the long-term perspectives of displaced individuals and families. Refugees living in camps for an extended period of time do not have a realistic chance to lead a self-determined life, and in the medium term protracted refugee situations can result in onward migration.

Development-oriented measures, in contrast, can offer hope and support for refugees in first countries of asylum. Examples of important interventions – especially in protracted crises – include education (in order to prevent the development of a lost generation) and the integration of refugees into the labour market, with the right to work, freedom of movement and the right to acquire land.

In addition, development cooperation can support the reintegration of former refugees who choose to return home. The process of reintegration may need to be accompanied by civil mediation measures in order to resolve conflicts over land or other unresolved issues. If refugees return to former war areas, comprehensive support in the reconstruction of material and social structures becomes necessary. Practice shows that the success of any reintegration measures depends on the voluntariness of return.

With regard to any of the measures outlined here it is, of course, crucial that the

local population is not discriminated against but benefits from the measures as well.

Conclusion

In light of the large refugee numbers globally and in the EU, many European countries agree that greater development-oriented engagement is desirable. The often-heard claim of the need to tackle the root causes of displacement is thus helpful in so far as it has contributed to the provision of more financial resources for development-oriented projects in countries of origin or host countries.

At the same time, the focus on tackling the root causes of displacement carries risks. There is the risk that successful structural programmes, aiming at long-term effects, are replaced by short-term projects to prevent acute refugee movements. This would be the case if, for example, development funds earmarked for the development of schools were redirected to the promotion of police cooperation.

In the case of violent conflicts in Syria, Iraq, South Sudan or the African Great Lakes region, development cooperation can only make a partial contribution to tackling the root causes of displacement. Here, involvement of other policy areas, such as foreign policy, security policy, trade policy and economic policy, is primarily called for. Only if these policy areas get involved can the factors driving displacement and the war economies be overcome.

Meanwhile, European host states ought to avoid any trade-offs between developmental responses to situations of forced displacement and the reception of refugees on their own territories.

Steffen Angenendt

steffen.angenendt@swp-berlin.org

Head, Research Division Global Issues

Anne Koch Anne.Koch@swp-berlin.org

Associate, Research Division Global Issues

Amrei Meier Amrei.Meier@swp-berlin.org

Research Assistant, Research Division Global Issues

German Institute for International and Security Affairs www.swp-berlin.org/en/start-en