JRC143213

European Commission

SCIENCE FOR POLICY BRIEF

# Assessing the relevance and coherence of the root causes approach: Insights from EU Trust Fund in the Horn of Africa

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **The EUTF strategies varied across countries**, with programming in Somalia and South Sudan tackling development challenges as broad root causes of migration, while in Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia addressing displacement dynamics more specifically.
- **Regional programmes effectively complemented national ones** fostering a cohesive and integrated approach to addressing migration and displacement challenges in the region.
- **Programmes were generally responsive to the needs of their targeted populations**, although some vulnerable groups, such as the growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region, remained underrepresented.
- The EUTF marked a **significant shift in the EU's approach to migration management in the context of its external action**. Going forward, clearer alignment of development and migration objectives shall be sought.

Joint Research Centre

## CONTEXT

The European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) is a financial instrument established in 2015 to address the root causes of instability, forced displacement, and irregular migration in Africa. Since then, the EUTF has supported activities in 26 countries across three regions of Africa - the Sahel and Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa (HoA) and North of Africa - allocating a total budget of almost 5 billion euros for approved programmes.

Interventions have focused on four strategic objectives: i) greater economic and employment opportunities; ii) strengthening resilience of communities; iii) improved migration management in countries of origin, transit and destination; and iv) improved governance and conflict prevention. The final allocation of funds took place in 2021, with activities on the ground concluding in December 2025.

With the EUTF approaching its end, DG International Partnerships requested the EU Joint Research Centre's (JRC) participation in a stock-taking exercise. The JRC analysis focused on the EU-level programming stage, examining the relevance and coherence of EUTF actions within the national and regional contexts, and assessing the ability of the instrument to adapt to changing needs and drivers of migration and forced displacement over time. This analysis covered the Horn of Africa region, comprising Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, and to a lesser extent some neighbouring countries included through regional programmes.

The JRC analysis is complementary to the numerous evaluations and academic studies focused on the EUTF, such as project-specific assessments, the mid-term review, the European Court of Auditors' reports, and independent research. We refer to some of these when introducing our results.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a multi-step methodology. Firstly, we conducted a comprehensive desk review of migration trends and drivers from 2015 to 2023 and mapped the complex network of factors influencing different types of mobility at both country and regional level. Next, we carried out a systematic screening of 94 EUTF Action Documents to identify the specific drivers and types of mobility targeted by the national and regional programmes, as well as the contextual elements considered in their design. The findings were then validated through consultations with experts, practitioners, and policymakers. Our analysis primarily relied on programming documents, complemented by a review of 47 project files. As programming documents represent broad intentions, their implementation on the ground through individual projects may partially differ, potentially leading to discrepancies between planned and actual outcomes.

## FINDINGS

The analysis focused on three key aspects: **relevance to context and its evolution**, including geographical and mobility dynamics considerations, as well as the ability to adapt to changing circumstances such as political shifts, effects of climate change, and the Covid-19 pandemic; **relevance to beneficiaries' needs**, encompassing the balance between immediate and more structural ones as well as the type and ratio of target populations; and **relevance to and coherence with policy objectives**, understood as the degree to which the actions were aligned with EU priorities and the overall objectives of the EUTF, as well as with broader policy frameworks at the national, regional, and international levels.

### Relevance to local context and its evolution

When considering geographical scope and targeting, **the EUTF's approach for the HoA window showed both strengths and weaknesses**. In some countries, such as Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya, the focus has been put on areas receiving the largest number of

displaced population. In other countries, like Somalia, South Sudan and Eritrea, the EUTF did not sufficiently account for regional variations in migration and displacement patterns.

**EUTF programming in the HoA demonstrated an overall good understanding of local dynamics and priorities**. This may also be linked to the relevant role of the EUDs in the identification of the actions and on the existence of the Research and Evidence Facility (REF)[1] created to support EUTF interventions with relevant research. In Sudan, for instance, EUTF programmes were mindful of local dynamics, particularly the limitations posed by the country's encampment policies. Similarly, planning in Djibouti demonstrated a specific attention to transit migration dynamics and undocumented migrants, which is highly relevant given the country's strategic position as a key passage point on the Eastern migration route towards Yemen and the Gulf. However, there is still a need for more context-specific approaches. For instance, **a lack of actions specifically targeting internally displaced persons (IDPs) despite increasing numbers across the region emerged**, especially in Ethiopia and Somalia. In Kenya and Uganda, programming focused almost exclusively on refugee settlements, deprioritising other mobility types, including labour migration and migration of nationals.

This JRC assessment differs from other EUTF-focused studies that highlighted the limited contextual adaptation of projects. Other studies[2] suggest that, while mechanisms were theoretically in place to tailor interventions to geographic and thematic specificities, in practice EUTF actions often reflected EU priorities rather than local needs. For example, in such literature, EUTF interventions have been seen as prioritising regions with high levels of emigration[3] or mirroring migratory paths[4] rather than adapting to the unique contexts of each country, and corresponding development needs or migration drivers.

At the regional level, **the JRC study found that programming was generally relevant in the HoA context, with a focus on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and a migration-security dimension**, including planned actions on conflict prevention, anti-migrant smuggling, and anti-trafficking in persons efforts.

Regional programmes invested in institutional capacities for sustainability and demonstrated good complementarity with national programmes, both thematically and geographically, including cross-border initiatives involving neighbouring countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, the EUTF almost exclusively focused on most vulnerable forms of migration, such as irregular and forced movements, and **lacked sufficient consideration of other types of human mobility**. This is particularly evident in the case of labour migration. Although some programmes have focused on circular and seasonal cross-border movements, these efforts remained limited. Labour mobility projects accounted for only a small proportion of EUTF funding in the region, even though the countries targeted would likely benefit from continued migration possibilities and the availability of legal pathways.[5]

One of the prominent features of the EUTF was its promise of flexibility and, specifically, its ability to respond quickly and adjust to evolving dynamics and crisis situations. **In terms of programme design responsiveness, t**he **JRC's analysis shows that the EUTF has demonstrated capacity to react to significant events**. Although not always at the appropriate scale and speed, programme adjustments were implemented for major events such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the severe drought between 2020 and 2023 that hit especially Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia. In terms of adapting to major political changes, in Sudan, the EUTF sought to adjust its approach during the transition period following the 2019 coup, modifying its implementation modalities both before and during the transitional government, demonstrating its ability to respond to evolving political dynamics. In other countries, such as Eritrea and Ethiopia, political changes have led to the suspension, cancellation or significant reduction and reallocation of EUTF programming.

In this sense, the EUTF's experience has served as a valuable testing ground for new approaches to development funding, demonstrating the importance of flexibility and crisis responsiveness. This approach should be built upon and integrated into the current Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), and future Global Europe development instrument.

While at programme level the EUTF generally provided flexible funding arrangements[6], both literature and interviewed practitioners note that such **flexibility was often constrained during the implementation phase of individual projects.** This underscores the need for greater adaptability at the project level and

[1] See https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/ref-hornresearch/
[2] De Guerry et al., 2018; ECA, 2018
[3] Bartels 2019; De Guerry et al., 2018
[4] De Guerry et al., 2018
[5] Bartels, 2019; Castillejo, 2016.
[6] As also highlighted by EUTF mid-term review

from the early design phase to address unforeseen circumstances on the ground. Embedding flexibility at project level can be achieved through mechanisms such as crisis modifiers, which enable rapid response to emerging crises, or contingency reserves.

### Relevance to beneficiaries' needs

**The JRC study found that, in terms of relevance to beneficiary needs, programmes generally had a good ability to factor in the needs of targeted populations,** at least at the design phase. Of course, the gap between programme design and actual implementation can be significant, and various factors can influence the effectiveness of interventions during the implementation phase. This could explain the discrepancy with the literature suggesting that the EUTF's focus on addressing root causes may not necessarily translate into relevance for local populations and their long-term development needs.[7]

From the Action Documents analysis, it appears that **all country programming was tailored to address the diverse needs of various groups, including different displaced populations, as well as host communities, with each country's approach reflecting its unique context and priorities.** In Djibouti, the EUTF focused on integrating both migrants and refugees into the labour market and improving access to services. In Kenya, interventions aimed at building social cohesion and development in areas heavily impacted by displacement, addressing issues such as equitable access to services, employment, and countering violent extremism. In Uganda, the strategy concentrated on resolving tensions between local populations and refugees to prevent conflicts, while also addressing the strain on services and natural resources caused by mass displacement. In Ethiopia, planned actions combined job creation and industry development with efforts to improve services for refugees and returnees. In South Sudan, a significant proportion of programmes were oriented to more general development goals and did not explicitly address migration dynamics or include specific activities targeting displaced groups.

**Most interventions in Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda foresaw to target equally displaced population and host communities**, considering common vulnerabilities and needs and aiming to reduce tensions.

Moreover, it emerged that **at the programmatic level significant attention was given to marginalized and vulnerable groups**. Programmes in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda stood out in their efforts to find durable solutions for (protracted) displaced populations and people on the move. Gender Equality and Women Empowerment interventions were planned in Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, and youth-targeted interventions in Djibouti, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Such interventions included programmes to support vulnerable groups' economic empowerment, improve access to education and healthcare, and enhance their participation in decision-making processes.

### Relevance to and coherence with policy priorities

Some experts have raised concerns about a disconnect between the types of interventions funded by the EUTF, with a specific emphasis on migration management, return, and reintegration, and the actual needs on the ground, such as education, employment, and governance reform.[8]

As regards the HoA region, the JRC analysis shows that different strategies were employed to address migration, displacement and development challenges. **In Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan, EUTF interventions focused on addressing key vulnerabilities of the general population**, including climate disasters, food insecurity and violent extremism, as well as improving living conditions and access to basic services, such as health and education. In approximately half of the programming documents, these issues were explicitly mentioned as root causes of instability leading to irregular migration and forced displacement, while in the other cases migration and displacement do not feature as programme objectives.

**For the majority of countries**, namely Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya, and Uganda, **response-oriented interventions were prioritised,** rather than root-cause-focused measures. These interventions concentrated on managing existing displacement crises by strengthening social cohesion, addressing immediate needs, and integrating refugees and migrants into local labor markets and communities. Efforts focusing on broader development challenges and local/ national concerns were also funded.

While some critics argue that the EUTF prioritised migration management, the JRC analysis found little evidence to support this claim in the HoA. Instead, the findings suggest that **the EUTF's approach in the HoA region has focused more on addressing the underlying drivers of migration and displacement, with an emphasis on linking humanitarian aid and development**. This focus is further

[7] De Guerry et al., 2018; Raty, 2020; Boersma et al., 2022.

[8] De Guerry et al., 2018; Al-Mouksit et al., 2024.

confirmed by the region's spending patterns, which show greater attention to root causes rather than solely managing migration.

*Figure 1. Allocated budget EUTF Horn of Africa breakdown by strategic objective, as of September 2024*


*Source: Authors' own elaboration*

Alignment with policy priorities was assessed at multiple levels. Internationally, the EUTF actions were guided by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Joint Valletta Action Plan, with additional frameworks such as the Khartoum Process and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) also influencing its programming**. Regional programmes were designed on the basis of the needs expressed by partner countries**, although there were some exceptions, particularly regarding return programming.

In terms of national policies, **the EUTF considered a range of country-specific policies and programmes**, including those related to economic growth, food security, disaster risk management, and Countering Violent Extremism, as well as locally-based action plans on social and economic development and refugees integration. Nevertheless, a review of literature and interviews with practitioners suggests that, in practice, there was **limited local ownership, of both beneficiaries and governments**, due to limited consultation and inclusion of local authorities, civil society organisations, and target communities during project design and implementation.[9]

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Over the years, the **EUTF and its approach have been exposed to significant scrutiny.** The existing analyses reflect a wide spectrum of views: while some highlight the EUTF's innovative role in promoting resilience, growth, stability and better management of migration in partner countries, others underline notable challenges in its design and implementation, raising critical questions about its coherence with EU values and development objectives.

Now that the implementation of the EUTF is coming to an end, it is necessary to capitalise on its results, both positive and negative, especially with regards to the definition and subsequent implementation of a migration-related line of action under the next multiannual financial framework (MFF) 2028-34, the EU's long-term budget for which negotiations will start in the second half of 2025.

In this context, the following consideration emerged from both this JRC study and previous external reviews.

### 1. Importance of coherence and alignment between development and migration policies

The **EUTF marked a significant shift in the EU's approach to migration management in the context of its external action**. At the time of its establishment - in the context of unprecedented arrivals of migrants and refugees in Europe and the resulting crisis response adopted by European governments of 2015 - the EUTF's approach, and narrative, focusing on root causes was very relevant. It provided a politically acceptable and understandable concept, while safeguarding development approaches in managing migration. Indeed, it was the **first large-scale attempt to integrate development and migration objectives**. Regardless of the actual effectiveness of the approach on either development or migration outcomes, this is an important achievement in terms of policy coherence.

To move EUTF-piloted coherence from discourse to practice, a **clear alignment of objectives shall be sought for future interventions**. The current instrument – the NDICI – took a step further in this sense, specifying that "*coherence between migration and development cooperation is important to ensure that the Union's external assistance supports partner countries to* ***manage migration more effectively towards sustainable development***".[10] This seems to suggest that migration management should serve development objectives rather than the converse, which has

[9] De Guerry et al., 2018; Boersma, 2022.

[10] See Article 10 of the NDICI-Global Europe Regulation, available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0947

been a criticism that has been directed at the EUTF and other EU-funded programmes.

## 2. Complementarity in the use of available instruments and their geographical scope

The EUTF's ability to address both humanitarian and development needs simultaneously has been a significant strength. Its multisector and humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach have enabled it to respond to complex challenges more comprehensively. This approach should be continued, **through the complementary use of existing instruments**, to address both immediate needs and longer-term development objectives, including capacity-building for governments in partner countries. In areas affected by displacement, prioritizing the peace dimension is particularly crucial, requiring sustained efforts to strengthen social cohesion and prevent conflict.

Building on this integrated approach, the EUTF's experience in the HoA has also demonstrated **the value of combining country-based programmes with both cross-border and regional projects**. Without explicitly referring to it, some EUTF funded initiatives in the HoA have pioneered what today is referred to as whole-of-route approach[11], providing protection and durable solutions along migration journeys.

Moving forward, regional interventions should focus on issues that require supranational cooperation, such as combating migrant smuggling and human trafficking, or promoting circular migration. Regional programmes should be designed and steered in accordance with existing regional dialogues and with the idea to **remain more flexible while addressing the so-called triggering or intervening factors** behind irregular migration flows. Conversely, **national programmes could focus on migration drivers and root causes, in closer alignment with development needs** and in agreement with the main actors in each partner country, thus fostering ownership.

## 3. Setting realistic expectations and goals for migration impacts of development cooperation

One of the primary criticisms on EUTF implementation concerned its broad scope of interventions. Indeed, JRC analysis and conversations with experts confirm what is stated in the literature[12], that **the spread of interventions was often too broad, covering a wide range of geographical areas, involving multiple actors, and pursuing diverse objectives**. While this criticism is valid, it is also essential to consider the complex and diverse needs of the contexts where EUTF has operated, where often movements are mixed and drivers multifaceted, requiring an integrated and wide-ranging approach.

Even if interventions were more concentrated, visible results on migration trends would not have been automatic. The relationship between development aid and migration is complex and non-linear, making it challenging to assess the effectiveness of the root causes approach and resulting in mixed evidence. While some studies suggest that better living conditions may enable people to migrate by providing them with the necessary resources, others suggest that improving economic opportunities and living standards would actually reduce the need and desire to move elsewhere.[13] In any case, it is worthwhile mentioning that Official Development Assistance (ODA) amounts to only USD 25 per capita per year in aid-recipient countries,[14] indicating that foreign aid is far from the volumes that can modify the socio-economic conditions of aspiring migrants. The effects of development interventions on other factors influencing migration decision-making, such as conflict or poor governance, are even more challenging to achieve, and to grasp.[15]

**Future programming should be less ambitious when setting migration-related goals, recognising that development aid is only one of many factors influencing migration and displacement dynamics**. The choice of what to focus on should be based on realistic expectations of what can be achieved through development interventions, considering priorities and the limited resources available.

**The more refined focus in the NDICI already represents a step forward**. The instrument foresees an indicative spending target of 10% of its overall budget for migration and forced displacement-related activities and indicates priorities by restricting actions targeting "root causes" to those that directly address specific challenges related to migration and forced displacement, thereby guiding the allocation of resources in a more focused and results-oriented manner.

While further research is needed to **provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between development aid and migration, especially**

[11] See UNHCR, 2024
[12] ECA, 2024; ECA, 2018.
[13] Clemens et al., 2014 and 2018; Fuchs et al.,2024.
[14] Source: World Bank. (2023). Net ODA received per capita (current US$). Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ODAT.PC.ZS
[15] See, among others, Carling et al. (2024).

**at the local level, it is also necessary to better inform policy discussions** and avoid oversimplifying the issue, ensuring that narratives are accurate and reflective of the complexities involved.

## 4. Adopting a broader approach to migration

The EUTF experience has shown how, even when substantial funding is secured for continued multi-annual operations, the focus often shifts toward short-term discussions on irregular migration. As mentioned, the EUTF's focus on irregular and forced migrations came at the expense of adequate attention to other forms of human mobility, such as labour migration and cross-border movements. Such trend seems to persist even as the EU shifts towards a route-based approach, embodied in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum[16] and operationalised through four Action Plans[17] focusing on the main migration routes to Europe.

Through the Action Plans, EU and Member State efforts have - so far - primarily focused on counter-smuggling, border control, and readmission, while actions to establish safe and regular pathways remain underdeveloped.[18]

This narrow approach overlooks the broader developmental context and benefits of migration, including the importance of informal movements in sustaining local communities, and the potential gains from creating legal pathways.

**Adopting a broader approach to migration and shaping the narrative beyond the security aspect seems imperative for development cooperation actors**.

From this perspective, fully adopting a route-based approach would involve two key aspects. On the one hand, **collaboration with countries of origin and transit to achieve common goals, including supporting their domestically owned agendas**. On the other, interventions focusing on the steps between the decision to migrate and the actual migration process, **expanding pathways that offer viable and lawful alternatives to irregular migration**, ultimately contributing to improved development outcomes for countries of origin.

[16] See COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL Striking a balance on migration: an approach that is both fair and firm - Publications Office of the EU

[17] See EU Action Plan for the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes.pdf

[18] See Cortinovis, 2024

## REFERENCES


Al-Mouksit, A., Heidland, T. (2024), The Impact of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) on Migration Aspirations, DYNAMIG Report, *available upon request*.

Bartels, I. (2019). Money against migration: The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. Heinrich Böll Foundation. https://doi.org/10.25530/03552.7

Boersma, M., Koch, D.-J., Kroon, L., McDougal, D., Verhoeff, G., & Wang, Y. (2022). Learning in migration management? Persistent side effects of the EUTF. International Migration, 60 (6), 81-94. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12965

Carling, J., Hagen-Zanker, J. and Weisner, Z. (2024) New insights on the causes of migration. MIGNEX Report. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo. Available at www.mignex.org/d067

Carling, J., & Talleraas C. (2016). Root causes and drivers of migration: Implications for humanitarian efforts and development cooperation (PRIO Paper). Peace Research Institute Oslo. https://www.prio.org/publications/9229

Castillejo, C. (2016), The European Union Trust Fund for Africa: A Glimpse of the Future for EU Development Cooperation, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, Bonn, https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP__22.2016.neu.pdf

Clemens, M. A. (2014). Does development reduce migration? In R. E. B. Lucas (Ed.), International handbook on migration and economic development (pp. 152–185). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781782548072.00010

Clemens, M. A., Ogden T.N. (2020), Migration and household finances: How a different framing can improve thinking about migration. *Dev Policy Rev*. 38: 3–27. https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12471

Clemens, M. A., Postel, H. M. (2018). Can development assistance deter emigration? (CGD Brief). Center for Global Development. https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/can-development-assistance-deter-emigration.pdf

Cortinovis, R. (2024) Unpacking the EU ´Route-based Approach´ to Migration: The Role of Safe Pathways. PACES Project Policy Brief No.1. Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2024-08-pacespolicy-brief-d31july-2024def

De Guerry, O., Stocchiero, A. (2018), Partnership or Conditionality? Monitoring the Migration Compacts and EU Trust Fund for Africa, CONCORD, Partnership or conditionality? Monitoring the migration compacts and EU Trust Fund for Africa - CONCORD

Engberg-Pedersen, L., Vammen, I. M. S. & Lucht, H. (2024). Can European foreign aid motivate people to stay in Africa? The root causes policy debate and irregular migration. *Development Policy Review*, 42, e12761. https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12761

European Court of Auditors (ECA), (2018), Special report 32 /2018: European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa: Flexible but lacking focus, https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR18_32/SR_EUTF_AFRICA_EN.pdf

European Court of Auditors (ECA), (2024), Special Report 17/2024: The EU trust fund for Africa: Despite new approaches support remained unfocused, https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2024-17/SR-2024-17_EN.pdf

Fogli, C, Majorano-Sarapo, F., Popp, S. (2025), Addressing root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement. What works and what does not? Lessons learned from the EUTF in HoA, Joint Research Centre (JRC), https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC141796

Fuchs, A, A Gröger, T Heidland and L Wellner (2024), 'DP19332 The Effect of Foreign Aid on Migration', CEPR Discussion Paper No. 19332. CEPR Press, Paris & London. https://cepr.org/publications/dp19332

Raty, T., Shilhav, R. (2020), The EU Trust Fund for Africa: Trapped between aid policy and migration politics. Oxfam International, https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/eu-trust-fund-africa-trapped-between-aid-policy-and-migration-politics

Tsourdi, E., Zardo, F., Sayed, N. (2023), Funding the EU's external migration policy: 'Same old' or potential for sustainable collaboration?, European Policy Centre, https://epc-web-s3.s3.amazonaws.com/content/PDF/2023/Funding_the_EUs_external_migration_policy_DP.pdf

UNHCR (2024), *A Route-Based Approach: Strengthening Protection and Solutions in the Context of Mixed Movements of Refugees and Migrants*, June 2024, https://www.refworld.org/policy/strategy/unhcr/2024/en/148087

Zaun, N., & Nantermoz, O. (2023). Depoliticising EU migration policies: the EUTF Africa and the politicisation of development aid. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *49*(12), 2986–3004. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2193711



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This science for policy brief is part of a study jointly carried out by DG INTPA A.4 and JRC E.5 Units.





## CONTACT INFORMATION

Camilla.Fogli@ec.europa.eu



EU Science Hub

Joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu