

ODA FOR DEVELOPMENT, NOT MIGRATION CONTROL

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In its proposed next long-term budget, the EU and its Member States risks undermining development and human rights by diverting development assistance towards migration control, rather than using it for its intended purpose. Drawing on evidence, lessons learned, and analysis of EU migration-related Official Development Assistance (ODA) instruments, this Oxfam paper sets out four recommendations to the EU and its Member States to ensure that development assistance remains focused on sustainable development, poverty eradication and human rights.

1. ENSURE MIGRATION-RELATED ODA DOES NOT UNDERMINE DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS

ODA must remain focused on its primary purpose: ending poverty and reducing inequality. Yet the EU is increasingly using ODA for other purposes. For example, Oxfam's analysis (2020) of migration funding under the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) found that €1 billion in EUTF funds intended for poverty reduction and long-term development were allocated by EU member states to domestic policy objectives aimed at curbing migration, including enhanced border controls and increased returns of migrants.¹

Redirecting ODA away from development objectives and towards migration control can have serious and harmful consequences. In Libya, ODA was used to support, train and equip the Libyan coast guard, despite its well-documented involvement in human rights abuses.² In Sudan, the emphasis on border control raised concerns that EU ODA could reach militias.³ Migration interventions in Niger reduced communities' access to livelihoods and mobility, while also weakening trust in local government.⁴

2. KEEP ODA FOR MIGRATION ACTIVITIES OECD ELIGIBLE

Cooperation on migration, human mobility and forced displacement can be a legitimate focus for ODA when it adheres to development effectiveness commitments. Oxfam's analysis (2023) of the EU Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) shows that the shift away from a development-focused approach to migration-related ODA risks contravening EU and OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) commitments and undermines the EU's credibility as a

1 Oxfam International (2020) 'EU aid increasingly taken hostage by migration politics', 29th January 2020. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/eu-aid-increasingly-taken-hostage-migration-politics> (Accessed 18 August 2026)

2 T. Raty and R. Shilhav (2020) *The EU Trust Fund for Africa: Trapped between aid policy and migration politics*. Oxfam. Accessed 21 July 2026 <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-eu-trust-fund-for-africa-trapped-between-aid-policy-and-migration-politics-620936/> pp 23 - 24

3 T. Raty and R. Shilhav (2020) *The EU Trust Fund for Africa: Trapped between aid policy and migration politics*. Oxfam. Accessed 21 July 2026 <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-eu-trust-fund-for-africa-trapped-between-aid-policy-and-migration-politics-620936/> p. 15

4 T. Raty and R. Shilhav (2020) *The EU Trust Fund for Africa: Trapped between aid policy and migration politics*. Oxfam. Accessed 21 July 2026 <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-eu-trust-fund-for-africa-trapped-between-aid-policy-and-migration-politics-620936/> pp. 11

leading development partner and reliable partner.⁵

Case studies in Niger, Libya and Tunisia found that at least one-third of EU migration-related development spending included objectives or activities that may not meet OECD ODA eligibility criteria, raising serious concerns that ODA has been used to mask migration control as development assistance.⁶ This includes funding focused primarily on returns and border security, conditioning development finance on migration-control outcomes, and using ODA to mitigate inhumane conditions created by non-ODA-funded migration policies.⁷

The Oxfam's NDICI analysis of €270 million in EU migration-related projects in Niger found that three out of five projects included objectives or activities that could call into question eligibility as ODA under OECD principles and criteria for migration activities.⁸

3. ENSURE ODA FOR MIGRATION ENHANCES RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARTNERS

The allocation of ODA to partner countries should not be used as a bargaining chip to pressure countries into meeting EU demands on returns and readmission or migration control as it risks jeopardising relationships with partner countries. Oxfam's research on the EUTF for Africa found that pressure and expectations on returns have caused friction between the EU and African countries.⁹

Diplomats from these African countries expressed concern about European pressure on returns and its long-term implications for sustainable development. They also explained that EU pressure to facilitate the return of people whose asylum applications have been rejected was undermining their governments' relationships with their citizens, who expect them to promote sustainable and safe development opportunities.¹⁰

According to research migration cooperation is most effective when based on genuine mutual benefit, dialogue and stronger diplomatic relations, rather than reinforcing unequal power dynamics through 'partnerships' that use ODA to address donors' domestic migration concerns. Objectives should instead be embedded within broader development priorities and perceived as fair rather than punitive.¹¹ Research across Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany finds limited evidence that conditionality significantly improves cooperation and warns that cutting ODA to secure returns can be counterproductive, undermining

5 Z. Weisner and S. Pope (2023) *From Development to Deterrence? Migration spending under the EU Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)*. Oxfam International. Accessed 12 August 2026. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/from-development-to-deterrence-migration-spending-under-the-eu-neighbourhood-de-621536/>

6 *ibid*

7 *ibid*

8 Z. Weisner and S. Pope (2023) *From Development to Deterrence? Migration spending under the EU Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)*. Oxfam International. Accessed 12 August 2026. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/from-development-to-deterrence-migration-spending-under-the-eu-neighbourhood-de-621536/> p. 33

9 T. Raty and R. Shilhav (2020) *The EU Trust Fund for Africa: Trapped between aid policy and migration politics*. Oxfam. Accessed 21 July 2026. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-eu-trust-fund-for-africa-trapped-between-aid-policy-and-migration-politics-620936/> p. 19

10 T. Raty and R. Shilhav (2020) *The EU Trust Fund for Africa: Trapped between aid policy and migration politics*. Oxfam. Accessed 21 July 2026. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-eu-trust-fund-for-africa-trapped-between-aid-policy-and-migration-politics-620936/> p. 11

11 See Cassarino, J.P. (2025) 'Using Development Aid as a Leverage in the EU's External Relations: Challenges and Consequences', *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 23(1), Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), Delmi and European Migration Network Sweden (EMN) (2026) Linking Migration and Development: European Experiences and Policy Lessons for Sweden and Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2026) Op zoek naar grip. Evaluatie van de Nederlandse bilaterale migratiepartnerschappen (2022 – 2025). The Hague: Ministry of Foreign Affairs. also see results IOB (2026) *Evaluation of the Dutch bilateral migration partnerships (2022 – 2025)*. The Hague: Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. <https://english.iob-evaluatie.nl/results/migration-partnerships>

long-term partnerships, diplomatic relations, trust and cooperation.¹²

The Oxfam EUTF study found that pressure on North African countries caused governments to delay the adoption of national legislation that protects the rights of refugees. North African officials expressing worries that “if they adopt laws protecting the right of refugees, the EU will use this to turn their countries into asylum processing centers”.¹³

4. DO NOT USE ODA SUSPENSIONS AS MIGRATION LEVERAGE

ODA should not be suspended to pursue short-term political objectives, particularly migration-related conditionality. Even temporary suspensions of any form of ODA can cause significant harm in the short and long term by disrupting development programmes, and weakening responses to reduce poverty, inequality, and humanitarian needs. The OECD emphasises the importance of predictable ODA provision and evidence shows that sudden cuts in ODA flows can affect stability in developing economies, with consequences extending beyond migration management.¹⁴

Suspension would have negative consequences for populations that have no control over national migration policy.¹⁵ Recent global aid cuts demonstrate the consequences of abrupt funding withdrawals: reduced access to essential services, increased health risks, and reversals of development gains. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, sudden funding cuts resulted in loss of clean drinking water, causing a 361% increase in deaths as a result of cholera¹⁶, while in Malawi, the Family Planning Association lost 30% of its funding, resulting in the closure of 35 clinics—putting sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) at risk.¹⁷

A study published in the Lancet models 14 million more deaths from 2025-2030 as a result of sudden global aid cuts (USAID) cuts alone. It estimates that aid cuts in 2025 alone, assuming a 21 percent aid cut, would be responsible for 695,238 excess deaths, and that, if the aid cut trend continued, it could kill 9,416,417 people by 2030.¹⁸

12 Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), Delmi and European Migration Network Sweden (EMN) (2026) *Linking Migration and Development: European Experiences and Policy Lessons for Sweden*

13 T. Raty and R. Shilhav (2020) *The EU Trust Fund for Africa: Trapped between aid policy and migration politics*. Oxfam. Accessed 21 July 2026. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-eu-trust-fund-for-africa-trapped-between-aid-policy-and-migration-politics-620936/> p 11

14 OECD, OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: European Union 2025 (2025); Jean-Pierre Cassarino (03 Jan 2025): Using Development Aid as a Leverage in the EU's External Relations: Challenges and Consequences, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* p. 4

15 Oxfam America (January 27, 2026). *What USAID did, and the effects of Trump's cuts on lifesaving aid*. Accessed 10 August 2026. <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/issues/making-foreign-aid-work/what-do-trumps-proposed-foreign-aid-cuts-mean/>

16 *ibid*

17 C. Leal. (February 21, 2025) *The USAID Collapse: What It Means for Global Humanitarian Aid and How Canada Must Respond*. Accessed 11 August 2026 <https://www.oxfam.ca/story/the-usaid-collapse-what-it-means-for-global-humanitarian-aid-and-how-canada-must-respond/>

18 Oxfam, *Death by aid cuts: Oxfam reaction to OECD preliminary data on aid spending in 2025* (April 2026); da Silva, A.F., Anderle, R.V.R., Sibils, G.B., de Sales, L.D.O.F., Pena, D., Monti, C., Vaz, C.G., Santa-Ramírez, H.A., de Jesus, G.D.S., Cavalcanti, D.M. and Nhacolo, A., 2026. Impact of two decades of humanitarian and development assistance and the projected mortality consequences of current defunding to 2030: retrospective evaluation and forecasting analysis. *The Lancet Global Health*, 14(5)