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Migration-related development aid in Norway

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This report provides an overview of Norwegian migration-related development aid focusing particularly on return, reintegration, migration management and efforts to address the so-called 'root causes' of irregular migration. It connects policy developments to implementation in practice, discussing both lessons learned and the broader direction and implications of national trends. Key concerns include political prioritization and trade-offs between policy areas, institutional coordination, and the risk of conditionality undermining development objectives.

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INTRODUCTION

The overall goals of Norwegian aid policy are to fight poverty, save lives, alleviate suffering, and support economic development and welfare.[1] The topic of 'migration' intersects with these goals in several ways. Yet, providing assistance and protection to displaced populations is the most prominent arm of the Norwegian migration-aid nexus, supported by Norway's leading norm-setting role in global displacement debates.[2] In addition to addressing the humanitarian needs of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), aid is understood to reduce migratory 'push factors' by supporting conditions for political stability and by enabling viable livelihoods.[3] Less prominently, migration is recognised as a facilitator of development; in this regard, the Norwegian aid budget has supported both regional mobility initiatives in Africa and diaspora engagement in countries of origin.

Interests in domestic migration managment have also, over the years, influenced development aid policy. Already in the 1980s rising asylum claims submitted by 'spontaneous' arrivals prompted efforts to link domestic reception with humanitarian and preventive measures abroad. In line with debates elsewhere in Europe and within UNHCR circles, policymakers sought to link asylum measures in Norway with humanitarian assistance and strategies to address the 'root causes' of displacement abroad (Bølstad et al. 1995; Brekke 2001). By the 1990s, experience with temporary protection regimes for refugees from the Balkans informed the government's White Paper *On Refugee Policy* (Meld. St. 17 (1994–1995)), which advocated assistance to support returns as well as for peacebuilding initiatives. Although the prevention of onward migration was not an explicit ambition, the logic behind this 'holistic' approach was embedded in the idea that since refugee status is not meant to be permanent, promoting the returns of refugees who no longer need protection would preserve Norway's capacity to receive new arrivals (NOAS 2013). Solidifying the development-asylum policy link at this time, the OECD DAC agreed to permit the costs for receiving refugees in donor countries to be reported as overseas development assistance (ODA). This has been a significant expenditure, especially in years with high numbers of refugee arrivals, e.g. in 2015 (Syria and Afghanistan) and 2022 (Ukraine).

During the past two decades, migration-related aid has expanded and diversified – particularly in response to growing political attention to the challenge of irregular migration from the Middle East and Africa, and the increasingly important role of international migration management and EU return policies. The active use of aid to facilitate the return of migrants without authorized stay and to deter future arrivals has been promoted in Norwegian government coalition platforms on both sides of the political spectrum since 2009 (i.e. the Soria Moria II, Sundvolden, Jeløya, Granavolden, and Hurdal platforms – see section 2 and Annex 1 for further details). In addition to supporting refugees and IDPs, vocational training and other traditional development interventions, as well as smaller projects to facilitate returns, Norway has funded migration management initiatives through the EU (e.g. the EU Trust Fund for Africa) and through the EEA (e.g. in Poland, Bulgaria and Greece). At the same time, and in contrast to some EU-level approaches, Norway has generally approached these linkages with caution and without fully embracing aid conditionality tied to migration management. Migration – especially since 2015 – has nonetheless been recognised as a security issue and therefore increasingly – although not

1 These are set out in government White Papers including Meld. St. 24 (2016–2017), p. 29; Meld. St. 27 (2018–2019), p. 50.

2 For example, Norway sponsors the biannual UN General Assembly resolution promoting assistance and protection to IDPs, it promotes uptake of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in national law, and it funds the UN Secretary General's Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement. Already in 1998, the Norwegian Refugee Council (with government funding) established the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) – now the leading global provider of data and analysis on internal displacement. With regard to climate- and disaster-related displacement, Norway launched and co chaired the Nansen Initiative in 2012 (together with Switzerland), a state led consultative process that produced the Protection Agenda on cross border disaster displacement and shaped emerging policy on climate and disaster related mobility.

3 As e.g. explained laid out in Meld. St. 27 (2017–2018), p. 52.

without significant resistance – the subject of a 'whole-of-government' approach involving different ministries and directorates.

Migration-related aid is channelled through multiple institutions and budget lines to non-governmental, governmental and multilateral partners. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Ministry of Justice and Public Security (MoJ) play central roles, together with the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), Norwegian embassies, the Immigration Directorate (UDI), and the National Police Immigration Service (NPIS) (see section 3). A handful of studies have outlined aspects of the migration-aid nexus in Norway, highlighting the potential for stronger coordination among the units involved, including a clearer role for Norad in planning and assessing reintegration programs currently implemented by the MoJ and UDI (Horjen 2020; Tjønneland et al. 2021, see also Kugiel et al. 2022). Paasche's study on conditionality (2022) points to deeper institutional debates over the legitimacy of linking aid to migration cooperation. However, there has not been a comprehensive mapping of the migration-related development field so far, capturing its evolution, shifting priorities, and practical implementation.

This report offers a bird's eye view of Norwegian migration-related development aid[4] focusing particularly on return, reintegration, migration management and efforts to address the so-called 'root causes' of irregular migration. It connects policy developments to implementation in practice, discussing both lessons learned and the broader direction and implications of national trends. Key concerns include political prioritization and trade-offs between policy areas, institutional coordination, and the risk of conditionality undermining development objectives.

The report is structured as follows: In section 2 it outlines the evolution of migration-related objectives in Norwegian aid spending, policy frameworks, and focus areas over time. Section 3 examines the key actors in the institutional landscape, and organisational shifts surrounding migration-related aid spending. This is followed by an analysis of aid flows and reporting practices in section 4, highlighting how migration-related activities are identified and classified. This primarily covers aid spending in low- and middle-income recipient countries in Africa and the Middle East, as well as Afghanistan. As such, it does not include refugee-related aid in Norway or to migration-related funding in other European countries, provided for example through EEA grants.[5] Section 5 presents case studies from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan to illustrate how migration and development objectives intersect in practice. The report concludes with a discussion of dilemmas and future developments.

1.1 Methodology

Our methodology combines three complementary components: 1) a review of Norwegian development aid statistics and budgets; 2) a review of strategic and policy documents outlining various priorities of relevance; and 3) 13 semi-structured expert interviews and conversations with institutional actors involved in the planning and implementation of migration-related development cooperation in Norway, representing different ministries and directorates. These methods were applied together to map the institutional architecture, financial flows, and political framing of migration-related aid in Norway, and to assess how this field has evolved and been implemented in practice.

First, the review of aid flows and budgets covers publicly available statistics on aid, as gathered in the official portal for statistics on and results of Norwegian development aid, and the MFA and MoJ's annual budget proposals. While Norway has collected aid

4 For the sake of simplicity, we use the term 'development aid' to encompass the 'triple nexus' approach including humanitarian, development and peacebuilding support and cooperation.

5 EEA grants aim to reduce social and economic differences in Europe and constitute a significant percentage of overall aid spending on migration in Norway. For example, between 2014–2021, Norway provided 33 million Euros in support to asylum management in Greece (Utrop 2019). Poland is currently the largest beneficiary of Norwegian aid, with 925 million Euros allocated for the period 2021–2028 (MFA 2024). A significant portion of these funds (46.8 million Euros) are allocated to help deal with the consequences of Russian's invasion of Ukraine, including the reception of refugees.

statistics since the 1960s, there are key challenges in specifying the migration-related aid flows, as discussed in section 4 of the paper. We have not consulted all ministerial budgets available but have limited ourselves to specific budgets from targeted periods to confirm and elaborate on insights gained from the policy review and expert interviews.

Second, the review of strategic and policy documents includes all government platforms (regjeringsplattformer) from coalition governments after 2005 as well as relevant strategic frameworks, such as the National Return Strategy (2011–2016; 2017–2022; 2023–2029; 2025–2030), government policy documents ('White Papers'), and, where available, country partnership strategies. These documents, together with the annual budget proposals, form the basis for tracing how migration has been articulated, prioritized, and institutionalized within Norwegian aid policy.

Third, we conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with 14 key actors from the MFA, the MoJ, UDI and Norad, and former and current Immigration Liaison Officers (ILOs, also referred to as migration officers or return officers) stationed at Norwegian embassies in key partner countries. The interviews were conducted mostly online, with some in-person meetings, and lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. Most were carried out jointly by Schultz and Talleraas. The interviewees included individuals currently or formerly responsible for managing or coordinating migration-related aid, providing in-depth institutional knowledge and first-hand experience. Several had held multiple positions across agencies or embassies, while others had long-standing experience in a single role.

Limitations and biases

The combination of these sources has allowed us – to some extent – to triangulate findings, cross-check information across interviews, revisit key themes, and validate statements against documentary evidence such as budgets and strategy papers. At the same time, several limitations remain. The study primarily reflects a donor-country perspective, focusing on Norwegian institutions and actors. While this provides valuable insights into coordination, priorities, and political framing, it does not capture recipient-country perspectives on implementation or local policy effects. Moreover, as migration-related aid has not been a major topic of public or parliamentary debate in Norway – and the number of actors involved is limited – it has proven difficult to obtain external or critical viewpoints. Our analysis is therefore shaped by the perspectives and documentation available within Norway's institutional and political landscape.

While the present review provides an overview of institutional and political priorities and budgetary developments, it must be noted that we have not been able to conduct a deep-dive or quantitative analysis of the underlying statistics. The available data do not allow for a systematic overview of all migration-related projects, and a more detailed mapping would require a dedicated data study. There may therefore be blind spots in our overview, including projects not tagged as migration-related in Norwegian aid statistics. Norad's collection of these data is based on the guidelines from the OECD DAC, which have evolved and changed over time in relation to how support to migration and return policies should be reported (see section 4).

2. THE EVOLUTION OF NORWAY'S MIGRATION-RELATED AID

Priorities for Norwegian migration-related development aid have been strongly shaped by geopolitics and evolving international norms and guidelines from the OECD DAC regarding the relationship between migration, development, and aid. At the same time, we see that domestic politics have informed the strong and continuous focus in Norway on the need for robust return policies. Regardless of ideological orientation, nearly all political platforms adopted by Norwegian governments since 2005 have pledged to intensify work on return and reintegration, through strengthened cooperation with origin countries, and enhanced support for people displaced in or near their regions of origin. More recent iterations emphasize the need for close cooperation with the EU on this topic.

In the following subsections, we outline the key changes across what we see as five main periods (1990s, 2000–2008, 2009–2014, 2015–2020, and 2021–2026), each marked by distinct policy priorities and institutional developments. For each period, we include the main shifts reflected in the relevant government platforms, and examine how these translated into priorities, strategies, and specific projects.

This historical overview shows that the evolution of migration-related aid in Norway has been gradual and cumulative – moving from a focus on humanitarian aid to refugees in the 1990s, via a relatively positive framing of migration as a potential driver of development in the 2000s, toward a more deterrence and security-oriented approach especially after 2015. The changing focus has also been mutually affected by the institutional architecture for managing migration-related aid, and the division of labour between the MFA and MoJ, and related directorates, which is further detailed in section 3.

2.1 The 1990s: Sowing the seeds of a holistic approach

As described in the introduction, the first voices in Norwegian policy discourse linking migration management with development aid emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s in response to changing patterns of displacement, geopolitical developments including the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Balkan wars, and the increasing numbers of 'spontaneous' refugees who were less likely to be political dissidents than victims of war and widespread rights violations. The crux of this more holistic approach focused on humanitarian aid to refugees and support in countries of origin, and the facilitation of voluntary returns for those with legal residence in Norway (Meld. St. Nr. 17 (1994–1995)).

The first repatriation program, managed by the UDI in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), was introduced in 1990 for Chilean refugees. By 1992, this initiative had broadened to include individuals from other countries granted asylum or humanitarian residence. The Bosnian program included both individual financial assistance and grants to the municipalities where repatriates settled. It was also possible to get support for short 'go and see' visits before deciding to repatriate (Brekke 2001). By the late-1990s, in connection with the limited collective protection regime for Kosovars, the idea of "forced repatriation" took root, for refugees who no longer had a need for protection (Brekke 2010). An effective return policy was understood to grease the revolving door of asylum, permitting a better reception of new refugee arrivals with presumably more urgent needs for protection. It was also during this period (1994) that OECD's DAC regulations permitted the first year of refugee reception expenses to be included as development aid. (Bølstad et al. 1995: 93)

2.2 2000–2008: Migration as a positive force for development

In the early 2000s, events such as 9/11 and emerging concerns about irregular migration and security prompted new reflections not only in Norway but globally, on how to restrict and control migrant arrivals. At the same time, debates on remittances, diasporas, and transnational engagement created new openings for framing migration as a potential driver

of development.[6] With the Soria Moria I government platform (2005–2009), there was a notable if short period during which migration was framed positively in Norwegian foreign policy and aid discourse.

Against this backdrop, a joint working group appointed by the Norwegian MFA and the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion (AID) delivered a report, titled "Migration and development – better coherence and coordination" in 2006, the same year as the first global summit on this topic (MFA and AID 2006; discussed in Horjen 2020). The group, composed of representatives from the ministries, Norad, and UDI, recommended measures related to expanding circular migration paths/temporary labour opportunities in Norway, the prevention of brain drain, leveraging diaspora communities in development efforts, increasing the development effects of remittances, the strategic use of resettlement quotas, and the strengthening of migration administration in partner countries using development aid. It also suggested considering using development cooperation as leverage in discussions around return and readmission of partner countries' own citizens and drawing on the MFA and Norad's expertise to link assisted return support more closely to the use of development aid for the reintegration of IDPs and refugees from neighbouring countries. These ideas were supported also in Norwegian research environments (interviewees 01;02;09).

Different recommendations and questions posed by the 2006 report were developed further during the next few years, including in the government White Papers on *Labor immigration policy* (St. meld. nr. 18 (2007–2008)), *Climate, Conflict and Capital: Norwegian development policy adapting to change* (St. meld. nr. 13 (2008–2009)), and *Interests, responsibilities and opportunities: main features in Norwegian foreign policy* (St. meld. nr. 15 (2008–2009)), in addition to the Official Norwegian Report on policy coherence to assist development in poor countries (NOU 2008: 14). Concretely, the process led to a number of diaspora-oriented initiatives, including efforts to reduce remittance costs (e.g., as part of the Finansportalen service) and to increase immigrant representation in international aid organizations. There was also a pilot program in Norad to support diaspora organizations' development projects in their countries of origin, by training them to compete for Norad funding and by providing matching grants (Horjen 2020). After two years, however, the program ended due to high costs and the limited development impact (ibid.). While Norad's evaluation found no generalised added value of diaspora organizations as development actors, it did find significant contributions to specific thematic areas, such as gender equality and female genital mutilation prevention, as well as to conflict-affected areas less accessible to large Western non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Although it discontinued the dedicated diaspora support program, Norad continued to fund NGOs cooperating with diaspora actors including Utviklingsfondet which had projects in Sri Lanka, Somalia, and Ethiopia until 2017 (ibid.). MFA and the embassies, for example in Somalia, also provided important financial support to local NGOs and Norwegian NGOs with strong diaspora involvement.

At the same time, the government policy at the time sought to prioritize "strengthening the work on deportation of foreigners with illegal residence and intensifying efforts to secure return agreements with more countries" (Soria Moria I). It also called for closer European cooperation on visa, border control, and asylum issues. Although not a member of the EU, Norway participated as a Schengen-associated state in the drafting of the EU Return Directive (2008), and the UDI, through collaboration with IOM, introduced provisions for assisted return for people without legal residence as early as in 2002 (Brekke 2010).

Rather than 'revolving door' arguments, the integration of a 'return perspective' at all stages of the asylum process was now primarily framed in terms of protecting the integrity of the asylum system and deterring future arrivals (ibid.). In 2006, the first 'return plus reintegration' country-based program was launched, following a tripartite agreement between UNHCR, Afghanistan and Norway, which opened the door for voluntary, assisted

6 This corresponds to the international discourse on migration and development, which can be seen to have "swung back and forth like a pendulum", from the 1970s and 1980s "neo-Marxist optimism", swung back to more optimistic views, highlighting the developmental potential of migration, in the 1990s and early 2000s (de Haas, 2010).

and forced returns to the country. Through the IRRANA program (Information, Return and Reintegration of Afghan Nationals to Afghanistan) implemented through IOM and the Norwegian Refugee Council, returnees received information, logistical support, and the option to receive training, a job referral or a small business start-up grant to ease reintegration. Most returnees ended up with a start-up grant in the form of equipment or goods for a particular business, which they quickly sold off for cash (Strand et al. 2008). The Voluntary Assisted Return Programs (VARP) implemented through IOM now primarily involve support to travel and a cash transfer, although for certain vulnerable groups and certain nationalities in-kind assistance (job training/advice, medical supplies, etc.) is still available in line with the Immigration Regulation on Grants to Assisted and Voluntary Returns (interviewees 13;14).

2.3 2008–2014: A sharper focus on return policy

The priority given to refugee returns was sharpened in 2008, when an unexpected increase in asylum seekers led the Stoltenberg government to propose thirteen measures restricting access to asylum and facilitating returns to third countries.[7] One of these was to intensify work securing return agreements with important countries of origin, including Iraq, to enable deportations by force. In addition, a new provision to the Immigration Regulations (§8–8) opened for the grant of temporary protection to unaccompanied minors until the age of 18, when their only basis for residence is the impossibility of tracing caregivers in their country of origin. This spurred other initiatives aimed at deterring new arrivals within countries of origin.[8] In Afghanistan, for example, efforts were made to establish a return center in Kabul to enable the deportation of youths without identified family members; to inform potential migrants about restrictive changes in Norwegian asylum policy; and to provide alternatives to outward migration through vocational training (see section 5 for more details on work in Afghanistan).

The center-left coalition's platform from 2009 (Soria Moria II) solidified this restrictive direction. This was the first government platform to mention a direct connection between the aid spending and migration, saying it sought to "use development aid and cooperation policy to support efforts to facilitate return and reintegration". ILOs which had previously supported Norwegian authorities making decisions on asylum, family reunification or other basis of residence, were now deployed in some countries primarily to work on return. However, their role in development has been limited to modest cooperation agreements with counterparts responsible for returns in partner countries which may or may not interact with the Norwegian governments' larger development priorities in the country (interviewees 6; 11; 12). The first platform under a conservative and right-wing coalition, Sundvolden (2013), redoubled on the efforts of its predecessors to use "Norway's position to secure more (return) agreements" and make "more active" use of Norway's diplomatic missions.

While the focus on diasporas and the developmental benefits of migration had largely disappeared from the political agenda during this period, it remained a concern among development actors and was supported by the Minister of Development at the time (interviewee 08). However, this agenda did not feature prominently within the MFA, and it failed to gain traction or become a clear policy priority (interviewee 07).

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7 Innstramming av asylpolitikken – regjeringen.no. The number of asylum seekers rose from 6500 in 2007 to ca 15000 in 2008.

8 Between 2009–2015, 221 minors had received a limited permit in accordance with the new regulation. 75 of these had disappeared from their residence centers, either to move on to a third country or to remain in Norway without documentation Dokument 8:13 S (2015–2016) – stortinget.no.

2.4 2015–2020: Crisis mode and whole-of-government approach

The Norwegian approach to migration-related concerns, and its links to development cooperation and aid, shifted significantly following the asylum crisis[9] in Europe from 2015. Tjønneland (2022) describes the post-2015 period as one in which migration became more visible in political debates and in development cooperation priorities. A harder line on deterrence and returns was fronted by the right-wing Progress Party, which led the MoJ from 2013–2021.

Norway participated in the Valetta Process to strengthen migration governance coordination between European and Africa, and provided funds to establish the European Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) designed to address root causes of irregular migration (see Box 1.). By 2023 Norway's contribution to EUTF totalled more than 260 million NOK.[10] In response to mounting political pressure, the Foreign Minister also established a Section on Migration within the Department for Regional Affairs in 2016, to coordinate the work within the MFA (European-, bi- and multilateral affairs, legal affairs, development, and humanitarian support) as well as to liaise with the MoJ (see further details in Section 3). Together, these developments laid the groundwork for a more coordinated, whole-of-government approach, reflected in closer coordination between the MoJ, the MFA and implementing agencies.

In this period, the MFA led the Norwegian delegation which negotiated the establishment of the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees in 2017–18. The MoJ advocated strongly for language reflecting the duty of states to cooperate in the readmission of their own nationals, and a state's right to return migrants without a legal basis for residence (interviewee 03), which became established Norwegian policy before the final adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in December 2018.

The return focus was reinforced by the development of 'return action plans' for a number of partner countries,[11] and by a series of restrictive measures introduced in late 2015 targeting different phases of the asylum process: from early verification of identity to accelerated procedures for people unlikely to qualify for protection, and enhanced collaboration with IOM on assisted return (MoJ 2015). The policies introduced also expanded the scope of exceptions from refugee status in Norway and mandated the revocation of residence permits after the need for protection has ended.[12] These changes meant that fewer people qualified for protection to begin with, and those who did were subject to cessation of their refugee status. Norway became a regional leader in returns, implementing for example 65 percent of all forced returns from Europe to Afghanistan in 2016 (NOAS 2020).

In 2018, the government platform (Jeløya) framed migration "no matter its causes" as a key challenge to the sustainability of the welfare state. The White Paper on partner countries in development policy (Meld. St. 17 (2017–2018)) emphasized migration and flight as global challenges that involve joint responsibilities. It clarified that dialogue and cooperation around these topics were integrated parts of Norwegian development policy, in line with SDG 10.7 on safe and orderly migration. Moving from there, the new government platform in 2019 (Granavolden) explicitly stated that it sought to "use Norway's position, *including as a donor*, to secure more return agreements and promote acceptance of the principle that all countries must receive their own citizens" (emphasis

9 We adopt the term 'asylum crisis' to describe the political and institutional response to the arrival of approximately 1.3 million asylum seekers, mainly from Syria and Afghanistan, in Europe during 2015. Norway received approximately 31,000 applications during this time (MoJ 2015).

10 Skriftlig spørsmål – stortinget.no.

11 Currently there are eight return action plans, for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Morocco, Ethiopia and Somalia (interviewee 11).

12 One measure was the expanded scope for applying the 'internal protection alternative' as a basis for refusing asylum, in which the reasonableness of relocation within a person's country of origin would no longer be a consideration for returns.

added), and "link Norway more closely to European processes toward a common asylum system, including the possible establishment of joint asylum centres outside the EU."

As noted by several experts interviewed, this period marked renewed discussions on conditionality, and, specifically, whether and how aid might be used as an incentive for cooperation on returns. The threat of leveraging aid for returns, or, in extremis, end development cooperation programmes if there was a lack of collaboration on returns, was explicit in the political discourse, fronted strongly by the Minister of Justice Sylvi Listhaug from the Progress Party (Kveinå 2017). While some interviewees, primarily those with experience from the MFA, emphasised that such ideas were not formalised in Norwegian aid practice, others pointed to an increased focus on the potential strategic leverage of aid. While some appeared more positive to these developments, others worried that conditionalities would compromise other Norwegian interests (see section 3; Paasche 2022).

While there was a general reluctance within Norad, and also by some in the MFA, to explicitly engage in migration management cooperation between the MFA and the MoJ, this development was practically facilitated by broader global developments in aid policy, and specifically the introduction of a new OECD DAC code for aid, supporting the "Facilitation of orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility." This made aid spending on some aspects of migration management ODA eligible, which allowed donors to report migration-related aid more systematically and made areas such as return management a more visible and legitimate area of development spending, also in Norway

More explicit links between migration and aid were articulated in various government strategy documents released during this time, e.g. the Partnership Strategy mentioned above, the government White Paper *Common Responsibility for a Common Future: Sustainable Development Goals and Norwegian Development Policy* (Meld. St. 24 (2016–2017); the White Paper *Setting the course of Norwegian foreign and security policy* (Meld. St. 36 (2016–2017); the 2017 *Strategic Framework for Norwegian Engagement in Fragile States* (stating that "return and migration shall therefore be an integrated and central part of the relationship to important countries of migrant origin"), and the 2018–2020 *Sahel*

Box 1: The 'root causes' approach:

Following the 2015 asylum crisis, the European development and migration agenda became increasingly marked by the so-called 'root causes approach', i.e. the idea to use development aid as a tool to influence migration drivers and hence deter irregular migration. The increased reliance on the root causes approach occurred even though academic research – both before and after – largely question the assumption that aid will effectively reduce migration. While a handful of studies finds that aid may be able to decrease migration in specific cases, most studies suggest that increasing aid in low-income countries will initially raise migration, as higher income levels enable people with the means to move (see e.g. Martin and Taylor 1996; Nyberg-Sørensen et al. 2002; Agenda 2019; Talleraas 2025; Restelli 2021).

Interestingly, the root causes agenda did not fully filter into Norwegian policy or practice. A comparative study found that Norway, unlike Poland or the EU, never fully embraced the root causes framework (Kugiel et al. 2019). Yet, in 2016 there was some interest in the approach, as reflected in an MFA-funded study examining its relevance. However, the resulting report (Carling and Talleraas 2016) highlighted that the logic of the approach was empirically and conceptually weak, and highlighted the complexity of migration 'drivers', aspirations and capabilities.

The requested report was received with mixed reactions within the MFA, and some rhetorical and political support for the approach existed in the first years after 2015, as e.g. visible in the government platforms in 2018 and 2019, stating that the government would 'intensify efforts for development and democracy', in order to 'address *the causes of migration*' (emphasis added). Yet, despite this, many of our interviewees said that Norwegian aid practices were not substantively shaped by the approach (Interviewees 01, 02, 03, 03, 07, 09). While some individual projects may contain elements consistent with this reasoning – such as vocational training or livelihood programmes – there is little evidence that they have been guided by a deterrence rationale. Through its contributions to EU initiatives such as the EUTF for Africa, Norway has supported projects within the root causes framework, but it does not appear to have initiated such programmes on its own, even despite the continued popularity of the root causes approach also in newer EU frameworks, such as NDICI Global Europe (Talleraas 2025).

Strategy which emphasized regional security, counter-terrorism, and irregular migration as interconnected concerns.

2.5 2021–2026: Recent developments

Following the parliamentary elections in 2021, a new government – a coalition of the Labour Party and the Centre Party – was formed under Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre. Their government platform (Hurdal) built on earlier return-oriented strategies by committing to "maintaining trust in the asylum system through effective return work". At the same time, it introduced a stronger emphasis on supporting durable solutions for displaced persons in their countries and regions of origin (as opposed to in Norway), through the establishment of a 'Solidarity Fund' (see Box 2). Interestingly, the "Solidarity Fund" was described in the chapter of the platform regarding the MoJ, not the MFA or Norwegian development aid. However, the establishment of the Fund would be within the mandate of the MFA and the development budget.

The current Labour-led government plan (2025–2029) generally mentions challenges with irregular migration, promising "strengthened return work" and "increased international cooperation on new solutions and measures", including to ensure a more "sustainable immigration to Europe".[13] This includes close cooperation with the EU in implementation of the Pact on Asylum and Migration, which opens the door for extraterritorial processing and 'return hubs' outside the country of origin.

The National Return Strategy was updated by the MoJ in 2023 to incorporate new regional realities, including an extended mandate for Frontex not only to monitor borders but also to implement returns (MoJ 2023). The updated document was somewhat controversial, because it introduced strong formulations on the use of development aid as an instrument for national migration policy goals, without significant inputs of the MFA or other relevant actors – as further discussed in section 3 below. Although the strategy is named "national" and hence gives the impression of being a cross-ministerial document, it was published by the MoJ alone and not treated by the government in cabinet.

In 2024, the newspaper *Vårt Land* reported allegations that the Minister of Climate had linked development aid in the environmental sector in Ethiopia to cooperation on return. Around the same time, the Minister of International Development stated in a Nordic meeting that Norway would not introduce return-related aid conditionality, as this would conflict with OECD guidelines, unlike some other Nordic countries that were reportedly prepared to do so. According to an interviewee, the controversy surrounding the implied conditionalities in the National Return Strategy and the public attention generated by the newspaper coverage prompted a backlash within government from actors seeking to defend a clearer separation between development policy and migration control. As a result, the MFA's recent Africa Strategy and Humanitarian Strategy contain very limited language on migration, in order to maintain a clearer distinction between development aid and humanitarian efforts on the one hand, and national migration policy on the other (interviewee 07).

In 2025 a revised return strategy was released with more input from MFA. It reiterates the importance of sustainable return and reintegration but emphasizes that grants and other forms of support to achieve this must comply with principles on development aid and the DAC guidelines on ODA spending (MoJ 2025). It remains unclear how cooperation between the two ministries might be operationalised to achieve the strategy's goals. As an agency under MFA, Norad's role vis-a-vis other ministries is usually limited to providing advice. For example, it has provided training to UDI in the management of international cooperation grants, but it is not involved in the design or evaluation of such projects. In

13 Regjeringens plan for Norge (2025–29). Available at: https://www.regjeringen.no/no/om-regjeringa/noverande/regjeringens-plan-for-norge/id3142802/

some countries, including Norway, both the MFA and MoJ provide support to the same institution (for example IOM), but they do so through separate contracts (interviewee 01).[14]

One area of overlapping interests relates to identity management. Norway's specialized competence, including through the National ID Center established in 2010, has been leveraged to support the development of systems in other countries with spillover effects for enabling returns and preventing human trafficking. Through the Partnership for Migration, the National Police Immigration Service (NPIS), UDI and the National ID Center have, since 2019, conducted trainings and other capacity building projects in, eg. Iraq, Kenya, and Somalia. The National Strategy against Human Trafficking (2025–2030)[15] commits Norway to continue its support for developing better systems for birth registry and digital IDs. This includes funding for the Modular Open-Source Identification Platform (MOSIP) which helps countries establish and administer national ID systems.

Box 2: The Solidarity Fund

The Labour Government's 2021 Hurdal Platform introduced a new initiative under the theme of 'immigration and integration' aimed at fostering sustainable solutions for refugees, IDPs, and host communities abroad. Through this Solidarity Fund ('Solidaritetspotten'), 5 billion NOK would be spent over four years to support displaced populations and to enhance host societies' capacity to accommodate them together with non-displaced citizens. By improving conditions in origin and host countries, the intention was to reduce drivers of onward movement and mitigate irregular migration. A post as Special Representative for Refugees, Displaced People and Host Communities (Spesialrepresentant for flyktninger, fordrevne og vertssamfunn) was established in the Section for Humanitarian Affairs in MFA in 2022 to oversee the creation and use of the fund., through an MFA-MoJ working group.

Instead of creating new funding, the initiative compounded existing projects and budget lines which supported the UNHCR, the World Food Programme and projects related to stabilisation and reduced vulnerability. Funding came from both the humanitarian and the development budgets to underscore a more holistic approach to durable solutions. The momentum behind the initiative fizzled out especially with the invasion of Ukraine and the reallocation of funds and attention. The Fund's 2024 portfolio included however earmarked funding to UNHCR for projects in Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and its neighbours; IOM activities in Yemen, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh; UNRWA programs in the West Bank and Gaza; Norwegian Refugee Council interventions in Sudan, Gaza, Lebanon, and Afghanistan; and contributions to the UN's Special Adviser on durable solutions (MFA 2025). From 2026, the Fund will no longer have a distinct budget line; its mandate for holistic management of migration-linked development aid will be incorporated into the humanitarian and regional aid budgets.

While the Fund did not generate sustained political momentum, some of our interviewees found that its working group to set priorities provided a useful forum for the MFA and MoJ to discuss their distinct interests and to identify countries where interests converged, such as with Syria and Somalia. Hence the entire budget of the Fund was ODA eligible, but focussed in many cases on countries where the MoJ had a particular interest. They also noted that the Fund's ambiguous aims and the absence of clear outcome benchmarks allowed for a more open dialogue and dampened potential conflicts. While it is not clear that this ambiguity was intentional, the consequences resonate with research on the EU Trust Fund revealing how the emphasis on "root causes" served to depoliticise migration control and provide a consensus-oriented middle ground among EU institutions and member states (Anderson 2024).

14 IOM's three interconnected objectives, or "pillars" (Saving lives and protecting people on the move (a humanitarian pillar); driving solutions to displacement (a development pillar); and facilitating pathways for regular migration ("migration management")) are all of relevance in Norway. Norway channels funding to several of these; MFA for instance mostly to the first pillar; MoJ to the third (Interviewee 07).

15 Nasjonal strategi mot menneskehandel (2025–2030) – regjeringen.no

3. THE INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE AND SHIFTS OVER TIME

Norway's work on migration and development, including aid spent on migration-related activities, involves several key institutions. The MFA has overall responsibility for foreign and development policies. This includes the aid budget and allocations from that. Norad is the main agency responsibility for operational management and professional advice. In recent years, Norad's responsibilities have also expanded to include humanitarian aid and most funding to all multilateral organisations. The embassies are only responsible for select bilateral/regional grants and country programmes. The MoJ and its subsidiary agencies are responsible for immigration administration, and migration and return management and cooperation.[16] Other government ministries (Education, Children and Families, and Labour and Social Inclusion) also play important roles. Through the budget chapter post on "Refugees in Norway", MFA reimburses MoJ and others for ODA-eligible expenses related to in-donor country refugee costs, including assisted return and repatriation.

Historically, responsibility for development cooperation has shifted between MFA and Norad, reflecting changing political and administrative priorities. Since Norad's establishment in 1968 as a directorate under the MFA, its mandate has alternated between an advisory and an implementing role. The most recent reforms have again expanded Norad's portfolio, positioning it as the central administrator of Norway's aid budget, which includes humanitarian aid to displaced persons.[17] Today, MFA retains the overall policy lead and external representation on issues concerning migration – in global forums such as the UN Global Compacts, annual political dialogues with the IOM and UNHCR and collaboration with the EU – while Norad manages the bulk of aid implementation (although some is managed directly by embassies). The MoJ operates, through UDI, a smaller portfolio of cooperation agreements as well as the reintegration program for assisted returns.

Over time, the institutional landscape and modes of organisation for migration-related aid have evolved, reflecting shifting political priorities, and the changing salience of migration in Norwegian foreign and development policy – as elaborated above. In the early 2000s, activities were largely fragmented across ministries and agencies with limited coordination or shared policy direction, with no formal coordination mechanisms between the relevant Ministries (interviewee 01). In 2005, as mentioned in section 2, an inter-ministerial working group with members from the MFA, the Ministry of Labor and Social Inclusion, Norad and UDI was set up to discuss Norwegian migration and development policy, and recommended to form a dedicated structure to ensure collaboration between – on the one hand – foreign and development policy, and – on the other hand – migration and integration policy. This was meant to strengthen ongoing work at the time, focusing on how coherent migration and development policy could support development processes in poor countries (Horjen 2020). Just before the working group's report was published, the MFA established a project on migration and development to strengthen and coordinate this work. After a couple of years, the project was terminated and issues were relegated to the relevant units within the MFA, including through a Refugee Advisor (Fagdirektør) in the Humanitarian Section.

Early on in the "Syria crises", the MFA appointed its Assistant Secretary-General to coordinate the various departments' work related to the situation – the prominent being the humanitarian, legal and European departments who made up a Task Force. In 2015 the Humanitarian Section also created a three person team on refugee and migration issues (interviewee 07) and appointed its first Special Envoy on Migration. The MFA activities at

16 The government's immigration and asylum/refugee policies have been positioned within different ministries over time, from the (then) Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (2001–2005) to the new Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion (October 2005–2009) before being moved to the Ministry of Justice where it remains today.

17 Initial information about this expansion is available here: https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/tydeligere-arbeidsdeling-mellom-ud-og-norad/id2992248/

the time were primarily linked to international initiatives to respond to this novel situation, as well as the humanitarian response, rather than a dedicated migration-and-development policy agenda. This remained the domain of the "Section for Development Policies".

3.1 The establishment of the Migration Section (2015–2019)

The subsequent creation of a dedicated Migration Section within the MFA and its Department for Regional Affairs in 2016 marked the first formal effort to coordinate Norway's migration-related foreign and development policy.[18] Established in the aftermath of the asylum crisis, the section reflected both heightened political attention to migration towards Europe, and a perceived need for stronger inter-ministerial cooperation, particularly between the MFA and the MoJ. Its formation was initiated under Foreign Minister Børge Brende (Conservative Party), primarily as a response to the need for coordination of the various MFA departments' responsibilities. It would also have an inter-ministerial role and became the entry-point for the MoJ to the MFA, to strengthen the link between migration, return and aid, in response to the evolving "crisis" (interviewees 03; 07).

The dedicated Migration Section consisted of five staff members, and its mandate covered negotiations on the Global Compact for Migration, engagement with the EU's Valletta/EUTF framework, and general coordination with MFA, MoJ and UDI on migration governance and issues such as the allocation of quotas to refugees (kvoteflyktninger). It was placed in the Regional Affairs Department, to be close to the geographical desks implementing policies and aid. The Section was also tasked with negotiating bilateral return agreements and lead dialogues with countries such as Ethiopia and Morocco, which enabled closer follow-up from the Embassies , e.g. as small-scale development support and other incentives were sometimes used as a carrot to incentivise cooperation (interviewees 03; 07; 12). While return strategies formed the basis for partnerships on migration issues, the embassies' budgets for development projects were not explicitly linked to these documents. In line with DAC rules, Norway could not allocate the aid budget to this, but some budgets were available from the MoJ, which could be used also for non-ODA activities (interviewee 07)

Although the Section was meant to 'show action' in response to pressure during the crisis, no new budget lines accompanied its work, which continued through existing foreign, development and humanitarian allocations. The MoJ was, however, drawn into MFA's policy planning through regular consultations, with a view to aligning MoJ country priorities with MFA policies and tools (interviewee 07).

While the section's establishment led to closer collaboration between the MFA and MoJ, it also clarified some tensions in terms of policy priorities. The MoJ, led at the time by a minister from the Progress Party, pursued a stricter control-oriented line, while MFA officials sought to preserve diplomatic balance (interviewee 03) and respect for the DAC rulebook. Internally, the Section faced "berøringsangst" – reluctance to engage openly with migration control agendas for fear of damaging Norway's "international reputation", especially during Norway's UN Security Council candidacy (interviewees 03;07). Some embassies were hesitant to collaborate on visible migration- and, especially, return-related tasks, although there was a push for this at the time, even directly from the Prime Minister Erna Solberg (Conservative Party) (interviewee 03). Efforts to use aid to secure return cooperation also met resistance within parts of the MFA (interviewees 01; 03; 12). Yet, while differing institutional logics persisted, collaboration between MFA and MoJ improved gradually. The section had little to no cooperation with Norad at that time, as the relevant funding was managed by the MFA (interviewee 03).

Ultimately, the Section was disbanded in 2019, primarily due to resource constraints: positions were reallocated to support the UN Security Council position process, leaving too few posts to maintain the section's formal structure (interviewee 03).

18 Information about the section from Norwegian State Administration Database is available here: https://forvaltningsdatabasen.sikt.no/data/enhet/57483

3.2 2019 onwards: shifting priorities and new coordination

After the section's dissolution, tasks and responsibilities were returned to their original MFA departments' mandates, such as the UN Department, the Humanitarian Section and the European department. MoJ lost a clear MFA contact point and found collaboration increasingly difficult (interviewee 07; 12; 11). Therefore, one of the responsibilities of the new Special Representative for Refugees, Displaced People and Host Communities, created in 2022, was hence to head inter-ministerial coordination, with a focus on MoJ, in addition to internal MFA migration-related coordination (interviewee 07). Since then, this role has been renamed as Special Envoy for Migration, and currently also serves as a focal point for migration-related affairs in international fora such as in the EU. The position has been occupied by four individuals over the first four years of its existence, and tasks and responsibilities have developed dynamically and in response to institutional and political shifts.

Another avenue – and need – for collaboration appeared when the MoJ developed a new National Return Strategy (2023–2029) which proposed greater collaboration between the MoJ and development actors to support the "reintegration ability" of specific return countries. This strategy was published unilaterally, triggering political pushback within the MFA and, to some extent – self-censorship: migration language was weakened or removed from subsequent MFA strategies to avoid being seen as endorsing conditionality (interviewee 07).[19] A reworked Return Strategy 2025–2030 was subsequently developed with MFA inputs (interviewees 07; 12). This document reiterates the importance of sustainable return and reintegration, emphasising that grants and other forms of support to achieve this must comply with principles on development aid and guidelines on ODA spending (MoJ 2025).

These developments underscored the need for inter-government collaboration, to ensure policy coherence. MFA–MoJ collaboration had been reinforced via the "Solidarity Fund" (as detailed above) which aimed to integrate better the efforts made towards refugees and displaced populations and their host communities, and set up the Solidarity Fund "working group" (2022–2025), which provided a specific arena for dialogue between the two ministries (interviewee 07). While this was welcomed by the MoJ as a means to influence spending in countries that seemed especially relevant to them, there were no new funds allocated: instead, relevant support was channelled/relabelled from existing lines (IOM, UNHCR, stabilisation, regional), mainly drawn from the humanitarian budget (interviewees 04; 07; 12). Over time, it became a separate budget chapter. While many other chapters financed development aid in sectors such as health, education, human rights etc, with potential "migration related" relevance, a key difference was that, in the use of the solidarity fund, the MoJ participated in the allocation of some of the projects.

In Norad, the interest in specific migration-related issues has been less stable. After producing an analysis on migration and development,[20] and presenting it at the Foreign Minister's office (receiving limited traction) (interviewees 01; 02), the focus on migration was reduced in Norad. Along with larger organisational shifts in 2024, however, many agreements (including IOM) were moved to Norad, which since has revived their migration–development activity, including closer cooperation with MFA and Norway's delegations (interviewees 01; 02). Norad now has a dedicated, albeit informal, position in charge of the 'migration portfolio', placed in their Section for Prevention and Stabilisation. In terms of focus, according to interviewees, the discourse has clearly shifted over the years, also within Norad, moving from migration-as-resource toward migration-as-problem (interviewees 01; 02).

In terms of the current institutional landscape, the MFA retains overall responsibility for development and humanitarian policy, which is implemented and administered by

19 These developments should also be seen in relation to the political and public discussions at the time, as described in the section 2.5

20 Horjen 2020

Norad and (to a limited extent) the embassies. In addition to aid oversight, the MFA leads on multilateral and regional processes on migration, through its Special Representative for Migration, and play a key role in negotiating bilateral return agreements in close collaboration with the MoJ. These are the responsibility of the Regional Department. While Norad has a key responsibility for IOM, responsibilities and funding are channelled through MFA, and then divided among three ministries — MFA, MoJ, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Inclusion– which as some interviewees highlighted, has led to persisting coordination challenges (interviewees 01; 02).

In line with Norway's commitment to facilitate "regular, orderly and safe" migration, the government platforms as well as the National return strategy, MFA and MoJ collaborate to strengthen bilateral cooperation with key transit and origin countries, focusing on facilitating return of persons without legal stay and supporting administrative capacity of partner authorities. This work is anchored in the current National Return Strategy (2025–2030). Since 2016, MFA and MoJ have developed joint return strategies for specific origin states (interviewee 11); there are also currently 12 positions fully or partly engaged as Immigration Liaison Officers (ILOs), placed at specific embassies to assist with immigration cases, and to collaborate with partners on the ground on returns. Seven of these are deployed by UDI while the others are recruited by National Police Immigration Service (NPIS) (interviewee 11).

In terms of current collaboration, interviewees from Norad noted a continued lack of coordination between MoJ/UDI return projects and broader development efforts in return communities. Interviews from MoJ and UDI welcomed closer collaboration with Norad, both to understand issues in relation to ODA eligibility (interviewees 01; 02; 11; 12) as well as to operationalize the Return Strategy's aim to promote 'sustainable reintegration' (interviewee 13). Several interviewees stressed that effective cooperation with partner countries – in the broad field of migration and development aid, but especially in terms of return – depends on individual expertise, continuity, and diplomacy/language/cultural competence; while frequent turnover among staff and weak local knowledge may undermine progress. Coordination within Oslo also depends on functional ties between regional and other departments (within MFA), and between the MFA and MoJ. Although the Solidarity Fund working group re-created a whole-of-government practice, which structured MFA–MoJ dialogues and align work that both sides would have done anyway (interviewee 07), many interviewees highlighted the need for more cross-cutting collaboration.

It is also worth noting that the MoJ's interests in migration related development aid and humanitarian aid is mostly limited to countries where there is a potential for irregular migration especially towards Europe – a rather narrow stretch of countries from Mauritania in West Africa to the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East onwards to Syria and its neighbours, and Afghanistan. There is a large number of countries is Asia and Africa that are not "interesting" to the MoJ, and where traditional development and humanitarian aid is much greater in total (Interviewee 07).

4. OVERVIEW OF AID FLOWS

Norwegian migration-related development aid comprises a wide range of objectives, sectors, and implementing channels. It spans from humanitarian and emergency assistance to longer-term development cooperation, and includes activities implemented through a variety of partners, including Norwegian and international NGOs, such as DRC and NRC, partner governments and multilateral organizations such as the EU, UNHCR and IOM – and take place both in Norway and abroad.

The scope of migration-related aid is therefore broad: it covers different types of migration and displacement, from forced and voluntary migration to internal displacement, transit, return and reintegration. The overview excludes ODA allocated to hosting refugees within Norway, and aid provided to EU countries according to EEA – Norway grant agreements, and aid spending on the budget chapter 153, on refugees, IDPs and host societies, i.e. much of the spending to UNHCR. While aid for refugees represents a key aspect of migration-related assistance, it is excluded from this overview since the purpose of the report is to examine migration initiatives beyond refugee support – that is, programmes more explicitly aimed at managing migration, facilitating return and reintegration, or addressing the challenge of irregular migration. By focusing on migration-related aid beyond refugee support, the analysis highlights the less visible but increasingly important areas where migration and development intersect within Norway's aid portfolio.

However, it is important to note that migration-related spending within Norway – particularly expenditures spent the first year on the reception and integration of refugees – has accounted for a substantial share of Norway's total ODA. In 2015, Norway spent 18.3 percent of its aid budget in 2015 on supporting refugees in Norway, making itself the single largest recipient of Norwegian aid that year (Agenda 2019). This trend intensified the year after with refugee-related spending in Norway rising from 3.7 billion NOK in 2015 to 6.7 billion in 2016. After a few years of a steady decrease, it rose again following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, to 5 billion in 2022, and has since decreased to 4 billion in 2024.[21] In 2022, refugee related spending accounted for 10 percent of the total aid budget, with 83 percent of the support for Ukrainian refugees (OECD 2024).

4.1 Migration-related aid: difficult to map

A key challenge with the available data is the difficulty of identifying and mapping migration-related projects beyond costs related to refugees. Such efforts would need to include, for instance, mobility-oriented initiatives, labour migration programmes, or projects addressing migration-development linkages in different ways (basically any other expenditure on humanitarian aid and long-term development). However, these are not tied to a specific code, recipient, or budget post. Moreover, much of these projects are financed through the humanitarian budget, distinct from the development budget, but remains ODA. The cross-cutting nature of migration is therefore reflected in the blurred boundaries between different types of migration-related development cooperation, which complicates comparisons of spending across years, sectors and budget lines.

In the Norwegian statistics, which follow OECD DAC reporting guidelines, there is therefore no explicit overview or systematic way to capture migration-related projects. Many potentially relevant activities are instead classified under other sectoral categories, such as "governance, civil society and conflict prevention," "environment and energy," "health and social services," or "education." These may include projects on "agriculture," "life skills for youth," "disaster risk reduction," or "education facilities and training" – all of which could hypothetically be migration-relevant without being registered as such. Consequently, it is impossible to estimate the total volume of migration-related ODA, as relevant projects are reported under other thematic headings. While a new code for migration management

21 These statistics are available here: https://resultater.norad.no/bistands-tall/sektor/kostnader-i-norge-og-uspesifisert/flyktninger-i-giverland Accessed 24.10.2025.

was introduced later (as discussed below), OECD guidelines explicitly note that "activities addressing the root causes of forced displacement and irregular migration should not be coded here, but under their relevant sector of intervention." In practice, this means that these types of migration-related objectives would be embedded – and thus reported, if so – under a wide range of sectoral codes, such as those named above.

Yet, one way of identifying migration-targeted projects is to sort data by relevant recipients, such as with IOM as implementing partner. Doing so reveals that IOM has been a major channel for migration-related funding, deriving from different ministries, since 1995. Thematically, IOM-administered projects have covered a wide range of objectives. In the early years, most projects focused on humanitarian support to refugees and returnees, counter-trafficking, and reintegration assistance, gradually expanding into migration management, governance capacity building, and support for regional cooperation. Over time, the portfolio has included more projects on border management, voluntary return and reintegration, and the protection of vulnerable migrants.

Geographically, IOM-implemented activities have followed major humanitarian and migratory developments, with early efforts concentrated in the Balkans in the 1990s, and steadily expanding to Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and various regions in Africa and the Middle East. In terms of specific countries, projects have centered on crisis responses and migration governance initiatives in countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Moldova, Philippines, Somalia, and more recently, Ukraine. The total amounts allocated through IOM have increased considerably over time – rising from a few million NOK annually in the 1990s to well over a hundred million NOK per year after 2015, reflecting both a broader Norwegian engagement with migration and IOM's growing role as an implementing partner for humanitarian and development-oriented migration assistance (Pécoud 2018). It also reflects that IOM was integrated in the "UN family" in 2015, becoming the multilateral agency responsible for the Global Compact on migration. In addition, the SDGs from 2015 were explicit on migration issues.

Beyond IOM, identifying other migration-related initiatives in Norwegian aid portfolios is far less straightforward. One possible approach would be to conduct a thematic review of all ODA-registered projects, searching for migration-relevant elements -such as labour mobility, diaspora engagement, or regional mobility schemes – across different sector codes and implementing partners. While such an in-depth mapping is beyond the scope of this study, a future analysis of this would yield valuable insights into how migration concerns have been embedded, also implicitly, across Norway's broader aid spending.

As noted by one interviewee, much of the work on migration takes place at the strategic rather than project level and is therefore not visible in statistical reporting (interviewee 07). For instance, in line with the whole-of-government approach, discussed above, different types of projects and instruments are designed to complement each other across ministries and policy areas, meaning that project may be migration-related, e.g. seen to potentially affect migration flows or migrants, but that this is not visible by looking at the project's name. Interviewees pointed to Somalia as a case in point where various projects – many of them not initially designed with migration in mind –have been part of an overall framing linking development cooperation to migration-related objectives (interviewees 03; 06; 07).

4.2 Migration-management spending since 2017

An important milestone occurred after 2015, when migration became more explicitly recognised within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Target 10.7 of SDG 10 calls on states to facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies. This language positioned migration management as a legitimate area of development cooperation and helped formalize related aid activities within international reporting systems (see e.g. McGregor 2020, Martens et al. 2020, Talleraas 2025).

In line with this, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) adopted a dedicated sector code for migration-related assistance in 2018, which allowed donor countries, including Norway, to report some migration-related spending more systematically

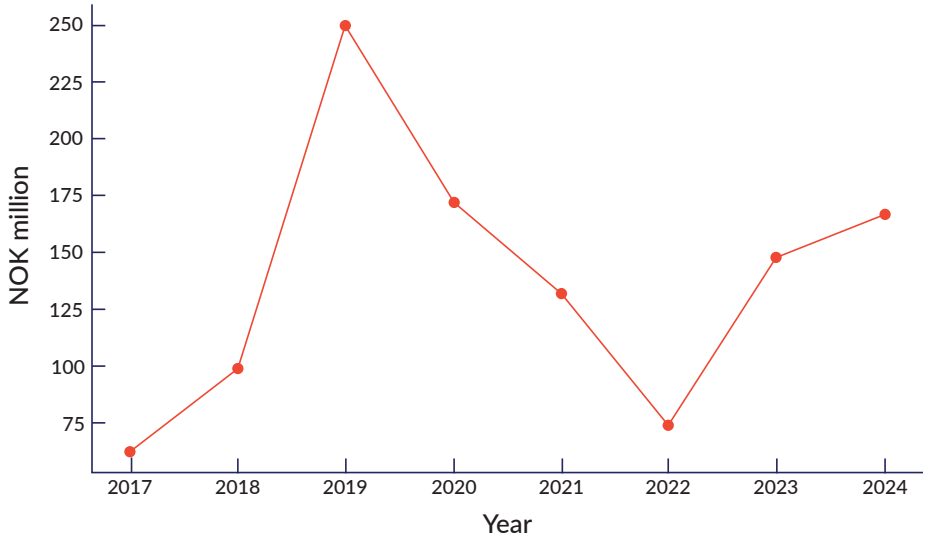
as ODA. According to OECD guidelines, only activities consistent with the definitions outlined in the DAC's criteria are considered ODA-eligible; activities falling outside these parameters cannot be reported as development assistance and are therefore excluded from official statistics. Currently, the first two principles for "Migration activities in ODA" are 1) that "the general rule that the main objective is the promotion of the economic development and welfare of developing countries", which means that "when assessing the ODA eligibility of activities in the field of migration, the primary purpose must […] be considered, and 2) that "there should be no diversion of ODA towards providers' immediate interests on migration at the expense of long-term sustainable development", meaning that "when different ministries (e.g. migration, development …) are involved in the programming of migration-related activities […], the authorities responsible for reporting ODA figures need to verify the primary objective of the programmes concerned" (OECD 2025a). To support this process, the OECD has conducted a review of the statistical reporting of migration-related agreements and is currently preparing a handbook on ODA and non-ODA eligible activities to guide such assessments (OECD 2025b).

For Norway, the new sector code was introduced in 2018 (code 151.90), with retroactive effect for 2017, with some projects also registered for 2015 and 2016. Older agreements with disbursements in 2017 were recorded for their entire duration to reflect this change. However, as noted by Norad,[22] reporting remained incomplete these first years, since the ministries managing funds under budget chapter 179 – Refugee costs in Norway (particularly MoJ) continued to report aggregated data. More detailed reporting was introduced from 2019, following a government decision establishing a revised methodology for classifying refugee-related ODA.

From 2019 onward, the MoJ began distinguishing between projects implemented in developing countries and refugee-related costs in Norway, reporting the former under sector 151.90 rather than as domestic refugee expenditures. This change has enabled a more systematic approach to identifying migration-related development spending in Norwegian aid statistics since 2019. Yet, since eligibility criteria are difficult to assess, there has been a need for increased knowledge on ODA eligibility, also within the MoJ and UDI, leading to new forms of collaboration where Norad has organised training sessions for MoJ and UDI staff.[1]

Since the new code was introduced, Norway has spent a total of 1.1 billion NOK on 107 different migration management initiatives under the code, in the years from 2017–2024 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Total allocations for code 151.90 on "Facilitation of orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration"



22 Email correspondence with the Section for Statistics and Analysis in Norad, in October 2025

The sharp increase in 2019 is partly explained by the inclusion of agreements managed by the MoJ, but also by projects administered by MFA, including a sharp rise in spending – and/or recoding of spending – at the Norwegian embassies, that were recorded under this sector in 2019. Disbursements from the EU Trust Fund for Africa, managed by the MFA, continued until 2020 and help explain the subsequent decline. At the same time, 2019 marked a shift in institutional spending patterns, with a growing share channelled through embassies, also in the following years, and in later years an increasing role of the MoJ. The MFA, which had dominated spending in earlier years, assumed a more limited role after 2019, while Norad only has contributed smaller and more sporadic amounts. It should also be noted that these figures cover ODA-eligible countries in all geographical regions, and thus not only low- and middle-income countries.

To get a more detailed understanding of the projects supported by the MoJ in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, since 2019, we can see that total allocations under the migration management sector have increased from NOK 36.2 million in 2019 to NOK 52.5 million in 2024. The full list of projects is included in Annex 2. Among the 34 projects reported during this period, several have focused on return and reintegration assistance – particularly in Afghanistan, Algeria, and Morocco – alongside migration management and institutional capacity building in Somalia and Iraq. Other projects have addressed information-raising on migration, counter-trafficking and prevention of irregular migration, for example through initiatives in Sudan (in 2019 only), Djibouti and Pakistan. Geographically, the projects have targeted nine specific countries, and Somalia, Afghanistan and Morocco have been recurring priority countries throughout the period.

A brief look at the MFA supported projects for the same regions, in the same period of time, reveal that the MFA in Oslo supported two EUTF projects in the Horn of Africa and one IOM project for Afghan returnees, while the Embassies supported two projects on reintegration for IDPs in Iraq, and two projects on constructing a headquarter for the Directorate of Immigration in Somalia.

Taken together, these developments illustrate how migration management has become a distinct and increasingly institutionalised area of Norwegian development cooperation over the past ten years. While the total volumes remain modest compared to humanitarian or sectoral aid targeted at refugees and emergency support, the growth and diversity of activities under the migration management code reflect how Norway's approach has been affected by evolving political priorities, with a predominance of return-oriented initiatives.[23]

4.3 Does the strategic priority of return come at the expense of "traditional" aid?

The evolution of migration-related ODA in Norway reflects broader international and domestic trends: a growing emphasis on migration, including return, management, expanding reporting practices under DAC rules, and continuing ambiguity over what constitutes development-relevant spending. The inclusion of aid spending by the MoJ (reimbursed by MFA) contributes to sustaining the Norwegian government's 1 percent aid target, albeit to a modest degree. At the same time, the expansion of ODA-eligible migration spending – which in Norway has centered on hosting refugees, return, reintegration and capacity-building in partner countries to facilitate return – raises questions about the boundaries between external humanitarian, development and migration control objectives.

Interviewees from both Norad and the MFA underscored that determining ODA eligibility for migration management remains challenging. Indeed, when the OECD/DAC reviewed activities reported under sector code 151.90, they also highlighted one project

23 It should also be noted that despite this development in strategic priorities, several interviewees noted that there was not always a clear rationale behind why certain migration-related projects were prioritized. A representative from Norad described how it sometimes appeared "a bit random" which programmes were put in action, noting that it could happen somewhat ad hoc, that "someone had a meeting with the MoJ, and then we made an agreement based on that, and then someone wanted to travel to this or that place, and we made an agreement there" (interviewee 02). This highlights how migration-related aid initiatives have at times emerged from situational opportunities and informal decision-making processes rather than from systematic prioritisation or overarching policy frameworks.

reported by the MoJ as difficult to assess against the ODA criteria due to an incomplete project description. However, this project was not removed from Norway's ODA statistics, as the MoJ confirmed that it complied with ODA regulations. Indeed, no MoJ-reported projects have been excluded from Norway's ODA reporting.[24,25]

While European debates have criticized similar practices elsewhere for diverting aid from poverty-reduction goals, there has been less public debate on this in Norway. Although Norwegian migration management funding does not reduce the development budget, but instead supplements it through the MoJ's own allocations (interviewees 7; 9; 12), it seems justified to claim that countering irregular migration and return objectives have become increasingly visible justifications for aid spending. One interviewee stated, however, that since spending on ODA is bound to the 1 percent rule, there has been a tendency to reduce ODA spending on "traditional aid or humanitarian aid" when the ODA in-country refugee costs have increased a lot (as e.g. with Syria and Ukraine especially), highlighting that this thus has "taken a larger and larger share of the development budget" (Interviewee 07). It is important to note, however, that interviewees from different sections had divergent opinions on the potential trade-offs between strategic spending on return, in-country refugee costs and traditional aid (as further discussed in the concluding discussion). Across all sections, however, interviewees underscored the importance of scrutiny and clear guidelines, to ensure that Norway's, explicit or implicit, migration-related aid spending remained transparent and DAC-compliant.

24 Email correspondence with the Section for Statistics and Analysis in Norad, in October 2025.

25 While this remained in Norwegian statistics, it is unknown whether this specific project was refused, and thus deducted from official OECD data.

5. LESSONS LEARNED FROM IMPLEMENTATION

In this section we move from aid flows to implementation experience. We draw on available documentation and interviews to explore experience with migration-related initiatives in three partner countries where Norway has had particularly strong interests in return cooperation: Afghanistan, Somalia, and Ethiopia. While the limited scope of this study precludes an evaluation of their 'success' over the medium or long term (e.g., through an increase in the number of assisted returns and/or forced returns; the reduction in the number of new arrivals without valid grounds for residence; or positive outcomes in terms of reintegration), these snapshots give a sense of how different strategies have been leveraged and what factors may have shaped the partner countries' cooperation incentives. It is important to note that our analysis here does not include partner-country perspectives or experiences of how these initiatives have been implemented, and with what implications on the ground, and should therefore not be read as a full assessment of implementation practices.

5.1 Somalia: Synergies from overlapping spheres of interest

Cooperation with Somali authorities on returns was initiated in 2012, when conditions in Somalia after decades of civil war had improved with a new government and a new constitution. This meant that more Somali asylum seekers in Norway received a negative decision, and were quartered in reception centres pending return. An information campaign in 2014 was launched through IOM to inform potential migrants about Norway's changed asylum policies (Utrop 2014), and the Danish Refugee Council came on board as a partner to UDI for assisted return and reintegration support. A return agreement covering forced returns, meanwhile, was signed in 2016.

In 2012, the ILO with responsibility for Somalia needed a stronger return partner in the Somali Immigration and Citizenship Agency (ICA), which was tasked with broad federal responsibilities for migration under the new Constitution (interviewees 07; 10). Funding was provided to the agency under MFA's humanitarian budget at first, before becoming part of the MoJ's portfolio several years later. In the beginning, just knowing who worked at the different offices was a priority, so support to human resources was a first step. In the years since, both MFA and MoJ have funded the Somali migration authorities for various purposes, including training on identity management (together with UDI, the NPIS and the National ID Centre) and a new headquarters building (through UNOPS, together with Denmark, Finland and the UK). Because ICA also issues Somali passports, the Norwegian National ID Centre visited to verify that the identity systems in place meet international standards. This meant that even if a person's identity from birth was unknown, receipt of a passport provided a fixed identity which could not be subsequently changed. Since 2024, Norway has accepted Somali passports as valid identity documents, whether issued in embassies or at the regional level. The cooperation was highly valued on the Somali side, with partners expressing how important it was to travel on their own passports even if, as dual nationals, many had an alternative (interviewees 6;12).

While the number of Somalis claiming asylum in Norway has reduced, Somalis comprise a significant percentage of the individuals affected by the increased focus on revoking residence permits that has characterised Norwegian immigration policy since 2016. The 'Somali project' from 2016–2020 involved the review of refugee status for Somalis from Mogadishu on the grounds that they may no longer have a need for protection. In addition, strengthened ID controls mean that a number of Somalis have faced revocation of their residence rights on grounds of fraud (i.e. by giving false information about their

identity and/or area of origin).[26] Compared to people refused asylum, revocation cases are more challenging to accept for Somali authorities; from their perspective it is hard to understand why the Norwegian government wants to deport a head of family who has lived in the country for decades (interviewee 12). Despite the reluctance on the Somali side in some cases, the return of people who made false claims in their asylum application – even if considerable time has passed – remains an important priority. The complexity of revocation cases may explain why the return and reintegration programme in Somalia cost 4.4 million NOK in 2024 and facilitated 7 returns (MoJ 2025).

According to our interviewees, the long-term presence of an ILO helps give credibility to the return agenda and enables a better understanding of the practical barriers to repatriation. As in other countries, the topic is still politicised, with authorities facing backlash for permitting particular returns. All in all, however, cooperation on migration in Somalia is considered a positive case in both ministries; the country was also singled out as an example of a 'whole-of-government' approach in the Solidarity Fund (interviewee 11). The MFA is a major contributor to the UN's multi-donor fund which has enabled the national ID authority, NIRA, to expand the population registry. This is seen as an "important step in development work, the state building process, and the implementation of elections" (MFA 2025). Further, Norway supports the World Bank's multi-partner fund to improve financial management and to provide basic services, including education and health. Improved governance and living standards, as one interviewee said, "make Somalia a place where people want to stay and contribute" (interviewee 9). While initiatives to engage the diaspora in local investment initiatives (e.g. the Nordic Horn of Africa Opportunities Fund) were not considered successful from a development perspective (Horjen 2020), members of the Somali diaspora including those with Norwegian citizenship have had important roles in the Somali government as well as in major NGOs receiving Norwegian development aid. The Somali case shows the potential of closer alignment between migration management, state-building support and return cooperation through durable partnerships with the relevant authorities.

5.2 Ethiopia: Misaligned interests and political constraints

While a return agreement was signed with Ethiopia in 2012, the path to effective return cooperation has been considerably bumpier than in Somalia. For years authorities in Ethiopia refused as a matter of principle to accept citizens who did not return of their own will; this was problematic for Norwegian authorities because Ethiopians comprised one-fifth of the population of long-staying migrants without a right to remain. As part of the bilateral dialogue to secure an agreement on forced returns, the carrot of development aid was leveraged in the form of a 5 million NOK contribution channeled from the MoJ through IOM to the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) to provide advice, education, job referrals and reintegration assistance (Zachrisen 2019).

However, this institutional support has not had the hoped for effects; until recently only a handful of Ethiopian nationals were returned from Norway. According to one interviewee, arrangements for cooperation made during negotiations on the return agreement between Ethiopia and the EU, which Norway was obligated to follow, have made implementation more challenging (interviewee 06). In contrast to the Somali Immigration and Citizenship Agency, the ARRA is not a constitutionally mandated interlocutor on return issues, and the role of IOM created more distance between partners.

Research also points to deeper conflicts in terms of norms and interests between the two states (Kefale et al. 2025). While Norwegian authorities emphasise the duty of

26 As part of the Asylum Agreement in 2015, the government mandated UDI to withdraw refugee status when conditions in the country of origin had improved, in accordance with the cessation provision in §37 of the Immigration Act. 1600 cases involving Somali refugees were opened, but only a small number resulted in return. Most Somalis who had been in Norway for some years received residence on other grounds, i.e. their family attachments to Norway or the risk of female genital mutilation (FGM) for girls upon a potential return. Hundreds of cases were set aside in 2020 because of the long processing time and because they were unlikely to result in a revocation decision (Schultz 2025). Since that time, the focus of revocation has been on cases of fraud.

countries to readmit their nationals and the sovereignty of states to deport those without a lawful right to remain, Ethiopian authorities strongly defend mobility rights including the decision by their own nationals not to return. Forced returns from Europe can also face opposition in Ethiopian communities, where migration has long been a way to earn income and status; remittances are important for both families and for the state (ibid.). The government has therefore been mindful of how domestic and diaspora audiences view its migration policy, including returns from Europe which seem like a marginal issue compared to the dire circumstances facing far larger numbers of Ethiopian migrants in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Libya. During the last two years, however, cooperation has improved, but this is seen as largely motivated by the visa restrictions imposed on Ethiopian nationals in April 2024 by the EU, as a sanction for non-cooperation on returns (interviewees 04 and 06).

Return cooperation has as such been politically sensitive on both sides: in Ethiopia because of domestic and diaspora audiences, and in Norway because debates over aid conditionality made the linkage between development assistance and migration control particularly contentious. In this case, then, aid-based incentives and institutional support have proven insufficient in the face of deeper normative, political, and societal constraints on return cooperation. In this case, then, aid-based incentives and institutional support have proven insufficient in the face of deeper normative, political, and societal constraints on return cooperation.

5.3 Afghanistan: Prolonged efforts to deter (youth) migration

Afghan youth have historically been the largest group of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) seeking asylum in Norway, representing 45 percent of the UAMs who received residence between 1996–2022 (SSB 2024). Concern about the high representation of UAMs among asylum seekers in Norway in 2008 led, in addition to the generalised measures to deter new arrivals to specific tactics targeting youth. The Soria Moria II government platform of 2009 included provisions for "care and education" of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in their countries of origin. Plans to open reception facilities for minors had been floating in European policy circles for several years; despite unsuccessful pilot initiatives by the Dutch government in Angola and the DRC since 2004, the idea was indirectly endorsed by the EU Returns Directive (Art. 10.2, see Lemberg-Pedersen 2015). In 2011, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Belgium launched the European Return Platform for Unaccompanied Minors (ERPUM), supported by funds of the European Commission. The ERPUM project, which ran between 2011 and 2014, was meant to enable the deportation of unaccompanied Afghan minors from Europe either to their families or to an 'adequate' reception facility in Kabul. The idea was that such facilities would be a stopgap measure only until families were located, and children's right to family reunification and therefore a 'durable solution' to their displacement was realised.

However, insurmountable problems ensued. First, the family tracing element proved impossible due to a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, poor communications infrastructures, and the limited resources of ERPUM governments' embassies (Lemberg-Pedersen 2015). Minors themselves were unwilling to assist in identifying their families, perceiving such cooperation to undermine their chances to receive asylum (Danielsen and Seeberg 2006). Second, there were no reliable partners on the ground. The Afghan authorities were less than enthusiastic about the return project (Schuster 2013), perceiving it as a politically sensitive issue. One European official remarked that their interlocutor from the Ministry for Return and Repatriation (MoRR) showed "no interest" in ERPUM (ibid.: 13), while the Deputy Minister of MoRR responded in a more pragmatic manner, noting that "we cannot spoil our relationship with Norway for the sake of a 100 children, when we have millions here that need their help" (ibid.: 14). However, disputes about which ministry would control how much of the budget derailed the Afghan involvement. Meanwhile, potential implementing partners outside the government withdrew due to security concerns (IOM) or were dropped because they lacked an understanding of the

legal responsibilities involved, including those regarding children's rights. Eventually, in June 2014, the pilot was discontinued.

Following the asylum crisis in 2015 and the relatively large number of unaccompanied minors (ca. 5300) among these new arrivals, return centres reemerged on the political agenda. The Asylum Agreement reached by six of the eight parties represented in Parliament mandated the government to renew efforts to establish 'care centres' for UAMs in their countries of origin (Norwegian Government 2015). Meanwhile, the aid budget for 2017 indicated that "large parts of Norwegian aid to Afghanistan in 2016 and 2017 will continue to prevent migration and children from being sent on a dangerous journey through Europe by contributing to the goal of stabilisation and development of the country" (MFA 2016: 166). Discussions around an institution in Kabul relaunched in 2016, and by 2018 Norwegian authorities, together with their Danish colleagues, were reportedly in the final stages of talks with Afghan authorities (Foss and Olsen 2018). The aim was to serve both local youths as well as those refused residence in Norway and Denmark. Two of the activities potentially supported by the project, education and vocational training, were consistent with Norway's existing priorities. These renewed efforts met similar challenges faced by the earlier ERPUM endeavour: rumours of corruption among potential institutional partners, difficulties meeting requirements regarding child protection, and travel restrictions for Embassy staff in Kabul making it difficult to physically evaluate proposed sites (interviewee 05).

Meanwhile, from a high of 7000 applications in 2015, far fewer asylum seekers from Afghanistan, including UAMs, sought protection in Norway during the following years even though elsewhere in Europe they remained the second biggest applicant group (Afghanistan Commission 2025). The importance of migration, and return cooperation, placed by Norwegian authorities is illustrated by the fact that while aid personnel at the Norwegian Embassy were sent home in 2015 on security grounds, two new ILOs joined the staff in Kabul (ibid.). Besides having on-the-ground officers, former embassy employees attribute the success of return policies to the deliberate use of low-key tactics to avoid too much public attention and potential escalation of pressure on Afghan authorities (i.e. the use of private flights rather than chartered jets, and the deployment of an Afghan staff member to quietly facilitate returns at the airport). An information campaign in Afghan newspapers and Facebook warned of Norway's stricter asylum regulations. Finally, in dialogue with Afghan counterparts, Norwegian officials emphasised that the aid budget spent on Afghanistan included asylum reception costs in Norway; less cooperation on migration would likely mean less funds to initiatives in-country (ibid., referring to a conversation between President Ghani and Prime Minister Solberg, and a visit to Kabul by state secretaries from MoJ and MFA in 2015). Despite facing occasional resistance (especially concerning families) on the part of Afghan authorities, Norway was able to return more Afghans than other countries in Europe.

Meanwhile, anchored by an action plan against migration in Afghanistan developed by the MFA, support in rural villages was geared towards dampening the desire to migrate, and efforts were made to direct multilateral funds towards job creation programmes (ibid.). The conclusion from a review of Norway's engagement with Afghanistan suggests that the coordination between MoJ, MFA, UDI, NPIS and the Norwegian Embassy was effective in deterring migration (ibid.). However, it is worth noting that between 2018–2023 Afghans still comprised the majority of UAMs who received residence in Norway (SSB 2024), unseated from this top position only by Ukrainians in 2022. In the absence of forced returns following the Taliban takeover, efforts to deter youth migration have returned to the domestic sphere, with proposals to limit family reunification and other restrictive measures making asylum in Norway less attractive.

In all three of the case countries, sources of resistance on the part of partner countries to returns included: the important role of remittances to individual families as well as communities, political pressure not to cave to a rather marginal European agenda, and the lack of capacity to verify identities and reintegrate returnees. Where returns were successful, what seems decisive was the long-term presence of ILOs to build relationships with their counterparts within national governments, collaborate with European colleagues, and to

identify and address specific barriers to readmission and reintegration. Mobility-related benefits (i.e. passport verification in Somalia) facilitated cooperation on returns, as did mobility-related sanctions (i.e. visa restrictions in Ethiopia).

5.4 Lessons from the country cases

The country cases show that implementation outcomes depended not only on the availability of funding or formal agreements, but also on how migration-related objectives aligned with partner-country priorities, institutional arrangements, and domestic political considerations. In Somalia, cooperation was facilitated by overlapping interests in identity management, mobility documentation, and broader state-building support. In Ethiopia, aid-based incentives and institutional support proved less effective where return cooperation was politically sensitive and partner-country interests diverged more fundamentally from those of Norway. In Afghanistan, return cooperation formed part of a broader and more sustained deterrence strategy, combining diplomatic pressure, information campaigns, vocational support, and efforts to reduce onward migration among youth.

Across the three cases, return cooperation appears to be shaped by a combination of political sensitivities, variation in partner countries' institutional capacity, and, in some contexts, the wider social and economic importance of migration and remittances. Where cooperation did improve, interviewees highlighted the importance of long-term relationship building by e.g. ILOs in identifying partner country interests, and addressing practical barriers to readmission and reintegration. At the same time, it is relevant to note that such forms of operational cooperation should not be understood as normatively neutral, as they may also reinforce migration-control priorities within broader aid and diplomatic relationships.

A final observation is that migration-related incentives took different forms across the cases. In Somalia, mobility-related benefits such as passport verification helped facilitate cooperation, while in Ethiopia visa restrictions imposed by the EU appear to have strengthened cooperation more recently. In Afghanistan, the possibility of reduced aid formed part of a wider strategy that also sought to deter migration through development-oriented and communicative measures. More broadly, the cases indicate that implementation should not be assessed only in terms of whether return cooperation became more effective, but also in terms of how migration-related objectives may shape bilateral cooperation more broadly, as well as and the wider relationship between development cooperation and migration governance.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In addition to humanitarian support to refugee and IDP populations, the facilitation of returns has become an increasingly visible objective in parts of Norway's migration-related development cooperation, particularly in selected partner countries. The MoJ has been the main driver of this agenda, while the MFA has played a more ambivalent role, balancing development-policy integrity and foreign policy priorities with growing expectations in the field of migration management. Since the late 2010s, and especially after 2015, cooperation between the MoJ and MFA has deepened and become more formalized, marking a gradual shift from *ad hoc* collaboration toward a more structured 'whole-of-government' approach. Organizationally, this evolution has proceeded through experimentation and adjustment, and has been shaped by changing political contexts and individual leadership among both political and bureaucratic actors. Periods of heightened political attention to migration, such as during the 2015 asylum crisis, prompted the creation of a coordinating body, and policy instruments such as the National Return Strategy and country-level partnership and return action plans. Although many of these structures were later dissolved, or reorganized, they left traces in the form of stronger inter-ministerial networks.

Over time, development cooperation and migration management have become more closely intertwined in practice. Migration-related aid currently spans a continuum – from traditional humanitarian or development interventions to targeted capacity-building of institutions that may also facilitate return and readmission. This hybrid character reflects both the pragmatic search for policy coherence and the political imperative to demonstrate control of migration to and from Norway.

The following sub-sections discuss two key implications of these findings. The first explores how Norway's migration-related aid navigates the tension between strategic and altruistic objectives, including concerns over conditionality. The second reflects on the broader direction of Norwegian policy in relation to European and political developments, and possible ways forward.

6.1 Strategic versus altruistic aims – and conditionality

A persistent tension runs through Norway's migration-related aid: the pull between development policy's altruistic aims – poverty reduction, humanitarian principles, peacebuilding and reconciliation, stability, and human rights – and domestic objectives linked to migration management, the reduction of irregular migration, and return. Several of the bureaucrats we talked with, across the MFA and the MoJ, underscored the traditional divide between development aid and strategic, migration and return-related mandates. One interviewee referred to this as "the elephant in the room," (interviewee 07) capturing the bureaucratic and political discomfort surrounding how far development cooperation should be used to advance domestic migration and return objectives.

Views on this differed across the administration. Norad staff emphasized the importance of a clear boundary between aid and domestic objectives, and adhering to the OECD-DAC principles that require development to be the primary objective, stating e.g. that there is "no development-policy argument for limiting migration," and that "return should not be an aid objective", while noting that reintegration support in return areas could be relevant (interviewees 01;05;07;08;09).

In contrast, representatives from MoJ and UDI stressed the practical need for cooperation on return and underscored targeted support – such as capacity building and identity systems – as legitimate instruments as long as they were aligned with partner-country priorities. The views of MFA officials tended to straddle both camps. This tension was also exemplified when MoJ developed a new National Return Strategy stating that development aid should support national migration policy goals with only limited involvement of the MFA, as discussed in section 2.5 and 3.2. This in turn might have influenced the MFA to soften migration-related objectives from subsequent strategy documents to avoid being accused of instrumentalizing aid.

Yet, consistent with research on Norwegian aid development more generally, there appears to have been a gradual shift toward prioritizing aid that also serves short-term national interests, including in the field of migration management (Tjønneland 2022; Kugiel et al. 2019; Stokke 2019; Paasche 2022; Agenda 2019; Hegertun and Eggen 2017). Our analysis likewise suggests that the linkage has been reinforced across successive government platforms and strategies, mirroring global tendencies and Norway's evolving role as a migration host.

Many we spoke with emphasized and described this trend as part of the "whole-of-government" approach, as e.g. visible through the national return and country-level partnership strategies. As one interviewee explained, the approach was not to use conditionality as a means per se, but rather to "use all of our portfolio to create a favourable environment for them to take back their own citizens" (interviewee 07). Positive incentives which may or may not be aid related were generally favored over explicit conditions or sanctions. As many also noted, such positive "carrot" incentives tended to work best in contexts where Norway had long-standing relationships and institutional trust, such as in the case of Somalia. At the same time, the country cases suggest that operationally effective cooperation on return does not necessarily resolve the broader tensions such linkages create for development-policy integrity, partner-country ownership, or the relationship between aid and migration control.

6.2 Future directions

While Norway has always been closely aligned to developments in the EU and particularly other Nordic countries in the field of migration management, even tighter cooperation is expected with the implementation of the EU Pact on Asylum and Migration starting in 2026. As a Schengen-associated country, Norway is bound by some of these instruments (e.g. related to border screening, return border procedures, the Eurodac database, and responsibility mechanisms replacing the Dublin agreement), and voluntarily incorporates others. Although a revised Return Regulation is still under negotiation, the general direction of innovations under the Pact appears to be towards greater externalization, including through the development of extraterritorial processing centers for asylum claims, and/or 'return hubs' in third countries. This raises a series of questions related to the asylum system, the meaning of 'return', the legitimacy of emerging discourses concerning 'route-based' approaches to protection, and the extent to which it is acceptable to support such initiatives through development budgets.

Under existing ODA rules, there are also grey areas when it comes to 'what counts' as migration-related development aid. A main point of contention is the requirement that aid's primary purpose should be to further the economic development and welfare of the recipient country (OECD 2025). While this clear language already may be difficult to reconcile with many of the examples of cooperation we found, there are signs of further pressure on the implementation of the DAC framework. A Nordic initiative is underway to recognize more return funding as aid relevant. As one interviewee noted, "if we transform the DAC rules into a system of conditionality" we undermine "our own capacity to be good donors and to protect this framework" (interviewee 07). Operationally, a weakening of DAC principles would make the division of responsibilities and the meeting of mandates even more challenging, as these principles offered a useful red line in terms of development actors' engagement with the migration agenda. In this regard, using aid to support asylum externalisation measures – for example through extraterritorial processing centres for asylum claims or 'return hubs' in third countries – would likely intensify existing tensions between development principles and migration-control interests.

While the advantages of maintaining clear boundaries between the MoJ and the MFA's work on migration were highlighted by some interviewees, others suggested greater cooperation, including by strengthening the institutional anchoring of migration–development aid within Norad. This would help ensure alignment with DAC principles and promote more coherent and development-oriented gains (see Horjen 2020). A specific suggestion, which also was supported by some of the interviewees, is to involve

Norad and/or Norec (the Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation which took over responsibility for independent evaluations of development aid from Norad in January 2025) more systematically in the MoJ/UDI's international cooperation initiatives, for example through assessing their development impacts. This would facilitate closer coordination between MoJ and MFA, and UDI and Norad more specifically, and help link short-term strategic objectives with broader development outcomes (see Horjen 2020 and Paasche 2022). More generally, several interviewees highlighted the potential in the concept of "sustainable reintegration", anchored in the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), which inherently bridges the domains of asylum, migration management, and development cooperation. As such, it may offer a useful framework for identifying shared interests and points of entry (e.g. dialogue with partner countries about how support to returnees can be incorporated into local and national development plans) and opportunities to lift the debate from reintegration of individuals to more partner country-owned strategies. This approach is gaining momentum especially in discussions around engagement in Ukraine and Syria (interviewee 13).

On a different note, several interviewees also highlighted the current lack of attention to the potential positive development dimensions of migration, which were more visible on the Norwegian and European agenda in the early 2000s. While they attributed this partly to shifting political priorities and geopolitical pressures, some stressed the importance of gaining more knowledge on how different types of aid can influence patterns of migration in the Global South. In addition, the global discourse on 'complementary pathways' including the establishment of labour migration channels to meet donor country needs in healthcare, eldercare and other sectors was identified as an area that deserved more attention in the Norwegian context.

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ANNEX 1: OVERVIEW OF MIGRATION- AND DEVELOPMENT-RELATED SHIFTS IN THE NORWEGIAN GOVERNMENT PLATFORMS 2005–2025

Platform	Relevant shifts in migration-related aid priorities
2005 Soria Moria I: The Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party	Committed to "strengthening the work on deportation of foreigners with illegal residence and intensifying efforts to secure return agreements with more countries", while also calling for closer European cooperation on visa, border control, and asylum issues.
2009 Soria Moria II: The Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party	Pledged to "use development aid and cooperation policy to support efforts to facilitate return and reintegration of persons without legal residence in Norway" and to "strengthen return cooperation and identity verification". Emphasized addressing the "causes that force people to flee," and providing support for displaced populations in regions close to their home countries, and stated that the government would "establish care and education services for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in their countries of origin".
2013 Sundvolden: The Conservative Party and the Progress Party	Committed to "work for more return agreements, and use Norway's position to secure more agreements", "strengthen return efforts, and identity work in the Police", and "make the foreign affairs services more active in regions with the highest numbers of unfounded asylum seekers to inform about limited opportunities for residence"
2018 Jeløya: The Conservative Party, the Progress Party and the Liberal Party (This was the first platform after 2015)	Framed migration and integration as "challenges facing Norwegian society, regardless of their causes," noting that "population movements put the welfare state's sustainability to the test." It called for "a foreign policy that safeguards Norway's interests and promotes international cooperation on cross-border challenges […] such as people on the move," and pledged to "conclude more return agreements to prevent individuals from staying in Norway without legal residence." To "address the causes of migration," the government would "intensify efforts for development and democracy.
2019 Granavolden: The Conservative Party, the Progress Party, the Liberal Party and the Christian Democratic Party.	Reiterated the aims to "conclude more return agreements" and to "address the causes of migration". It also pledged to "continue work to establish care centres in countries of origin," to "link Norway more closely to European processes toward a common asylum system, including the possible establishment of joint asylum centres outside the EU," and to "use Norway's position, including as a donor, to secure more return agreements and promote acceptance of the principle that all countries must receive their own citizens".
2021 Hurdal: The Labour Party and the Centre Party.	Announced the establishment of "a solidarity fund within the development budget of at least NOK 5 billion to improve conditions for displaced persons and the local communities hosting them." Committed to "maintaining trust in the asylum system through effective return work" and to "strengthening the system of return support."
2025 The Government's Plan for Norway (The Labour Party)	Prioritises a more effective immigration administration, strengthened return work and increased cooperation on "new solutions and measures". Norway to take an active role in European migration cooperation to ensure a more "sustainable immigration to Europe".

ANNEX 2: MOJ PROJECTS CODED AS SECTOR "90 – FACILITATION OF ORDERLY, SAFE, REGULAR AND RESPONSIBLE MIGRATION AND MOBILITY" SINCE 2019, TO COUNTRIES IN AFRICA, ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Year	Name of project	Country	Amount in 1000 NOK
2019	Capacity building of Immigration and Naturalization Directorate	Somalia	4200
2019	Support for irregular migrants	Sudan	3030
2019	Capacity building of Immigration and Naturalization Directorate	Somalia	4055
2019	Assistance to sustainable reintegration of returning migrants	Afghanistan	4400
2019	Capacity building of KRGs migration management	Iraq	2500
2019	Information on migration and radicalization	Morocco	1200
2020	Voluntary Return from Morocco and reintegration for migrants in vulnerable situation	Morocco	3030
2020	Capacity building of staff in shelter for migrants and victims of trafficking in Lac Assal, Djibouti	Djibouti	2020
2020	Capacity building of Immigration and Naturalization Directorate in Somalia	Somalia	1307
2020	Temporarily anonymised	Afghanistan	1400
2020	PISTE – Pilot Study and Assistance to Enhance the Reintegration Sustainability of Returnees in Algeria	Algeria	1709
2020	Capacity building of Immigration and Naturalization Directorate in Somalia	Somalia	2800
2020	Telling the Real Story Information Campaign	Eastern Africa	3000
2020	Emergency Response and Assistance to Displaced Populations – Cross-border afghans returnees	Afghanistan	3000
2021	Temporarily anonymised	Afghanistan	1400
2021	Project 6 – Enhancing Operational Capacities of Somalia's Immigration Authorities	Somalia	4000
2021	Inspiring phase III in Morocco	Morocco	1604
2021	Emergency Response and Assistance to Displaced Populations – Cross-border afghans returnees	Afghanistan	3000
2022	Enhancing Operational Capacities of Somalia's Immigration Authorities	Somalia	3000
2022	Cross Border Assistance for Afghan returnees	Afghanistan	3000
2022	Temporarily anonymised	Afghanistan	4390
2022	Pilot Study and Assistance to Enhance the Reintegration Sustainability of Returnees in Algeria	Algeria	1675
2022	Inspiring phase IV in Morocco	Morocco	2100
2022	Enhancing Operational Capacities of Somalia's Immigration Authorities	Somalia	64
2022	Supporting the Government of Morocco in Facilitating Voluntary Return for Migrants in a Vulnerable Situation	Morocco	4040
2022	The Impact of possible displacement on Islamic Republic of Iran and its neighbouring region	Afghanistan	520
2023	Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) – Erbil	Iraq	3600
2023	Enhancing Operational Capacities of Somalia's Immigration Authorities	Somalia	8361
2024	Enhancing Operational Capacities of Somalia's Immigration Authorities – project 8	Somalia	3600
2024	Afghan Workforce Training and Microbusiness Development program	Afghanistan	2000
2024	IOM Iran	Iran	2000
2024	Preventing fraudulent job advertisements and cyber activity as a facilitator of irregular migration and trafficking in human beings in Pakistan	Pakistan	2600
2024	Enhancing Operational Capacities of Somalia's Immigration Authorities – project 7 Addendum	Somalia	502
2024	Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) – Erbil	Iraq	2400

This report examines how migration-related objectives have become part of Norwegian development cooperation, and what this means for policy and practice. Section 1 introduces the report's scope and analytical approach. Section 2 outlines the evolution of migration-related objectives in Norwegian aid spending, policy frameworks and focus areas over time. Section 3 examines the key actors in the institutional landscape, as well as organisational shifts surrounding migration-related aid. This is followed by an analysis of aid flows and reporting practices, in Section 4, which highlights how migration-related activities are identified and classified. Section 5 presents case studies from Somalia, Ethiopia and Afghanistan to illustrate how migration and development objectives intersect in practice. In Section 6, the report concludes with a discussion of dilemmas and future developments.

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