



Is policy coherence a smokescreen for a more restrictive migration agenda?

Historically, the EU aimed for policy coherence across development and migration policies to prevent undermining development in other countries. Yet the meaning of ‘coherence’ has shifted.

In the EU policy context, ‘policy coherence’ now refers to ‘efficient’ migration policies with a focus on returns, while development policies are conceived mainly to manage and prevent migration.

The depoliticized language of “policy coherence” helps to overcome internal disputes by maintaining the same language yet changing its meaning.

As the New EU Pact is implemented, it is important to understand the history of coherence as a concept, particularly around return policies and the trend towards stricter migration policies.

Marie Godin
Leicester University

Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert
Peace Research Institute Oslo

Julia Schweers
University of Oxford

Elaine Lebon-McGregor
Maastricht University

Niels Ike
Leiden University



Highway signs in Tunisia, a country under increasing pressure to manage migration

Source: Safouen Azouzi for MIGNEX.

Policy ‘coherence’ has long been a buzzword in European Union (EU) migration policy. However, its meaning has changed over time. MIGNEX analysis of EU policy documents shows an initial focus on the relationships between migration and development, where policy coherence is sought for the sake of development.

These connections spawned another buzzword: the ‘migration–development nexus’. Yet coherence is now used more in the sense of ‘efficiency’, with emphasis on the return of irregular migrants.

This Policy Brief considers the ambiguity and evolution of the concept and shows how this affects the formulation and potential impact of migration–development policy-making. This Policy Brief is based on research documented in MIGNEX Background Paper *Internal (in)coherence in European migration policies*.¹

The migration–development nexus: different meanings over time and sectors

The linkages between migration and development are as manifold as the terms ‘migration’ and ‘development’ are broad. Put bluntly, the ‘migration–development nexus’ highlights the multiple and mutual relations that exist, whether in the field of economic, social or cultural development.

The subsequent vagueness of the concept thus leaves room for diverse interpretations that can serve contradicting purposes. Interpretations have oscillated between optimistic and pessimistic readings, often mirroring the political zeitgeist and global economic trends.

In the 1990s, this nexus was adopted into EU policy documents through the concept of policy coherence for development (PCD). In 2007, this PCD framework included migration as one of five key areas for assessment. This echoed a relatively optimistic view at the time of the migration–development nexus among both sending and receiving countries.

However, negative attitudes towards migration have grown in the last decade. The primary shift has been from PCD that included migration within ‘development-relevant policies’, to development policies being mainly understood as ‘migration-relevant policies’.

This can be seen in the EU’s New Pact on Asylum and Migration, where development aid is framed as a tool to curb migration.

From EU alignment between migration and development policy, to development as a tool for a more restrictive migration agenda

The narrow focus on development to prevent migration ignores how migration can enhance and contribute to development.² Moreover, this emphasis also limits the potential impacts

of European development policy. Now, development initiatives are often evaluated based on their perceived impact on migration, overshadowing the intrinsic value of development itself.

One example is the recasting of investment in manufacturing and industrial strategy in Morocco through a ‘reduce migration’ lens.³ This narrow and potentially irrelevant focus is harmful given that Africa needs strategic industrial policy and investment for job creation.

The emphasis on policy coherence has also been used in discourse on the need to address the ‘root causes’ of migration, and the ensuing policy focus on identifying ‘push and pull factors’.⁴

But migration dynamics are more complex than this. While painting such approaches as seeking ‘policy coherence’ is potentially less divisive than calling them containment policies, this is a means to make highly contentious policies more palatable.⁵

Under the New Pact, migration policies are coherent if they make return policies efficient

On 23 September 2020, the European Commission (EC) unveiled a proposal for a New Pact on Migration and Asylum. A core ambition was to develop a coherent strategy on migration. But what does coherence in this context really mean?

As a result of recurrent perceived crises at its external borders, the EU has increasingly focused on return and readmissions policies. This means aligning the EU’s supranational return policy with the return policies of individual member states to form a comprehensive and coherent framework. Though not the only focus of the New Pact, the effectiveness of return policy has become a core objective for the EU.

The EU increasingly seeks to enforce its priorities onto third countries, rather than seeking mutually beneficial partnerships and agreements. Consequently, development aid is made conditional upon cooperation on return and migration control.

Moreover, introducing such negative conditionalities skews development partnerships and may negatively impact trade relationships and preferential trade access.

Returning to the foundations of coherence in EU development policies

- EU policy-makers should reconsider the approach to migration and stop co-opting ‘development policies’ to achieve migration management goals. On the contrary, they should focus on maximising the potential benefits of migration for development. This could be through remittances, opening regular labour migration pathways or by supporting diaspora engagement, instead of



An EU development intervention in Golf City, Ghana

Source: Marie Godin for MIGNEX.

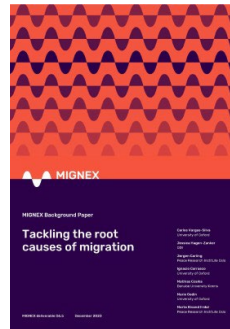
applying a one-sided lens on returns policies.

- Coherence with international norms such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) should also be addressed in the design of EU migration policies. Currently, the New Pact not only omits to mention this international agreement, but in many ways contradicts many of the GCM's core principles.

Further reading



Godin M., Gabrielsen Jumbert M., Lebon-McGregor E., Schweers J. and Hatleskog Tjønn M. (2022) Internal (in)coherence in European migration policies. MIGNEX Background Paper. www.mignex.org/d092



Vargas-Silva C., Hagen-Zanker J., Carling J., et al. (2023) Tackling the root causes of migration. MIGNEX Background Paper. www.mignex.org/d065

Notes

¹ See Godin M., Gabrielsen Jumbert M., Lebon-McGregor E., Schweers J. and Hatleskog Tjønn M. (2022) *Internal (in)coherence in European migration policies*. MIGNEX Background Paper. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo (www.mignex.org/d092).

² Norman K.P. and Micinski N.R. (2022) The European Union's migration management aid: developing democracies or supporting authoritarianism? *International Migration* 61(4): 57–71 (<https://doi.org/epdf/10.1111/imia.13075>).

³ Tanchum M. (2024) Africa-to-Europe value chains: how nearshoring can mitigate Europe's migration crisis and aid energy transition. ICMPD Blog, 8 February (www.icmpd.org/blog/2024/africa-to-europe-value-chains-how-nearshoring-can-mitigate-europe-s-migration-crisis-and-aid-energy-transition).

⁴ Hagen-Zanker J. and Carling J. (2023) What are the 'root causes' of migration? MIGNEX Policy Brief. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo (mignex.org/d066a).

⁵ See, for example, De Haas H. (2007) Turning the tide? Why development will not stop migration. *Development and Change* 38(5): 819–841 or Martens M., Adams I. and Trauner F. (2020) The migration–development nexus in selected African states: is the implementation of EU migration policies development–friendly? In: Rayp G., Ruysen I. and Marchand K. (eds) *Regional Integration and Migration Governance in the Global South*. New York: Springer, pp. 201–216. See also Hagen-Zanker and Carling (2023).

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