

The fate of migration in Danish development policy

Opting for the middle ground

Migration has long been perceived as a completely distinct area of concern from development. In 2000, the Danish International Development Assistance Agency (Danida), which had traditionally taken this view, appeared to change course and adopted migration as a valid element of its development programme. A year later, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs commissioned a study, called *The Migration-development Nexus*, which was to reveal present and potential links between migration and development.

The Danish Centre for Development Research was chosen to undertake the study, and I was appointed coordinator of the project. Together with international colleagues, we produced a state-of-the-art study with policy recommendations. We distinguished three 'policy logics' at work in the migration-development field: a *closure and containment* logic; a *selectivity* logic, which is less restrictive but scarcely addresses the root causes of migration; and a more progressive *liberalization and transnationalism* logic that promotes the benefits of considering mobility as an integral element of development. Nearly a decade later, we can only conclude that adopting this progressive approach was a bridge too far for Danida, which ended up embracing the compromise by opting for a selectivity logic.

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Danish development policy has traditionally focused on poverty reduction and sustainable development. In recent years, development cooperation has increasingly been integrated with foreign policy and security concerns. One result was that migration – the costs and gains of human mobility – became a frequently mentioned issue in Danida policy papers. This started in 2001, when concerns about how to stem unwanted migration were high both on the EU and the national agenda.

In February 2001, the then Danish minister for development cooperation, Anita Bay Bundegaard, of the Social Liberal Party, began to explore new ways of handling migration by introducing the concept of 'poverty refugees'. Her objective was to prevent refugee flows by directing aid to selected war- and famine-afflicted areas of the world. This rather provocative concept was put forward during a time of heated debate over the volume of immigration to Denmark. It was quickly disavowed by the Social Democrat prime minister, but the minister of internal affairs, Karen Jespersen, known for her hard-line views on immigration, was quick to capitalize on the momentum and invite the two ministries to cooperate. Together, albeit probably with different motives, the two ministers established cooperation aimed at elevating the theme during the Danish chairmanship of the European Union in the latter half of 2002.

Exploring the nexus

In search of more knowledge to support their new policy intentions, the ministry of foreign affairs commissioned a study to the Centre for Development Research, which has since merged with the Danish Institute for International Studies. In September 2001, we started our research to uncover potential links between migration and development. Based on available evidence, our 2002 report asserted that:

- Policies on development aid, humanitarian relief, migration and refugee protection are internally inconsistent.
- Development aid is more effective than humanitarian assistance in preventing violent conflicts, promoting democratization, and encouraging development investments by migrant diasporas.
- Poverty reduction is not in itself a migration-reducing strategy.



Upon arrival at the refugee centre outside Copenhagen, fingerprints are taken the old-fashioned way with ink, Padborg, Denmark, March 2007.

- Aid to developing countries receiving large inflows of refugees is poverty-oriented to the extent that these are poor countries, but it is uncertain what effect it has in terms of reducing the number of people seeking asylum in developed countries.
- There is a pressing need to reinforce the image of migrants and refugees as contributors to development. Migrant remittances are double the size of official development assistance and target the poor.
- If conflict resolution is accompanied by large-scale repatriation, remittances will diminish. This results in increased pressure on scarce resources, and a higher potential for renewed conflict. There is an argument against repatriation on these grounds.
- Mobile populations have proven to be beneficial to local development in times of deteriorating economic conditions as well as during conflict. Restrictive migration policies may hinder such gains.

Our study moreover identified three ‘policy logics’ at work in the migration-development field:

- A *closure and containment* logic aimed at controlling migrants and refugees. Development policy becomes an instrument of migration policy rather than the other way around.
- A *selectivity* logic both in the application of aid and the reception of migrants. While it is less restrictive than the closure and containment logic, it remains essentially palliative without addressing the root causes of migration.
- A *liberalization and transnationalism* logic in the fields of labour mobility, diaspora activities and refugee protection. This implies a consistent application of development and humanitarian aid, a gradual relaxation of immigration measures, a gradual liberalization of the global labour market, increased resettlement quotas for refugees currently hosted in developing countries, and the provision

of dual citizenship to encourage mobility and positive intervention in the homeland by migrants and diasporas. Population mobility, so the study stressed, is a key feature of development. Building on that notion, our study was innovative in that it included both ‘forced’ refugee and ‘voluntary’ migration movements, promoting policy development for these groups along a continuum, rather than in separate policy areas.

Denmark managed with this study to influence international development discourse – for example the 2002 European Commission Communication ‘Integrating migration issues in the European Union’s relations with third countries’. When all was said and done, though, the question still remains: what became of the migration-development thinking in Danish foreign aid policy?

Much ado about nothing

In November 2001, the political situation in Denmark changed drastically. The social-democratic minority government lost to a coalition of two centre-right parties, which formed a minority government supported by the right-wing Danish People’s Party. This is the political situation up to today. In January 2002, the new Danish government announced its decision to enhance the nexus between its aid and refugee policies as part of the overall focus on poverty reduction. This was later reflected in the 2007 Danida policy document ‘A world for all’. In this document, the Danish Government writes that it prioritizes ‘the link between migration and development’ in its bilateral and multilateral development assistance, with the ‘dual aim of tackling the growing challenges presented by migration and more effectively deriving benefits from its opportunities’.

A careful reading of the policy document reveals that a combination of population growth in the South and greater awareness of better living conditions in the North presents





the international community with a development challenge. On the one hand, migration can be ‘an engine for development’ through the transfer of experience, knowledge and remittances. On the other hand, brain drain and the rising death toll of ‘illegal immigrants attempting to escape poverty and insecurity’ provides fuel for a policy discourse on the ‘management of immigration, security and protection’. Indeed, accelerated migration between the countries in the South and growing migration pressure especially from Africa to Europe, including Denmark, resulted in additional policy initiatives regarding ‘migration management’, as is evident from more recent policy documents.

Today, it is fair to say that the ideas put forward in our study, which showed the potential benefits of a progressive policy based on a *liberalization and transnationalism* logic, never really made any headway on the Danida agenda. It is therefore tempting to conclude that the migration-development nexus has suffered a ‘Much ado about nothing’ fate in Danish development thinking. The fashionable concept certainly found its way into policy vernacular, but scarcely led to much synthesis between policy formulation and action.

It is true that, initially, thinking in terms of the migration-development nexus was welcomed and embraced by the foreign ministry. An impending EU chairmanship offered a good opportunity to ‘brand’ Denmark in the rest of Europe as a progressive player in the field of development cooperation. Two related events, however, severely restricted migration-development policy thinking.

The first was a change in Danish government in November 2001, which led to a hardened anti-immigration discourse and immigration policy. This political change introduced the possibility of Danish development aid being used *politically* for migration, a development Danida policy makers and practitioners would have done almost anything to avoid. The second, derivative effect was that Denmark became known as a hardliner or even as a ‘rogue state’ among other member states in the United Nations family because it started to repatriate refugees.

Opting for compromise

Danida went from being one of the first aid agencies to take up the migration-development policy discourse to one that stepped back and embraced the reigning understanding that ‘voluntary’ migration is caused by poverty and economic and social inequality, while ‘forced’ migration is caused by social or political conflicts or natural disasters.

Instead of developing comprehensive policies, Danida continued to develop policies along two traditional lines. One was geared towards securing genuine refugees’ basic protection, and another was geared towards tackling the supposed root causes of migration. The refugee question was dealt with by the Office of Humanitarian Assistance, part of Danida, who used a ‘neighbouring areas’ approach to work with durable solutions for refugees in developing countries. The migration question was relegated to a poverty-oriented approach, building on Danida’s traditional sector policy.

Danida staff, it is important to stress, had a clear interest in this approach. Pairing the poverty approach to the migration policy vernacular of ‘combating the root causes’ enabled Danida to protect a declining development budget from being used politically for migration and go about business as usual. Indeed, the Danish aid budget has been off limits for spending on migration reduction measures. EU border and immigration policy (and practice) reveals significant and sustained moves towards the securitization of migrants and the externalization of border controls to countries of origin and transit. The scope for genuine development cooperation with third countries therefore remains limited. In light of this, Danida’s simultaneous push for policy formulation and its protectionist attitude in development practice could be read as evidence that a *logic of selectivity* has been chosen in order to avoid the anti-immigration *closure and containment logic* often promoted in times of economic crisis.

It is probably not conceivable that a transnational policy logic benefiting migrants and poor people in developing countries could have been developed during the climate of anti-immigration that was ushered in with the start of the new millennium. And taking into account the enormous gap between the policy-developing and aid-executing offices – a gap further widened by the 2003 decentralization of operational power over Danish development assistance from headquarters to the embassies – it should come as no surprise that the rhetoric of migration-development policy has hardly affected concrete development practice.

I remain convinced though that much can be gained by organizing development policy and practice around migration issues in countries and regions where migration seems to be the strategy poor people use to combat poverty. Under heavy pressure to produce coherent policies which show some results on the national problem agenda, Danida has managed to take up this challenge, while at the same time confine it to the humanitarian office. As a result, development – and not security – has remained the main focus of Danish development policy. ■