


Refugee protection in the region: A survey and evaluation of current trends

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Abstract

Protection in the region has rapidly become a favoured durable solution to refugee situations and the hallmark of all current policies. These initiatives reflect changes in humanitarian approaches that have taken place over the past decades as the focus has shifted towards the resilience of crisis-affected communities and the need to enable their self-reliance. Despite the strong logic that this change will bring about more dignified solutions, the approach is easily instrumentalized. This instrumentalization is particularly evident where resilience humanitarianism meets security-migration politics. This paper focuses on the efforts of the European Union and a number of its member states to advance so-called protection in the region. The paper reviews the characteristics of these policies, highlights a number of risks and defines some known and lesser known implications of this approach.

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INTRODUCTION

'Protection in the region' has become a buzzword in international refugee and migration policy. At first sight, the term seems a pleonasm since traditionally the vast majority of refugees has been hosted in their region of origin. However, the term is meant to cover approaches aimed at integrating protection and humanitarian assistance, safeguarding human rights and implementing 'durable solutions' (Uzelac & Meester, 2018). There are three commonly accepted 'durable solutions': voluntary repatriation, resettlement and local integration (Global Compact on Refugees 2018). Because voluntary repatriation is often not possible and resettlement is a sensitive political issue, efforts have focused on local integration. Local integration embeds refugees in local development processes: through investment in the economy, social services and basic infrastructure that – crucially – equally benefit refugees and host communities. Ultimately, 'local integration' may lead to granting refugees legal status and naturalization.

Protection in the region programmes combine support to host countries to regulate, assist and possibly integrate refugees with incentives such as financial support, trade benefits or political concessions. A common example is the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) established in 2016 as part of the Jordan Compact, where special regulations incentivize international companies to set up businesses and provide jobs for refugees (Betts & Collier, 2017). These zones aim to provide both refugees and the local population with employment opportunities and protect refugees against labour exploitation. Moreover, refugees should be able to achieve a livelihood in the region and be disinclined to move onward. It goes without saying that this requires a minimum level of stability in the host country.

Whereas protection in the region is mainly associated with refugee politics, it seamlessly fits with a change in humanitarian discourse, policy and practice from one of independent, principled humanitarianism towards one of more integrated resilience approaches. Humanitarian aid has long been dominated by a paradigm rooted in exceptionalism, grounded in the ethics of humanitarian principles and centred on international humanitarian United Nations (UN) agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In recent years, this classic humanitarianism has been complemented and partly transformed by a radically different approach, which can be labelled 'resilience humanitarianism' (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015). Whereas the classical paradigm centres on principled aid, the resilience paradigm foregrounds building on local response capacities (Hilhorst, 2018). Resilience humanitarianism corresponds to actual changes in aid enabled by technological innovations, such as the use of digital payment systems, but maybe even more so to a change in discourse by international actors on the nature of crises, crisis-affected populations, their societies and ultimately aid itself. The resilience paradigm rests on the notion that people, communities and societies have the capacity to adapt to or recover from tragic life events and disasters. Disaster, rather than a total and immobilizing disruption, becomes an event to which people adapt using available resources. Resilience humanitarianism originated in the realm of disaster relief, as international policy (The Sendai Framework for Action) recognized the resilience of people and communities and began giving national players greater control over disaster response (United Nations, 2015).

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit set out to bridge the divide between humanitarian action, development, peacebuilding and crisis resolution (Ban, 2016). This bridging effort is now commonly referred to as the humanitarian-development nexus, the humanitarian-peacebuilding nexus and – combined – to the triple nexus. Much less attention has been given to another nexus that resilience humanitarianism has also given rise to: the *humanitarian-migration nexus*. 'Protection in the region' is very much exemplary of such nexus. It blends resilience humanitarianism with migration politics, primarily aimed at refugee containment. As an integrated approach, it has led to large initiatives that bring together humanitarian actors with development-oriented institutions, such as the World Bank and multi-donor programmes.

This article critically reviews current 'protection in the region' policies. In the first part, we define this international and EU policy framework and then compare the policies of six European countries that are particularly active in this policy area - Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom - in relation

to three key host countries 'in the region': Ethiopia, Jordan and Lebanon. The second part discusses criticisms of 'protection in the region' programmes, ranging from implementation deficits to a lack of responsibility sharing. Most importantly, we underline the lack of evidence as to the actual impact of these policies on the welfare of refugees and explain the risk that these policies entail for human rights and humanitarian assistance. The purpose of this critical policy review is to contribute to a better understanding of the possible unintended consequences of the humanitarian-migration nexus and 'protection in the region' policies.

INTERNATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Global governance¹

At the international level, the last five years have been crucial in shaping a stronger relationship between humanitarian aid, development and migration. Four frameworks in particular have taken shape to provide principles for the reception and protection of asylum seekers and refugees: the 2016 report of the United Nations General Secretary of the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) (UN General Assembly, 2016), the 2016 Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) (UNHCR, 2016), the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) (United Nations, 2018) and - to a lesser extent - the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) (UN General Assembly, 2018).

One of the aims of the WHS was to shift the implementation of humanitarian aid into the hands of national and local actors. To do so, 51 international actors – donors, UN organizations and major aid organizations – united in the Grand Bargain, committing themselves to transfer more funds directly to national players (IASC, 2021). The UNHCR-led CRRF offered practical guidelines for interventions in cases of protracted displacement. It also underlined the need to link humanitarian action as much as possible with development cooperation in a comprehensive approach that combines reception, support to the recipient community and the pursuit of sustainable solutions. The GCR builds on the CRRF by emphasizing countries' shared responsibility to find durable solutions. The GCM promotes shared responsibility in managing migration, including measures to foster resilience and self-reliance, to mitigate factors and conditions that encourage people to seek a future elsewhere and promote sustainable livelihoods in countries of origin. The emphasis of the GCM is primarily on migrants, including vulnerable persons such as irregular migrants and victims of trafficking. Much like the GCR, however, the GCM emphasizes the importance of protecting the human rights of migrants and banks on their resilience by promoting their self-reliance. It stresses the importance of responsibility sharing and includes a wide variety of stakeholders, ranging from migrants and refugees themselves to state authorities and international donors.

The European Union²

At the EU level, a number of policy frameworks and programmes have been put in place to address migration management and refugee protection. To promote durable solutions, the EU introduced Regional Protection Programs (RPPs) in 2005, which it later expanded by including development objectives under the Regional Development and Protection Programs (RDPPs) in 2014.

Accompanying the RDPPs is the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM), which includes the Mobility Partnerships and the Common Agendas for Migration and Mobility (CAMM). These initiatives are aimed at regulating legal migration and discouraging irregular migration. These objectives have been reinforced under the European Commission's proposal for a New Pact on Migration and Asylum (European Commission, 2020), which emphasizes controlling migration and managing asylum movements alongside a more effective and tightened border and return policy in Europe itself.

In the New Pact, the Commission reiterates its support for emergency aid to refugees and displaced persons, as well as for 'sustainable development-oriented solutions'. The New Pact stresses the cooperation with third countries, especially a number of EU-selected priority partnership countries, including heavily burdened countries such as Jordan and Lebanon and countries of strategic importance such as Ethiopia and Niger (Collett & Ahad, 2017; European Commission, 2016). The Jordan Compact mentioned above is a direct consequence of this emphasis. Funding for projects under these partnerships depends on the location of the third countries concerned. For example, Jordan used the European Neighbourhood Instrument, Turkey the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and Niger the Development Cooperation Instrument (FIS). At the same time, funding flows are not always transparent. For example, money has been made available from the FIS for the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF for Africa).

EU asylum and migration policy and its instruments have been criticized for their one-sided focus on managing irregular migration and return at the expense of protecting refugees (ECRE, 2017). To counter this criticism, the Commission points out that 80% of the humanitarian budget of EUR 1.2 billion (2018) and EUR 1.6 billion (2019) is earmarked for forcibly displaced persons and host communities to address immediate, basic needs in conflict, crisis and long-term displacement (European Commission, 2020). In addition, the EU intends to step up measures to ensure that member states meet their current resettlement commitments.

Considering the observed convergence in the paradigms of global and EU policies on humanitarianism, migration and refugees, we set out to explore whether such convergence can also be recognized in the policies of different EU member states.

EUROPEAN STATES³

This section briefly reviews how 'protection in the region' initiatives are considered and promoted by six European countries – Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom – for three specific refugee-hosting countries: Ethiopia, Jordan and Lebanon. After a brief look at national priorities, we review these countries' participation in multilateral and national initiatives and conclude with a brief reflection.

National Priorities

Each of the six European countries reviewed has its own specific national strategy. Denmark has shown a commitment to support and protect refugees, stateless people (e.g. Palestinians in Syria and Lebanon), returnees and internally displaced people and to promote sustainable solutions. UNHCR has praised Denmark for its support of multi-year interventions in protracted situations, systematic engagement with development actors, flexible funding mechanisms and creative solutions to displacement (UNHCR, 2021a).

The French and German governments have been actively engaged in the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR, 2021b, 2021c). France urges attention to displacement caused by war and persecution and is committed to supporting receiving communities. The country takes a proactive stance in linking humanitarian aid with development cooperation and aims to strengthen the resilience and economic independence of refugees and to promote gender equality, education, energy provision and develop infrastructure in the reception areas. Germany stresses humanitarian principles in emergency aid and supports initiatives following a three-pronged approach: tackling the root causes of displacement; supporting refugees; and stabilizing and strengthening host communities (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2021b). The country focuses largely on education and job creation (Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, 2021).

The Netherlands' approach bears some similarities to that of Germany: playing an active role in EU and international policy, shaping its interventions in line with such frameworks such as the GCR and focusing strongly on

education and job creation. However, the Dutch government stresses the need to adopt multilateral approaches, as it has a long history of cooperation in development and humanitarian aid. In addition, the Dutch include the private sector as an actor in 'protection in the region' initiatives.

Norway is pursuing an integrated approach that brings together aid to refugees and support to host communities. It has also been commended by UNHCR for its generous financial support to the UNHCR resettlement program for the most vulnerable refugees (UNHCR, 2021d). The UK government provides important support to UNHCR and is committed to the protection of forcibly displaced persons. It often takes the lead in international policies targeting vulnerable groups (such as women, girls and the disabled) and introduces measures to address the risks of sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation and abuse (UNHCR, 2021e).

Multilateral and national initiatives

All countries except for the Netherlands participate in the Syria Refugee Response and Resilience Plan (3RP), which is implemented in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Egypt. All countries except for France also participate in the Ethiopia Country Refugee Response Plan (ECRRP) led by the UN and the Ethiopian government. Germany is strongly committed to the ECRRP, helping to address the needs of large numbers of displaced persons, including, as of August 2020, 770,000 registered refugees mainly from South Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea.

Denmark plays a leading role in the EU's Regional Development and Protection Program (RDPPII) in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq (2018–2021). France also contributes to this initiative through the *Agence Française de Développement* (AFD). The Dutch government has played a leading role in the RDPP in Ethiopia (EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 2020), which involves many international humanitarian partners and receives funding through the EUTF for Africa.

In addition to these multilateral initiatives, these six European countries promote their own initiatives, often through their national development agencies. For example, the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) is involved in two sustainable solutions initiatives. The Solutions Alliance is a multi-agency initiative that raises awareness of displacement as a development challenge and promotes legal and humanitarian solutions for forcibly displaced persons. DANIDA is a funding-partner of the Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS), which was established in 2015 to promote sustainable solutions for displaced communities in the Horn of Africa. ReDSS focuses specifically on sustainable solutions for displaced persons.

Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) works closely with two institutions for the implementation of the initiatives and the provision of services: the German Development Bank (KfW), an important funding channel in German development cooperation and the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ). In Jordan and Lebanon, German government-backed initiatives targeting refugees and local communities are underway to promote long-term integration and inclusion. They support the development of infrastructure such as schools and health centres and voluntary return assistance (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2021c). From 2016 to 2018, the German government was the sole donor to the Partnership for Prospects (P4P) and cofunded the Jordan Response Plan with the US from 2020 to 2022. The KfW supports a number of projects to help Syrian and Palestinian refugees. In Africa, the German government contributed to an initiative on migration between the Horn of Africa and the EU under the Karthoum process (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2021a). In Ethiopia, the German government prioritizes activities to promote sustainable development, vocational education, agriculture, food security and biodiversity. The German Development Bank (KfW) and the Norwegian Organization for Development Cooperation (NORAD) collaborate in a program that promotes refugee employment.

In 2018 the Dutch government initiated the Prospects Partnership, which is a five-year international partnership program with the World Bank Group (the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation), UNICEF,

UNHCR and the ILO to enhance cooperation with (local) governments, the private sector and other parties and address long-term displacement. This innovative partnership model includes investments in education, employment and protection in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Uganda, Kenya, Sudan and Ethiopia, with a focus on refugees, internally displaced persons and vulnerable host communities (Government of the Netherlands, 2021; ILO, 2020; Kaag, 2021). In line with its 'trade and aid approach', the Netherlands is committed to strengthening the role of the private sector. For example, during the Dutch Business Summit organized by the TENT Foundation on 8 April 2019, fifteen Dutch companies (including ING, Philips, Randstad and ABN-AMRO) committed themselves to provide employment for 3500 refugees in the Netherlands and abroad (Spark, 2019; Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2019).

In addition to 'protection in the region' initiatives, a number of European countries are actively seeking to introduce various forms of 'external processing'. This tactic is not part of protection in the region policies, yet in political discourse it is often conflated with protection in the region and, hence, we briefly review it here. The French government established pilot projects to screen asylum seekers in Niger and Chad, including migrants who were evacuated from Libya, with a promise that France would resettle some of them to France (Giraudon, 2018). Taking 'external processing' a step further, the Danish parliament's passed Bill L 226 in June 2021 for the transfer of asylum seekers who have reached Denmark to a third country outside of the EU for the processing of asylum claims and the protection of asylum seekers (Tan & Vedsted-Hansen, 2021). The UK followed suit with its Nationality and Borders Bill that includes 'offshore asylum processing' and signals a strong interest in promoting reception in the region as a way to decrease potential onward migration to Britain (Ansems de Vries, 2021; Evans, 2020; Lewis et al., 2020). In a bold move, the UK government concluded a Memorandum of Understanding with the government of Rwanda in April 2022 for a partnership whereby the UK would transfer asylum seekers in the UK whose claim is not considered by the UK government to Rwanda for processing and eventual settlement or removal. This controversial UK-Rwanda agreement was signed before the passage of the recent Nationality and Borders Bill into law, which meant the agreement had no legal ground. Moreover, it is incompatible with refugee, human rights and anti-trafficking law as well as the Global Compacts (Grundler & Guild, 2022). Although the Prime Minister himself made claims that transfers would start in 2022, it is unclear whether the UK-Rwanda partnership can be implemented given these legal challenges.

Converging objectives with national peculiarities

The above review shows how protection in the region has indeed become a central tenet of international policy across the EU. Notwithstanding its long pedigree in practice, as policy this approach is a relatively new development. The emphasis on reception in the region has gone together with the humanitarianism-development nexus discourse, which stresses the collaboration of donor countries with national and local authorities, the localization of responsibilities and action and the promotion of resilience of refugees and host communities. Notwithstanding differences in focus between the six countries reviewed here, there is an undeniable policy convergence aimed at improving the resilience and local integration of refugees and host communities through education and employment and through multilateral initiatives that bring together development and humanitarian actors. The humanitarian approach has thus been reshaped, coming to rely on a manifold of initiatives and the participation of an ample variety of international organizations and development actors (Zetter, 2020). Part two of this article will briefly explore the rationale behind this policy convergence, before examining the potential conceptual and practical drawbacks of the 'protection in the region' approach.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON PROTECTION IN THE REGION

Policy convergence and the merging of governmental and institutional interests

The widespread adoption of the 'protection in the region' approach within the last five years is rooted in the blurring between migration and forced migration politics and the convergence of humanitarianism, development and migration. High fiscal concerns in European states about welfare costs and efficiency of social protection in general drive domestic policies and international approaches, specifically reductions in humanitarian and development aid. In the UK, for example, there has been an ongoing battle to stop development aid (Worley, 2021), while various European countries rationalize the reception of refugees and asylum seekers through analyses of the financial costs and benefits of accepting and supporting refugees. Most analyses, however, show much more nuanced evidence of the fiscal burden posed by refugees (Clemens, 2017; Kroet, 2017; NL Times, 2016; Ruist, 2016).

The nexus between refugee protection and migration control has become increasingly visible since 2015. After the peak in arrivals from Syria, the EU and its member states have reinforced its external borders, intensified the fight against irregular migration and, in vain, aimed to reform the Common European Asylum System. In August 2021, the fall of Kabul, Afghanistan and Belarus' instrumentalization of migrants immediately raised concerns of a new 'refugee crisis' (Sieradzka, 2021). National governments were also concerned about public pushback, such as riots against the arrival of a few hundred refugees in the Netherlands (Euronews, AP and DPA, 2021). An organized EU response eventually started to take shape. Spain received Afghan asylum seekers temporarily before their onward journey to other EU member states, and several European states and the US rushed to offer millions in aid to countries close to Afghanistan to temporarily host Afghan refugees while security checks needed for their onward journey to Europe and the US took place (Oltermann & Kassam, 2021; Wintour, 2021). European leaders have stressed the importance of containment of Afghan migrations towards Europe, and Horst Seehofer, the German minister of interior, made it clear that 'The first priority is accommodation in neighbouring countries and the support of states in the region' (Oltermann & Kassam, 2021). Thus, for the EU and its member states as well as for many other countries in the Global North, the main concerns may be summed up as the need to limit arrivals to their own countries and support cost-efficient initiatives justifiable to their constituencies while retaining their commitment to human rights protection and compliance with international law. Because three of the four main objectives of the GCR put the responsibility on host countries in the region, countries of origin and the refugee themselves, the convergence of refugee protection with migration policies strongly reflects the interests of states in the Global North, whose role is to contribute financially and, to a much lesser extent, explore official solutions for refugees' resettlement or legal migration to the EU.

For host countries in the region, protection in the region has added responsibilities but also opened new opportunities. In a study of the policy diffusion of protection in the region policies, Freier et al. (2021) show how host countries have learned from each other and are engaged in collaborative processes to transform these new initiatives into new norms and standard practice. Thus, Turkey's negotiation strategy to secure the 2016 EU-Turkey deal was adopted by Kenya less than two months later to secure more funds for hosting refugees in the Dadaab refugee camps, while Erdogan used the refugee situation again in February 2020 to pressure Western states to support a 'safe zone' in northern Syria. International organizations play an important role in this process. UNHCR has promoted the cooperation of many countries in the 3RP to coordinate responses and promote shared planning and standardized tools to assist Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq. All the while, institutions that support international frameworks like the GCR have been emulating these approaches and joining in a growing choir of organizations singing its praises while providing funds and logistical power to implement them. The multi-level cooperative framework of the 2016 Jordan Compact became the model for the Lebanon Compact (2016-2017) and Ethiopia's Job Compact in 2016 (Freier et al., 2021), which, altogether, demonstrate the rapid proliferation of these initiatives.

Protection in the region is advocated as a 'magic bullet' that can operationalize responsibility sharing and give host countries the necessary resources to promote development for their own populations as well as for refugees. Indeed, it seems to accommodate policy interests of different sides: the Global North can pay to remove itself from the responsibilities of burden sharing; and host countries in the region use the situation for rent-seeking, a process known as the 'commodification of refugees' (Freier et al., 2021). Despite the official praises of these initiatives, do these policies address the refugees' need for short-term protection and humanitarian assistance as well as long-term integration? And, more broadly, what evidence do we have of the effects of these policies? The next section focuses on the conceptual weaknesses and the practical risks of protection in the region, including an assessment of how these initiatives meet the interests of forcibly displaced people.

Conceptual weaknesses

Protection in the region, notwithstanding the validity of its intentions towards dignified refugee care, is based on a few problematic assumptions. Four of these stand out as the possible source of important future challenges: the feasibility of jump-starting economic development; the role of the private sector; the idea of refugees as agents of development; and the notion that, with development, forcibly displaced people will not travel onwards.

The first point concerns the feasibility of promoting development in host countries to ensure a livelihood to large numbers of forcibly displaced people on short notice. Development projects have a long history of successes and failures, pointing both to questions of the feasibility of bringing about positive change at the community level as well as long-term sustainable development at regional and national levels (Tarp, 2006). One of the main concerns raised by the arrival of forcibly displaced people is the potential 'downward pressure effect' on wages of the sudden enlargement of the labour force (Chambers, 1986). To solve this problem, donors and multilateral actors, such as the ILO, UNHCR and UNDP, stress the need to diversify and expand labour markets in host countries and create employment opportunities for refugees and nationals alike (Zetter, 2020). This is not an easy endeavour, as demonstrated by the challenges faced in the Jordan Compact: after 3 years of implementation, it became clear that greater efforts were needed to foster a better business environment and encourage the creation of formal businesses as key precursors for the expansion of the labour market. Moreover, evaluators observed that the jobs created in the Jordan Compact did not provide satisfactory working conditions and wages for workers (Huang & Gough, 2019). Jump-starting entrepreneurial growth to expand the labour market with suitable jobs can be problematic and promoting local integration and refugee resilience through employment may be harder to achieve than it first appears.

The difficulties in triggering economic development and the growth of the labour market is closely associated with the second concern: the role of the private sector. Commercial actors have become important players in the humanitarian-development nexus through their role as investors, innovators and promoters of entrepreneurship and job creation. However, we notice that, in these initiatives, businesses are asked to invest in high-risk environments. To offset these uncertainties, a merchant bank has proposed to underwrite these risks (Zetter, 2020). However, the creation of a better business environment is essential for a sustainable approach: this involves facilitating procedures to register businesses, clarifying regulations and simplifying bureaucratic processes around entrepreneurship as well as ensuring suitable infrastructure (i.e. energy and transport) to enable daily operations. In addition, there must be an adequate level of security and an appropriate workforce available. This latter issue has been identified as a weakness of the Jordan Compact, since the special economic zones are located far from where Syrian refugees live (Huang & Gough, 2019). While the private sector may accept some investment risks, ultimately the host country must be willing and able to provide a minimum level of public services. It is uncertain whether protection in the region initiatives can effectively address long-term structural challenges. An unsuitable investment climate could threaten the sustainability of these humanitarian-private partnerships and the livelihood of refugee communities.

The third problematic notion of the humanitarian-development nexus is the economic value placed on refugees. Humanitarian agencies have intentionally introduced the idea that refugees may be made responsible for their own survival because they are active agents of development rather than 'passive recipients of assistance', an idea aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (Zetter, 2020: 6). This shift mirrors the emergence of the migration-development nexus starting in the mid-2000s (Geiger & Pécoud, 2013; Nyberg-Sørensen et al., 2002), when migrants and returnees were designated as agents of development because of their transnational engagement, of which remittances are the most obvious example (de Haas, 2006; Durand et al., 1996; Levitt, 1998; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). Yet, research also shows that the interests of migrants and returnees in the development of their home community is secondary to their own interests and those of their family (de Haas & Vezzoli, 2010). Moreover, migrants and returnees might not have the necessary skills and connections to promote development initiatives (Bovenkerk, 1981).

Similar criticism could apply to the role of refugees as 'agents of development'. While refugees may engage in entrepreneurial activities in host countries, it would be overly optimistic to consider them as drivers of economic development under their often precarious conditions in host countries. A key to 'protection in the region' initiatives would be the legal recognition of refugees' status in order to provide the stability required for local development. As a means to facilitate the active role of refugees in development, there has been a shift under the humanitarian-development approach from service provision to cash transfers: recipients are encouraged to put cash to good use, for example through micro-enterprises (Zetter, 2020). However, a study on Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon found that the large majority (88 per cent) were poor or living on the poverty line. The provided in-cash assistance helped them to meet their basic needs but did not allow for productive investment. Furthermore, the absence of labour market access and economic opportunities prevented them from developing long-term strategies for their integration in the host community (Verme et al., 2015). While cash contributions symbolize the move towards empowerment, rather than promoting entrepreneurship, they may instead simply enable subsistence.

Lastly but crucially, we question the assumption that local integration will prevent onward travel. Once again the debate on the migration-development nexus is informative as it is based on a similar logic. Research shows that while development may change migration patterns, it does not necessarily reduce migration (Clemens, 2014; Zelinsky, 1971). In fact, the process of socio-economic development, which includes increasing incomes and access to better education, is associated with an increase in life and migration aspirations (de Haas, 2021; de Haas et al., 2020; Schewel & Fransen, 2018). How development affects onward migration aspirations of forcibly displaced people is not well-known as there are only a few recent studies available. A 2018 study into the motives of Syrian refugees to stay in Turkey showed both a wish and yet an inability to return to Syria safely after the conflict in combination with relative satisfaction with life in Turkey and negative perceptions of life in Europe (Müller Funk, 2019). As with migration decision-making in general, moving onwards is based on a combination of factors. Migration is as much influenced by what people value within their social environment (de Jong, 2000), their satisfaction with local life (Ivlevs, 2015), their personal objectives and what they perceive they can achieve locally (Vezzoli, 2022). Moreover, the possibilities for successful local integration do matter. Importantly, sudden displacement may have resulted in the interruption of life projects, such as studying at university, starting a business or a family. A mismatch between interrupted or new life projects and possibilities in host countries may, therefore, trigger onward movement despite ongoing development initiatives.

Practical risks

Beyond the conceptual problems with protection in the region, a few practical risks have also been observed that may lead to consequences for forcibly displaced people and for the countries involved in these initiatives. Since host countries in the region have historically hosted large refugee populations, the new focus on protection in

the region finally provides financial resources that can be used to benefit refugees as well as other segments of societies. However, Freier et al. (2021) observed that host countries have adopted rent-seeking behaviour in order to keep refugees within their borders. Moreover, they identified the emergence of 'refugee commodification', whereby asylum seekers, refugees and displaced people are used to obtain payoffs by state and non-state actors (Freier et al., 2021). Both developments increase volatility as political pressure and retaliations may lead to the withdrawal of big donors' financial support for these initiatives, putting in jeopardy the services needed by refugees on the ground. Moreover, while promoting refugee protection increases the security of host states (Lischer, 2017), it remains unclear whether further concentrations of refugee populations in regions that already carry great responsibility might increase risks of regional destabilization, including further population displacements.

A second risk is that many of the initiatives referred to in the country sections, such as the Syria 3RP and the RDPPs in North Africa and the Horn of Africa, aim for regional strategies that are complementary but in fact generally bring together plans that were designed for individual host countries. These disparate plans require the collaboration of various partners, which at times have different visions and even uneasy relations (Zetter, 2020). In an effort to be comprehensive in tackling regional challenges, these initiatives have a very large scale, which means they must address diverse realities and needs that differ not only across but within countries. For this reason, it is challenging to implement such projects and ensure that both the development and the protection objectives are achieved.

A third risk in the implementation is the donors' limited financial support for these initiatives. To start, it is unclear which financial resources are allocated to these initiatives because they cross the policy areas of humanitarian aid and development cooperation. Humanitarian flows of funds from the OECD countries are in principle reported to OCHA's 'financial tracking system' (FTS). However, according to our research, protection in the region initiatives are only partly classified as humanitarian aid and are, therefore, not registered in the FTS. Money flows outside the FTS are not bundled or only concern specific areas.⁴ The report 'Supporting Syria and the region: Post-Brussels conference - financial tracking', for example, includes programmes not found in the FTS but does include unrelated cash flows, such as support to Lebanon after the explosion in Beirut and funds for the fight against COVID-19. The financial commitment by the six European countries in this study reveal much variation, both in the funding made available and how the funds are dispensed. The Netherlands mainly channels funding through UN organizations such as UNHCR, while the German government contributes to UN agencies and EU programmes while also deploying its own development bank and a number of international and German NGOs. Overall, the lack of transparency and the mixed labelling of initiatives make it very difficult to assess the amount and type of donors' support. Because these initiatives require significant long-term financial commitments, they may become even more uncertain in the future as the inability of these initiatives to keep refugees in the region becomes more apparent.

Resettlement, one of the sustainable solutions for refugees, has been a point of tension between donor and host countries. Remarkably, protection in the region does not put a strong emphasis on resettlement by donor countries. In fact, donor countries remain hesitant even in meeting the current low resettlement figures they promised. Conversely, donor countries have been forthcoming in financing capacity-building activities to enhance migration controls. Several initiatives mentioned in earlier sections of this article include support for border controls and training of officials on identification processes and regulations.⁵ Their legitimacy is based in EU frameworks, such as the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, where the focus is on the management of the movements of migrants and refugees. It is here that we find the fourth and perhaps most problematic risk of the protection in the region approach: the presence of mixed objectives and a lack of clarity of priorities in these initiatives. Together, these pose grave risks to the protection of asylum seekers, refugees and displaced populations. In these initiatives, we find that the advancing of provision of protection and local integration are important yet may be overshadowed by an overriding concern to discourage migration and stop the arrival of refugees. The bundling of protection, development and migration control measures under a single program may seem like a magic bullet that efficiently and productively addresses all these issues at once. Yet, the economic principles of self-reliance, the

role given to the private sector, the misguided perceptions of job creation as a migration stopper and the strong focus on capacity-building work together to emphasize development as migration prevention and to marginalize protection needs. Overall, the numerous conceptual shortcomings and practical risks call into question both the viability of these initiatives and their short- and long-term effects on refugees, the local populations and host countries.

CONCLUSION

This article has offered a critical reflection on protection in the region initiatives, how they are situated within the humanitarian-development transition and the potential challenges to which they give rise. As shown, protection in the region - characterized by the integration of protection and humanitarian assistance with 'durable solutions' - has become a key tenet of international policy. It has rapidly been translated into EU policies, as well as policies of European countries. This article has been based on the initiatives promoted by six European countries in three host countries. We use these cases to illustrate the evolution of humanitarian aid into joint development and migration programmes and raise critical points about this transition in particular with regards to refugee protection.

Reception in the region meets the demands of countries in the Global North, such as the reduction of refugee arrivals and limiting public protests, while showing responsibility towards the human rights of refugees and the countries hosting these populations. These initiatives mark a transition from the provision of humanitarian aid based on a needs-based approach and entitlements under International Humanitarian Law to notions of cost-effectiveness; an understanding of refugees into active agents that are supposed to be self-reliant, economic actors engaged in the labour market; and the participation of the private sector - all approaches that justify the reduction of public welfare solutions.

Despite the rapid and wide adoption of these policies, this article identifies a number of flaws in the assumptions underlying the concept of reception in the region as well as risks for their implementation. Overall, the ability to generate sufficient opportunities for refugees and local populations in the short-term remains insufficiently substantiated. As such, there is a risk that the interests of refugee communities and the location population is subordinated to the dominant political objective of reducing migration to the EU.

It would be a mistake to suggest that the challenges emerging from these initiatives are unexpected consequences. Countries in the Global North are complicit in the strategies that are leading to rent-seeking and the commodification of refugees and the international community; humanitarian actors and donor countries together are pursuing international strategies that jeopardize humanitarian protection by blending humanitarian and development efforts with migration politics. Nevertheless, the development objectives of protection in the region initiatives also merit some credit. In a recent presentation of this article to an INGO, the attending development workers - including from host countries such as Ethiopia - indicated that they are aware of the instrumentalization of their programmes for migration politics and other dilemmas raised by these initiatives. However, they valued the possibilities to improve local infrastructure, expand the labour market, provide access to educational and health services and engender fair distribution of resources in host communities. What these development practitioners argued was that, in the end, given the high level of uncertainty, protection in the region initiatives require close monitoring and apt evaluations in order to assess them accurately, in particular in terms of what these initiatives mean in practice for the protection and sustainable livelihoods of forcibly displaced people.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the supplementary material of this article

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ See [Table A1](#) in the Supplementary Material for more details on the programmes listed in this section.
- ² See [Table A1](#) in the Supplementary Material for more details on the programmes listed in this section.
- ³ See [Table A2](#) in the Supplementary Material for more details on the programmes promoted by each European country listed in this section.
- ⁴ See [Table A3](#) in the Supplementary Material for more details on the funding streams in the FTS.
- ⁵ See [Table A2](#) in the Supplementary Material for more details.

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