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Seeking Legitimacy Through Knowledge Production: The Politics of Monitoring and Evaluation of the EU Trust Fund for Africa

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Abstract

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is a form of expert knowledge that is central to migration governance. This article analyses M&E of the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), created in 2015 to ‘fight the root causes of migration’. Combining institutionalist accounts with practice theory, we examine whether M&E knowledge production served the instrumental purpose of assessing policy impact or mainly legitimated particular policy actors and positions. We find that M&E did not produce evidence on whether the EUTF met its objectives. However, in the context of the EU’s multiple crises, M&E knowledge production served to seek legitimacy not only for the EUTF, but also for the further fusion of development and migration policies, and for the EU as a competent and transparent actor. Our analysis highlights that knowledge use and knowledge production are connected, and that M&E knowledge politics allow for the legitimization of both actors and policies.

Keywords: EU Trust Fund for Africa; evaluation; knowledge production; legitimacy; monitoring

Introduction

The EUTF ... is not an appropriate vehicle for addressing root causes of major societal problems. But it ... is producing important data and lessons learned (EUTF Mid-Term Evaluation, European Commission/GDSI, 2020, p. 7)

Five years after its creation, the ‘EU Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa’ (EUTF) was found in its Mid-Term Evaluation to be inadequate for reaching its original objectives, but apt at producing knowledge. As one of the key external policy responses to what came to be known as the EU’s refugee crisis (Niemann and Zaun, 2018; Hackenesch et al., 2021), this €5 billion fund for migration-related interventions on the African continent has invested massively in its monitoring and evaluation (M&E), which is described as pioneering and trendsetting (for example, European Commission/GDSI, 2020). The M&E website of the EUTF encompasses not only dozens of monitoring reports, case studies and reviews, but also an interactive website where anyone can look up the results of every single EUTF-funded project, down to the number of water points installed and border guards trained. To us as migration scholars, first encountering this M&E infrastructure was baffling. In twenty years of studying European migration politics, which have long been criticized for being opaque and anything but evidence-driven (Gatti, 2022), we had never seen anything like it.

The European Union has a long tradition of deploying M&E, as part of its self-understanding as a rule-giving and -following actor that values and promotes transparency and efficiency. For instance, M&E has played a crucial role in EU cohesion policy and the deployment of the structural funds, as well as in EU development policies (Polverari et al., 2007). However, M&E has been largely absent in EU migration policies, where sporadic efforts have been found to be ‘anecdotal, instead of being based on systematic data’ (Reslow, 2017, p. 158).

In order to make sense of M&E as a new phenomenon in EU migration governance, we turn to scholarship on the role of knowledge and expertise in policy-making. M&E is a particular field of ‘specialized, expert knowledge’ (Schwandt, 2015, p. 1), which has hitherto been neglected in scholarship on knowledge politics. Where monitoring assesses inputs and outputs – for example, numbers of goods delivered or jobs created, evaluation asks about the outcomes or impact of the policy (UNDP, 2009). Institutional accounts of knowledge use in EU policy-making (Boswell, 2008) have shown that beyond the instrumental function of improving policy quality, knowledge can be used to enhance the legitimacy of specific policies or policy actors. We complement these institutional perspectives with practice theory approaches, including those taking inspiration from science and technology studies (Korneev, 2018; Stachowitsch and Sachseder, 2019; Glouftisios and Scheel, 2020), to examine the role of *knowledge production* in the context of policy-making. Thus we ask: What purposes does the production of knowledge through M&E of the EUTF serve? Is knowledge production instrumental, or does it seek to enhance the legitimacy of particular policies or policy actors?

Empirically, our analysis draws on a document analysis of M&E reports as well as key informant interviews and background talks. This article starts by explaining how we theorize the knowledge politics of M&E. In the following sections, we describe the context of multiple legitimacy crises in which the EUTF was created and implemented, as well as our research approach. In the subsequent analysis, we observe that M&E did not serve the instrumental purpose of assessing whether the EUTF has achieved its objectives. However, in the context of multiple legitimacy crises which the EU faces as a polity, migration actor and development actor, the knowledge politics of M&E served primarily to seek legitimacy, not only for the EUTF as a policy instrument but also for the EU as a competent and transparent policy actor and for the further integration of migration rationales in EU development policies.

I. Theorizing the Knowledge Politics of M&E

Scholars of migration governance in the EU and its Member States have shown that knowledge produced by networks of government experts and EU agencies plays an important role in European migration politics (Boswell, 2008; Stachowitsch and Sachseder, 2019). In particular, this scholarship has highlighted how knowledge and expertise are key for lending legitimacy to specific policies and practices, and to certain actors or the EU as a whole. Building on this scholarship, we contend that M&E knowledge production is key for legitimizing and empowering specific policy rationales and actors in EU external migration policies.

Knowledge can be understood as a ‘codified, scholarly and professional mode of knowledge production that has its prime institutional loci in universities, policy analysis

units of government departments or international organizations and private research institutes and produced by academics, think tank experts and [policy] professionals' (Stone 2002, p. 2, quoted in Boswell, 2008, p. 486). Adopting an institutionalist perspective, Boswell (2008) studies the uses of knowledge and expertise in policy-making. She highlights that the legitimacy provided by knowledge and expertise strengthens the power position of policy actors who 'are fundamentally concerned to secure legitimacy, in the sense of meeting societal expectations about appropriate structures, practices, rhetoric or output' (Boswell, 2008, p. 473). Especially in politically unstable circumstances – where the distribution of authority, power and resources is in question – policy actors, such as different Directorate Generals (DGs) within the Commission, will seek to secure legitimacy through knowledge.

Boswell (2008, pp. 471–472) distinguishes three functions which knowledge and expertise may fulfil in the policy process. First, knowledge may serve the instrumental function of enabling policy-makers to 'ensure decisions are based on sound reasoning and empirical knowledge' so that they design high-quality policies that are likely to achieve their objectives. Second, knowledge may strengthen the legitimacy of an institution or organization, if it is used to show that an actor has the required knowledge and expertise to act competently in a policy field. Third and finally, knowledge may be used to strengthen the legitimacy of certain policy choices over alternative policy options.

Our analysis differs from Boswell's, in that we focus not on the *use* but on the *production* of knowledge in the context of policy-making. Knowledge is not a natural 'resource' to be harvested and used: its production is a social and political process (Carmel and Kan, 2018). Especially when knowledge or expertise is produced for the explicit purpose of informing policy, as M&E is, it is crucial to assess whether and how power relations between policy actors and paradigms are reflected and (re)produced in the process of knowledge production.

To do so, we complement Boswell's institutionalist perspective with a practice theory angle (Bueger and Gadinger, 2014; Côté-Boucher et al., 2014). Practice theoretical approaches to knowledge production in migration and security governance have highlighted that data, such as reports, statistics, charts and their classifications, crucially shape the very way we perceive social phenomena – such as 'migration' or 'the migrant' – and attach meaning to it (Glouftsiou and Scheel, 2020). As such, practices of knowledge production – whilst often perceived to be 'neutral' and 'objective' – have a deeply political dimension (Merry and Wood, 2015), or what Mol refers to as 'ontological politics' (Mol, 1999): the methodological frames, tools and methods deployed 'do not only describe but also help to produce the world' (Law, 2004, p. 5), which has political consequences (see, for example, Amore and De Goede, 2005). For practice theorists, it is thus not only knowledge use but also knowledge production – how data is collected, arranged, presented and visualized – that forms an essential part of *seeking* legitimacy for certain actors and policy positions. For instance, scholars have shown that Frontex's visualizations of oversized arrows of 'migration flows' produce the image that Europe is invaded by large numbers of 'irregular migrants', which in turn legitimizes Frontex as an actor and its practices of border control (van Houtum and Bueno Lacy, 2020).

Fusing Boswell's institutional perspective with practice theory approaches, we contend that knowledge *production* may also be geared towards three functions. Knowledge production can be instrumental, where the way data are collected and analysed follows

established scientific standards that allow for evidence-based policy-making or adjustment of policies to improve their impact. Knowledge production can also legitimate policy actors, where particular actors gain authority and influence through their participation in knowledge production and/or through the way they are represented in expert reports. Finally, knowledge can be collected and presented in a way that legitimates particular policy logics or approaches. With regard to the EUTF, we seek to understand whether the production of M&E knowledge was instrumental, or whether it created legitimacy for particular policy actors and policy agendas at the intersection of development and migration.

M&E, as it is practised in the EUTF and in many other contexts, constitutes a thriving professional field, with dedicated academic journals and some 140 'national, regional, and inter-national evaluation associations and societies' (Schwandt, 2015, p. 6). In line with practice theorists' views, we follow Dahler-Larsen (2012, p. 13) in conceptualizing M&E as 'an artificial or consciously constructed mechanism for creating meaning'. Thus, we consider the practice of M&E not as a 'politics-free' research exercise but as a value-laden inherent part of the *policy-making* process (Werner and Wegrich, 2007, p. 54), through which policy problems are construed and policy interventions, actors and positions are legitimized.

II. Seeking Legitimacy in a Context of Multiple Legitimacy Crises

The EU Trust Fund for Africa was established in 2015, at the height of what came to be known as the refugee crisis. It funds a combination of security, development and migration management projects across the African continent. Whilst its aim is to fight the 'root causes' of migration, more than 80 per cent of EU funds contributed to the EUTF came from the European Development Fund and the Development Cooperation Instrument (personal communication European Commission, 2022). It thus represents a new step in the fusion of migration and development policies, which has been a key feature of EU external migration governance since the early 2000s (Lavenex and Kunz, 2008).

The EUTF was created and implemented in a context of multiple legitimacy crises facing the EU as a polity, as a development actor and as a migration actor. Legitimacy, in Max Weber's classic definition, is the 'belief' which lies 'at the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey' (Weber, 1964, p. 382). The legitimacy of the EU as a polity has been in question since its inception (cf. Hansen and Williams, 1999; Moravcsik, 2002), with concerns framed mostly in terms of its alleged democratic deficit but also in terms of whether EU policies contribute to the public good, or whether its procedures are transparent and accountable. In essence, 'Europe's crisis of legitimacy' boils down to enduring insecurity about the question: 'Does the EU benefit from the legitimacy required of any governing body, namely citizens' unquestioning acceptance of its authority?' (Schmidt, 2020, p. 7). In both migration policies and development policies, the question of legitimacy is especially fraught, since the people primarily affected by these policies are not members of the polity on behalf of whom the policies are conducted. These policies therefore face challenges not only of internal legitimacy – in the eyes of EU audiences – but also of external legitimacy – in the eyes of non-EU audiences.

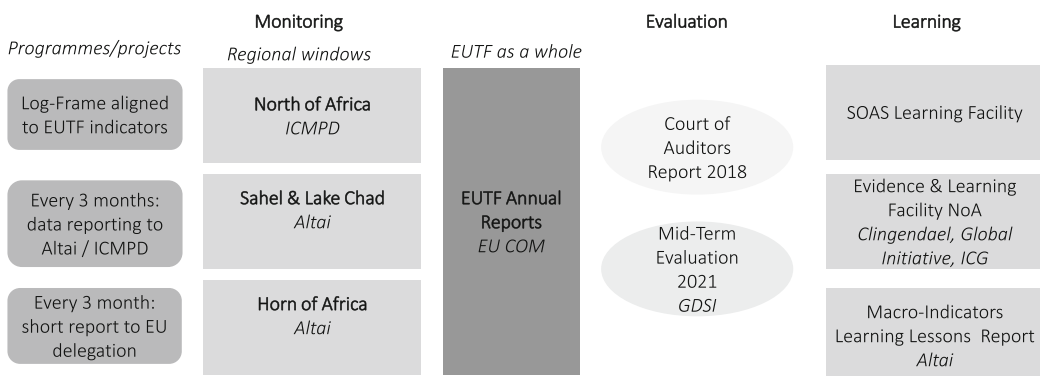
At the time of the EUTF's creation in 2015, the EU's legitimacy was shaken both internally and externally by what came to be known as Europe's 'refugee crisis'. In reaction

to the civil war in Syria and dire conditions in countries of first refuge, the EU saw an increase in people arriving at its shores to seek protection as well as an increase in migrant fatalities at its borders. The EU and its Common European Asylum System (CEAS) were seen to fail, both at their humanitarian goal to save lives and at their aim to protect and manage European external borders (Moreno-Lax, 2018). The political deadlock on how to fairly distribute responsibility amongst EU Member States further fuelled populists' rhetoric of 'loss of control' and demands to 'return to sovereignty' (Bhambra, 2017; Niemann and Zaun, 2018). These multiple and contradictory perceived failures strengthened calls for collective action on border control at the EU level to reduce arrivals and fatalities. The EUTF was created in 2015 in response to such calls.

Yet, long before 2015, the legitimacy of EU external migration policies was contested. These policies were broadly criticized for being exclusively oriented towards 'control and repression', which was seen not only as 'ineffective' but also as violating the Union's own values, its image and legitimacy in the world (Lavenex and Kunz, 2008, p. 450). The 'migration and development' approach was introduced in the 2000s precisely to address such criticism. However, despite 20 years of rhetoric on equal partnership with third countries and migrants' rights, scholars agree that migration management logics, which prioritize Member States' self-interest in controlling migration, have systematically prevailed (Reslow, 2017, p. 394; cf. Lavenex and Kunz, 2008, p. 454; Hansen and Jonsson, 2011).

EU development policies in turn have faced their own legitimacy crisis. In the past, the EU was globally recognized as a leading development actor, and the DG in charge of development was particularly influential in Brussels in shaping EU external policies. However, more recently, this influential position has been undermined both externally by the rise of BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), especially China, as global development actors, and internally, as the development DG has lost power to DGs working on foreign policies, neighbourhood policies, trade and migration (Delputte and Orbie, 2020). Furness et al. (2020) note that EU development actors are under pressure within the EU from populist politicians to prove the 'usefulness' of development policies, notably by showing that development can help to curb migration, whilst at the same time this 'instrumentalization of aid' is contested in development circles within and

Figure 1: Architecture of the EUTFs Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning System



outside the EU. Challenged on both ends, EU development actors must thread a fine line to maintain or strengthen their legitimacy.

We argue that in the context of these multiple legitimacy crises, some acute and some longstanding, the M&E knowledge production of the EUTF was oriented first and foremost not at improving policies, but at seeking legitimacy.

III. The M&E System of the EUTF

The EUTF's M&E system appears to be one of the most ambitious efforts to report and evaluate EU-funded external migration policies. The EUTF website presents it as cutting across three levels: individual programmes, regions, and the EUTF for Africa as a whole (European Commission, 2021b). We summarize in Figure 1 the different components, actors and activities of the EUTF's M&E system, based on our document analysis and key informant interviews.

The EU has commissioned monitoring partners to take charge of the three regional windows. The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), a Vienna-based international organization, is responsible for the North of Africa window, which falls under the competence of the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). Altai, a Paris-based company that specializes in 'addressing the challenges faced by developing countries' (Altai, 2022a), is in charge of the other two regional windows, Sahel/Lake Chad and the Horn of Africa, which are managed by the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), previously DG DEVCO. Out of the €18 million budget committed to the EUTF Monitoring and Learning System, almost €2.5 million went to ICMPD and over €14 million to Altai (personal communication European Commission, 2022). Implementing partners regularly report the progress made in individual projects to these monitoring partners and to EU delegations. ICMPD and Altai in turn produce regular regional monitoring reports, which mostly aggregate quantifiable outputs next to some qualitative studies of selected projects. At the level of the EUTF as a whole, the Commission's yearly reports summarize the aggregated outputs from the different regions and delve into the broader strategic orientation of the Trust Fund. It is in this multi-layered and multi-actor context that the EUTF's M&E knowledge is produced.

Data and Research Approach

Our analysis draws on a document analysis of various M&E reports as well as key informant interviews and background talks with 19 respondents of the wider community of practice of the EUTF's M&E system: representatives of the EU Commission, EU Member States, and EU delegations, M&E specialists from implementing partners, as well as monitoring actors, such as Altai and ICMPD (see supplementary material). We have collected all relevant documents via the EUTF website (European Commission 2021a). Our sampling strategy for interview partners sought to cover the diversity of M&E actors to better understand the overall M&E architecture and various M&E knowledge practices. We obtained consent for recording interviews and using them in an anonymized way. Interviews aimed to triangulate information from documents on the creation and development of the M&E system and to enquire about interviewees' views on M&E as a practice,

the challenges it entails and purposes it should serve. As interviews focused on knowledge *production*, the *use* of M&E knowledge by various audiences lies beyond the scope of this article. Drawing on interpretive policy analysis and supported by Atlas.ti, we have analysed the data with a focus on M&E actors' interpretations of (1) the EUTF as a policy instrument: its creation, objectives, implementation and impact; and (2) the EUTF's M&E system: the process of its creation; the practices of collecting, aggregating and communicating knowledge; and the substantiating and legitimating functions of M&E knowledge in the wider policy process.

Analysis

What are the functions of knowledge production through M&E of the EUTF? Is knowledge production instrumental, or does it seek to enhance the legitimacy of particular policies or policy actors?

Measuring Policy Impact

In principle, the purpose of M&E activities is *instrumental* knowledge production: to assess to what extent policies meet their objectives. M&E practices rest on the 'normative rationale that, finally, policy-making should be appraised against intended objectives and impacts' (Werner and Wegrich, 2007, p. 53). Thus, both a policy and its M&E system are shaped by causal claims that specific interventions will result in specific outcomes.

According to its main website, the objective of the EUTF was 'to address the root causes of instability, forced displacement and irregular migration and to contribute to better migration management', mainly through development co-operation (European Commission, 2021a). The 'Strategic Orientation Document', which the Commission presented shortly after the creation of the EUTF, states that its 'overall impact – the desired end result – should include a more inclusive political and economic environment across the regions, expansion and strengthening of the rule of law, increased economic productivity and social cohesion and new opportunities for local populations' (European Commission, 2015, p. 2). In short, the Trust Fund aimed at reducing undocumented and/or refugee movements to the EU, by improving living conditions and 'migration management' in African countries.

The Strategic Orientation Document states that the EUTF will be 'based on an ... evidence-driven approach' (European Commission, 2015, p. 2), which demonstrates not only the desire to use knowledge instrumentally to improve EUTF policies, but also the EU's ambition to present itself as a rational and knowledgeable foreign policy actor whose migration governance is fact-based. However, the causal claim of the 'development–migration' nexus which underlies the EUTF is not evidence-based. In fact, there is broad consensus amongst migration scholars that more development does not necessarily contribute to stopping migration but instead often creates the financial and social capital necessary for people to migrate in the first place (for example, De Haas, 2005). Put simply, development more often than not fosters instead of curbs mobility. Zaun and Nantermoz (2022) show that many policy actors involved in shaping the EUTF, notably within the Commission, were well aware that the 'root causes' narrative underlying the EUTF contradicts current scientific consensus. They argue that an important reason for

still adopting the EUTF was that it allowed the Commission to bridge the divide between Member States which favoured migration control, and those who wanted funds to be allocated to development policies. Indeed, ‘the very inaccuracy of the “root causes” narrative, in fact, served to reconcile the need for talking about migration control while largely acting to preserve the core of development policy’ (2022, p. 523). Thus, the EUTF was based on a flawed causal logic, which allowed it to be supported by actors with very different policy objectives.

These flaws and tensions between development and migration agendas built into the very rationale of the trust fund inevitably rubbed off on its M&E knowledge production. The EUTF’s objectives and causal logics were so poorly defined that it was unclear what exactly would count as ‘success’. The 2018 European Court of Auditor’s report (2018, p. 4) for instance found that:

the objectives of the EUTF for Africa are broad. This has allowed flexibility in terms of adapting the support to suit different and changing situations, but is less useful when it comes to steering action across the three windows and for measuring impact.

Different actors have acknowledged that the initial EUTF objectives were not just broad or vague, but unachievable. For instance, Altai (2021, p. 25) reports that ‘Many interlocutors, notably from the [EU Delegations], pointed out that the EUTF’s time frame was too short to show concrete achievements and even more so for desired systemic change’. Without clearly defined objectives or scientifically sound causal logics, M&E knowledge production could not be instrumental as it was bound to fail at assessing to what extent the EUTF achieved its policy goals.

Still, the M&E knowledge practices we observed demonstrate the clear *attempt* at different levels to produce valid and comparable knowledge about the linkages between migration and development. For example, on behalf of the Commission, Altai strove to mainstream the reporting of multiple implementing partners into EUTF common output indicators (European Commission, n.d.). These partners included traditional development actors such as the German *Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) with long-established M&E practices of their own, as well as major international organizations in the field of (forced) migration such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which expanded their M&E efforts through EUTF requirements and funding (Interview GIZ; Interview IOM). Next to enabling aggregation of outputs, these standardized indicators were crucial to infuse development projects on the ground with migration management rationales, for instance by requesting implementing partners to report on migratory status and intentions of persons they assisted (Interview GIZ, Interview Plan International).

Despite all these efforts, the standardized indicators could only measure outputs not outcomes, as evaluating the impact of the EUTF was further hampered by methodological problems. M&E experts generally recommend building M&E into the policy from the outset (for example, UNDP, 2009). However, the Commission initiated the EUTF’s M&E system only in October 2016, one year after the creation of the fund. It took until October 2018 to become fully operational (European Commission, 2021b). As a result, there was no baseline assessment, that is, no assessment prior to implementation, which would have allowed for measuring subsequent change (ECoA, 2018, p. 4). Furthermore, attempts at defining a shared methodology for measuring the overall impact of the EUTF

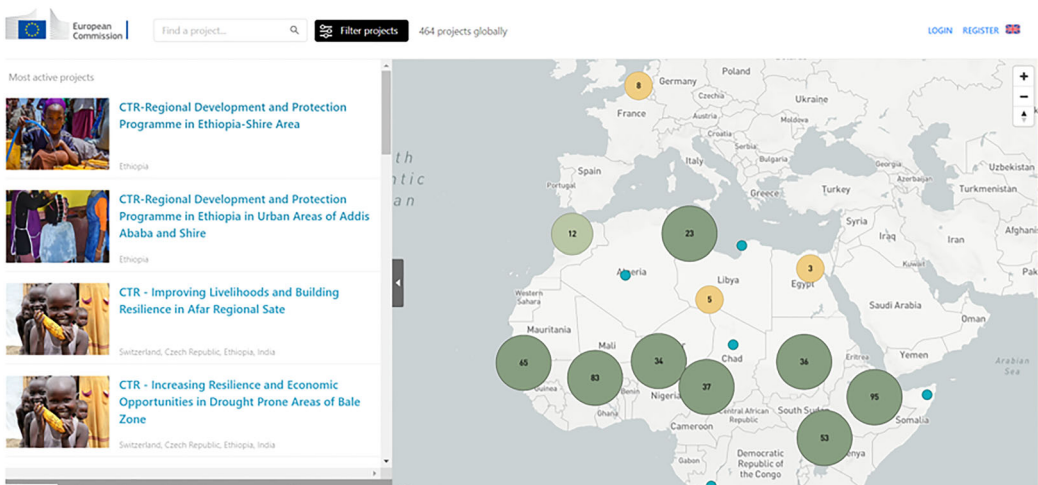
as a whole failed. In an overview on ‘outcomes and impacts’, Altai and the EU Commission highlighted the lack of common output and impact indicators as a central challenge to measuring the EUTF’s impact (Altai and EU Commission, 2020). In sum, the M&E of the EUTF – no matter how substantive the efforts and budgets allocated to it – has not served the instrumental function of producing evidence on whether or not the programmes funded under the EUTF have impacted migration.

Seeking Legitimacy for the EUTF vis-à-vis European Publics

The EUTF was in dire need of substantiation, that is, of bolstering its legitimacy as a policy. From the early days of its initiation, the EUTF has been criticized for its opaque governance structure and project selection procedures, as well as its lack of parliamentary control and accountability. Like other policy responses to the ‘EU migration crisis’, the EUTF was established as an ‘emergency’ instrument outside of regular EU policy-making structures, thus limiting the formal role of the EU Parliament and Court and circumventing official requirements for impact assessments (Kipp, 2018; Spijkerboer and Steyger, 2019; Zardo, 2022). For instance, a 2018 think tank report concluded that ‘[w]hile the instrument allows more flexibility, it does not respect certain criteria, notably policy impact assessment, democratic control, quality and transparency, which are required for the effective use of ODA [Official Development Assistance]’ (Zandonini, 2018, p. 13).

The step-wise introduction and expansion of the fund’s M&E system was thus also a direct response to such criticism, so that M&E knowledge became increasingly represented as an alternative means to legitimize the EUTF internally and externally, instead of formalized reporting requirements and parliamentary scrutiny. Members of the EU Commission put forward the website and its special section on ‘Results, Monitoring

Figure 2: **AKVO Online Platform for the EUTF.** Source: European Commission (2021c) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]



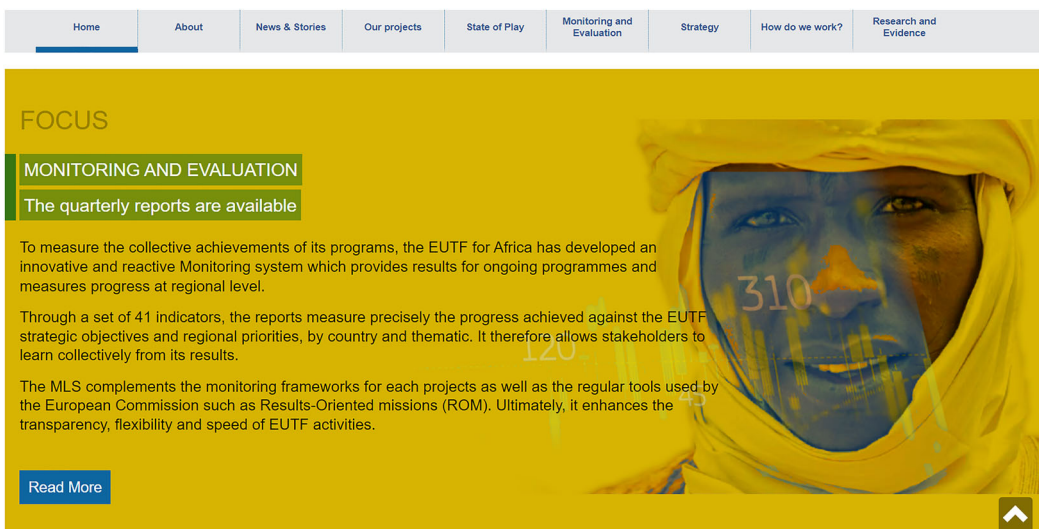
and Evaluation' as a central tool to increase transparency and praised the reporting as unprecedented compared to previous activities (Interviews EU Commission). Similarly, the EUTF's 2019 annual report (European Commission, 2020, p. 7) emphasizes that '[a]ccountability and transparency have been improved [...] by regularly updating the EUTF website', and through social media and communication events such as photo exhibitions.

The EUTF's website and online communication are thus key features to legitimize the EUTF as a policy and the EU as a both competent and accountable actor in external migration governance and development co-operation. In these legitimating efforts, the way in which knowledge is produced and presented to the wider public is central. The website impresses by the sheer number and diversity of reports and results. Especially impressive is the online platform AKVO (European Commission, 2021c) (Figure 2).

Visually, the AKVO map suggests a broad scope of EUTF-funded projects and a strong European presence across the African continent: the project circles visually obliterate some of the countries on the map, whilst the actual location of projects remains obscure without zooming in. The way knowledge is presented here thus, on the one hand, impresses upon EU Member States and their constituencies that 'something is being done' about migration beyond the EU's borders. On the other hand, it creates the impression of the EU as a development actor having a strong foothold on the African continent, despite challenges by new development actors like China (Delputte and Orbie, 2020).

Notably, through the AKVO platform, the EU presents itself as a particularly *transparent* development actor. AKVO allows visitors to click through interactive maps and lists to identify individual programmes, their budgets and results in terms of quantitative indicators such as 'jobs created' or 'number of people benefitting from social services'. The AKVO website thus performs transparency in a powerful way: its interactive flashy

Figure 3: **Section of EUTF Website.** *Source:* European Commission (2021a) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]



format suggests that all relevant information about the EUTF is knowable and accessible. Whilst M&E feeds into reports addressing a wider public, monitoring on an operational level in principle does not serve a public purpose (Boswell, 2008, p. 476). However, the AKVO platform makes the results of each individual EUTF-funded project publicly available, in an effort to ‘ensure transparency’ (European Commission, 2021c). This aura of transparency is in sharp contrast to the opacity and difficulties in obtaining information about the EUTF that think tanks, NGOs and researchers have documented (for example, Kipp, 2018; Pacciardi and Berndtsson, 2022). However, the reason why M&E data is usually not directly reported to the public is that it takes considerable effort, knowledge and skill to draw meaningful conclusions from such raw data. Crudely put: burying the public under a mass of data does not equal transparency.

A similar message of ‘knowability’ and transparency is conveyed by the EUTF’s M&E system as a whole. A ‘focus’ box (Figure 3) underscores that the ‘innovative and reactive monitoring system’ with its 41 indicators ‘measure[s] precisely the progress achieved’, ‘allows stakeholders to learn collectively from [the fund’s] results’, and ‘enhances the transparency, flexibility, and speed of EUTF activities’. Illustrated with the image of what appears to be a Tuareg man, the EU frames its M&E system as an effective tool for evidence-driven policy-making, collective learning and transparency. M&E bars and numbers seem to overwrite the man’s face – not unlike the AKVO map which overwrites African countries with project circles. Simultaneously, the visual conveys the image of the EU as a technologically savvy foreign policy actor that generates ‘hard facts’ in the form of numbers and statistics in an otherwise traditional and underdeveloped context.

Whilst the EUTF’s website and showcased M&E results address a wider audience, the M&E data and reports also serve EU Member States’ needs to report on and legitimize their financial and operational participation in the trust fund vis-à-vis their own constituencies. This required producing, processing and presenting M&E data in a particular way, as an Altai consultant explains (Interview Altai):

We know that [EU Member States] are using those reports to present to their constituencies what’s happening. And in that sense I think it was a game changer, [...] I think it really gave them the chance to have something readable, visual, easy to share, they can extract, they can take some screenshots. [...] There is a dashboard which you have not seen because it’s not public, which is bringing the information of the report in online version. So [the Member States] can play with the dashboard, they can play with the data.

The quote illustrates that the *producers* of M&E data anticipate how their audiences intend to *use* these data. Altai knows that both EU Member States and EU delegations need to report to ‘their constituencies’ what the money is spent on and what outputs the trust fund produces. Altai, as a profit-oriented consulting firm, capitalizes on this demand and strives to meet it by producing and presenting knowledge in particular aggregated and visual forms.

What these stakeholders are interested in are ‘screenshots’, which reduce comprehensive EU interventions in multiple social contexts on the African continent to aggregated and numerical representations. As critical scholarship on knowledge production in migration governance and other fields has pointed out, such numerical representations are the result of a ‘successive reduction of complexity’ (Hansen and Porter, 2012, p. 412), which hides and depoliticizes the situation they represent (Beier and Çağlar, 2020). At the same

time, numbers often appear to be ‘conveyors of facts and truth’, creating the ‘illusion of transparency’ (Hansen and Porter, 2012, p. 415) as if policies and their effects were fully calculable and knowable. In the context of the EUTF, we can think, for instance, of the ‘number of border stations supported to strengthen border control’ (indicator 4.1), which provides ‘hard evidence’ but obscures the diverse effects on individuals and communities who depend on cross-border mobility in different ways. Similarly, a member of the SOAS evidence facility (Interview SOAS) in reflecting about Altai’s M&E activities finds that

the kind of data that [Altai] gathers is very ... so context free in many cases. It is about numbers of things delivered, numbers of that, you know these numbers of things and so what do you do with that to create a narrative story of what’s happening? It is a bit tricky.

At the same time, this research participant also underscored that Altai has ‘done a great job at gathering that information and making it accessible’ (Interview SOAS). Similarly, the Mid-Term Evaluation (European Commission/GDSI, 2020, p. 478) praises the Altai reports for their ‘excellent graphics that include maps that show the geographic location of projects and visual presentations of achievements being described’.

Thus, what Altai and the broader M&E system are appreciated for is collecting data and making it accessible in a simple and visual way. Although the different M&E outputs say little to nothing about the actual outcomes and impact, they still serve to bolster the internal legitimacy of the EUTF vis-à-vis the constituencies of the EU and its Member States and to portray the EU as a savvy foreign policy actor that is influential across the African continent.

Boswell (2008, p. 480) argues that in some cases ‘the very process of producing expert knowledge – rather than the research findings themselves’ may serve the substantiating function of legitimizing certain policies. This is precisely what we observe in the case of the EUTF, where knowledge is produced and presented so as to perform accountability and transparency. The Mid-Term Evaluation of the EUTF takes this policy legitimating function to an extreme by framing data collection and learning as the fund’s very *raison d’être*:

The EUTF [...] is not an appropriate vehicle for addressing root causes of major societal problems. But it has brought attention to the issues, mobilised resources to address them, and is producing important data and lessons learned that can be used in the design and management of future interventions (European Commission/GDSI, 2020, p. 7)

Thus, immediately after acknowledging the flawed nature of the original objectives of the EUTF, the Mid-Term Evaluation bestows the trust fund with a new policy goal: it exists to produce data and to learn lessons. Accordingly, the Mid-Term Evaluation states as first priority that ‘during the remaining implementation period, the EUTF should focus on generating further knowledge and understanding of its interventions’ (European Commission/GDSI, 2020, p. 9). Thus, the scope and perceived quality of knowledge production through M&E in and of itself become a justification of the EUTF’s existence.

Legitimizing Future Policy Agendas

It is standard practice for policy evaluation to feed into agenda-setting and policy design. In the case of the EUTF, however, M&E reports present particular policy directions as

desirable based on ‘lessons learned’ even though, as we have seen above, very little is actually known about the impact of the projects funded under the EUTF.

Amongst M&E actors, Altai in particular is very proactive in formulating a policy vision for the future, also with an interest to secure new demand for its consultancy services. In 2021 it published a report entitled ‘Learning Lessons from the EUTF’ (Altai, 2021), based on literature review and stakeholder interviews rather than on extensive M&E analysis. Whilst the report details what projects have been funded under the EUTF, it says nothing about results, let alone the impact of the EUTF, beyond one ‘focus box’ per chapter which presents lessons from one selected project. The central role of Altai in monitoring the EUTF provides it with the authority to formulate ‘lessons learned’ even without being able to assess overall results or impact of the fund. A respondent from Altai told us: ‘We don’t have time to wait. It is going to take too much time to really measure the impact. We need to take the train while it is moving and try to look at what seems to be emerging from the EUTF’ (Interview Altai). In its ‘Learning Lessons’ report, Altai similarly argues that ‘Momentum has been built, and [...] there is a window of opportunity to gather the multiple stakeholders [...] and build on the lessons learned from the EUTF and other programmes to plan for the future in a coordinated fashion’ (Altai, 2021, p. 28). Thus, M&E knowledge production is used to actively push particular new policy agendas for the EU.

The substantive policy agenda put forward by Altai directly matches the skills and expertise which Altai sells. Altai prides itself on 18 years of building up migration expertise in development contexts (Altai, 2022b). Altai is being paid over €14 million by the Commission for its role in the EUTF monitoring and learning system (personal communication EU Commission 2022) and has an interest in continuing to sell its services to EU development policy actors. It therefore comes as no surprise that the lessons which Altai argues the EU should learn centre on including migration management as a core development policy issue. In its ‘Learning Lessons’ report, Altai (2021, p. 9) states that ‘the next funding cycle should be an opportunity’ to adopt ‘a new ambitious EU-funded programme [...] to support the development, coordination and harmonisation of migration governance systems across Africa’.

Altai strives to disconnect migration as a development issue from the ‘root causes narrative’. They argue that EU development policies should aim to promote ‘good migration governance’ rather than ‘addressing root causes’, which Altai respondents described as ‘a century of work’. It seemed ‘more realistic’ to them to strive to ‘improve migration and mobility: make it safer, more legal, more organised in Africa’. According to these Altai respondents, ‘making Africa a better place so its people don’t necessarily try to frankly move out of where they live’, whilst a desirable development goal in the (very) long term, should be ‘separate’ from ‘creating better migration mobility systems’ in the here and now (Interview Altai).

Importantly, in Altai’s vision, the proposed objective of improving migration management in Africa is only very loosely, if at all, connected to the question of controlling or reducing migration to Europe. As an Altai representative told us, ‘Whatever the political decisions of Europe are, to let or not let people come in, migration and mobility in Africa is something in itself, I would say, independently from Europe’ (Interview Altai). Altai perceives migration on the African continent as an internal challenge first, and a challenge for Europe only in the second place (Altai, 2021, p. 6). This is not only a matter of vision

for Altai, but also of strategically catering to the policy preferences of their primary client, the Directorate General in charge of Development: 'In the case of a DG like DEVCO it is obviously going to take more of a development kind of angle. (...) Stopping people, things like that, that's not something that's going to fly in a DG like DEVCO' (Interview Altai). With this in mind, through M&E knowledge practices, Altai legitimated intra-African migration management as a central issue for future EU development policies to address.

Lending legitimacy to this policy agenda through M&E knowledge is crucial because European intervention in African national migration policies is not self-evident. Migration control is traditionally considered a crucial feature of state sovereignty, which other states have no business interfering in (Spijkerboer, 2022, pp. 2901–2902). Moreover, it is apparent from the Altai 'Learning Lessons' report as well as the Mid-Term Evaluation that African governments, rather than asking for EU support in migration management, need to be convinced that migration is a problem that requires state intervention in the first place. For instance, the Mid-Term Evaluation concludes that 'national authorities and local administrations that have been receiving EUTF support are over time better informed and more open to addressing such problems' but that 'there is so far limited evidence that this has led to a concomitant shift in resource reallocations' (European Commission/GDSI, 2020, p. 8). This resonates with scholarship on EU–African relations in migration governance, which emphasizes that African and European leaders have diverging perceptions and preferences on migration (Zanker, 2019; Adam et al., 2020). These political differences make it all the less evident that the EU should have a say in whether and how African countries govern intra-African migration.

In the knowledge produced through M&E, however, migration management is presented as a key feature of 'good governance' that EU development policies should strive to promote – which would allow a commercial actor like Altai to continue selling its specific expertise. Thus, M&E knowledge production seeks to legitimate the further entrenchment of migration rationales in EU development policies as well as the EU's presence as a foreign policy actor on the African continent.

Conclusions

M&E is a crucial part of migration governance, which hitherto remained underexplored in scholarship on knowledge production. Our analysis shows that the M&E of EU externalized migration policies is inherently political. Extensive resources were dedicated to M&E of the EUTF, resulting in impressive amounts of mostly publicly available data and reports on outputs. In spite of these efforts, however, M&E knowledge production did not serve the instrumental function of assessing to what extent the EUTF was meeting its objectives. Instead, M&E knowledge production served to legitimate policies and policy actors. First, extensive M&E reporting served to represent the EU as 'doing something' about the migration crisis *and* as an influential presence throughout the African continent, thus boosting the EU's legitimacy internally both as a migration actor and as a development actor. Second, M&E knowledge production performed transparency and accountability, thus legitimating not only the EUTF in the absence of judicial and democratic oversight, but also the EU as a competent, accountable and transparent (foreign) policy actor at a time when the EU's legitimacy was questioned from different sides. Finally, despite the lack of evidence on policy impact, M&E knowledge also served to seek

legitimacy for future EU policy interventions on the African continent, notably the inclusion of ‘good migration management’ as a key feature of the promotion of ‘good governance’ in future EU development policies.

What at first sight seemed to be a novel and unexpected effort to monitor and assess EU external migration policies, does not after all herald a new era of transparent and evidence-based external migration governance for the EU. Instead, M&E knowledge mainly served to ex-post justify an EU emergency policy tool in reaction to the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ and the EU’s attempts to control and limit mobility beyond its territorial limits. Comparative research on the knowledge politics of M&E in EU external migration policies and in other policy contexts may offer fruitful avenues to assess under what conditions M&E knowledge production is instrumental or mainly legitimating.

Furthermore, we find that practices of knowledge production affect the power relations between policy actors, allowing new actors to enter the field. In the context of the EUTF, it was most notably Altai, a private consultancy firm with the appropriate skill set to produce particular forms of knowledge – aggregated statistics, user-friendly snapshot visuals and interactive dashboards – which benefitted from the political desire to legitimate the EUTF as part of a broader EU external policy agenda. This in turn gave Altai the authority and legitimacy to propose significant changes in EU development and migration policies. Future research may delve further into the opportunities for new (commercial) actors created by the introduction of M&E into EU migration governance.

On the level of theory, our analysis has illustrated the fruitful fusion of institutionalist accounts of knowledge *use* in policy-making (Boswell, 2008), with practice theory approaches that highlight the politics of knowledge *production* (for example, Korneev, 2018; Stachowitsch and Sachseder, 2019). It invites institutionalist scholars to take the connection between knowledge use and knowledge production seriously, as we have shown how producers of knowledge anticipate political desires for knowledge use by producing and presenting knowledge in particular ways. For practice theorists, the institutionalist analytical distinction between instrumental and legitimating functions of knowledge offers a more fine-tuned analytical lens to understand the different roles knowledge production may have in policy-making. In sum, our analytical perspective highlights that knowledge use and knowledge production are connected, and that these knowledge politics allow for the legitimization of both actors and policies.

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Interviews (for a complete list of interviews, see supplementary material)

Interview Altai Consulting, three consultants responsible for the monitoring and learning system of the EUTF, online, 26 February 2021.

Interview Save the Children, programme manager in West African country, online, 4 March 2021.

Interview Plan International, former programme manager in East African country, online, 18 March 2021.

Interview SOAS, member of the SOAS research and evidence facility ‘Migration in the Horn of Africa’, online, 12 March 2021.

Interview GIZ, three interviewees: M&E expert North of Africa, EUTF co-ordinator, project coordinator, online, 16 March 2021.

Personal communication European Commission, email in response to an email inquiry about the total budget spent on the monitoring, evaluation and learning scheme of the EUTF, 5 August 2022.

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Data S1. Supporting Information