



What We Know About External Migration Management

What this summary covers

This summary descriptively synthesizes impact evaluations that examine the effects of *external migration management* interventions on migration outcomes (i.e., migration flows and intentions).

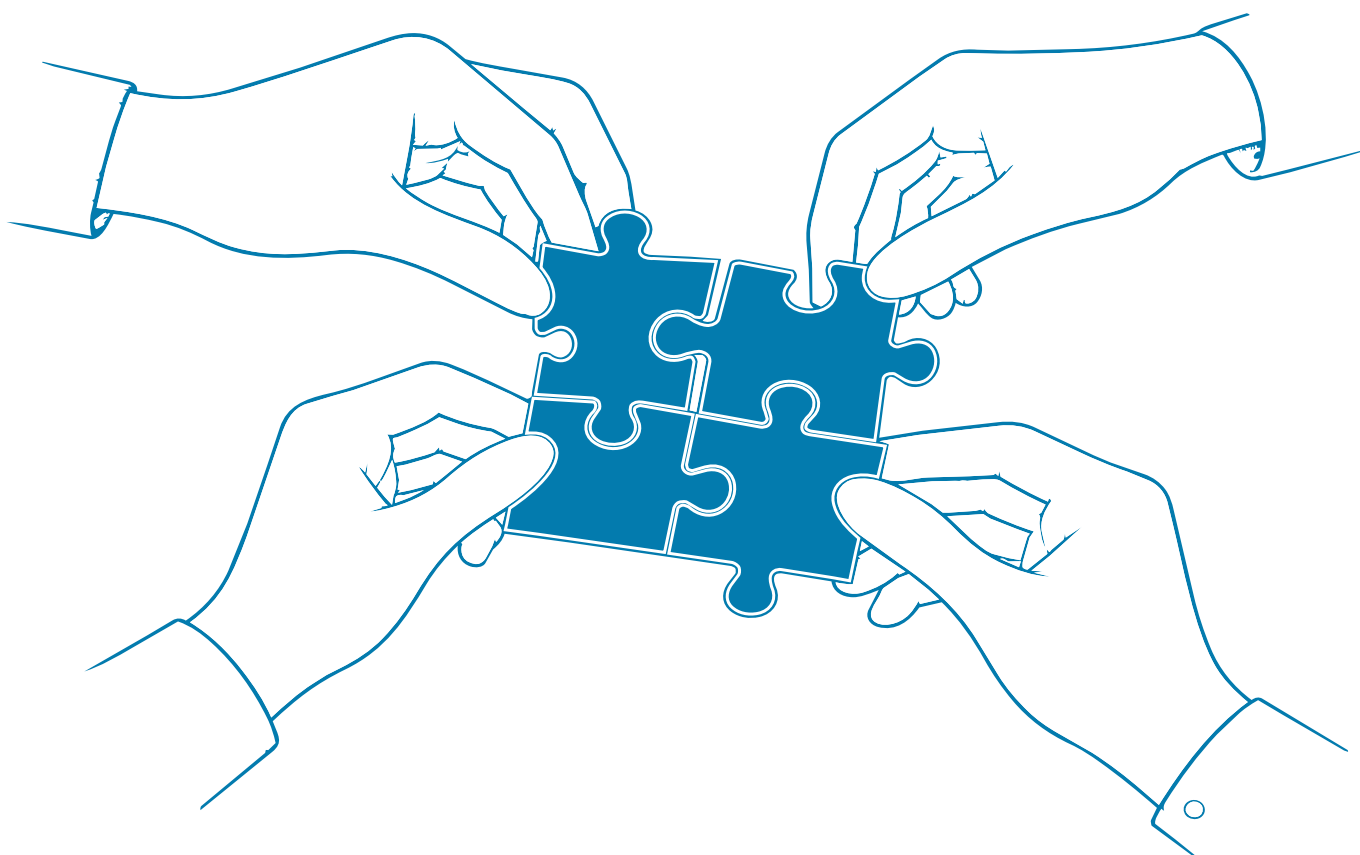
The 2025 update of the [Irregular Migration Evidence Gap Map \(EGM\)](#), a thematic collection of rigorous evidence on the effects of interventions addressing the root causes and drivers of irregular migration, identified six studies of external migration management policies; all met our predefined [study eligibility criteria](#). See the [study search and selection summary](#) for more details.

In this summary, *external migration management* interventions refer to policies, programs, or projects in which destination countries work with origin or transit countries, often through bilateral or multilateral arrangements, to manage international irregular migration. Intervention types include *migration partnerships/deals* and other *deterrence measures* aimed at discouraging irregular migration through intimidation and restriction of rights.¹

Reporting effects within this descriptive analysis could be misleading, as the small and heterogeneous set of studies limits comparability and risks drawing inferences beyond what the evidence can support. Instead, this summary provides an overview of what is currently known, and highlights where future evaluations are most needed to strengthen understanding of *external migration management*.

Key takeaways

- The evidence base of *external migration management* interventions consists of six quasi-experimental impact evaluations focused on a few high-profile policy arrangements— primarily the EU–Turkey Statement and Italy–Libya cooperation— with no systematic reviews or qualitative impact evaluations.
- These interventions are theorized to divert migration routes, timing, and detection patterns, rather than creating sustained reductions in overall irregular migration flows. Several studies also noted heterogeneous responses across migrant types. The study findings broadly align with these assumptions.
- The evidence base has clear gaps, including: reliance on limited detection data; lack of evidence on intention-to-action dynamics; and absence of cost or value-for-money information. Several of the above limitations reflect structural constraints inherent to evaluating real-world external migration management policies.



How external migration management interventions influence migration pathways

This summary draws on an aspiration–capability model,^{2,3,4} used as a conceptual framework in the EGM, which conceptualizes migration as a process shaped both by people’s desire to move and their ability to do so.

- In this model, *external migration management* is a facet of the migration infrastructure, conceptually positioned as acting primarily on migrants’ abilities. It is assumed that constraining the practical feasibility of movement through stricter exit controls and containment measures in third countries will translate into reduced irregular migration.
- By increasing the practical and perceived costs of movement, these interventions also assume that limiting feasibility will alter migrants’ risk calculations and expectations.

The studies included in this summary articulate additional conceptual assumptions about how these interventions are expected to operate, including:

- Rather than deterring migration aspirations, interventions are assumed to reshape migration routes, channels, and timing of movement.^{5,6,7,8} This is theorized to occur when the perceived costs of remaining in origin or transit contexts continue to outweigh the risks of alternative or riskier migration pathways. Individual-level motivational mechanisms were not directly assessed in the included studies.

- A temporal rush (i.e., an increase in attempts at irregular migration) is assumed to occur following the announcement of route closures or control measures, but prior to their full enforcement.⁸
- Destination countries shifting border control, asylum processing, and migrant containment to transit countries is assumed to generate qualitatively different decision environments. This is particularly the case when protection conditions deteriorate in transit countries due to limited asylum access, detention practices, abuse, or weak governance.
- Responses to the interventions are assumed to be heterogenous across migrant types with different constraints, risks, and decision margins. For instance:
 - Refugees facing acute survival pressures are conceptualized as less responsive to mobility restrictions;⁵
 - Economic migrants and migrants from distant origins are expected to exhibit greater flexibility in adjusting routes, channels, and timing;⁶ and
 - Circular South–South migrants are assumed to transition into onward migration when interventions (unintentionally) worsen economic viability, labor-market access, or the feasibility of return or settlement in transit contexts.^{7,8}

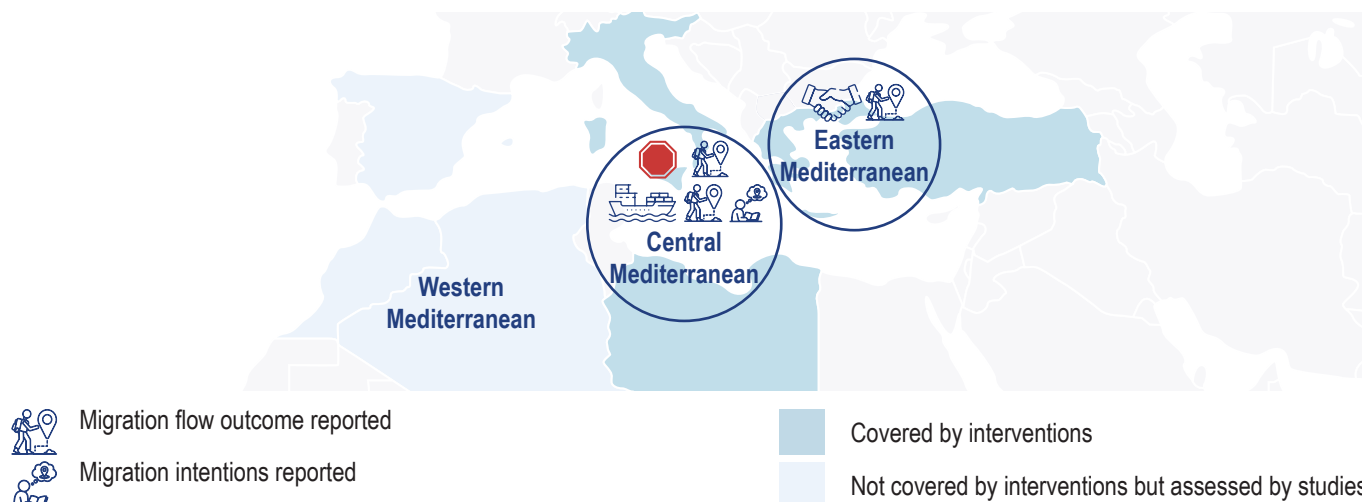
Further details on the assumptions of the included studies are provided in [Appendix Table A1](#).

Evidence base characteristics

Evidence on *external migration management* was very limited: **Six quasi-experimental impact evaluations**; no systematic reviews and qualitative impact evaluations.



Map link



Five studies assessing *migration partnerships/deals* focused primarily on the EU–Turkey Statement, which combined enforcement with conditional protection mechanisms, and the Italy–Libya MoU, which centered on outsourced interdiction without resettlement safeguards; two additional studies examined *deterrence-oriented* interventions, with one study covering both *partnerships/deals* and deterrence.

EU–Turkey (2 studies)



- Externalized enforcement with €6 bn in funding for Syrian refugees in Türkiye
- Returns of irregular migrants from Greece to Türkiye
- 1-for-1 resettlement of refugees to the EU
- Visa & accession dialogue for Türkiye

Italy–Libya (3 studies)



- Delegation of search-and-rescue and return of intercepted migrants to Libya
- Transfer of patrol assets
- Restrictions on NGO search-and-rescue
- Naval monitoring and surveillance support

Operazione Mare Nostrum (1 study)



- Italian Navy-led search-and-rescue close to Libyan coast
- Anti-smuggling enforcement and vessel destruction

Visa restrictions (1 study)



- Travel visa policy regimes to deter irregular entry and overstaying (38 multi-states in the globe; not specified in the above figure)

Migration partnerships/deals were analyzed using route-based units observed over time and focused on short- to medium-term effects (i.e., 1–3 years), whereas other *deterrence-oriented* interventions relied on country-dyad or aggregate time-series data and examined either short-term effects (1 year, as in Operazione Mare Nostrum) or long-term dynamics (decades, as in visa restrictions).

Type of external migration management	Unit of analysis	Average exposure to the interventions observed in the studies
Migration partnerships/deals	Route-country-time; country	1–3 years
Deterrence (non-partnership/deal)	Country-dyad-year; route-time	Varies (1 year to 20–30 years)



Outcomes were mostly concentrated on irregular international flows; monthly irregular border crossings.



Migration partnerships/deals were evaluated as a bundled, multi-component, without isolating individual effects.



No cost evidence was available, aside from aggregate funding figure of the €6 billion EU–Turkey Statement.

Narrative description of study results

The included studies report informative effects of *external migration management* interventions. Regarding *migration partnerships/deals*, the EU–Turkey Statement primarily blocked likely refugees while deflecting likely irregular migrants to alternative routes (primarily the Central Mediterranean) within the first post-intervention year.⁵

Another evaluation also reported that the Statement led to a short-term diversion of detected irregular border-crossing flows from the Eastern to the Central Mediterranean during the first post-implementation year.⁶ This analysis was based on route- and nationality-level crossing data rather than migrant type (e.g., likely refugees versus likely irregular migrants).⁶

Similarly, the Italy–Libya Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) diverted irregular migration flows from the Central to the Western Mediterranean for two to three years following its implementation.⁷ One evaluation noted a short-term reduction in irregular migration flows on the Central Mediterranean route within the first one to two

years, but explicitly cautioned against interpreting this as policy success given severe human rights costs and unaddressed structural drivers.⁹

Another study measured intentions to migrate among a mixed population of labor and forced migrants in Libya, both immediately before and after MoU implementation. It found an increase in intentions to move onward to Italy, with the strongest effects found among conflict- or poverty-driven migrants, those previously unemployed, and those travelling farther or at higher cost.⁸

With regard to other *deterrence* measures, Operazione Mare Nostrum showed no evidence of an effect on irregular migration flows along the Central Mediterranean route (measured up to two years post-intervention).⁹ Focusing on regular migration, visa restrictions reduced both regular migration inflows and outflows, making migration less responsive to labor-market conditions approximately five to ten years post-intervention.¹⁰



Implementation and research practices

Implementation practices

Across the studies, implementation practices were generally not described in detail. However, three studies identified implementation practices that could undermine the originally stated aims of the interventions (i.e., managing irregular migration in an orderly manner while ensuring access to international protection and respect for human rights). They pointed to the de facto restriction of asylum access in the implementation of the EU–Turkey Statement,⁵ alongside weak governance and human rights violations in the context of the Italy–Libya deal, including abusive and harsh detention conditions that fall short of international protection standards.^{7,8,9}

Research practices

The studies used novel practices to leverage quasi-experimental variation, ranging from matrix completion estimators⁶ to spatial difference-in-differences,⁷ and synthetic control combined with survey data.⁸

Methodological limitations included:

- Interventions often comprised multiple actions implemented simultaneously, making it difficult to disentangle how individual components contributed to

observed effects.^{3,5} Because these interventions occur as complex policy packages implemented in dynamic contexts, isolating individual components may often be neither feasible nor necessarily desirable.

- Migration data used in several studies^{5,7} captured detections rather than true migration flows, which may have limited inference about migration dynamics.
- Even where intentions were captured, studies did not trace how these shifts translated into actual migration behavior, as a causal effect of the intervention (e.g., migration stocks/flows), leaving intention-to-action dynamics unexamined.⁸
- Evidence was based on a small number of high-profile cases, limiting generalizability. The studies repeatedly cautioned against extrapolating findings to other migration routes, policies, or contexts without additional evidence.^{5,6,8}
- None of the studies provided information on costs or value for money.^{5,6,7,8,9}

The above limitations may reflect structural, ethical, or political constraints inherent to evaluating real-world *external migration management* interventions, rather than gaps arising from study design choices alone.

Implications

Policy implications

- Future *external migration management* policymaking should move beyond route- and nationality-specific deterrence measures to engage more explicitly with the underlying drivers of irregular migration, including the provision of credible alternatives that are consistent with human rights obligations.
- Given that the documented implementation practices have undermined stated intervention aims, *external migration management* interventions should embed safeguards, accountability mechanisms, and human rights monitoring in their design and implementation.

Research implications

- Future research should examine wider *external migration management* arrangements, such as the

EU–Morocco mobility partnership and Spain–Senegal and Mauritania agreements. The studies included in this summary are heavily concentrated in a small set of policy cases, mainly the EU–Turkey and the Italy–Libya deals.

- Future evaluations should incorporate more outcomes that capture aspirations, perceptions, decision processes, and displacement dynamics alongside realized movements. Evaluations should also examine differences in effects by migrant groups (e.g., circular South–South migrants), whose migration decisions are shaped by distinct mechanisms and may otherwise be unintentionally affected.
- While detailed cost evidence may be difficult to obtain, collecting and reporting basic costing and resource information should be considered in future studies.



Endnotes

¹ While these categories are conceptually related and may overlap, the EGM applied clear, pragmatic classification boundaries for this synthesis and revisited them as needed during study screening.

² Carling, Jörgen. 2002. "Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28 (1): 5–42.

³ Carling, Jörgen, and Kerilyn Schewel. 2018. "Revisiting Aspiration and Ability in International Migration." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44 (6): 945–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384146>.

⁴ Carling, Jörgen, and Cathrine Talleraas. 2016. *Root Causes and Drivers of Migration: Implications for Humanitarian Efforts and Development Cooperation*. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).

⁵ Mesnard, Alice, Filip Savatic, Jean-Noël Senne, and Hélène Thiollet. 2024. "Revolving Doors: How Externalization Policies Block Refugees and Deflect Other Migrants Across Migration Routes." *Population and Development Review* 50 (3): 607–42. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12650>.

⁶ Tafani, Irene, and Massimo Riccaboni. 2025. "The Impact of the EU–Turkey Agreement on the Number of Lives Lost at Sea." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12 (869). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04900-1>.

⁷ Zambiasi, Diego, and Emanuele Albarosa. 2025. "Externalizing rescue operations at Sea: The Migration Deal Between Italy and Libya." *Journal of Economic Geography* 25 (1): 41–58. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbae022>.

⁸ Blair, Christopher W., and Omer Solodoch. 2025. *Offshoring migration policy: Migrant Responses to Restrictive Policies in Transit Countries*. SSRN. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5236161>.

⁹ Rodríguez Sánchez, Alejandra, Julian Wucherpfennig, Ramona Rischke, and Stefano Maria Iacus. 2023. "Search-and-Rescue in the Central Mediterranean Route Does Not Induce Migration: Predictive Modeling to Answer Causal Queries in Migration Research." *Scientific Reports* 13 (11014). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-38119-4>.

¹⁰ Czaika, Mathias, and Hein de Haas. 2017. "The Effect of Visa Policies on International Migration Dynamics." *International Migration Review* 51 (4): 893–926. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45116670>.

About this brief

This brief is based on the report “Addressing Root Causes and Drivers of Irregular Migration: Evidence Gap Map 2025 Update”. This work was developed by 3ie with funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, through the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB). The findings and conclusions presented in this brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department, 3ie’s donors or governing bodies. The brief designed and produced by Akarsh Gupta and Mallika Rao is authored by Sanghwa Lee, María Daniela Anda León, Pierre Marion, Shannon Shisler, Carolyn Huang, and Anilkrishna B. Thota. Sanghwa Lee also contributed to data visualization. Visuals were created using AI-

assisted tools and subsequently edited and adapted to align with 3ie branding guidelines.

We thank the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands for their support and feedback, particularly Caspar Lobbrecht, Zeineb Romdhane, and Johannes Claes. We are grateful to our advisory group, Florian Trauner, Jon Kurtz, Marina Manke, Antoine Pécoud, Jeannie Annan, Federica Zardo, Camille Le Coz, Jasmijn Sloopjes, Ilse Van Liempt, and Simona Vezzoli, and the external reviewer, Sandra Morgenstern. Finally, we acknowledge Constanza Gonzalez Parrao for her feedback as an internal reviewer, and Tamara Lofti for her contribution as an external reviewer manager.



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June 2026

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