

Master Thesis

**The Security–Development Nexus in Action: EU Discourses of Legitimation
in the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa**

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Abstract

The ongoing decline in global development funding is particularly concerning in regions like the Sahel, where limited state capacity and political will hinder the implementation of humanitarian and development policies. The European Union, a major donor, has channelled aid through instruments such as the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTFa), whose blending of development and security goals has drawn significant criticism. This thesis investigates how the European Commission justifies a securitised development agenda in the Sahel within the EUTFa framework. Grounded in securitisation theory—drawing from both the Copenhagen School’s focus on speech acts and the Paris School’s emphasis on technocratic routinisation—this research applies discourse analysis to Commission reports from 2015 to 2024. It mobilises van Leeuwen’s framework of discursive legitimation to identify how the Commission deploys moral, rational, mythopoetic, and authority-based strategies to justify the EUTFa’s security-driven agenda. The findings demonstrate that these discursive strategies serve not merely to defend policy decisions but to institutionalise and depoliticise security logics within EU development discourse. By framing security-oriented interventions as humanitarian imperatives, rational necessities, or natural historical responsibilities, the Commission constructs securitisation as both legitimate and inevitable. Alternative framings and voices—particularly from Sahelian actors—are marginalised, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations and obscuring the political nature of EU intervention. This thesis contributes to the literature by showing that discursive legitimation is a generative mechanism of securitisation, not just a rhetorical supplement. It reveals how legitimising discourse embeds security rationales within development practice, reshaping the EU’s role from partner to protector. This insight opens space for rethinking how development can be co-constructed in more inclusive and politically conscious ways.

Keywords: securitisation, European Union, Sahel, development policy, discursive legitimation

Acronyms and Abbreviations

DGs	Directorates Generals
DG DEVCO	Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development
DG HOME	Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs
DG INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
EUTFA, EUTF	European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa
M&L	Monitoring and Learning
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PARIS	Political Anthropological Research for International Sociology Securitisation
SLC	Sahel and Lake Chad
TEU	Treaty of the European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

Contents

Introduction	6
EU Development Policy: Definition and Scope	8
Theoretical Framework.....	9
Securitisation Theory and Migration.....	9
Securitisation of Development Policies	10
The Migration-Development Nexus: A Hybrid Space of Securitisation.....	11
Discursive Legitimation in the Securitisation of Development and Migration Policies	12
Expectations.....	14
Methodology.....	15
Discourse Analysis of EU Policy Documents	15
Case Selection: The EUTFA in the Sahel Region	16
Data Sources	18
Operationalisation	20
Findings and Analysis	22
Moral Legitimation	23
<i>Comparison.....</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Abstraction.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Normalisation</i>	<i>27</i>
Rational Legitimation.....	28
<i>Instrumental Rationalisation</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Theoretical Rationalisation.....</i>	<i>30</i>
Mythopoetic Legitimation.....	31
<i>Cautionary Tales.....</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>Moral Tales</i>	<i>32</i>
Authority Legitimation.....	33
<i>Impersonal Authority</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>Personal Authority.....</i>	<i>34</i>
Discussion and Conclusion	35
Legitimation Strategies and Security Logics	35
Resilience and the Migration-Security-Development Nexus.....	36
Authority and Institutional Power: Silencing and Complexities.....	36
Implications for EU Development Policies	37
Methodological Limitations and Reflexivity.....	38
Conclusion	38
Policy Recommendations.....	39

Reference List.....	41
Appendix A.....	43

Introduction

The European Union (EU) is the world's largest provider of development aid, accounting for 46% of global Official Development Assistance (ODA) in 2022 (OECD). It is widely recognised as a leader in development and foreign aid policies. In 2024, the European Commission allocated four trust funds, including the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTFA). Established at the Valletta Summit on Migration in November 2015, the EUTFA aims to improve migration management in Africa, focusing on migration and displaced persons (Somogyi, 2022).

Two performance audits conducted by the European Court of Auditors in 2018 and 2024 revealed that the EUTFA failed to meet its objectives due to unfocused goals, inaccurate data, and dispersed fund allocation (European Court of Auditors, 2024). As highlighted in several studies (Olivie & Pérez, 2021; Magcamit & Mahon, 2024), donors frequently politicise foreign and humanitarian aid projects to serve their diplomatic interests. The EUTFA is no exception, with diplomatic aims increasingly overshadowing migration and development objectives within EU policy (Pacciardi, 2025; Somogyi, 2022). This paper adopts an under-explored approach to the security-development nexus by analysing legitimisation strategies behind the securitisation of the development component of the Fund (Walkowski, 2021).

Development policy is a key component of the EU's external action for managing migration on the African continent (Somogyi, 2022). The securitisation of development aid, including the EUTFA, is shaped by broader geopolitical trends, such as the Global War on Terror and international efforts to combat drug trafficking and poverty (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2014, p. 104). These geopolitical trends have strengthened the view of Africa as a security threat to Europe, rather than a continent with potential for development and humanitarian growth (Idahosa, Degterev, & Ikhidero, 2021, p. 357). However, while there is a global trend to securitise development and aid policies, the European Commission cannot directly govern foreign security matters, as decision-making in this domain remains intergovernmental within the EU (Article 4, TFEU). Instead, security-oriented projects such as the EUTFA fall within development and humanitarian aid policies, where the Commission operates with greater autonomy from Member States (Article 208, TFEU).

One key region in the EU-African migration and development policy partnership is the Sahel. This part of Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for a significant portion of migrant arrivals on the European continent, serving as both an origin and transit country (European Court of Auditors, 2024). According to the EU's current migration strategies, which include return and

reintegration approaches, the Sahel is a vital partner in achieving these objectives (Jegen, Claes, & Cham, 2020). The poor socio-economic conditions, political instability, and conflict-prone environment in the Sahel explain the high numbers of irregular migrants within and originating from the region. The EUTFA aligns with the EU's Global Strategy for addressing security and development challenges in the Sahel (Zaun & Nantermoz, 2023; Idahosa et al., 2021). Therefore, the Sahel exemplifies an EU development policy target in this research on the EUTFA, where both development and migration management are set as goals for addressing a broader range of issues (Somogyi, 2022).

This study contributes to debates on the securitisation of development aid by integrating discursive legitimisation theory with securitisation frameworks from both the Copenhagen and PARIS Schools. In doing so, it advances a more nuanced understanding of how resilience, stability, and development are framed in EU policy discourse—not only as policy goals, but also as rhetorical tools that shape institutional legitimacy. In particular, the discourse of resilience is shown to function as a bridge between security and development rationales, allowing the EU to depoliticise its strategic interests under the guise of capacity-building.

The research addresses the question: *How does the EU Commission justify a securitised approach to development in the Sahel through the EUTFA framework?* Three sub-questions are analysed to answer the main research question: What discursive patterns of legitimisation appear in the EUTFA? Which modes of justification are used most frequently? How are alternative views to securitisation depicted or marginalised?

While the securitisation of the EUTFA has been studied, particularly regarding its migration goals (Idahosa et al, 2021), less attention has been given to the discursive strategies through which the EU legitimises a securitised development agenda, especially in regions such as the Sahel. This thesis addresses this gap by arguing that the European Commission actively legitimises the securitisation of development in the Sahel through strategic discursive practices. Through moral, rational, authority-based, and mythopoetic justifications, the Commission frames itself as a responsible securitising actor while constructing Sahelian states as security threats. This framing prioritises EU interests and stability over local development needs, with significant implications for the future of EU-Africa partnerships.

The study proceeds as follows. Firstly, it explores key concepts related to EU development policies. Secondly, it examines the construction of security discourse within the EUTFA and how the security framing of development and migration in EU policies reflects European interests over development goals. It applies the Copenhagen School of securitisation to demonstrate how security discourse influences development policy. Additionally, it draws

on the PARIS school of securitisation theory to analyse the feedback loop between institutional frames of securitisation and policy actions. It uses discursive legitimation theory to analyse the feedback loop between institutional discourse and policy action, legitimising the security framework. Thirdly, the research outlines its methodological approach and case selection, employing discourse analysis as its primary analytical tool. Fourthly, the data are analysed qualitatively following a coding scheme under the discursive legitimation of securitisation.

EU Development Policy: Definition and Scope

Development assistance, alongside foreign, security, and trade policies, is one of the pillars of the EU's external action and an area where the EU enjoys policy autonomy (Lucarelli, Sperling & Webber, 2019). The ultimate goal is eradicating extreme poverty; other goals encompass a more stable, peaceful, prosperous, and equitable world (Somogyi, 2022). Development policy goals are characterised by the long-term and result-based nature of the solutions (Magcamit & Mahon, 2024; Walowski, 2021). Today's European Development Policy principles align with the Official Development Assistance (ODA), which in turn follows the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2015-2030 (Somogyi, 2022). ODA is "aid whose main objective is to promote the economic development and welfare of developing countries" and does not usually cover the funding of military goods and services (European Courts of Auditors, 2024, p. 12).

The Union maintains long-lasting partnerships with the Member States of the Organisation of African, Caribbean, and Pacific States (OACPS). Those agreements include priority areas, such as "human rights, democracy and governance in people-centred and right-based societies; peace and security; human and social development; inclusive, sustainable economic growth and development; environmental sustainability and climate change; migration and mobility" (European Commission, 2025). The EUTFA, largely "portrayed as a continuation of EU development policy" (Zaun & Nantermoz, 2023, p. 2987), aligns with those areas of priorities and focuses on the promotion of resilience, economic and equal opportunities, security and development, and addressing human rights abuses (European Court of Auditors, 2024).

Although humanitarian and development aid differ regarding purpose, focus, and characteristics, they usually intervene consecutively in receiving countries. Humanitarian aid focuses on short-term responses to crises, while development aid aims at long-term solutions to the root causes of crises (Magcamit & Mahon, 2024). The two share the same logic of

improvement and understanding of social life; it can be said that humanitarian aid falls within the category of development aid. This paper encompasses humanitarian aid as part of development aid, as both are covered under the EUTFA (Court of Auditors, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Building on the contextual understanding of EU development policy outlined in the previous section, this chapter introduces the theoretical frameworks used to analyse the securitisation and legitimisation strategies in EU development policy. It draws primarily on securitisation theory, particularly as developed by the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998), and is complemented by the PARIS approach, which emphasises institutional practices and discourse (Lucarelli et al., 2019; Somogyi, 2022). These perspectives are vital for grasping how the uniqueness of securitisation becomes incorporated into the development discourse and institutionalised into actions.

Securitisation theory understands security as socially constructed. Issues are deemed security threats when presented as existential risks to a referent object by a securitising actor and accepted by a relevant audience (Buzan et al., 1998; Somogyi, 2022). This study identifies five key components of securitisation theory: security actor (the entity articulating the threat), referent object (what is claimed to be at risk), security logic (framing the threat as exceptional or routine), audience (whose acceptance legitimises the securitisation), and policy action (the measures implemented as a result) (Lucarelli et al., 2019).

The framework first elaborates on securitisation theory and its relevance to EU migration governance. It then examines how security concerns influence development policy and intersect within the migration–development–security nexus. Finally, it analyses how discursive legitimisation justifies securitisation through strategic narratives and institutional discourse.

Securitisation Theory and Migration

Securitisation theory, as developed by the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al., 1998), provides a foundational perspective for understanding how the EU frames migration as a security threat. Central to this approach is the idea of speech acts, whereby political actors elevate an issue to the realm of security by depicting it as an existential threat requiring urgent, exceptional measures (Keukeleire & Raube, 2013). This logic detaches migration from ordinary political debate (Olivie & Pérez, 2021), legitimising emergency responses such as border controls or military deployment through discourse (Stępką, 2022). In the Sahel, the EU employs this exceptionalist logic by linking migration to instability, terrorism, and trafficking,

portraying it as both a humanitarian crisis and a direct threat to European security (Idahosa et al., 2021).

In contrast, the PARIS School shifts focus from dramatic speech acts to everyday practices and institutional routines that normalise security responses. Here, securitisation is not only about emergency logic but also about how policies, technologies, and administrative norms gradually embed security thinking into governance (Idahosa et al., 2021; Rychnovská, 2014). As Broeker (2022) illustrates, migration management is increasingly influenced by bureaucratic tools—such as algorithmic risk analysis and the integration of military and policy forces into migration management—that reinforce security framings without requiring explicit declarations (p.39). This process naturalises the treatment of migration as a latent risk, embedded in routine governance.

Despite their differences, both schools see securitisation as a socially constructed process that relies on the acceptance of security framings by relevant audiences (Olivie & Pérez, 2021). In the EU context, this interaction is evident in the coexistence of exceptionalist measures and risk-based governance. Migration is portrayed not only as a threat requiring urgent control but also as a chronic issue that can be managed through technical solutions, such as border assistance, capacity-building, or resilience measures (Stepka, 2022). In the Sahel, the debate remains dominated by risk logic. As Davitti and Ursu (2018) demonstrate, this logic sustains a prolonged military presence in countries like Niger, where security imperatives increasingly override development and migration objectives (p. 4). Resilience, in particular, exemplifies how humanitarian rationales can merge into security logics, illustrating the entanglement of both schools' insights in EU policy (Tocci, 2019). This dual perspective underpins the theoretical approach of this thesis.

Securitisation of Development Policies

The securitisation of development policies follows a similar logic to the securitisation of migration, framed through the same referent objects (e.g., EU security, territorial integrity, and economic stability). Development policies, particularly those addressing underdevelopment, poverty, and financial instability in regions such as Africa, have been increasingly shaped by the same security concerns that influence migration management. This securitisation process is evident in the EU's emphasis on the development-security-migration nexus, where development aid is framed not only as a tool for poverty reduction but also as a means to reduce the migratory pressures on the EU (Plank, 2022; Walkowski, 2021).

Resilience is pivotal in this nexus, but its logic manifests differently in the security and defence sectors compared to the humanitarian and development sectors. In the security and defence communities, resilience is often framed in terms of military capacity and the ability to withstand external shocks such as terrorism or armed conflict. It focuses on the robustness of states and societies in the face of security threats, including terrorism, radicalisation, and extremism (Tocci, 2019). In contrast, in the humanitarian and development sectors, resilience is framed as the capacity of communities and states to prevent and respond to crises such as economic collapse, human displacement, and environmental disasters. This approach emphasises societal resilience, focusing on governance, social cohesion, and long-term development (Tocci, 2019; Stepka, 2022).

In the context of development policy, the EU increasingly frames interventions in terms of risk management and prevention, aimed at stabilising regions seen as breeding grounds for migration and insecurity. For example, the EU has framed its development aid programs as tools for stabilising the Sahel, addressing poverty, unemployment, and the root causes of terrorism, while simultaneously promoting border security and anti-smuggling initiatives (Idahosa et al., 2021; Davitti & Ursu, 2018). By linking development goals with security objectives, the EU blurs the lines between humanitarian aid and securitisation, treating underdevelopment as a threat to both security and peace, which must be addressed through integrated interventions (Walkowski, 2021).

The Migration-Development Nexus: A Hybrid Space of Securitisation

The migration-development-security nexus illustrates the EU's growing convergence of security and development agendas. As migration is increasingly framed as a security threat, development policy becomes instrumentalised within broader strategies aimed at preventing instability. This logic is central to the EU's emphasis on tackling the "root causes" of migration—poverty, conflict, and state failure—particularly in regions like the Sahel (Plank, 2022; Davitti & Ursu, 2018). In this context, the EU presents itself not merely as a recipient of migrants but as a proactive actor addressing upstream drivers of mobility (Stepka, 2022).

The premise of the nexus is that mitigating structural drivers—such as poor governance, unemployment, or criminal economies—enhances security in both the EU and its neighbourhoods (Idahosa et al., 2021; Walkowski, 2021). Resilience-building initiatives are key instruments in this strategy, aiming to strengthen institutional capacities and prevent instability before it triggers displacement (Plank, 2022; Stepka, 2022).

However, this nexus blurs the distinction between humanitarian goals and security imperatives. Development becomes entangled in a logic of migration control and border security, where human security concerns legitimise interventions primarily designed to curb mobility (Walkowski, 2021). As a result, humanitarian discourse masks increasingly coercive strategies. This is especially evident in the EU's reliance on military deployments and border externalisation, which are justified in terms of promoting regional stability and protecting vulnerable populations (Tocci, 2019; Stęпка, 2022).

In this framework, resilience functions as an empty signifier—adaptable to a variety of ends, from conflict prevention to migration deterrence (Walkowski, 2021). The EU's framing of the nexus thus reflects a dual objective: managing migration flows while stabilising fragile regions, both treated as security imperatives. The response to push factors such as underdevelopment and fragility is framed through a preventive, risk-management lens, where stabilisation supersedes transformation (Tocci, 2019).

This fusion of development and security consolidates a mode of governance in which a logic of preemptive control increasingly shapes the EU's external engagement. It supports the thesis's core claim that securitisation is not simply discursive but embedded in institutional frameworks that reframe development as a strategic instrument of border governance.

Discursive Legitimation in the Securitisation of Development and Migration Policies

As the securitisation of migration and development increasingly influences the EU's external policy, understanding how these framings become acceptable is crucial. This section examines the role of discursive legitimation in embedding security logics within development narratives, particularly how EU actors justify exceptional measures, such as those outlined in the EUTFA.

Legitimacy is central to securitisation: it enables actors to frame issues as threats and implement corresponding policies. According to van Ostaïjen (2017), legitimacy is "the creation of a sense of understandable, necessary or acceptable action in a specific setting" (p. 41). Olesker (2018) further argues that legitimacy empowers securitising actors politically. Although inherently subjective, legitimacy becomes stabilised once it is embedded in institutions (Olesker, 2018).

Actors like the EU derive authority from their institutional legitimacy, which enables them to frame external instability (such as terrorism, criminality, and underdevelopment) as existential threats. This legitimises exceptional governance measures (Buzan et al., 1998; Stęпка, 2022). Discursive legitimation, therefore, forms the connective tissue between discourse, securitisation, and policy practice.

Discursive legitimisation refers to how actors justify actions through discourse, framing specific responses as necessary or acceptable (van Ostaïjen, 2020). Policy frames are essential to this discursive legitimisation; they do not directly cause behaviour but legitimise political action (Pacciardi, 2025). They frame specific phenomena, such as push factors of migration (e.g., poverty, terrorism, state fragility, radicalisation), into coherent security discourses by embedding them within institutional discourse as security threats. Once institutionalised, they shape both organisational practices and traditional modes of reasoning about what constitutes security threats and how to address them (Bekkers, Fenger & Scholten, 2017).

As Lucarelli, Sperling, and Webber (2019) outline, the securitisation process fundamentally relies on the ability to construct and legitimise security threats through speech acts. Security is a *self-referential* practice: something becomes a threat not because of objective danger, but because it is discursively framed as such (Somogyi, 2022). In EU development policy, this framing links migration to terrorism, state fragility, and criminal networks, transforming development cooperation into a form of preventive security governance (Davitti & Ursu, 2018; Stępka, 2022).

However, this securitisation only succeeds if it resonates with the audience's (Member States) perceptions (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2014). This requires ongoing discursive work: securitising actors must justify exceptional measures and align them with dominant norms and expectations (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2014). Broeker (2002) highlights the power of *empty signifiers* in this process: vague, anxiety-laden terms (like “instability” or “migration crisis”) can absorb multiple meanings, forge hegemonic narratives, and reinforce existing hierarchies.

Within EU governance, discursive legitimisation is reinforced by institutional structures. As a securitising actor, the EU engages in continuous interactions with Member States and external partners to adjust threat perceptions and justify responses. (Lucarelli et al., 2019). Key to this process is the strategic use of discursive labels, such as resilience, stabilisation, and root causes—concepts that blend humanitarian and security logics (Tocci, 2019; Walkowski, 2021). These terms appear benign but carry different connotations across sectors: in security contexts, resilience denotes robustness and risk management; in humanitarian settings, it refers to local capacity and long-term development (Tocci, 2019).

Discursive legitimisation is not neutral. It serves political and strategic interests. Securitising actors use it to unlock exceptional powers and circumvent democratic scrutiny (Magcamit & Mahon, 2024). This is particularly evident in the externalisation of border control and development aid conditionality, where security concerns justify interventions framed as resilience-building or humanitarian assistance (Walkowski, 2021). The strategic invocation of

push factors (e.g., radicalisation, smuggling, underdevelopment) masks hard security objectives under the guise of soft security language (Plank, 2022; Idahosa et al., 2021).

Van Leeuwen (2007) provides a framework to understand these justificatory strategies, identifying four key modes of discursive legitimation: authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis. Authorisation appeals to institutional or expert authority—whether personal (e.g., EU commissioners) or impersonal (e.g., treaties, official policies)—to justify actions (Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Moral evaluation invokes normative claims and value systems, often through naturalisation (presenting policies as inevitable), abstraction (appealing to moral ideals such as stability), or comparison (linking to other “successful” initiatives). Rationalisation appeals to logic and knowledge, either through instrumental reasoning (e.g., reducing migration by tackling root causes) or theoretical claims (e.g., evidence-based policymaking). Mythopoesis, finally, legitimates through narrative, using moral tales (positive outcomes of compliance) or cautionary tales (negative consequences of inaction) to shape perceptions (Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997, cited in Pasveer, 2023). These modes are not mutually exclusive—they often work together to construct legitimacy. In EU external governance, they manifest in strategies that invoke authoritative institutions, moral obligations (e.g., “prevent suffering”), practical logic (“migration reduction”), and security narratives (e.g., “Europe under threat”). Institutional discourse thus continuously reinforces the legitimacy of security responses (Bekkers et al., 2017).

This typology provides the analytical lens for the empirical analysis of the EUTFA in this study. It guides the identification of discursive patterns (RQ1), categorisation of dominant modes (RQ2), and analysis of how alternative framings are marginalised or co-opted within institutional narratives (RQ3). Through this lens, the thesis assesses how discursive legitimation sustains the securitisation of development in the EU’s external governance.

Expectations

In conclusion, this thesis conceptualises the EU’s securitised development agenda as a product of discursive legitimation embedded within institutional practices. Building on the theoretical insights above, it is expected that the European Commission draws on strategic modes of justification—appeals to authority, rationality, morality, and myth—to render exceptional measures, such as externalised border control or conditional development aid, both acceptable and necessary. These modes are not simply rhetorical, but constitutive of the policy logics that underpin the EUTFA.

By tracing these justificatory patterns, the analysis anticipates that resilience and stability will emerge as central discursive nodal points that facilitate the reframing of development as a security tool. This process blurs the boundaries between humanitarian objectives and political strategy, positioning migration management and risk containment as development goals in their own right. Within the EUTF framework, this transformation is expected to manifest in language that co-opts developmental norms while simultaneously marginalising or subordinating alternative, non-securitised understandings of regional needs.

These theoretical expectations directly inform the empirical analysis. The thesis examines the legitimising discourses that are mobilised, the frequency of specific modes of justification, and how dissenting or alternative framings are neutralised or delegitimised. In doing so, it aims to show how discursive practices produce and sustain a securitised logic within EU external action.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative discourse analysis to investigate how the European Commission legitimises the securitisation of development policy in the Sahel through discursive practices within the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF). The focus lies on how policy language is used to justify institutional actions, construct meaning, and marginalise alternative understandings. This approach enables a close reading of institutional texts to uncover how EU policy conveys, adopts, and naturalises ideas about security, development, and migration.

Discourse Analysis of EU Policy Documents

Discourse is here understood not simply as language, but as an “ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorisations” articulated through institutional practices (van Ostaïjen, 2020, p. 3). This aligns with a constructivist understanding of reality, where policy discourses do not neutrally describe the world but actively produce and reproduce it through meaning-making processes (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 391; van Ostaïjen, 2017, p. 1).

The study is informed by a constitutive approach to discourse, which recognises that discourse does not merely reflect but also performs institutional action. Through language, discursive distinctions bring new policy realities into being (van Ostaïjen, 2017, pp. 42, 46). This performative power of discourse enables the study to examine how institutional actors discursively legitimise policies by providing acceptable reasons and justifications for their actions (van Ostaïjen, 2020, p. 5). In this sense, discourse analysis is well-suited to explore the

discursive legitimisation of securitisation in development policy. In addition to what is stated explicitly, the study examines what is not said, through omission or marginalisation, to trace discursive exclusions and the naturalisation of particular worldviews (Walkowski, 2021, p. 19). This aspect draws on critical discourse analysis, with sensitivity to intertextuality and the absence of counter-narratives.

The analysis employs the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti, which facilitates systematic material coding. The discourse is analysed at both the paragraph and sentence levels, allowing for a precise examination of the discursive legitimisation strategies across various types of texts. Deductive coding is used, guided by a predefined set of 20 indicators drawn from the literature on securitisation and legitimisation (see Table 1). Different methods were employed to identify the relevant sections of texts depending on their type. Documents on the EUTF in the Sahel and Lake Chad region were thoroughly examined. For the documents concentrating on the EUTF without a regional focus, relevant sections were identified through key searches (i.e., Sahel, Mauritania, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad). Finally, the same keywords were applied to review the documents that neither focused on the EUTF nor the Sahel region, complemented by a thorough reading to determine whether those sections related to the EUTF.

Case Selection: The EUTF in the Sahel Region

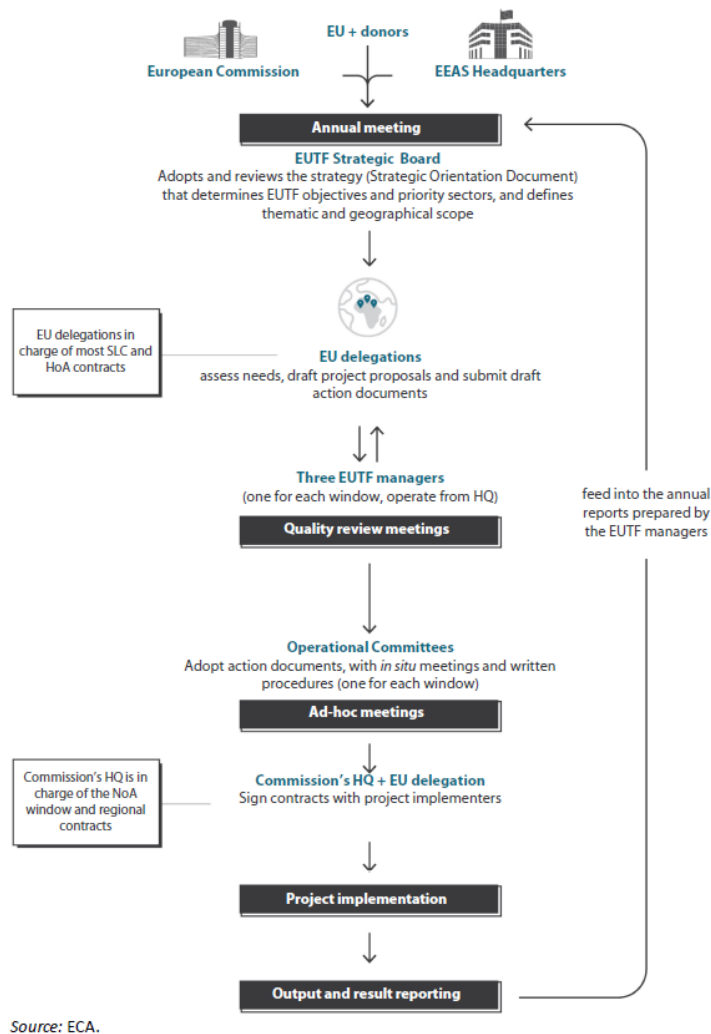
This study employs a single-case study design, focusing on the EUTF for Africa in the Sahel region. The Sahel, a region of high-security risks, including terrorism, conflict, and irregular migration, is a key player in the EU's external policies due to its role as one of the primary migratory transit routes between Africa and Europe (Somogyi, 2022). It is a significant EU security discourse feature (Idahosa et al., 2021, p. 355). Together, the Sahel and Lake Chad regions receive 40% of the EUTF's resources, making it the largest beneficiary of the fund (European Court of Auditors, 2024). Coupled with the European Development Fund, it totalled 8 billion euros between 2014 and 2020 for the countries of the G5 Sahel, making the Sahel a major recipient of EU development funds. The definition of the Sahel varies according to the EU's strategy, which aligns with its geopolitical agenda (Idahosa et al., 2021). This study adopts the definition of the EEAS, encompassing the five countries of the G5 Sahel, namely, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

European Union Trust Funds are one of the external dimensions of EU resilience-building activities and a key instrument in addressing the external causes of the "refugee crisis" (Stępką, 2022, p. 160). They are efficient and tailored financial instruments that allow the

pooling of resources to fund a specific goal (Stepka, 2022, p. 162). What sets the EUTFA apart from other EU development programs is its unique integration of development, migration, and security policies within a single framework (Zaun & Nantermoz, 2023; Somogyi, 2022). In the Sahel and Lake Chad region, the EUTFA prioritises key policy areas, including: “Return and reintegration; Refugee management (comprehensive refugee response framework); Securitisation of documents and civil registry; Anti-trafficking measures; Essential stabilisation efforts in Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan and, subject to resources, the Sahel; Migration dialogues (The Gambia, Ethiopia)” (European Court of Auditors, 2024, p. 16). Moreover, the origins of the EUTFA can be traced back to the 2011 EU Sahel Strategy, further underscoring the region’s significance for this study (Zaun & Nantermoz, 2023).

The decision to focus on EU supranational bodies is grounded in the prominence of security governance at the regional and sub-regional levels rather than at the national level (Lucarelli et al., 2019, p. 234). It is essential to note that although securitisation may be initiated by actors other than political services, the EU Commission and the EEAS have the authority to move an issue beyond politics into governance (Idahosa et al., 2021, p. 341). Given its nature as an Institution, the Commission holds the most power among these two actors. In contrast, the EEAS remains a hybrid body between the Council and the Commission (Article 27(3) of the TEU). By examining the EUTFA’s role in the Sahel, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the securitisation of development and other EU competencies in external action.

Figure 1. EUTFA, from Strategy to Reporting.



Source: ECA.

From *Special Report: The EU trust fund for Africa: Despite New Approaches, Support Remained Unfocused*, by European Court of Auditors, 2024.

Data Sources

This study involved desk research of annual and regional reports produced within the EUTFA framework. The EUTFA, emphasising data monitoring and learning, provides a robust selection of publicly available reports, including eight annual reports and three learning and monitoring annual reports in the Sahel and Lak Chad region. In addition to the EUTFA and Regional reports, other documents covering the period from 2015 to 2025 (Pacciardi, 2025) originate from key actors of the European Commission Directorate General in the EUTFA, including the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO), which merged into the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) in 2020, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME), and the Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)

(European Court of Auditors, 2024; Kervyn & Shilhav, 2017). The four selected DGS are relevant to the implementation of the EUTFa.

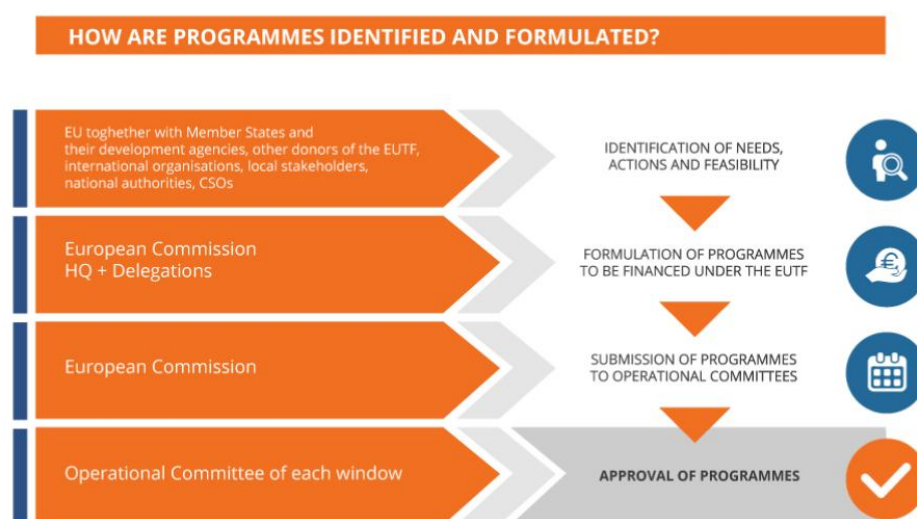
The annual reports selected for review include six from DG DEVCO (2016 and 2017) and DG INTPA (2020-2023)¹, nine from DG NEAR (2015-2023), and nine from DG HOME (2015-2023). Other significant actors within the EUTFa were excluded, such as the European External Action Service (EEAS), Member State donors, and other EU bodies aside from the Commission, as the research aims to examine the discursive legitimisation strategies employed by the European Commission. Entities like the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) were also omitted, as co-written documents (in this case, between Commission and EEAS bodies) may compromise the sole intentions of the Commission (Gamkrelidze, 2024).

Focusing on annual reports rather than semiannual or quarterly reports prevents repetition of information, as the annual reports encompass the details provided in the other periodic reports. This emphasis facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the EUTFa and the Commission's actions. Furthermore, the annual learning and monitoring reports are presented more fluidly and narratively than the quarterly reports. The EUTFa managers oversee the EUTFa's annual reports (see figure 1), and they are appointed by the Commission trustee (European Court of Auditors, 2018), serving as a conduit for the Commission's discourse strategies.

The selection of three groups of document sources (DG reports, EUTFa reports, regional learning and monitoring reports) enhances this research by providing a broader range of communication channels from the European Commission. More importantly, these documents, particularly the EUTFa and regional reports, are used to formulate future programmes and strategies (Figure 2) during the EUTFa's annual meetings (Figure 1). The DG's annual reports present an opportunity to develop an inter-institutional legitimisation strategy with other actors and EU bodies, thereby institutionalising the securitisation strategy across DGs.

¹ DG DEVCO, having merged into DG INTPA, the six reports are found under DG INTPA and titled as such in the analysis of the documents.

Figure 2. EUTFA, Identification and Formulation of Programmes.



From *Emergency Trust Fund for Africa – How Do We Work?*, by Directorate-General for International Partnerships, n.d., European Union. (https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-mission/how-do-we-work_en).

Operationalisation

This section operationalises the key theoretical concepts developed in the previous chapters to conduct a structured analysis of the securitisation processes at play. Based on the framework of securitisation theory, resilience thinking, and discursive legitimation, the operationalisation translates abstract concepts into concrete analytical categories and indicators.

The following table summarises the main concepts, categories, indicators, and examples of sentences found in the documents to guide the empirical investigation.

Table 1. Operationalisation of Discursive Legitimation Strategies in light of Securitisation of Development Policy.

Concepts and definitions	Dimensions & Definitions	Indicators
Moral legitimation Draws on underlying value systems (van Leeuwen, 2007).	Normalisation Normalising actions by considering them ‘healthy’, ‘natural’, or ‘inevitable’ (van Leeuwen, 2007).	(M.N.1) Risk management: risks to EU mobility systems, EU citizens, and internal order
		(M.N.2) Preventing suffering through stabilisation

	Abstraction	(M.A.1) Partner state security and resilience: stabilisation, governance resilience, and comprehensive approach to address causes of insecurity
	Indicating the moral qualities of an action, such as cooperation, independence, and commitment (van Leeuwen, 2007).	(M.A.2) Resilience-building as a moral imperative
		(M.A.3) Human Empowerment
	Comparison	(M.C.1) Protection of vulnerable populations; justification through ODA and humanitarian aid
	Comparing actions with other actions that are associated with positive or negative values (van Leeuwen, 2007).	(M.C.2) Underdevelopment: reference to fragile states, poverty, and lack of governance
		(M.C.3) Framing of partner states as dangerous/fragile vs. Stable EU
Rational legitimization Justifies actions by appealing to logic or knowledge (van Leeuwen, 2007).	Instrumental rationalisation Reference to goals, means, and effects of practice (van Leeuwen, 2007).	(R.I.1) Threat factors: terrorism, organised crime, drug trafficking, human smuggling, etc.
		(R.I.2) Addressing root causes to reduce migration
		(R.I.3) Quantified results and investment logic (showing purpose with measurable impact)
	Theoretical rationalisation Reference to systematic knowledge (van Leeuwen, 2007).	(R.T.1) Resilience-building as a goal-oriented response to threats like migration or terrorism
		(R.T.2) Evidence-based justification
Authority legitimization Relies on the authority of individuals or systems to justify actions (van	Impersonal authority Related to laws, rules, and regulations (van Leeuwen, 2007).	(A.I.1) Use of legal/formal language (“policy”, “regulation”, “law”, “compulsory”, “mandatory”, “obligatory”, etc.)

Leeuwen, 2007; Vaara & Tienari, 2008)		(A.I.2) Reference to European-African ² (in which G5 Sahel are concerned) partnerships related to migration, development, security, crisis, etc. (Consensus on Development, Pact on Migration and Asylum, Bilateral Agreements, Valletta Action Plan, The Rabat Process, EU action plan against migrant smuggling, Cotonou Agreement, Post Cotonou Agreement APSA, MESA, GMES, APF, MME ³)
	Personal authority	(A.P.1) EU institutional competence (e.g. Commission, DGs)
	Statutory authority accorded to an entity because of its competence in a particular institution (van Leeuwen, 2007).	(A.P.2) Mention of EU foreign policy competencies
Mythopoetic legitimization Legitimizes through narratives, using stories that illustrate the consequences of past actions (van Leeuwen, 2007; Pasveer, 2023).	Moral tales	(MYTH.M.1) Resilience as a success story
	Cautionary tales	(MYTH.C.1) Adverse consequences if no action is taken
	Stories about adverse outcomes due to the absence of specific actions (van Leeuwen, 2007).	(MYTH.C.2) “migration chaos”, “insecurity spillover”, and crisis narratives

Source: Author’s Elaboration.

Findings and Analysis

This research examines the discursive legitimization of the securitisation of EU development policy through the case of the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa in the Sahel region. By analysing the discursive legitimization strategies outlined by van Leeuwen (2007) in a fund already claimed to be securitised, this research highlights the discursive legitimization

² Including bilateral agreements between a Member State and a Partner State or the EU with one of the states of the G5 Sahel.

³ European Union Support to the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), Monitoring for Environment and Security in Africa (MESA), Global Monitoring of Environment & Security (GMES), African Peace Facility (APF), the Africa-EU Partnership on Migration, Mobility, and Employment (MME).

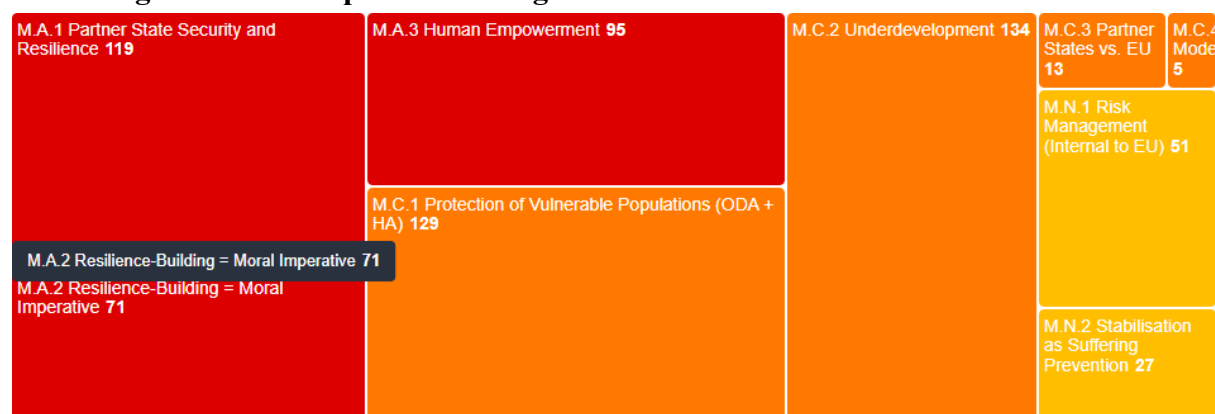
strategies employed, or not, as well as the relationship between securitisation and legitimisation strategies, and how the latter influences the former. This section is divided into sub-sections for clarity. First, the analysis is divided into four sub-sections, each taking a closer look at the discursive legitimisation strategies (first column in Table 1). In these sections, the analysis examines the patterns of the various indicators (columns two and three) of each discursive legitimisation strategy and their interpretations across all document groups. Within those sub-sections, the research provides a cross-document comparison and a reflection on the influence of the discursive legitimisation strategy on the securitisation of development policies.

Moral Legitimation

Moral legitimisation stands out as the most prominent strategy in this study, appearing in all documents and making up 55% of the total coded instances (644 out of 1163 quotes). It broadly refers to using value systems to justify actions. In van Leeuwen's (2007) terms, it involves naturalising practices as "natural", "healthy", or "inevitable", even if these attributes are not explicitly stated but must be inferred by the reader (p.98).

Within EU foreign policy, such legitimisation also draws on the Union's foundational values, such as peace, human rights, and liberal democracy. In this research, moral legitimisation is examined through three mechanisms: comparison (orange in Figure 3), abstraction (red), and normalisation (yellow). These are broken down into specific indicators based on literature on securitisation and the development–migration–security nexus (see Table 1 for definitions).

Figure 3. TreeMap of Moral Legitimation Indicators.



Comparison

Comparison, or analogy, refers to an action's implicit or explicit correlation with another activity that carries specific positive or negative value (van Leeuwen, 2007). Consequently, comparison can serve a delegitimatory function; in the case of EU development policy, underdevelopment and security threats are linked with negative analogies. Here, these

analogies are drawn to the developed and modernised world, represented by the EU. Underdevelopment, therefore, presents an opportunity for the EU to justify its actions, as the underdeveloped society poses a threat to itself and its international counterparts. The other function is legitimacy in nature, as the EU justifies its actions by attributing them elements of humanitarian and modernising efforts.

In the EUTFA, underdevelopment is not usually named outright but is conveyed implicitly through references to weak governance, fragile economies, or lack of institutional capacity. The Sahel is repeatedly portrayed as a region unable to withstand shocks—whether environmental, demographic, or security-related. This framing constructs underdevelopment as a root cause of instability and migration, thereby justifying the EU’s intervention:

The EU provides support to the three regions to face the growing challenges of demographic pressure, environmental stress, extreme poverty, internal tensions, institutional weaknesses, weak social and economic infrastructures, and insufficient resilience to food crises, which have in some places led to open conflict, displacement, criminality, radicalisation and violent extremism, as well as irregular migration, trafficking in human beings and the smuggling of migrants. (DGNEAR16, Appendix 1)

The direct link between underdevelopment and instability relies on two key factors: political tensions and the resulting conflicts. “The security landscape in West Africa deteriorated in 2023, as conflict intensified across the central Sahel region”, “The protracted conflict is severely hampering Niger’s development, which is concerning as the country is already one of the poorest in the world” (SLC23, Appendix 1).

These links between instability, conflict, and migration clearly reflect a risk management logic, where development policy becomes a preventive security tool (Tocci, 2019; Stepka, 2022).

Comparison is also reinforced through geopolitical contrasts. For instance, the mention of the Sahel’s ties with Russia—framed as a country contrary to EU norms—serves to highlight the democratic and rule-of-law deficiencies in partner states.

In contrast, the EU presents itself through positive analogies, especially via references to humanitarian aid. These underscore the necessity of the EUTFA in protecting vulnerable populations in critical situations, such as starvation and the lack of access to potable water and sanitation facilities. This depiction of the humanitarian crisis in the Sahel calls for exceptional measures in response to the urgent needs of Sahelian society, following the Copenhagen School of securitisation, which frames threats as emergencies needing exceptional measures.

As the following quote shows, the vulnerable population includes not only populations of the Sahel but also the refugees and migrants who reside and transit through the region: “For programmes in Mauritania, urgent relief and humanitarian assistance were a priority during S2, particularly given the urgent needs of migrants transiting through Nouakchott and Dakhlet Nouadhibou” (SLC21, Appendix 1). Additionally, the EU incorporates humanitarian actors, such as UNHCR, into its actions, reinforcing the humanitarian nature of the EUTFA’s objectives:

The EUTF for Africa continued to support the UNHCR Evacuation Transit Mechanism (ETM) (...) It also supported the EU-IOM Joint Initiative to provide protection and voluntary return assistance to migrants in transit, and to help them reintegrate in their countries of origin. (EUTFA18, Appendix 1)

Finally, the EU discusses another positive action: modernisation. The quotes here pertain only to explicitly mentioning modernisation as a goal of the EUTFA. In contrast, the implicit value of modernisation is inferred through the negative implications of underdevelopment. The content, aligned with underdevelopment analogies, primarily concerns the modernisation of systems related to governance and security. Furthermore, the EU highlights the modernisation of migration laws as a crucial element of the region’s modernisation process: “The adoption of a modern asylum law which is aligned with international norms and standards is a crucial pillar in building a sustainable, reliable and enforceable support system for refugees” (SLC22, Appendix 1).

Abstraction

Abstraction involves describing practices (or parts of them) in abstract terms that assign moral values, emphasising traits that align with broader moral or ethical discourse (van Leeuwen, 2007, p.99). In the case of the EUTFA, abstraction occurs in relation to three core EU priorities: governance resilience, human empowerment, and moral imperatives. These abstract formulations obscure the security imperatives underlying EU development policy, portraying them instead as value-driven, moral obligations.

The paramount value the EU upholds in addressing instability and fostering development is the stabilisation and resilience of governance in partner states through a comprehensive approach. This method enables the international community to tackle the threats posed by migration and insecurity in the Sahel. As one of EUTFA’s primary objectives, this comprehensive strategy reflects the EU’s commitment to both international and regional

cooperation, especially within the G5 Sahel, as well as with West and North Africa and the EU on migration and security matters.

As explained by the DG INTPA, “The action seeks, on the one hand, to initiate a dialogue with the main actors of the irregular migration channels (...)” (INTPA16, Appendix 1). To achieve this level of international cooperation, the capacity of partner states to act must be enhanced, particularly regarding the robustness of their (national) institutions and the training of their officials (security and justice): “The equipment was distributed to national institutions, as well as journalists, justice officials, security forces, and regional institutions, reflecting commitment to strengthen the capacity of all types of actors across the region” (SLC23, Appendix 1).

The most recurring aspect of boosting stabilisation and resilience is directly linked to security and migration management goals: “EUTF-funded programmes are committed to reinforcing national infrastructure and building capacity among national security forces and communities” and “Increasing the capacities and coordination of security forces to ensure stability in the region” (SLC21, Appendix 1), “The main objective is to strengthen the capacity of governments and other relevant players to address migration issues in a comprehensive, cooperative and ultimately self-reliant manner” (EUTFA17, Appendix 1), “In response, the EU is scaling up support to address this regional spillover and promote stability, blending security measures with socio-economic and developmental efforts” (EUTFA23, Appendix 1). By insisting on governance resilience as a foundation for migration and security management, the Commission frames development as precautionary security governance, in line with Davitti and Ursu’s (2018) approach.

The second abstraction indicator that the EU most strongly supports is human empowerment through economic and employment opportunities. This involves extending and maintaining an inclusive and robust economic system that counters the threats of illegal migration and limits the unlawful movement of people from the outset. These initiatives are often aimed at youth and women, groups that frequently find themselves most excluded from the workforce: “namely to provide better employment opportunities and living conditions in the area, in particular for the youth” (INTPA15, Appendix 1), “The Trust Fund primarily targets inclusive job creation focusing on the most vulnerable, both through the job market and by supporting people to develop IGAs” (SLC23, Appendix 1). Many of these initiatives include small-scale income-generating activities (IGAs), micro-entrepreneurship, and member-run microfinancing. These efforts aim to empower people to set money aside, which should act as a social protection tool.

The third indicator in abstraction is the imperative nature of the actions taken by the EU through the EUTFA. The situation in the Sahel is portrayed as a crisis of various types (economic, migration, humanitarian, etc.), which necessitates the assistance of the EU and its partners. This aspect pertains to the need for international cooperation, this time emphasising the tragedy-like nature of the situation in the region: “In 2021, the coup in Mali, the continued deterioration of the security context in the Sahel, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in an increased need for the EUTF for Africa to show resilience and flexibility” (EUTFA21, Appendix 1). In framing resilience and state-building as moral imperatives, the EU justifies a shift from development as empowerment to development as control, a central characteristic of its securitised approach

Normalisation

Normalisation evaluates the action by simultaneously providing it with a designation and an attribute; it is a principle embedded within the human order and can shift from one’s moral compass to another’s (van Leeuwen, 2007). In relation to securitisation, it pertains to the referent object, in other words, the system that is supposedly at risk and which requires a securitised response. The data identifies two primary referent objects.

The first and most common concern refers to the EU's order, encompassing its security, territorial integrity, and economic stability, which are believed to be threatened by the underdevelopment of the Sahel, along with the resulting migration movements and risks that arise in the region. In the documents, the threat identified most often as disruptive to the EU's internal order is immigration. Frequently linked with the migration routes towards the continent, the Sahel is recognised as a key transit and originating region for migrants aiming to reach Europe: “The SLC region continues to be an important transit area for migrants that intend to reach Europe through the Mediterranean and Atlantic” (SLC22 and SLC23, Appendix 1).

The second referent object is the liberal system as a whole. The data indicate that the EU is concerned about the breach of fundamental human rights and essential needs of the Sahelian populations, and that only through the adoption of liberal actions can the region's instability be minimised. For the EU, state stability is key to alleviating the suffering of those populations: “Instability is also both a source and a result of food and nutritional security vulnerabilities, sometimes exacerbating pre-existing pressures” (EUTFA17, Appendix 1). In this quote, the EU refers to extremism, terrorism, poverty, poor economic conditions,

malnutrition, and radicalisation as both the underlying cause and consequence of instability in the region, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that hinders development.

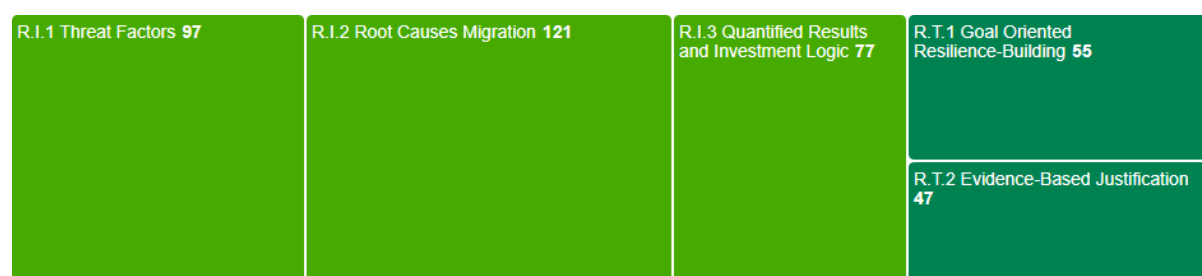
Framing underdevelopment as a threat to the EU's internal order and Western values illustrates how development policy is securitised: humanitarianism becomes a vehicle for security, and coercive interventions are reframed as moral imperatives. Normalisation discursively positions such threats as necessitating self-evident, securitised responses.

Rational Legitimation

Rational legitimation, or rationalisation, is the second most significant discursive legitimation strategy employed by the Commission in the content related to the EUTFA. In theory, van Leeuwen (2007) refers to rationalisation as using technical, logical, and ostensibly neutral language to justify institutional actions. This form of legitimation appeals to logic and knowledge rather than emotion or values. These rationales can manifest in two forms: instrumental (light green in Figure 4) and theoretical (dark green). The former pertains to the goals, means, and effects of securitisation, while the latter explicitly relates to the natural order of things (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 101).

In the case of securitisation, rational legitimation pertains to the security logics associated with the securitised actions. Two such logics are evident in the data: human security and risk management (Stepka, 2022). Risk management is dominant in this section, appearing through instrumental and theoretical justification forms. Within this logic, long-term security and structural development are framed as necessary measures to counter risks such as irregular migration and terrorism, with resilience-building as the most effective solution. This framing of migration and underdevelopment as interlinked threat factors contributes to a discourse of exceptionality. These intertwined logics legitimise securitisation by appealing simultaneously to technical necessity and normative justification.

Figure 4. TreeMap of Rational Legitimation Indicators.



Instrumental Rationalisation

The first indicator of instrumental rationalisation is the emphasis on addressing root cause migration as a means to reduce irregular migration and improve reintegration and return programmes. The Commission highlights the underdevelopment of the Sahel and directly links it to displacement and irregular migration in the region. These elements of underdevelopment include violent conflict and uprisings, a lack of resilience in the face of environmental crises, and economic decline: “the SLC region continued to grapple with political instability and intensified conflict, driving more people into food insecurity and displacement” (SLC24S1, Appendix 1). This diagnosis constructs migration not as voluntary but as a rational response to unlivable conditions, thus making EU intervention appear logical and necessary.

On the one hand, the Commission argues that development can reduce push factors and consequently decrease irregular migration. By improving livelihoods and strengthening local conditions, the EU assumes fewer people will feel compelled to leave their homes. This logic also supports sustainable return and reintegration efforts: “where returnees clean public spaces or participate in similar sanitation- and environment-related work. These activities are intended to improve the living conditions in local communities while giving a social role to returnees” (SLC24S1, Appendix 1). On the other hand, irregular migration is portrayed as a source of instability, reinforcing its securitisation. Migration is portrayed not merely as a symptom of instability, but as a source of further disruption to local cohesion and essential services: “Political instability and conflict further fuelled forced displacement, leading to exploitation and the disruption of essential services” (SLC24S1, Appendix 1).

This dual framing enables the EU to present its interventions as both humanitarian and security-driven. The instrumental rationale normalises development measures that serve broader security objectives.

A second prominent indicator of instrumental rationalisation is the framing of irregular migration as a conduit for threats such as terrorism, migrant smuggling, and drug trafficking. The Commission identifies two main threats of irregular migration that can be mitigated through effective migration and border management. First, irregular migration portrayed as being facilitated by unlawful practices such as smuggling and trafficking: “These challenges contribute to the migratory crisis, aggravated by human trafficking, the smuggling of migrants and problems of stability, conflicts and forced displacement” (EUTF17, Appendix 1). This portrayal aligns with a human security rationale: migrants are both pushed out by terrorist groups and preyed upon by smugglers during their journey. The threat is further emphasised

through a discourse of “spillover”, suggesting that instability in one region can easily spread beyond its borders.

The second threat is a structural security issue. The presence of smugglers and traffickers in the targeted countries necessitates enhanced law enforcement capabilities and stricter migration and border regulations:

The project aimed to contribute to national law enforcement capacities in the targeted countries by providing law enforcement actors with appropriate tools to better manage police information and therefore increase their effectiveness in handling transnational crime and terrorism related cases. (SLC21, Appendix 1).

Yet, the Commission also presents a more complex picture by framing smugglers not only as threats but also as victims of systemic failure. High demand for irregular migration routes compels individuals to build livelihoods around illegal work. This dual characterisation reveals the entanglement of human security and risk management logics in the EUTFA's discourse.

A third indicator of instrumental rationalisation is the emphasis on quantified outcomes and investment reasoning. The EUTFA is presented with numerous figures and metrics that reflect efficiency and impact. This rationale aligns with investor logics, aiming to foster trust among partners regarding the use of funds. By appealing to quantitative benchmarks and the language of investment, the Commission legitimises the securitisation of development policy without invoking explicit value-based or security arguments.

Theoretical Rationalisation

Theoretical rationalisation appeals to perceived truths and shared knowledge (van Leeuwen, 2007). The Commission presents resilience-building as the logical and effective response to irregular migration and underdevelopment in the Sahel, citing studies, statistics, and causal reasoning. The EUTFA is explicitly designed around monitoring and learning principles, producing knowledge and data on the root causes of migration to guide its interventions.

Goal-oriented resilience building is underpinned by technical vocabulary and knowledge-based activities, including community representation, social cohesion, dispute resolution, mediation, schooling, and broader societal empowerment. Training and awareness-raising in the region are framed as enhancing security and resilience building, supporting the risk management logic of securitisation: “These Security forces also received technical training to support them in fulfilling their civilian protection mandate” (SLC21, Appendix 1).

This discourse aims to convince of the necessity of raising awareness of societal and security issues, and also to justify the EUTFA’s actions regarding the identification of best practices and innovative approaches in the implementation procedures.

Evidence-based justification also extends to actions not directly tied to resilience-building yet justified through knowledge and studies. In this instance, the EUTFA calls for humanitarian assistance, which does not inherently involve resilience building, but rather necessitates other types of actions based on research: “According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in 2023, more than 37.7 million people across Burkina Faso, the north of Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, and northeast Nigeria required humanitarian life-saving assistance” (EUTFA23, Appendix 1).

The EUTFA’s emphasis on data, evidence, and technical learning provides a powerful legitimising scaffold for security-led development interventions. This reliance on “rational” discourse subtly recasts securitisation as an informed, neutral, and inevitable response.

Mythopoetic Legitimation

Mythopoetic legitimation is the third most common discursive legitimation strategy in the EUTFA data. It relates to narratives emphasising the outcomes of actions or inactions (van Leeuwen, 2007). Two types of storytelling are present in the data. The first is cautionary tales (purple in Figure 5), which describe what will happen or could happen if no development and resilience-building are carried out in the Sahel region. The second is moral tales (pink), where the effects of actions related to resilience and state-building are highlighted as positive social practices.

This legitimation strategy underscores both the humanitarian aspect of the EUTFA’s outcomes and the urgent nature of the situation in the Sahel. On one hand, stories are connected to real-life consequences and events, sometimes even including direct quotes from individuals who received aid from the Fund. Consequently, this strategy embodies the humanitarian security logic by centring populations in EUTFA’s actions. On the other hand, the urgent tone regarding the worsening situation in the Sahel triggers the exceptionalist security logic.

Figure 5. TreeMap of Mythopoetic Legitimation Indicators.



Cautionary Tales

Cautionary tales portray the Sahel as a space of impending or ongoing collapse, demanding urgent intervention. These narratives construct a *present continuous crisis*, where inaction is framed as an almost moral failure. Examples range from localised risks to regional destabilisation, creating a layered logic of emergency.

One set of cautionary stories highlights human insecurity and the fragility of basic life conditions, as demonstrated in the statement: “In Mauritania, according to the latest figures, approximately 15% of the population will be in severe food insecurity for the first semester of 2018” (EUTFA17, Appendix 1). Others connect insufficient governance capacity to systemic fragility: “For the law to become effective, however, further steps are needed: in particular, to complement the normative framework, strengthen implementation capacities, and ensure adequate and long-term funding” (EUTFA22, Appendix 1). These references presuppose the necessity of long-term institutional intervention, a discursive move that justifies external (EU) involvement in state-building.

A second strand of cautionary tales escalates from local fragility to transnational spillover and contagion. This logic constructs the Sahel as a geostrategic threat zone, whose dysfunctions — including migration, conflict, and governance breakdown — risk “spilling over” beyond national or regional borders. For instance: “The spillover effects of violence erupting in Sahelian countries during the latter months of the year led to increased displacement in coastal states” (SLC23, Appendix 1), or, more starkly: “A coup in Burkina Faso in the beginning of 2022 (...) have confirmed fears of a ‘domino effect’ in the region” (SLC21, Appendix 1). These narratives generate danger through discourse, invoking the EU’s responsibility to act and justifying securitised governance as a form of prevention.

What links these cautionary tales is their anticipatory temporality: they collapse the future into the present to legitimise the ongoing need for intervention. The stories combine humanitarian and strategic justifications in a hybrid legitimisation logic

Moral Tales

Moral tales serve to legitimise by portraying the EUTFA’s actions as both virtuous and effective. They are success stories — sometimes human-centred and emotional, sometimes broad and technocratic — but always designed to show that intervention produces measurable, beneficial outcomes. These narratives help to humanise the EUTFA while also affirming its efficiency and necessity.

Human-centred moral tales highlight individual empowerment and transformation, often foregrounding aspiration and pride. For example, the testimony of a trained mechanic expresses more than economic resilience:

“That’s why I decided to become an outboard mechanic, help fishermen, save my life myself, and especially support my brothers. (...) I would like to invest in many fields in Mauritania, it is my country, and I am proud of it.” (EUTFA21, Appendix 1)

This story does more than illustrate success; it links personal empowerment to national pride and collective good — constructing the beneficiary as both a subject of development and a citizen-patriot, thereby embedding the EUTFA’s actions within both human and state security narratives.

Even in cases where no individual story is highlighted, figures representing individuals are presented: “A notable achievement during this period was the training of 8 823 people in Mali to support the referendum process which led to the adoption of a new Constitution in June” (EUTFA23, Appendix 1).

Beyond testimonials, moral tales also feature in statistical and policy language that addresses wider societal outcomes: “A notable achievement during this period was the training of 8,823 people in Mali to support the referendum process which led to the adoption of a new Constitution in June” (EUTFA23, Appendix 1). Here, democratic governance is presented both as an outcome of resilience-building and as a normative good. Meanwhile, technocratic achievements such as “444,549 people benefitted from improved access to services thanks to new or rehabilitated social infrastructure” (SLC21, Appendix 1) mobilise legitimacy through scale and quantifiability.

The stories seldom show conflict or uneven results, instead presenting a steady narrative of progress, which reinforces a form of technocratic optimism. Alongside cautionary tales, these stories normalise ongoing intervention as both necessary and ultimately benevolent.

Authority Legitimation

Authority legitimation, the least common strategy in the data, draws on established sources of institutional or legal power to justify EUTFA actions. Following van Leeuwen (2007), it can be divided into impersonal (laws, treaties, frameworks) and personal (actors, institutions) authorisation. Although infrequent, authority anchors emotive and moral claims in an ostensibly neutral, institutional register. Importantly, these appeals to authority are not value-free: they mask asymmetries, normalise interventionist practices, and subtly support securitisation logics under the guise of legality and policy coherence.

Figure 6. TreeMap of Authority Legitimation Indicators.



Impersonal Authority

The most recurring impersonal reference is to international agreements, especially the Valletta Agreement, which initiated the EUTFA framework. Others include the Rabat Process, the Global Refugee Forum, and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. These references do ideological work by situating the EUTFA within a constellation of multilateral consensus, giving the impression of collective authorship and mutual benefit. This is reinforced in statements such as: “(...) in 2019 the EUTF supported the Sahel Alliance by providing financial support to the Alliance Coordination Unit. This strengthened coordination between the EUTF, partner countries and the G5 Sahel” (EUTFA19, Appendix 1).

Notably, general legal language does not appear in isolation within the documents. The Commission does not refer to legal language without linking it to the Agreements or the institutional competencies of the EU. This may not be surprising for some documents, such as the M&L documents, as the focus is on technocratic legitimation. However, this can be surprising when the Commission addresses the public or the Member States, as this lends the EUTFA an aura of procedural inevitability.

What is absent in this strategy is any explicit reflection on power imbalances within these frameworks — for instance, how “partnership” might mask conditionality, or how EU-driven agendas shape “consensual” frameworks. The silence reinforces a structural authority that legitimises the EU as a natural actor in African governance without naming its stakes.

Personal Authority

Personal authority is asserted through references to the EU’s institutional competencies, especially in development and foreign affairs. This is both a defensive and assertive strategy: it frames the EU as responsible, legally entitled, and already embedded in the Sahel context.

For instance, documents cite “reinforcing the EU’s ongoing, significant development cooperation in the continent” (DGINTPA16, Appendix 1) as a rationale. Elsewhere, the use of EU missions in Mali affirms the EU’s embedded presence: “Such diagnosis was conducted in

close collaboration with the two CSDP missions deployed in the country (...) as well as the Malian authorities” (EUTFA17, Appendix 1).

Finally, references to migration-related competencies are particularly notable. In a key excerpt, the Commission is positioned as the legitimate source of policy propositions: “On migration policy, in November the European Commission proposed a Skills and Talent Mobility Package (...) to make the EU more attractive to talent from outside the EU” (EUTFA23, Appendix 1).

Here, the authority to act — and to reshape migration governance — is claimed explicitly. This illustrates how personal authority is not just about justifying actions but about narrating control over complex fields like migration, development, and security. It thus discursively supports securitisation by presenting the Commission not just as an actor, but as a necessary one.

Discussion and Conclusion

This section provides a comparative discussion of the legitimisation strategies observed in the data, showing how these discursive practices institutionalise the EU’s securitisation of development policy through the EUTFA. The thesis argues that the Commission employs discursive legitimisation not merely as rhetorical support but as an active mechanism of securitisation. By embedding the EUTFA in moral, rational, mythopoetic, and authoritative frameworks, the Commission constructs legitimacy for security-oriented development measures while strategically omitting alternative voices and framings. This represents an original contribution to the literature by foregrounding discursive legitimisation as a constitutive driver of securitisation, rather than a secondary effect.

Legitimation Strategies and Security Logics

The data reveal a strong correlation between humanitarian, exceptionality, and risk management logics and the Commission’s discursive strategies. These findings align with Stępk’a’s (2022) thesis on EU migration policy, reinforcing the argument that migration and development policies are securitised in tandem.

Moralisation, rationalisation, and mythopoetic legitimisation are often deployed in overlapping ways, indicating that security logics are strategically layered. This confirms the utility of combining the PARIS and Copenhagen School lenses, as Stępk’a (2022) suggests. However, this hybrid theoretical lens also has limitations. While it aids in unpacking multiple

layers of securitisation, it risks underestimating the importance of non-discursive or material power structures. A more pluralistic approach could better engage with these dynamics.

The humanitarian logic is most consistently invoked, emphasising individual security by comparing the EUTFA to humanitarian aid and depicting human security as a prerequisite for resilience. This logic often merges with exceptionalist narratives, portraying trafficking, terrorism, or climate-induced displacement as urgent crises demanding extraordinary measures (Idahosa et al., 2021). This fosters a form of technocratic humanitarianism, emphasising moral urgency and echoing familiar tropes in EU migration discourse.

Humanitarian reasoning also intersects with risk management logic. Here, governance failures in the Sahel are seen as fundamental causes of instability, portraying these states as both origin and centre of risk. From this perspective, resilience-building becomes a preventative measure—designed not only to empower local populations but also to stabilise governance systems, ultimately safeguarding EU borders and political interests.

Resilience and the Migration-Security-Development Nexus

Contrary to Tocci (2019), the EUTFA frames resilience as encompassing both humanitarian and development dimensions, collapsing the distinction between them. State development, humanitarian aid, and risk mitigation are grouped under a comprehensive concept of resilience, which serves as an empty signifier for security.

Stepka's (2022) analysis of resilience as a risk management tool in migration policy equally applies here: resilience becomes a preventive strategy that seeks to insulate the EU from irregular migration, instability, and emergencies. This redefinition of resilience blurs the line between solidarity and self-interest, legitimising securitised development as both ethical and pragmatic.

While Juncos (2017) sees resilience as potentially counter-securitising—by normalising risk and reducing the need for exceptional measures—this thesis finds the opposite. In the EUTFA context, resilience serves to institutionalise and depoliticise securitisation. Framing development as a technical, risk-oriented process obscures the political choices and power asymmetries embedded in it.

Authority and Institutional Power: Silencing and Complexities

The Commission presents itself as the lead securitising actor while downplaying or omitting other global and local voices. As Lucarelli et al. (2019) note, the international security architecture is multi-actor, yet the EU's discourse simplifies this complexity. Sahelian states

are primarily framed as risk sources—associated with instability, migration, and terrorism—rather than as co-creators of policy.

This discursive exclusion reproduces the North–South divide and reaffirms the EU’s normative hierarchy in global development (Olivie & Pérez, 2021). However, the EU is not a monolithic actor; internal tensions between member states, DGs, and funding instruments often shape competing policy narratives. Similarly, Sahelian governments are not powerless. While marginalised discursively, they exercise agency in other domains—through diplomatic negotiations, security cooperation, and even tactical acceptance of EU funds to advance domestic political goals.

As a result, the EUTFA’s top-down approach enforces European liberal values and securitised reasoning without considering local political contexts. This discursive silencing of Sahelian voices deepens unequal power relations within EU development policy. However, silencing does not necessarily mean complete disempowerment in the political arena.

Implications for EU Development Policies

This thesis identifies two regressive trends in EU development discourse. First, the fusion of security logics transforms underdevelopment into a singular, urgent threat. Development is legitimised not as a long-term process of mutual empowerment, but as an emergency intervention to pre-empt instability and migration. This aligns with Magcamit and Mahon’s (2024) claim that securitisation erodes the inclusive and participatory purpose of development policy.

This discourse reveals a contradiction at the heart of the EU’s normative agenda. While the EU insists on liberal standards from its partners, it engages in securitised and often unilateral practices that exclude local agency. This dynamic exposes the double standards embedded in EU foreign policy and complicates its self-image as a normative power (Tocci, 2019; Juncos, 2017).

Second, despite rhetorical commitments to partnership, the EU’s discursive framing alienates local actors by excluding them from policy design and narrative control. The EUTFA constructs Sahelian states as passive recipients of European expertise and intervention. This exclusion is especially problematic given the EU’s declining influence in the region, where competitors like Russia and China are gaining traction by appealing to alternative development models.

To remain relevant, the EU must revise not only its geopolitical approach but also the way it constructs development discursively. Engaging African states as co-constructors of

policy—beginning at the discursive level—can shift development from an imposed project to a shared agenda, enhancing its legitimacy and longevity. This reorientation must begin at the discursive level, where narratives of risk, resilience, and partnership are shaped.

Methodological Limitations and Reflexivity

This study faces several limitations. It draws exclusively on official Commission documents, excluding the perspectives of other EUTFA actors (see Figure 1). These actors may adopt different legitimisation strategies or challenge the dominant discourses identified in this study. Additionally, the final two annual reports of the EUTFA (2024 and 2025) were unavailable, limiting the temporal scope of the analysis.

More fundamentally, discourse analysis is an interpretive approach. Legitimation strategies were identified through close reading, informed by theory for coding. However, interpretation is never neutral. My positionality—as a researcher based in the Global North—inevitably influences how frames are recognised and assessed. Alternative readings are possible, and different theoretical lenses (e.g., postcolonial or decolonial) may yield distinct insights.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that the European Commission legitimises a securitised development agenda in the Sahel through the strategic use of moral, rational, mythopoetic, and authority-based discursive strategies. These are not mere rhetorical tools but constitutive mechanisms that embed security logics into the very fabric of EU development discourse.

First, the Commission systematically deploys these strategies to frame securitisation as coherent with its normative identity, anchoring it in humanitarian concern, rational planning, and historical responsibility. Second, the EUTFA reflects a convergence of security logics, where resilience operates as a catch-all justification for interventions that would otherwise appear politically contested. This fusion redefines development as a risk mitigation strategy rather than a process of empowerment.

Third, while the EU claims to support cooperative governance, its discourse sidelines both internal dissent and external partners, particularly Sahelian actors. This omission contributes to the institutionalisation and depoliticisation of security-driven development, presenting it as a neutral necessity rather than a political choice.

In summary, this thesis presents an original perspective by demonstrating that discursive legitimisation is not merely reflective but also generative, as it shapes policy outcomes by constructing specific logics, actors, and futures as natural or inevitable. Recognising this

dynamic opens space for reimagining development beyond the securitised, top-down paradigms that currently dominate EU external action.

Policy Recommendations

While this study exposes contradictions in the EU's normative self-image, it also highlights opportunities for reform. If discourse shapes legitimacy, it can also be reshaped. A more inclusive, dialogical approach to development framing—one that genuinely incorporates African voices—could help reorient EU policy away from narrow security imperatives and towards mutual partnership. As the EU faces shifting alliances and declining influence in the Sahel, rethinking how it talks about development is not just ethical—it is strategic:

- Strengthen co-ownership through inclusive strategy and reporting mechanisms. To support the longevity of its foreign policy partnerships, the EU should involve partner states in shaping both development strategies and reporting frameworks. This participatory approach begins by addressing problematic discourse (Vine, 2023):
 - Framing partner states as threats undermines trust and limits prospects for joint problem-solving;
 - Actively position the partner states as the audience in the securitisation process, capable of endorsing, contesting, or shaping security framings. This would grant them a central role in constructing legitimacy;
 - Engaging both Sahelian governments and societies strengthens multilevel governance and mitigates the binary framing that fuels political resistance.
- Rebalance the comprehensive approach with a strong emphasis on long-term development goals. While the EU's resilience-based comprehensive approach is conceptually sound, its implementation in the EUTFA has skewed toward short-term migration and security outcomes. However, such frameworks only succeed when long-term aims, such as enhancing governance, human rights, education, and local economic opportunities, take precedence (Motomura, 2024). The EU should:
 - Allocate a greater share of funding to structural development objectives, such as education, job creation or healthcare infrastructure;
 - Draw a clear distinction between security and development aims in strategic documents and communications;

- Commit to long-term impact by establishing robust, participatory, monitoring and follow-up mechanisms, not as a means of asymmetric social control, but as a sincere investment in sustainability and local ownership.

A shift toward long-term, inclusive, and dialogical approaches to development would allow the EU's external action to function not merely as a crisis response tool but as a credible and sustainable mechanism for addressing the root causes of instability and migration.

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Appendix A

1. European Commission – Directorate-General Annual Activity Reports

1.1 DG International Partnerships (DG INTPA)

Code	Year Covered	Published
INTPA15	2015	2016
INTPA16	2016	2017
INTPA20	2020	2021
INTPA21	2021	2022
INTPA22	2022	2023
INTPA23	2023	2024

1.2 DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)

Code	Year Covered	Published
NEAR15	2015	2016
NEAR16	2016	2017
NEAR17	2017	2018
NEAR18	2018	2019
NEAR19	2019	2020
NEAR20	2020	2021
NEAR21	2021	2022

NEAR22	2022	2023
NEAR23	2023	2024

1.3 DG Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME)

Code	Year Covered	Published
HOME15	2015	2016
HOME16	2016	2017
HOME17	2017	2018
HOME18	2018	2019
HOME19	2019	2020
HOME20	2020	2021
HOME21	2021	2022
HOME22	2022	2023
HOME23	2023	2024

2. European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa – Annual Reports

Reports published by the European Commission (2016-2017) and later by the Publications Office of the European Union.

Code	Year Covered	Published	Publisher
EUTFA16	2016	2017	European Commission
EUTFA17	2017	2018	European Commission
EUTFA18	2018	2019	Publications Office of the European Union
EUTFA19	2019	2020	Publications Office of the European Union
EUTFA20	2020	2021	Publications Office of the European Union
EUTFA21	2021	2022	Publications Office of the European Union
EUTFA22	2022	2023	Publications Office of the European Union

EUTFA23	2023	2024	Publications Office of the European Union
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3. Sahel and Lake Chad Window – Learning and Monitoring Reports

Prepared by Altai Consulting for the European Union.

Code	Period Covered	Published	Notes
SLC21	2021	2022	Annual Report
SLC22	2022	2023	Annual Report
SLC23	2023	2024	Annual Report
SLC24S1	2024 (S1)	2025	Semester 1 Report