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The rise of the Team Europe approach in EU development cooperation: Assessing a moving target

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The Rise of the Team Europe Approach in EU Development Cooperation

Assessing a Moving Target

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Abbreviations

COVAX	COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access
CSO	civil society organisation
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DG	Directorate General
DG Meeting	Directors General meeting
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Commission
EEAS	European External Action Service
EIB	European Investment Bank
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
G7	Group of Seven
G20	Group of Twenty
INTPA	International Partnerships
MPF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MIP	Multi-annual Indicative Programme
MS	member states
NEAR	Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCD	Policy Coherence for Development
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
TAIEX	Technical Assistance and Information Exchange
TE	Team Europe
TEI	Team Europe Initiative(s)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

Objective of this paper

This paper analyses the European Union's (EU's) evolving motivations, priorities and approaches to development cooperation under the label of "Team Europe", following its introduction in April 2020 as the EU's global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It assesses what Team Europe is, to what extent and how the Team Europe approach has changed EU development cooperation, and what effect it has had on EU initiatives to support partner countries. It also discusses the implications of Team Europe for the EU's development policy in the medium and long term. By analysing the EU's efforts, perceptions and considerations in relation to Team Europe, this paper contributes to further clarifying its content, objectives and expected results. For this reason, the paper's analysis is primarily targeted at policy-makers co-shaping European development policy, yet may also inform academic debates on soft-law integration approaches in EU development policy.

At the time this paper was being prepared, the COVID-19 pandemic and the EU's policy discussion on how to respond to it through its external policies had been ongoing for over a year and had not yet reached an endpoint. Researching Team Europe therefore meant assessing a moving target. To research the EU's evolving approach, the analysis is primarily based on 17 semi-structured interviews with 23 respondents, conducted between February and May 2021, and complemented by a review of relevant literature, policy statements, and public and grey policy documents.

What is "Team Europe"?

EU efforts under the label of "Team Europe" were launched in April 2020 and sought to provide an immediate and short-term financial response to the pandemic, through the combined efforts of the EU, its member states, the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). These early efforts centred on mobilising EUR 36 billion – a sum comprising repurposed planned development interventions, grants and guarantee funding.

After a ministerial meeting in June 2020, the scope of Team Europe expanded as new purposes and goals were added to the initial focus on financial support. The ministers emphasised that the EU's longer-term external response to the pandemic should be addressed in the preparation of strategies for allocating European funding under the next seven-year budget cycle (2021–2027) that were still under negotiation at that time. Beyond the EU's own development cooperation engagement, Team Europe was also increasingly used to refer to the EU's efforts to support the multilateral system, specifically those multilateral initiatives directly addressing the pandemic.

In this paper, Team Europe is considered as a process that operates on three levels. At country level, EU delegations and member state missions and embassies are invited to work together in order to bring to the fore country-level packages. This coordination exercise is continued at the HQ level, where member states agree on common policies within the Foreign Affairs Council. Lastly, Team Europe aims to strengthen the internal

coordination of European stakeholders within and in cooperation with international institutions in response to the pandemic. The reviewed policy documents, the EU's political communications, including those on social media, and the interviews conducted for this paper demonstrate a strong and increasing emphasis on the so-called Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs). These are flagship initiatives that bundle contributions by the EU, selected member states and banks in relation to specific themes in a specific country or region, or are pursued at the global level.

The overarching motivations and objectives behind Team Europe are associated with the broader strategic objectives for EU development pursued under the von der Leyen Commission. These objectives seek to ensure that EU development policy “should be strategic and effective, should create value for money and should contribute to our wider political priorities” (Von der Leyen, 2019, p. 4). Linking these overall objectives with public communication on Team Europe, and based on concepts traditionally emphasised in EU development policy, we establish four dimensions to structure our assessment of Team Europe: (i) visibility, (ii) effectiveness, (iii) ownership and (iv) integration.

Key findings on visibility, effectiveness, ownership and integration

1) Team Europe primarily seeks to increase the visibility of EU actions in support of partner countries

Increasing the visibility of EU efforts to fight the pandemic is an important rationale of Team Europe. The priority given to visibility stems from European actors' perception that there is a gap between the actual contributions made and initiatives developed by the EU and the extent to which these are acknowledged by the EU's partners and global competitors. The primary audiences of this narrative are European constituents, the EU's partner countries and other major powers. This motivation is closely connected to the EU's desire to position itself as a global leader in international cooperation and foreign affairs, meaning that visibility is both pursued as an end in itself and at the same time is considered a driver of progress in other dimensions, notably integration.

2) “Effectiveness” efforts tend to focus on the process of improving coordination between member states and the EU, and within the EU

The notion of effectiveness does not enjoy the same prominence as visibility. On the contrary, the frequency with which it is mentioned and the importance attributed to it by policy documents and our interviewees pales when compared to the quest for increased visibility. Most considerations related to effectiveness concern the “process effectiveness” of the preparation of the TEIs, with respondents considering the flexibility of the planning to be both a benefit and a challenge. As far as benefits are concerned, interviewees noted that the TEIs were adapted over time in accordance with feedback from member states and from those without representation in the country concerned. In addition, contributions of a non-financial nature could also be added to existing TEIs. In terms of challenges, the flexibility of TEIs raised operational issues regarding the approval, implementation and objectives of the initiatives.

3) Team Europe prioritises European ownership over developing country ownership

On the dimension of ownership, respondents acknowledged – and the overall Team Europe label implied – that the process is driven by European actors rather than local or national stakeholders in partner countries. The formulation of thematic priorities for Team Europe was closely linked to European policy priorities. Consultations on these considered priorities were made with partner country officials, and subsequently associated to their national development plans. The preparation of regional and global TEIs was similarly led by European actors, and subsequently associated with the priorities of Europe's partners. In contrast to this static approach to promoting country ownership based on existing formal plans, the internal EU discussions on TEIs sought to promote and sustain broad-based ownership among European actors.

4) It remains unclear whether Team Europe promotes further integration between the EU and the member states

Finally, in relation to integration, interviewees demonstrated diverging ambitions and expectations. Some respondents expected and hoped that the more flexible preparation of TEIs would allow a more structured cooperation and joint action between the EU and its member states. This agenda, better known as “joint programming” and “working better together”, has been pursued for decades, yet never fully completed. These discussions have mostly been driven by the EU together with those member states with a broad diplomatic presence and considerable bilateral development cooperation budgets. This explains why Team Europe has prompted hopes that cooperation would be more inclusive, in the sense of engaging additional member states. In addition, there remain some question marks regarding the boundaries between the TEIs and the EU programming of development cooperation (with the European Parliament being only formally involved in the latter) linked to the frequently large proportion of overall EU cooperation budgets represented by the different TEIs.

Policy recommendations

Team Europe represents a promising process that could enable further cooperation between the EU, its member states, the EIB and EBRD and national development agencies, and thus contribute to increasing the EU's collective effectiveness in this area. The dynamic and flexible approach and the considerable investments in internal dialogue are key to generating and sustaining the political traction of Team Europe. At the same time, we identify two key issues that are insufficiently considered in the current debate and that could negatively affect both the results and sustainability of Team Europe.

The first concerns the relationship between EU priorities and ownership by developing country stakeholders, including those addressed by the cooperation initiatives concerned. EU priorities do not always align with developing countries' needs. Neglecting this tension could negatively impact the effectiveness of the EU's cooperation, in particular the sustainability of the results achieved, and the successful establishment of the aspired new model of cooperation based on equal partners.

The second issue concerns the trade-off between flexibility and the results-orientation of EU development policy. While the preparation of Team Europe has been driven by enthusiasm, and has benefited from the momentum created by the pandemic, this enthusiasm must be followed by monitoring and evidence of results. This, however, may require a formalisation of the expected processes and results of Team Europe, both at the general level and with regard to individual TEIs. Such a formalisation and specification would allow the EU to be held accountable for the implementation of the TEIs, for a public communication of these results, and for their independent evaluation.

At this stage, an open question, therefore, is to what extent the focus on and traction of Team Europe will be consolidated beyond decisions on the distribution and management of the involved EU budgetary resources. Four recommendations are presented here as a way of consolidating and deepening support for Team Europe by stakeholders in EU member states engaged in development cooperation:

1. Clarify how and in which areas Team Europe should become (more) visible and create different visibility objectives for the key stakeholders within the EU, developing countries and the EU's international partners. Accompany these efforts with targeted communication campaigns for the various stakeholders.
2. Since Team Europe seeks to strengthen the collective effectiveness of the EU and its member states, the EU institutions and the member states should jointly evaluate the TEIs. Preparations for these evaluations can be made in parallel to the remaining steps in the programming process.
3. Include Team Europe as a regular item on the agenda for meetings of EU ministers responsible for development policy in the Foreign Affairs Council. This will allow ministers to take stock of progress made, guide further action and provide a basis for accountability, and the sharing of best practices and learning about Team Europe.
4. Use the second geopolitical dialogue between the Commission/EEAS and the European Parliament in the autumn of 2021 for a further exchange on the political objectives of Team Europe, and enable more parliamentary involvement and scrutiny thereof.

1 Introduction

Team Europe was first introduced in April 2020 as the European Union's (EU) global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Shortly after the start of the first wave of the pandemic, and in a context of heightened global geopolitical competition, the EU sought to step up its support to partner countries and to foster international solidarity in the fight against COVID-19. The EU's efforts were presented as a single framework of action, combining resources from all EU institutions, EU member states, the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) to provide short and long-term support to partner countries. Emphasising the EU's position at the forefront of the global effort to respond to the pandemic and its role as the world's largest donor and a leading economic power, Team Europe is meant to provide "a critical mass that few others can match" (EC [European Commission], 2020a, p. 1). The EU's international financial disbursements in response to the COVID-19 crisis (classified as development donations and excluding direct humanitarian aid) amounted to around USD 4.1 billion as of 28 April 2021. This makes the EU the world's largest donor in the current crisis (Andrew, 2021).

Over the course of 2020, the Team Europe narrative, which was initially built as a collective, rapid and direct financial response, was refined and applied to an increasing number of different policy areas with a broader ambition. In a statement adopted by EU ministers responsible for development policy in June 2020, the ministers called for the medium- to longer-term implications of COVID-19 to be addressed, and for Team Europe to be embedded in the "programming" of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021–2027 (Council of the EU [European Union], 2020). The term "programming" referred to the process of defining the key priorities and focal sectors for international cooperation. As a result, what began as an immediate and short-term crisis response took the shape of a more structural long-term transformation of the cooperation between the EU, its member states and their partner countries.

By analysing the EU's current efforts and considerations in relation to Team Europe, this paper contributes to further clarifying the content, objectives, perceptions and expected results of the EU's efforts to fight COVID-19 globally. The paper finds that a wide range of actions and priorities are now part of Team Europe, including vaccine developments, contributions to the United Nation's (UN) COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility (COVAX), and efforts to work together in a coordinated manner in the context of dedicated flagship initiatives in specific countries and regions.

The flagship initiatives within the Team Europe framework are referred to as Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs). They have attracted most attention and efforts by the EU and its member states in recent months. The present paper looks into the broader understandings and discussions on Team Europe and TEIs. Based on current overall priorities of EU development policy (Von der Leyen, 2019), our analysis focuses on four dimensions extracted from the analysed policy documents to assess the meanings and impacts of Team Europe: (i) visibility, (ii) effectiveness, (iii) ownership and (iv) integration. They are explained in the next section.

Altogether, the EU's Team Europe efforts are not only ambitious but also flexible in the sense that they are guided and redefined by continuous feedback from the different stakeholders involved in the policymaking process, seeking to reconcile respective interests

and priorities. For this reason, the analysis presented here should be considered as an informed snapshot of the thinking on Team Europe during the first half of 2021, as opposed to a final assessment thereof. The final assessment will become possible once Team Europe Initiatives have been implemented and evidence on their effectiveness becomes available. A snapshot of the present stage can be particularly helpful to further identify the objectives of Team Europe, adjust its implementation, and enable accountability and learning.

Efforts to promote visibility, effectiveness and ownership of EU development cooperation through Team Europe, and the TEIs in particular, are valuable ends in themselves but are also considered as suitable means to promote further integration in the area of development policy. Development policy is an area where the EU Treaty has given the EU and its member states parallel competences to conduct policy independently. While all interviewees participating in our analysis recognise the value of increased cooperation, their views differ as to whether the TEIs should become part of more structured joint planning efforts, which have previously been referred to as “joint programming” and “working better together”. Instead, some member states may be more interested in participating in TEIs for self-interested and instrumental motives, without supporting the broader integration agenda the EU associates with Team Europe.

This paper is primarily targeted at policy-makers and other stakeholders shaping current debates on EU development, yet may also inform the academic debate on soft-law integration approaches in the Union’s development policy (see, for instance, Orbie & Lightfoot, 2017; Kugiel, 2020). In order to provide an insight into the concept’s evolving nature, the analysis draws on 17 semi-structured interviews of 23 respondents, including officials of member states, EU officials and independent consultants, conducted between February and May 2021. This primary data collection is further complemented by a review of the relevant literature on EU development policy, official policy statements, and public and internal policy documents.

The paper is structured as follows. The following section clarifies the methodological considerations and choices made for this inquiry. The next section provides a policy reconstruction of Team Europe and describes the concept’s gradual development and expansion since its first appearance on the political stage in April 2020. The fourth section explains the four dimensions of analysis and discusses the main findings drawn from the interviews. The concluding section presents overall conclusions and presents four policy recommendations.

2 Methodological considerations: analysing a moving target

In essence, the object of this research inquiry represents a moving target, since we analyse the meaning and effect of Team Europe at the same time as the concept and its practice are “in the making”. To take one of the four dimensions, the European Commission and the External Action Service have made conscious efforts to promote ownership among relevant stakeholders and particularly among the EU member states, of the overall aims and priorities of Team Europe. As a consequence, the overall Team Europe project is evolving through the articulation of these preferences, and this paper presents an informed snapshot of the preferences and experiences of a selected number of stakeholders during the first half of 2021. In doing so, we relied on EU policy documents and statements, as well as on the perception of officials directly involved with Team Europe, which were collected through semi-structured interviews.

In view of the dynamic status of the Team Europe approach, the analysis of policy documents and statements can only provide an overview of the progress to date and a snapshot of the current stage. The adoption of policy statements by the Commission and the Council serve to “codify” the collective understandings of Team Europe. The review of existing policy documents constitutes a key part of our analysis and provides an overview of the dedicated efforts of the EU institutions to conceptualise and present the Team Europe approach to the public. The analysis of policy documents and statements served as the basis for identifying the announced objectives of Team Europe and the four underlying dimensions of visibility, effectiveness, ownership and integration. These four dimensions were used to prepare the structure of the interviews and the analysis of the collected data.

To complement the assessment of policy documents and to examine their translation into practice from the perspective of actors involved, this paper puts a primary focus on expert interviews with EU officials and member state representatives, based in Brussels and in the capitals of different member states. We made the effort to select a diverse range of interviewees, from large and smaller member states, and of different regions of Europe. As required by the evolving nature of the topic, these interviews were conducted on the condition that the contributions would be anonymised. The 23 respondents to this study included 18 member state representatives (a mix of representatives based in Brussels and their respective capitals), three EU officials (Commission and European External Action Service (EEAS)) and two other external respondents (consultants and academics). The authors sought to consult representatives from a wide range of member states, covering those both with and without significant bilateral development cooperation budgets and project implementing agencies of their own, as well as with varying geographic priorities for these bilateral development policies.

In addition to allowing the collection of key perceptions and observations in relation to the four dimensions, the expert interviews also allowed the authors to access documents that were not (yet) available in the public domain. All interviews were conducted via an online conference software and conducted by a minimum of two authors. The interviews were not recorded, but key points were captured in terms of written notes. These were subsequently structured in a matrix along the four conceptual dimensions of analysis, to enable a comparative analysis that is presented in the following section.

3 The evolution of “Team Europe”: broadening scope and substance

Following the prioritisation in the European Consensus on Development, in 2006 the European Commission presented proposals under the title “EU aid: delivering more, better and faster”, which placed key emphasis on joint programming of development cooperation between the Community and the member states (EC, 2006). The emphasis on joint programming increased even more after the global economic and financial crisis in 2008–2009. Joint programming refers to a structured planning process whereby the EU and member states with an in-country presence seek to develop a joint strategy fully aligned to the partner country’s national development plan. As such, it provides a basis for joint action. According to Commission self-reporting, joint programming is currently implemented in 78 developing countries.¹ Since the member states have not been willing to delegate further development policy competences to the European level, the Lisbon Treaty, efforts to strengthen the EU’s collective effectiveness in development cooperation are pursued by soft-law initiatives, and joint programming remains key to pursuing this objective (Orbie & Lightfoot, 2017; Kugiel, 2020; Bergmann, Delputte, Keijzer, & Verschaeve, 2019). Against this background, the pursuit of enhanced coordination of EU and member states’ development policies by the Team Europe approach is not fully new. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic and the current geopolitical competition represent a critical juncture as they offer a greater impetus for the EU’s collective, coordinated, flexible and prompt action to support partner countries to face global challenges.

When the work on this paper began in early 2021, the term Team Europe had been in use for just over a year. Over the course of 2020, the term Team Europe evolved from an emphasis on the “what” (COVID-19-related development funding) to an increased focus on the “who” (EU institutions, member states, and development finance institutions) and the “how” (the EU and its member states working together) dimensions. This section presents a policy reconstruction of Team Europe, based on an analysis of key policy proposals and public communication from the European Commission, as well as the political statements adopted by EU ministers responsible for development policy (Council Conclusions) in June 2020 and April 2021 (Council of the EU, 2020; 2021a). The European Parliament has been informed by the European Commission of its proposals in relation to Team Europe, though it is not directly involved or providing scrutiny of the efforts under this label. The section provides a dynamic interpretation of Team Europe as per its definition and use within EU development policy processes during this period. The purpose of this section is to provide a framework to guide the analysis of the evolving conceptualisation of Team Europe.

3.1 The emergence of Team Europe during the first wave of COVID-19 (first half of 2020)

In a blog post published on 28 March 2020, the European Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen emphasised that the COVID-19 pandemic required a global response. She called on the EU and its member states to mobilise all tools and resources that could contribute to this international response. In order to effectively manage these contributions, the EU’s approach would need to be “as coordinated as it is comprehensive”,

1 For more information, see the European Commission’s Joint Programming Dashboard: <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/joint-programming-tracker/>

and the EU and its member states should “work together as a real Team Europe” (Urpilainen, 2020).

The idea of Team Europe as presented in the Commissioner’s blog post was that the EU should coordinate its response in dialogue with its partners, but also make “efforts to form a united front against the pandemic with other major international players, partner governments, financial institutions, civil society, the private sector and others” (Urpilainen, 2020). The ambition to form a united front should be seen in the context of the increased geo-political competition during the pandemic and the EU’s aspiration to position itself as a global leader and reliable partner (Burni, et al., 2021). Hence, the term Team Europe emphasises European self-coordination – in contrast to earlier European approaches to development policy, which, at least rhetorically, focused on partner coordination and sought to strengthen the leadership of developing country governments (Lundsgaarde & Keijzer, 2018).

Following the announcement in the Commissioner’s blog post, the proposals for Team Europe were formally presented on 8 April 2020, when the European Commission issued a Joint Communication on the EU’s Global response to COVID-19 (EC, 2020a). The document emphasised the need for rapid action and proposed prioritising the mobilisation of financial support to partner countries in order to help them cope with the pandemic and its consequences. It was announced that “Team Europe” would attract “contributions from all EU institutions and combine (...) the resources mobilised by EU member states and financial institutions, in particular the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)” with the objective of providing “a critical mass that few others can match” (EC, 2020a, p. 1). Team Europe was presented as an example that the EU, under a geopolitical Commission, was ready to take responsibility on the global stage and to lead the fight against the pandemic (EC, 2020a, p. 1).

The Communication presented three Team Europe priorities: 1) support for the urgent, short-term emergency response to humanitarian needs; 2) the strengthening of health systems; and 3) the mitigation of economic and social consequences. The Communication laid out a table with the individual contributions for each priority, totalling EUR 15.6 billion. The bulk of the contributions were dedicated to the mitigation of expected economic and social consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The geographic focus of Team Europe was turned on the most affected countries in need of health support, including countries in Africa, the Neighbourhood, the Western Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa, parts of Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. In addition, Team Europe aimed to address the needs of the most vulnerable people, including migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons and their host communities (EC, 2020a, p. 1).

Table 1: Contributions under Team Europe according to priority lines of action	
Priority line of action	EU contribution to Team Europe package (EUR million)
Support the urgent, short-term emergency response to humanitarian needs	502 (3.2%)
Support to strengthen health systems	2,858 (18.3%)
Mitigation of economic and social consequences	12,281 (78.5%)
Total	15,641
Source: Adapted from EC 2020a, p.10.	

In line with these official objectives and motivations, the EU's approach to Team Europe during the first wave of COVID-19 focused on a rapid and visible response and the pooling of financial resources by the EU, the member states, the European Investment Bank (EIB) and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). These contributions would throw a lifeline to the most affected countries until the end of 2020. Planning beyond this point proved difficult, as the EU, the member states and the Parliament were still in the process of negotiating a new EU budget for the period 2021–2027. Not being able to access “fresh” funds, the EU had to redirect budgets of other cooperation programmes/instruments. These budget constraints in part explain Team Europe's initial emphasis on the mobilisation of development finance and its short-term focus (Burni et al., 2021).

Taken together, the Joint Communication of 8 April 2020 served the purpose of displaying the EU's combined weight in the international system as the world's foremost civilian power and provider of development cooperation and stern defender of multilateralism and global coordination. The EU did not miss the opportunity to link this display of power to its normative ambitions and orientations, in an attempt to differentiate itself from other global powers. The Communication stressed that both the EU's core values and strategic interests should guide any European response, stating that “the EU will continue to promote and uphold good governance, human rights, the rule of law, gender equality and non-discrimination, decent work conditions, as well as fundamental values and humanitarian principles”. Finally, the document emphasised the EU's commitment to multilateralism by stating that the EU “will put its full weight behind the UN Secretary General's efforts to coordinate UN-wide response” (EU, 2020a, p. 1) and further elaborated on the wide range of multilateral actors (WHO, G7, G20) it was going to coordinate its response with. Although the Communication did not clarify the internal architecture and practical implementation of Team Europe, it indicated that it was not a stand-alone short-term crisis management tool, but would further integrate the EU's long-term objectives, such as the European Green Deal, and the Digital Agenda.

3.2 The expansion of a concept (mid-2020)

As the term “Team Europe” became better known and gained political traction over the summer of 2020, its conceptualisation expanded beyond the initial focus on short-term bilateral cooperation support.

The President of the European Commission played a key role in expanding the understanding of Team Europe. Responding to the call from the World Health Organization (WHO) for a global collaboration for the development, production and equitable global access to new health technologies, Ursula von der Leyen took a leading role in setting up a high-profile pledging conference on 4 May 2020, which aimed at raising EUR 7.5 billion to develop a “universal and affordable” vaccine (EU [European Union], 2020b). Accelerating research efforts to develop effective treatments, vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics, and ensuring their universal availability at an affordable price had already been identified as one of the key challenges in the fight against the pandemic in the 8 April Joint Communication. After almost reaching the goal by raising EUR 7.4 billion (EC, 2020b), the Commission launched a new campaign with the international advocacy organisation Global Citizen, “Global Goal: Unite For Our Future”. This campaign had raised EUR 15.9 billion by the end of June 2020 and

the European Commission stated that “Team Europe” had contributed significantly to the success of the pledging summit (Burni et al., 2021).

Rooted in the EU’s aspiration to present itself as a capable global leader, Team Europe actions were accompanied by coordinated communication campaigns about the engagement and cooperation with partners (EU, 2020a, p. 3). The preparation of political statements on Team Europe also played a key role in systematising and confirming the expansion of Team Europe. Statements like the June 2020 Council Conclusions on the one hand confirmed and took stock of existing approaches, and on the other hand allowed for the addition of new purposes and processes under the Team Europe label.

EU ministers responsible for development cooperation reconvened in the Foreign Affairs Council on 8 June to adopt Council Conclusions on Team Europe, a political statement (Council of the EU, 2020) and an updated table with financial contributions by all associated official EU actors. The Council Conclusions stated the Council’s full support of the Team Europe approach and its policy priorities and highlighted the role of EU Delegations in coordinating and ensuring inclusive participation of all member states’ diplomatic networks, European financial institutions, and other relevant actors at country level, in line with their commitment to joint programming and joint implementation, which, since 2018, has been referred to as the “Working Better Together approach” (Council of the EU, 2020, p. 3). The Council Conclusions further stressed the “importance of a joint, swift, visible, and transparent action of Team Europe, in full coordination with partner countries and the UN”, emphasising the essential role of country ownership as well as cooperation with civil society organisations and the private sector.

During the summer period, the EU’s delegations all over the world began to prepare the thematic choices for EU development cooperation during the next EU budget period 2021–2027. During this preparatory process, known in EU-speak as “pre-programming”, EU heads of cooperation were instructed to begin a dialogue with member states’ embassies in partner countries to determine joint flagships. Joint flagships were groups of projects and programmes targeting a common theme and were subsequently presented under the label of Team Europe Initiatives.

The changing focus on expanding Team Europe beyond its short-term activities was further demonstrated during the preparations of Council Conclusions under the German EU Presidency. Initial discussions for these Council Conclusions considered adding debt relief and multilateral action as new areas to be considered as part of the Team Europe approach. The Council Conclusions on Team Europe were initially planned to be adopted by the end of 2020, yet only came into being on 23 April 2021 due to some member states’ sensitivities around agreed language on gender equality (Council of the EU, 2021a). The term “Team Europe” subsequently appeared in four Council statements on development policy adopted on 14 June 2021, illustrating the notion’s general acceptance by policy-makers. Although these statements addressed different topics, including middle-income countries, overall development finance figures, human development and the architecture for external investment, they all found grounds for making Team Europe references, indicating that the term had been truly mainstreamed in development debates. With no officially adopted definition between the EU institutions and the member states, variations of the term have also begun to emerge. Box 1 presents the various “sub-concepts” that feature in the policy

discussions, with working definitions representing the authors' interpretation of the terms, as derived from the statements in which they appear.

Box 1: Team Europe sub-concepts	
Team Europe Approach	EU support to partner countries' short-term needs and longer-term programmes to counter structural impacts of COVID-19 on societies and the economy, in the spirit of "building back better and greener" (Council of the EU, 2021b). Alternative definition: reference to European external investment actors working together as opposed to independently from one another (linked to "European Financial Architecture for Development") (Council of the EU, 2021d).
Team Europe Toolbox	The combination of financial (official development assistance (ODA) and investments) and non-financial (technical assistance and dialogue) instruments that the EU and the member states have at their disposal to cooperate with middle-income countries (Council of the EU, 2021c)
Team Europe Spirit	Refers to commitment of EU and member states to contribute their share to ensuring optimal visibility and effective communication of Team Europe (Council of the EU, 2021c).
Source: Authors	

Due to the political traction it gathered, the term "Team Europe" has been increasingly used in other contexts beyond international development cooperation. One example concerns the use of the term "Team Europe approach" by EU ministers responsible for migration policy.² This paper will, however, restrict its analysis to the use of Team Europe within the confines of EU development policy.

The Commission's Communication "Strategic Foresight", published on 9 September 2020, introduced "resilience" as the new compass for EU policy-making and specified ways in which the EU could future-proof its policies and increase its resilience. This document presents a much stronger connection between Team Europe and the EU's global positioning than the previous documents. Pointing to the geopolitical void left by the United States' and China's willingness to assume a bigger role on the global stage, the Communication presented Team Europe as a key instrument to increase the EU's geopolitical resilience through the mobilisation of strategic resources for humanitarian and development aid and the EU's insistence on global accessibility of COVID-19 vaccines and medicines (EC, 2020c, p. 14). At the Foreign Affairs Council held in Brussels on 21 September 2020 "Team Europe" was referred to as an example of cooperation to be followed in the EU's relation to the African Union for the next decade. Team Europe, here, was no longer connected to the COVID-19 response alone but to the ministers' decision to develop joint strategic priorities and to focus on tangible results. At the video conference of development ministers two months later on 23 November 2020, ministers discussed how Team Europe could better complement debt relief efforts at multilateral and country level, and support partner countries in preparing a resilient, sustainable, and green recovery.

² See <https://twitter.com/josepborrellf/status/1371588253850083328?lang=en>

3.3 2021: Aligning Team Europe with the EU's long-term ambitions

The Commission's Communication "A united front to beat COVID-19" of 19 January 2021 stated that Team Europe had delivered two external response packages in 2020: (1) the EUR 38.5 billion recovery package, including EUR 449 million in the form of humanitarian aid and (2) EUR 853 million in support of COVAX mobilised through Team Europe, making the EU as a whole COVAX's biggest donor" (EC, 2021, p. 9-10). The Communication further suggested setting up an EU Vaccine Sharing Mechanism, which would structure the provision of vaccines shared by member states with partner countries through the "proven Team Europe approach", with special attention to be given to the Western Balkans, the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood and Africa (EC, 2021, p. 11).

The Council Conclusions on Team Europe from 23 April 2021 clearly demonstrated that Team Europe had been broadened over the course of the previous year and was now a constitutive part of the EU's long-term policy ambitions, including the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the goals of the Paris Agreement. Furthermore, the document emphasised that Team Europe is "fully committed to the promotion of an environmentally friendly recovery and investments in ambitious climate action in line with the objectives of the European Green Deal", that it contributes to inclusive and sustainable economies and societies and boosts resilience in order to reduce the risk of future crises (EC, 2021, p. 3). A core element of Team Europe's commitment to improving global health is to ensure fair and equitable global access to safe, affordable and effective vaccines (EC, 2021, p. 4).

In contrast to previous documents, these Council Conclusions provide details on how the members of Team Europe are meant to achieve these ambitious goals. Stating that Team Europe acts in line with partner countries' development needs and priorities, the document instructs all members of Team Europe to work together "in an inclusive and coordinated manner" and "to closely coordinate and jointly design, implement and monitor Team Europe Initiatives in an inclusive manner" (EC, 2021, p. 5). This includes "proactive information sharing, close consultation, coordination and flexibility" (p. 2), increasing the visibility of their joint engagement as Team Europe in a strategic manner, and using the new visual identity of Team Europe (EC, 2021, p. 4). The goal of these efforts is not only to achieve a sustainable recovery from the pandemic but also to further increase the effectiveness of the EU's joint engagement beyond the crisis (EC, 2021, p. 4).

Finally, yet importantly, the Council's statement refers to the Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) in relation to ongoing efforts to promote joint programming and implementation in EU development policy, albeit without detailing the nature of this relationship. It states that "The Council emphasises that safeguarding coherence regarding the programming of EU funds under the envisaged Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) is essential, in particular with regard to the relationship between TEIs and Joint Programming/Working Better Together." In view of the central role and place of TEIs in current policy discussions on Team Europe, and indeed in the wider EU development policy debate, the remainder of this section presents the interviewees' perception of Team Europe, the evolving understanding of TEIs, their objectives and the process through which they are being elaborated.

3.4 Perceptions of Team Europe by EU and member state officials

In order to complement the conceptualisation of Team Europe presented in the policy documents with its perception by EU and member state officials, we asked the interviewees what they understood Team Europe to be. The majority of the respondents described the approach as “a brand”, “a label”, “a marketing strategy”, and “a communication strategy” aimed at giving more visibility to the EU’s engagement in partner countries. Interestingly, the respondents did not acknowledge the added value of the pooling of funds that was presented by the Commission as the core innovation of the Team Europe approach. The perception of Team Europe as a brand demonstrates the crucial role the aim to increase the EU’s visibility played in the approach and implies that Team Europe is primarily understood as a self-focused image campaign. As pointed out by one interviewee, Team Europe was not a new approach but a mere re-branding of what the EU is (or should) already be doing, as it is the EU Delegations’ task to promote synergies and coherence between member states and increase the EU’s visibility in partner countries.

Reflecting on the origin of the term “Team Europe”, which was supposedly first coined by Director-General Koen Doens and inspired by Belgium’s slogan for its national team “Team Belgium”, one respondent pointed out that the conceptual reference to a sports team with a winner and a loser at the end of the game had initially raised concerns. The respondent reported that some actors raised questions regarding the relationship between Team Europe and Team Africa and asked whether Team Europe would be playing against Team Africa. Particularly in relation to the colonial past, concerns were raised that Team Europe would become a self-referential discourse. Another respondent failed to see the added value of the concept, arguing that the multitude of different terms and concepts within the EU was confusing to developing countries, who had difficulty understanding the difference between the Commission and the member states.

However, overall, Team Europe is perceived as a welcome approach. Smaller member states, in particular, appreciate the inclusive approach of Team Europe as it opens the possibility of engaging partner countries with whom they had not previously collaborated. These member states thus suggest that Team Europe has an increased, if not an entirely new, emphasis on inclusivity.

Whereas some member states perceived the change from the COVID-19-focused Team Europe approach to the broader concept as gradual, others stated that the change was sudden and it only occurred to them that Team Europe was here to stay when the list of TEIs was distributed in autumn 2020. This difference in awareness of the change in the concept might be a reflection of different member states’ engagement and integration in the discussion process.

The proliferation of the term Team Europe to describe any measures by the EU led several interviewees to caution that it was not clear whether everyone referring to Team Europe knew what Team Europe was and how it originated. Some see the broadening of Team Europe and different actors’ wish to shape it as a natural process, whereas others pointed to the danger of some actors “hijacking” Team Europe for their own purposes and making it too broad. Those respondents wanting Team Europe to be closely aligned with the EU’s development agenda stated that the increasingly broad application of the term might not be welcome. In spite of these different views on the broadening of the concept, respondents

demonstrated a shared understanding of Team Europe as an approach that was here to stay, even if its content might change with time.

Discussing the implementation of the Team Europe approach, the majority of our respondents focused on Team Europe Initiatives that will be elaborated on in the following section.

3.5 A closer look at the Team Europe Initiatives

Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) are joint activities by the EU, its member states, and the European development finance institutions. The TEIs were initially exclusively national in focus and presented key “flagships” for a joint EU engagement in the bilateral cooperation with the country concerned on a limited number of topics. The preparation of these TEIs in the EU’s partner countries began in summer 2020 and has been led by the EU delegations, in cooperation with other member states and, when applicable, the EIB and EBRD.³ All the EU actors present in a given country were free to suggest, design, finance and implement TEIs, which should bring together the best possible mix of modalities, tools and partners (e.g. civil society organisations (CSOs) and the private sector). At a later stage in the process, efforts were made also to associate “non-resident member states” with selected TEIs, based on their interest.⁴ While the preparation of TEIs showed important differences from one country to another and was as much driven by informal networking and personalities as by instructions from Brussels, the most recent Council Conclusions determined some key features, presented in Box 2.

TEIs are financed both from the EU budget – and are therefore guided by NDICI programming guidelines – and by the participating EU member states. The joint programming processes at country level should reflect and incorporate the Team Europe Initiatives, and, in turn, TEIs that are identified should feed into the ongoing and future joint programming processes (EU, n.d.).

3 An exception concerns the countries under the EU’s neighbourhood policy who, with the exception of Libya, have adopted bilateral association agreements with the EU. The partnership priorities for cooperation are developed jointly by the EU and the country concerned, and subsequently serve as the basis for potential TEIs, which is why, for these countries, the preparation of TEIs started in 2021.

4 The term “non-resident member states” refers to EU member states that do not have an embassy or other kind of permanent representation in the country concerned.

Box 2: Seven principles for TEIs

1. TEIs need to aim to achieve the greatest transformative impact and systemic change in line with the policy first principle and the strategic objectives and values of the EU. TEIs need to contribute to the objectives and targets under the envisaged NDICI. TEIs need to be planned in a strategic and coherent manner, be linked to political and policy dialogues, and to support reforms.
2. TEIs need to be aligned with the development needs and priorities of partner countries. They need to be designed and implemented through participation with relevant partners, including those implementing actions on the ground.
3. TEIs need to abide by the principles of transparency and accountability, sustainability, effectiveness and results, “do no harm”, country ownership and inclusive partnership.
4. TEIs need to leverage the development potential of the private sector and civil society, and support and empower their independent and active role in democratic transformation.
5. TEIs need to build towards increasing the use of Joint Programming as the preferred approach, where feasible. They can also draw on bilateral engagements of member states and other Team Europe members. Established Joint Programming procedures should be reviewed to increase speed, usability and flexibility.
6. TEIs need to be set-up at country and regional/multi-country level. Thematic TEIs should be explored at global level.
7. TEIs need to be regularly monitored and evaluated and, if need be, adjusted.

Source: Council of the EU (2021a)

The list of TEIs is currently available to Member States but not to the public and other stakeholders, including those based in the countries where the TEIs will be pursued. Although the level of information on the individual TEIs varies, they do not seem to follow a common framework, although were systematically included in the EU’s Multi-Annual Indicative Plans for the period 2021–2027. Overviews of geographic TEIs have been circulated to working-level member state representatives, with those TEIs that have advanced furthest in their preparation having been presented as two “batches” of 48 and 50 initiatives during informal meeting of EU Directors General in February and May 2021. While these informal meeting of EU Directors General do not allow for formal decisions to be taken, with the Commission and EEAS instead circulating minutes in the form of “operational conclusions”, the regular meetings provided an important channel for dialogue and feedback between the EU and its member states about Team Europe.

As the preparation of national TEIs gained speed and enthusiasm, discussions about the idea of potential regional or global TEIs continued. This enthusiasm came, in particular, from Europe-based stakeholders, who were discussing the TEIs in a number of seminars held during the first half of 2021. The preparation of these regional and global TEIs, still ongoing, was inevitably conducted in a more top-down manner than were the national TEIs. A number of criteria were considered for the regional TEIs, which are presented in Box 3.

Box 3: Regional initiatives

The regional initiatives are currently being planned. In order to qualify as a regional TEI the proposed initiative must adhere to the following principles:

- The initiative must address regional challenges that require a collective regional (or multi-country) response and provide real added value to country programming from a multi-country, regional or continental perspective.
- It must be underpinned by strategic (joint) policy dialogue that aims to support transformational change by delivering concrete results for the region/sub-region and partner countries.
- It must address critical regional bottlenecks that constrain the development at country, multi-country, regional or continental level.
- The initiative must be open to all members of Team Europe who are interested in working together in the design, financing, implementation and monitoring of TEI actions.
- As for the geographic coverage, a TEI must target a minimum of three partner countries.
- At least four Team Europe members have to make a financial contribution to the initiative. In regions or specific sectors where few European actors operate, a TEI can be set up by two Team Europe members who must follow the criteria for national TEIs.
- As for Sub-Saharan Africa and sectors where sufficient EU actors exist, the NDICI–Global Europe financial contribution should, in principle, not exceed 50% of the total (indicative) amount of a TEI, with the remaining contribution being covered by other participating Team Europe members. In other regions, the EU contribution should, in principle, not exceed 70%.
- A TEI proposal should ensure partner country ownership, with Team Europe members securing the buy-in of existing regional bodies/institutions, national governments and other key stakeholders
- A TEI should include concrete interlinkages between results that fall under two or more priority areas of the relevant regional Multi-Annual Indicative Plans (MIPs) and/or address crosscutting issues. For regions where the number of priority areas in the regional MIP is fewer than three, the results could fall under one or more priority areas. Synergies and complementarities between country and regional MIPs should be maximised.

Source: European Commission (n.d.)

3.6 Intermediate conclusions

The above reconstruction of the policy discussion around Team Europe shows an expanding approach as opposed to a redirection of Team Europe: over time new purposes and goals were added, rather than earlier efforts being replaced. This is a natural effect of a simultaneously pragmatic and opportunistic approach that mainly aims to increase the visibility of Team Europe. Although Team Europe started as an immediate response to COVID-19, the approach can now be seen as embracing both the short- and medium-term health, social and economic consequences of the pandemic, and the subsequent containment measures. Beyond the EU's own development cooperation engagement, Team Europe is also increasingly used to refer to the EU's efforts to strengthen the shaken multilateral system and enhance its resilience, as well as to exercise Europe's leadership in the world and advance the EU's priority agendas.

To this end, Team Europe is a process that operates on three levels. At country level EU delegations and member state missions and embassies are invited to work together in order formulate country-level 'packages'. This exercise in coordination is continued at the HQ

level, where member states agree on common policies within the Foreign Affairs Council, prepared, when applicable, by the Working Party on Development Cooperation. Lastly, Team Europe is meant to strengthen the internal coordination of European stakeholders and cooperation with international institutions in response to the pandemic. In contrast to the multi-faceted conceptualisation of Team Europe in policy documents and statements, the interviewees presented a rather one-dimensional perception of Team Europe as the EU's marketing strategy. This understanding does not, however, stand in the way of their positive attitude towards the approach, with smaller member states, in particular, welcoming the approach due to its focus on inclusivity.

Interestingly, when discussing the implementation of the Team Europe approach, most respondents focused solely on the design and implementation of TEIs, with only one respondent being adamant that Team Europe was much broader than the initiatives and that there needs to be a clear distinction between the TE approach, as the way in which the EU gets involved in an international context, and the TEIs. However, it remains unclear whether the majority of the respondents focused on the TEIs because this was the predominant stage of the Team Europe journey they found themselves in at the time of the interview or whether their understanding of Team Europe did indeed equate to the TEIs.

4 Assessing Team Europe: visibility and flexibility prioritised over partner ownership and effectiveness

This section presents the findings from the analysis of documents and interviews along the four dimensions of visibility, effectiveness, ownership and integration, which are four key dimensions in the EU's current development policy priorities and are expected to guide its engagement in relation to Team Europe.

The EU's development policy is currently undergoing major reforms that were set in motion during the Barroso II Commission and summarised in the 2016 EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy. These reforms call for a development policy that is more flexible and aligned to the EU's strategic priorities (Bergmann et al., 2019). In December 2019, the Commission President von der Leyen instructed Jutta Urpilainen, her Commissioner overseeing development policy, whose portfolio was renamed "International Partnerships", to continue these reforms. Specifically, the Commissioner's mission letter tasked Urpilainen to "ensure the European model of development evolves in line with new global realities. It should be strategic and effective, should create value for money and should contribute to our wider political priorities" (Von der Leyen, 2019, p. 4).

In addition to seeking greater integration of development policy with other EU policy areas and effective management of the EU's development budget, the branding of the new European Commission as a "Geopolitical Commission" (Von der Leyen, 2019, p. 2) emphasised a stronger focus on the visibility of EU development policy. The EU's development cooperation response to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Burni et al., 2021) confirmed the EU's wish for greater visibility of its external action. Another key reform sought to direct the EU's cooperation relationship towards a greater focus on external investment, while maintaining the commitment to ownership by promoting "a partnership of equals and mutual interest" (Von der Leyen, 2019, p. 4). Last, but not least, while the EU member states retain their legal competence to formulate and pursue

development policy, the EU seeks to promote further cooperation and ultimately integration in the field of development cooperation. In view of the need to respect the member states' competencies in this field, the Commission's policies are less explicit in defining an ambition in this regard, yet it can be assumed that other priorities may contribute to this endeavour.

In sum, visibility, effectiveness, ownership and integration are four key dimensions in the EU's current development policy priorities and were used to structure the expert interviews, the analysis of the policy documents, and the findings that are presented in the next section. The following working definitions of the concepts are based on various official (EU) sources or EU-commissioned studies. They thus provide a broadly shared understanding of Team Europe by the policy communities and stakeholders involved.

Visibility. Visibility is about the extent to which something is seen by the public. In this case it refers to the degree to which the EU is perceived, by developing countries, as a partner who is providing support. The visibility of EU efforts to fight the pandemic is one of the main rationales behind Team Europe and closely connected to the EU's desire to position itself as a global leader. Team Europe is a symbol of EU global leadership and its willingness "to support its partners and international organisations." (EC, 2020d, p. 16). Consequently, Team Europe is to be accompanied by a strong communication strategy, ensuring transparency and tackling disinformation. The need for a communication strategy was emphasised by the Council in its Conclusions from 8 June 2020. This requires "all the actors involved in Team Europe to coordinate actions, and share information and communication efforts at country level, within the EU, in partner countries and in global and multilateral fora" and to use the term "Team Europe" in national or joint communication campaigns, visibility efforts and public announcements (Council of the EU, 2020, p. 8).

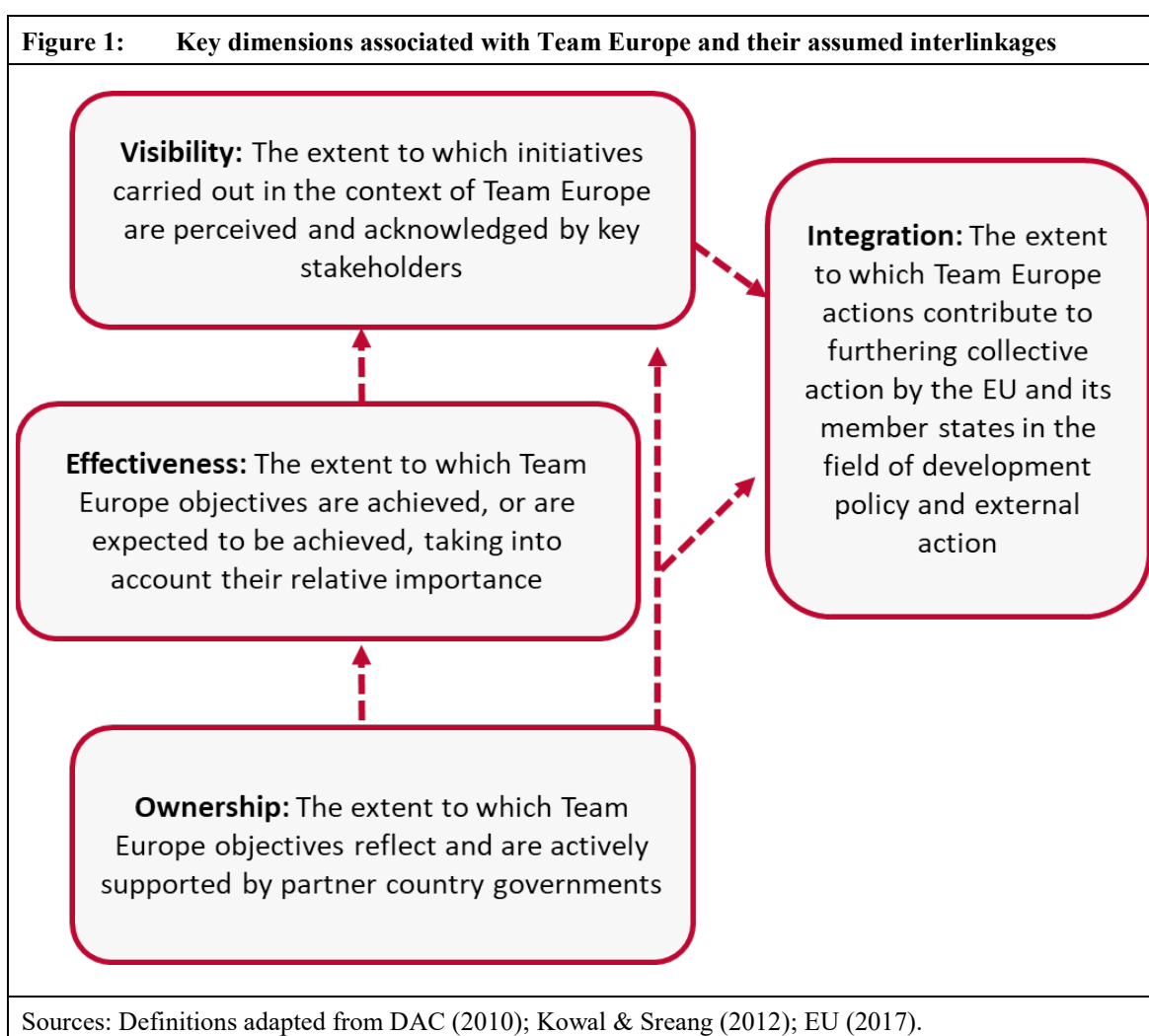
Effectiveness. Effectiveness generally refers to the extent to which the stated objectives of an action are realised. In the context of Team Europe, it is broadly understood specifically to refer to the amount, rapidity and coordinated nature of a response. This emphasis logically follows from visibility being an important end in itself for Team Europe, in addition to providing effective support to developing countries. The Council Conclusions from 8 June 2020, for instance, stress "the importance of delivering fast and tangible results" (Council of the EU, 2020, p. 3). Since further work in terms of specifying the results of Team Europe in general and the TEIs in particular was still ongoing at the time the interviews were conducted, effectiveness was mainly pursued in terms of process-dimensions of effectiveness, i.e. to what extent preparatory actions are plausibly deemed to contribute to the expected results of Team Europe.

Ownership. Ownership refers to the extent to which EU initiatives involve and engage with stakeholders from partner countries and align with partners' needs. Although the rationale behind Team Europe is mainly the added (financial) value to the EU's support for partner countries, the principle of ownership plays a relevant role in the Council Conclusions on Team Europe Global Response to COVID-19 from 8 June 2020. In its statement, the Council considers country ownership as well as partnership with CSOs and the private sector as essential to the Team Europe approach (Council of the EU, 2020, p. 6). This juxtaposition of country ownership and EU strategy opens the question as to how to achieve a balance of the different interests, preferences and needs. An unclarified point is whether partners' ownership is to be respected only if its national plan aligns with the EU's strategy

to “build back better and greener” (Council of the EU, 2020) and how to deal with cases of conflicting interests between partner countries and the EU’s strategy.

Integration. Forming a single framework for all European external response to address the COVID-19 pandemic, integration is at the heart of the Team Europe approach. All actors involved in Team Europe are asked “to coordinate actions, and share information and communication efforts at country level, within the EU, in partner countries and in global and multilateral fora” (Council of the EU, 2020, p. 8). Looking forward, the long-term response of Team Europe is to be integrated into the next EU development cooperation programming exercise (2021–2027) in the context of the EU commitments to joint programming. The Council Conclusions further stress the relevance of policy coherence for development (PCD) and of building synergies between EU internal and external policies and instruments” (Council of the EU, 2020, p. 5). A lack of unity and coordination among member states is considered to limit the effectiveness of EU action and have far-reaching negative consequences, as it “might enable foreign powers to apply divide-and-rule strategies” (EC, 2020e, p.17).

Based on the above discussion of the dimensions, Figure 1 presents working definitions and the authors’ assumptions regarding their potential interlinkages.



In order to explore the participating policy-makers' understanding of Team Europe and to investigate whether there are difference between the term's conceptualisation and its usage in practice, most interviewees were first asked, by way of an open-ended question, to elaborate on their understanding and overall experiences of Team Europe. The following analysis of Team Europe thus engages with the subjective perceptions of its makers. In other words, the analysis engages with how policy-makers give meaning to a nascent and rapidly changing concept.

4.1 Visibility

Increasing the visibility of EU efforts to fight the pandemic ranks among the principal rationales behind Team Europe, and for a majority of respondents it constitutes the absolute priority. The primary audiences of this narrative are European constituents, Europe's partner countries as well as other great powers and multilateral forums such as the UN. The motivation to project a coherent Team Europe narrative at home and abroad is closely related to the EU's desire to position itself as a global leader in international cooperation and foreign affairs.

The drive towards increased visibility is to be understood against the backdrop of a broader political shift. In today's rapidly changing international order the EU seeks to be recognised as a "geopolitical power". This central aspect of the von der Leyen Commission's mandate reflects the EU's increasing consideration of the notion of hard power and situates EU action in a global system dominated by self-interest and relative gains. While some would attribute this political re-orientation to a pitiful clinging on to times long past, the majority of policy-makers and pundits sees the shift as necessary for Europe to prevail in a competitive environment and to help shape the multilateral order according to EU values and interests (Lehne, 2020).

From the outset, the European Commission drew parallels between the pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis and increasing geostrategic tensions (EC, 2020a). In other words, COVID-19 was framed as a critical juncture and a moment for the EU to offer an adequate set of instruments in line with its understanding of economic and political order.

Making the world know about European action in the fight against a global pandemic thus became a prerequisite for the success of such a strategy. In April 2020, when the notion of Team Europe was first introduced in public discourse, the Commission identified the need to enhance the visibility of European support to partner countries (EC, 2020a). The need for a proactive communication strategy was reiterated by the Council in June 2020. The Council Conclusions from 8 June 2020 stipulate the need "for all the actors involved in Team Europe to coordinate actions, and share information and communication efforts at country level, within the EU, in partner countries and in global and multilateral fora" and "to use the term "Team Europe" in national or joint communication campaigns, visibility efforts and public announcements" (Council of the EU, 2020, p. 4). The Council also called on the Commission services to develop a communication strategy for Team Europe, which did not formally materialise. By April 2021, the Council reiterated its call to the Commission and formally established visibility as a stated goal and core pillar of Team Europe, underlining the importance it attributed to this dimension:

The Council calls upon all members of Team Europe to increase the visibility of their joint engagement as Team Europe in a strategic manner, including through strengthened joint messaging at all levels and the extensive use of the new visual identity of Team Europe. Disinformation needs to be actively countered. The Council emphasises that tailored and strategic communication is essential and reiterates its call upon the Commission services and the EEAS to develop a strong communications strategy (Council of the EU, 2021a, p. 4).

The European Commissioner for International Partnerships, the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and 25 EU ministers in charge of development policy had already circulated, in February 2021, a letter addressed to EU Delegations, member state Embassies and the offices of EU respective development finance institutions and agencies. This letter identified impact and visibility as the core objectives of Team Europe.⁵ An entire paragraph of this one-page letter was dedicated to the issues of strategic communication and visibility. By categorising Team Europe as a “brand”, ministers underpinned the concept’s instrumental nature (EU, 2021). From a visibility perspective, but also from the perspective of the related dimension of ownership, it is noteworthy that the letter was not addressed to, nor otherwise systematically shared with, the EU’s partners.

Interviews with member state representatives further confirmed that the competition with China for the ultimate authority to interpret the crisis and different actors’ reactions to it, according to their respective values, interests and world-view, was a strong impetus for introducing a coherent European narrative. The potential to create additional visibility for European projects also constitutes a distinguishing feature between Team Europe and previous coordination efforts, such as joint programming and the Working Better Together agenda. In these two cases, institutional embeddedness and a strong focus on established processes has often prevented European leaders from using the programmes proactively to showcase European added value in global affairs. Similarly, the COVAX deliveries occurred under the umbrella of the UN and initially did not feature the EU logo, causing some discontent among EU officials since this way the deliveries would not be publicly associated with the EU’s contribution to controlling the pandemic. Shortly after that episode, social media accounts and press offices of EU and member state diplomatic representatives began to circulate pictures of vaccine deliveries being unloaded at the airport, for instance in Rwanda, Malawi and Ghana.

The desire for more visibility on the international stages has been growing for some time. Numerous interviewees expressed a degree of frustration about the fact that the EU remains the world’s largest donor but rarely receives due recognition for its role and financial share. Team Europe is considered an opportunity to remedy this situation and allow the EU to capitalise from a policy field that is expected to be primarily values- rather than interest-driven. It should be noted that the “lack of visibility” featuring in this intra-European policy debate is based on Europe’s self-perception, and on anecdotal evidence and feedback. The EU has not systematically assessed the visibility of its external cooperation to verify the gap between actual cooperation investments and the perception of this cooperation by the wider international community. As part of this debate, the EU also assumes that its partners

5 The letter was not signed by the ministers of Hungary and Poland, and was also not signed by the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, despite Team Europe also covering countries under his remit.

perceive the EU as the sum of the institutions and member states, as opposed to the EU and individual member states present in a country or region.

Yet, representatives also acknowledged that discrepancies prevail between the narrative the EU intends to project and the actual perception of the EU's engagement abroad. For many partner countries, the labelling of operations as either member-state driven or EU driven is only of secondary importance, making the Team Europe communication strategy first and foremost an expression of European interests. Increased internal visibility of Team Europe was deemed by a minority of interviewees as conducive to further integration by increasing expectations and ambitions in terms of working together as a team.

First and foremost, the communication strategy functions as a branding of EU foreign policy. To this end, it becomes necessary to align the intended message with the expected and actual perceptions by partners. In the literature on soft power, the ability to exert influence over others is often broken down in two stages: (i) the (un)intended externalization of ideas and policies and (ii) the adoption of those by recipients. Whereas the EU can and does advance the first of the two stages, impact in terms of increased influence is always, and to an equal extent, dependent on the adoption of a given narrative (Harpaz & Shamis, 2010).

The operationalisation of Team Europe might be further hampered if member states continue valuing national visibility over European visibility. There is a trade-off, which will be mostly felt by member states with a strong development portfolio, between strengthening the EU's branding and acting as an independent nation state in the international arena. In view of the exceptional crisis and perceived competition from other actors in the system, EU member states have mostly rallied behind the promise of a more coherent European approach to overcome the pandemic and start the promised reconstruction and transformation. Although some member states seem confident that Team Europe is there to stay, it is still too early to tell whether the current level of joint action and joint communication will prevail once (a new) normality returns. Potential for intra-institutional conflict looms between some of the lines issued by the Commission and the EEAS. Both institutions consider EU leadership, meaning Commission leadership, detrimental to achieving a coordinated agenda.

4.2 Effectiveness

Respondents rarely addressed the question of effectiveness, in terms of assessing the likelihood that the planned development results of Team Europe in general and the TEIs in particular will reach their objectives and improve the impact of EU development cooperation. Neither the Council Conclusions nor other official documents provide a more detailed description of what constitutes “tangible” results and how these are to be achieved or measured. Rather than presenting mechanisms that would ensure effectiveness, the documents present updated numbers of allocated resources, which, given that the initial rationale behind Team Europe was to pool as many resources as possible, is not surprising.

Three reasons may explain the lack of attention to “effectiveness” at the time of the interviews:

First, the lack of focus on effectiveness might be explained by the early stage of the discussion of TEIs, which may only begin to be implemented over the course of 2021 and at a later stage in Neighbourhood countries, for which TEI preparations started only in 2021. At this stage, in fact, respondents showed different understandings and expectations of what it will mean for TEIs to be “implemented” and how much joint work this will entail. However, effectiveness has to be taken into account from the very start of an initiative and not be an afterthought once the initiative is up and running. One respondent pointed out that the monitoring requirement for TEIs were established quickly, requiring quarterly inquiries regarding the transfer of funds. Other respondents were more cautious, questioning what will happen to the funding and wondering whether they will ever see reporting on what the money will be used for.

Second, it can be argued that in this early, formative, stage of preparing TEIs it was not yet possible or a priority to think about and plan for effectiveness. In part, this was due to various different individual interests. In addition, the TEIs were perceived as “packages”, i.e. as the sum of what the EU and the member states would support in terms of cooperation on a specific theme or topic, rather than a joined-up strategy. At the level of individual interventions by the EU and the member states that contribute to TEIs, it is likely that effectiveness will be considered as part of the established planning processes. This approach to planning could potentially evolve in those cases where TEIs were prepared in and are expected to contribute to EU joint programming and joint implementation processes, where expectations for collective effectiveness would likely need to be clarified.

Thirdly, the main understanding among respondents at this stage was that TEIs served first and foremost to promote EU visibility. Some noted that the EU does not experience a lack of means to contribute to global development, but a lack of recognition for what it does. They expected that this perceived discrepancy between the size of Europe’s contribution to global development and the assessment of this contribution by others could be adjusted by means of Team Europe. For that reason, effectiveness was frequently linked to the extent to which Team Europe efforts could deliver on the visibility returns that the EU and the member states expected. Though the assessment of the potential of Team Europe to increase EU aid effectiveness varies among different actors, most do share the conviction that it has to provide good results and success stories on the ground and demonstrate what the EU is capable of delivering, especially in light of the geopolitical competition with China.

This said, current discussions on TEIs did pay particular attention to the effectiveness of the process. On the one hand, the process was perceived by member state respondents as flexible and responsive, and, as such, as effective. Several interviewees referred repeatedly to the informal meetings at EU Director General (DG) level, at which member states could suggest changes to the approach laid out by the Commission and EEAS. Specifically, member states were satisfied with the follow-up of the concerns they expressed on issues, such as: (1) how to involve non-resident member states in the preparation of selected TEIs that had been prepared under the leadership of the EU Delegation and member states with a presence in the country; and (2) how to enable member states with smaller bilateral cooperation programmes and budgets to contribute to TEIs.

While valuing this degree of flexibility, other respondents did express concerns over the lack of process effectiveness in terms of the difficulty of anticipating and committing to the planning process moving forward. During one of the meetings of DGs the Commission

suggested that they were constructing the path while walking, which was understandable for the above reasons and successful to date but did leave several operational questions unanswered for the member states. It is for this reason that some maintained that, while being different from the standard EU programming period linked to the budget instruments, the TEIs were part of it and would therefore have to be approved through the established comitology process in which member states approve the EU's country strategies and programmes as prepared.

Some respondents suggested that Team Europe makes EU development cooperation more effective because the common approach allows for better prioritisation. More critical interviewees pointed out that it was not clear how the collective efforts would increase the effectiveness of EU cooperation, since the approach did not include any special mechanisms or special features that would ensure better efficiency. The fact that most member states point out that they are only proposing TEI for areas in which they are already engaged can mean that they apply (and perhaps extend) existing know-how. However, following a business-as-usual routine can also mean that member states do not use the chance to change and increase effectiveness. Moreover, the dynamic whereby TEIs seek also to include contributions by member states not present in the country or region represents a potential source of innovation and complementarity, but also a potential for experimentation and trial-by-error. While some cooperation approaches may be successfully introduced in new countries, such as an increased use of twinning, they also have the potential to be ineffective in the region for a host of reasons. All in all, the experiment that Team Europe in essence represents, as a new way of working between the EU, the member states and implementing institutions, creates tensions with the ambition to be successful in terms of providing a visible and effective European contribution to global development.

4.3 Ownership

Although not prominent in the public communication about Team Europe, the concept of ownership represents an important element of EU development cooperation in general. We understand national ownership as the idea that cooperation choices should be jointly determined with and supported by partner country governments. In other words, to display some level of national ownership, the mobilisation of existing and new funds, as well as the development of innovative crisis response tools under Team Europe, should be in line with partner countries' needs and expectations. In today's EU development policy debate, the concept of ownership mediates the objective of a more assertive EU approach to cooperation that is explicit about its interests and values, and a strong emphasis on the desire to reorient the EU's existing partnerships with third countries and regions away from what is commonly referred to as a "donor-recipient" relationship. In this context, the EU seeks to modernise the notion of development cooperation as consisting of relations between equals, which is reflected in the mainstreaming of the term "partnerships" under the current EU Commission.

The policy discussion suggests that the EU may articulate its interests while at the same time remaining sufficiently demand-driven in its cooperation approach. Rather than recognising the trade-offs between both goals, the EU's approach in the context of the TEIs seeks to square the circle by using a static understanding of ownership, whereby ownership is assumed if cooperation choices focus on priorities reflected in a country's national

development strategy. This is in contrast to a dynamic understanding of ownership, whereby ownership is present when “actors involved in a dedicated development co-operation relationship consider their involvement in terms of control over process and substance to be both sufficient and desirable over time” (see Keijzer & Black, 2020, p. O6).

The principle of ownership plays a relevant role in the Council Conclusions on Team Europe Global Response to COVID-19 from 8 June 2020, which emphasised that the allocation of resources to partner countries should be based on a joint needs assessment in cooperation with partner countries and aligned with their response plans to COVID-19 (Council of the EU, 2020, p. 8). As a potential trade-off to this endeavour, the Council further states that Team Europe should be implemented in line with the EU’s broad external policy strategy and values, namely “promoting equitable, sustainable and inclusive recovery processes in line with the Green Deal” (Council of the EU, 2020, p. 3).

In June 2020, the Council highlighted in its Conclusions “the role of EU Delegations in coordinating and ensuring inclusive participation of all member states’ diplomatic networks, including European development agencies, the EIB and other European financial institutions, as well as other relevant actors at country level, in line with the Working Better Together approach”. The Council further stressed the importance of coordinating Team Europe packages with partner countries’ and other international donors’ efforts. Even though there is no explicit definition of “country ownership” in official communications, the idea that EU support should take into account the needs of partners is present in Team Europe, although not prominently (Council of the EU, 2020).

The order of priorities as presented in the Council’s statement appears to suggest that the EU sought to promote ownership primarily among European actors participating in TEIs and, in the second instance, among non-European actors, including stakeholders in the partner countries.

In general, the EU’s understanding of country ownership is first and foremost inward-looking. Resulting from intra-European coordination, EU support is aligned with the partner country’s needs as expressed in its official long-term strategies. This approach rests on two key assumptions. First of all, it assumes that the partner country concerned is sufficiently politically stable to ensure long-term commitment to the adopted strategies, as opposed to going through democratic changes in government whereby such strategies may undergo a change. Secondly, it suggests that governments are sufficiently representative of the electorate, as are, by extension, the national development plans they adopt. Specific mechanisms of participation or consultation seem equally absent from the Team Europe framework. However, the key coordinating role of EU delegations is often stressed. Both EU and member state representatives consider EU delegations as the main actors in establishing dialogue with partner countries and communicating their prospects to EU headquarters. This understanding refers primarily to national TEIs, whereas regional and global TEIs are mainly driven by headquarters. When asked about ownership, interviewees often only mentioned the EU delegations, which suggests that stakeholders tend to assume that the delegations’ job is to ensure country ownership.

The preparation of regional and global TEIs was led by Brussels-based stakeholders, while at this level there was no standardised equivalence of a national development plan to align these to. The principles suggested for regional TEIs (see Box 3; section 2) call for efforts to

ensure “buy-in of existing regional bodies/institutions, national governments and other key stakeholders”, which also suggests that the formulation of these TEIs is led by European stakeholders. In the case of one such regional TEI targeting investment in Africa, which was launched at the Summit on Financing African Economies hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris on 18 May 2021, several consultations were made in preparation. This included an online seminar during the week before the summit, where ample consultation was enabled, though with the agenda set by the EU.⁶

Overall, our findings show that only limited attention to partner country “ownership” was present in official documentation and in the daily work on Team Europe by EU and member state representatives. Team Europe is somehow concerned with partner country’s needs and approval, but this appears as an underlying or accessory principle, which is also present in other EU initiatives. EU initiatives have been described as being conducted “in dialogue”, “aligned” or “in consultation” with partner countries. In other words, “ownership” is not prominent in or exclusive to Team Europe. The degree of engagement strongly depends, however, on the level of the project itself and the expectations of the partner country. Interviewees from the EU and member states emphasised that the EU does not propose anything “without discussing or getting the approval of partners”.

One interviewee went as far as saying that partner countries were not at the centre of the Team Europe discussions, which they did not perceive as a major problem or something negative. Another group of interviewees stated that partner countries have different expectations of the EU. Some countries want to “see quick action” and wish to have things “delivered”, regardless of the “brand” attached to it. Other partners are more active and precise when communicating their priorities to the EU. As an example, one interviewee mentioned that when EU headquarters collected the demands of partner countries, while one of them proposed three Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs), another proposed a single initiative. Therefore, they concluded, partner countries differ in their approaches and levels of engagement, as well as priorities regarding EU support. One respondent mentioned that no objections about the (lack of) involvement of partner countries have been heard so far, and if there were problems of this kind, “the EU would have heard complaints”. From the interviews, we could discern that Team Europe has not been perceived as something new by partner countries, but rather that it is deemed a continuation of the status quo.

While there is a bottom-line agreement that TEIs are to be designed in cooperation with partner countries, our interviews show that Team Europe has not put a mechanism for feedback or consultation with partner countries in place. The process and outputs of the consultation with partner countries predominantly depend on the work conducted by EU delegations on the ground and their reports to Brussels.

In fact, several interviewees pointed out that dialogue with partners depends mainly on the EU delegation in place and that it is largely driven by personalities and good relations on the ground, as opposed to detailed instructions from Brussels. One interviewee highlighted that dialogue with the partner depends specifically on the head of the delegation. Another

6 For more information on the regional TEI, see https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_2543. The workshop preparing the TEI was observed by two of the authors.

interviewee said that the member states received mixed messages on how active EU delegations had been and how open they were to engage with certain member states on TEIs. Although Brussels sent similar instructions to the delegations, “personal matters” of the delegations could influence how Team Europe is implemented in the field. As a matter of fact, in early June 2021, the International Partnerships Commissioner assessed that some delegations have been too “passive”, despite instructions from Brussel to promote engagement with civil society and local authorities in partner countries. She had earlier assessed that an important challenge for promoting the European Green Deal, was to “convince the partners”. The Commissioner announced that an evaluation of EU delegations’ work with local stakeholders would take place (Chadwick, 2021), since there seemed to be considerable variety in their performance and efforts to promote dialogue with partners.

Our assessment is that there are different understandings of “ownership” among EU and member state actors involved in Team Europe, without a consensual meaning emerging from our study. Moreover, ownership among European actors is given greater priority and is pursued in a more dynamic manner than the ownership of partner countries and regions. Many interviewees shared the idea that “ownership” refers to “partner needs”. They mostly agreed that those demands can be channelled via EU delegations or member states embassies. Often times, what is framed as “ownership” is the simple agreement or communication with the partner’s national government. Furthermore, another major idea linked to “ownership” emanating from the interviews is that the EU does not go “against” the needs or wills of partner countries. The EU does not “intervene without the request of the partner”. In this sense, one common notion attached to “ownership” is that actions taken by the EU should and indeed do have the approval of partners – most of the time assumed to correspond to the government of that country.

Finally, there is a latent tension between the EU strategic agenda (e.g. Green Deal, migration management, etc.) and partner countries’ central interests or needs. One member state interviewee observed that partner countries have their own needs, but the EU (Commission) also has its thematic priorities (e.g. Green Deal). Sometimes the needs of a partner country are more “basic”, “fundamental” or “material” necessities and there can be a trade-off to consider in relation to what is prioritised by the EU. The urgency of the crisis drove an ad hoc application of the Team Europe approach at the country level, with large variation among countries (Jones, 2021). For the time being, Team Europe initiatives remain largely donor-driven and fully in line with EU priorities, even though there is an effort to get information from the delegations on the ground. At the same time, there is no agreed understanding of “ownership” among Team Europe actors, the performance of EU delegations in engaging with local stakeholders is mixed, and there is no clear toolbox on how to engage with such local actors, nor monitoring mechanism to assess the engagement of EU delegations on the ground.

4.4 Integration

With the Belgian national football team being one of the suggested inspirations for Team Europe,⁷ one of its primary goals is to promote further cooperation between different European stakeholders. The EU Treaties grant the EU and its member states parallel competences in the field of development policy and instruct that they should complement and reinforce one another (EU, 2009, Art. 208). Yet, member states have very different starting points in this regard. Only a minority of member states engage in bilateral development policies worldwide, with an appropriately sized budget and national implementation capacity, while others have more limited bilateral means and a more selective geographic focus. Moreover, increased cooperation does not always translate into a more permanent state of integration.

The TEIs were welcomed by member states, many of whom had been involved from the start by means of a bottom-up approach whereby the initiatives “on the ground” were led by the EU delegations. This allowed member states who had a presence, such as an embassy, in the country concerned to take part. This approach made it harder, however, for those, usually smaller, member states who did not have a diplomatic representation in the partner countries concerned. During the first phase of preparing TEIs, much emphasis was placed on developing a “package” whereby member states were invited to specify the financial value of their contributions, which again placed those with considerable bilateral programmes at an advantage. Since the beginning of 2021, a more balanced approach has begun to emerge, informed by Brussels-based discussions on the need for “inclusivity”. Non-resident member states were also at the table, and non-financial contributions to Team Europe were included in the discussion. Non-financial contributions mainly include member states’ public sector expertise; as evidenced by the Commission’s Technical Assistance and Information Exchange scheme (TAIEX), these contributions are typically short-term in nature and comprises workshops, expert missions to the partner country, or study tours to the EU member states concerned by partner country officials.⁸

While the TEIs have demonstrated some flexibility, those member states with most means and the broadest presence have nonetheless enjoyed an advantage in contributing to the definition of TEIs. Differences between member states also means that while increasing cooperation is possible for all in an interest-driven and sensitive manner, member states’ willingness to cooperate does not automatically reflect a willingness for further integration. For the European Commission – which led the process and is by definition involved in each TEI agreed – the recent cooperation is a natural basis to be taken further in the form of more structured cooperation. This motivation is not necessarily (and uniformly) shared by the member states. Interviewees noted that those partner countries where joint-programming exercises were already ongoing enjoyed something of a head start with TEIs, since they were already used to interacting regularly on cooperation planning and processes. The engagement in TEI planning of the representatives of member state does not, however, necessarily reflect their interest in taking the associated joint programming processes

7 See <https://teambelgium.be>. Another suggestion was a Finnish multi-stakeholder business initiative, which is called “Team Finland”: <https://www.team-finland.fi/en>

8 For more information on TAIEX, please refer to https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/tenders/taieux_en

further, nor can it be assumed that in those countries where joint programming processes were still nascent, the participation of member states in TEI planning reflects their motivation to take their newfound cooperation immediately to the next level.

While member state respondents valued the flexible approach taken by the EU to preparing the TEIs, some also observed a certain “make it up as you go along” approach, where uncertainty reigns with regards to the steps following the planning stage. Hence, apart from “bundling” initiatives in the form of TEIs, the actual practical implications of these initiatives – and their associated objectives – remained unclear. This also meant that the actual implications in terms of day-to-day cooperation between the EU and the member states in the context of the TEIs was not specified, with most having the expectation that context-relevance will take priority over standardisation. There is some tension between this pragmatic and adaptive approach and the European Commission’s efforts to strengthen the communication of Team Europe as a whole and to stress the linkages to established joint programming processes.

A different reading emerged from the traction generated by Team Europe, particularly in the period when programming decisions for the 2021–2027 period were being considered. Interviewees noted that it would have been a hard sell to convene Directors General from the member states (or even ministers) to speak about either joint programming or “working better together”, terms that were respectively perceived as bureaucratic and vague. That TEIs were discussed for several consecutive meetings at DG level has first of all meant a considerable increase in discussions on EU cooperation in the field of development policy, and perhaps implied some degree of “integration by stealth”. Some interviewees suggested that the recommendation for TEIs to be more flexible in terms of the type of contribution it could accommodate from member states came from the member states and was mentioned during a January 2021 DG meeting.

While the regular DG meetings allowed for informal and formative exchanges on Team Europe and the TEIs in particular, this choice of forum also brought some downsides. These became clear in 2021, when DG meetings were twice invited to adopt shortlists of TEIs that were at an advanced stage of preparations. After the most recent meetings the Commission and EEAS began to circulate “operational conclusions” of the meetings, which represented a kind of chair’s summary and thus enabled the meeting forum to at least prepare decisions. Member state respondents nonetheless maintained that the decisions on the TEIs were linked to the programming for NDICI–Global Europe, and that therefore the final decisions were to be made by member states through the established comitology process. In addition, the iterative nature of the TEI preparation also meant that expectation management of a moving target would prove a challenge. The inclusiveness discussion illustrates this, as it reflects an implicit expectation among some member states that – as was the case with the EU Trust Fund – they would informally be entitled to a certain degree of involvement in implementation. In this context, several member states are seeking to profile their own bilateral cooperation implementing agencies and consider EU development finance as a potential source of income. While some considered it a more recent development, others traced the discussion on inclusiveness back to almost 15 years ago, when the European Consensus on Development included commitments by the Commission to capitalise on the (then) new member states’ experience and strengthen their role as donors (EU, 2006).

Last, but not least, interviewees also indicated an associated integration agenda *within* EU institutions. While the Directorate-General for International Partnership (DG INTPA) was seen as fronting the wider Team Europe agenda and actively pushing the link to joint programming processes, the EEAS was perceived to be closer to the member states in favouring a more pragmatic approach and not directly linking the Team Europe process to joint programming by default. The Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), by comparison, was considered as less enthusiastic about Team Europe, also as programming processes linked to association agreements did not allow the same degree of flexibility in terms of the EU and the member states defining potential flagships while consulting government representatives. In the case of the “neighbourhood states”, partnership priorities are jointly formulated by the EU Delegation and the partner country under the association agreements concluded with them, which in turn provides a starting point for cooperation. Last, but not least, several interviewees also stressed the need for the head of cooperation in each of the EU delegations to work closely with the political sections as well as with the Head of Delegation, which would represent an additional area for further integration.

5 Conclusions and policy recommendations: moving Team Europe forward

This paper has analysed the EU’s evolving motivations, priorities and current approaches to development cooperation following the introduction of the label “Team Europe” in April 2020 as the European Union’s global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. After addressing the question of what Team Europe is, the analysis looked at whether and how the Team Europe approach has changed EU development cooperation, assessed the effects it has had on EU actions in support of partner countries, and discussed the implications of Team Europe for the EU’s development policy in the medium and long term. The study was based on policy documents and official statements, as well as on interviews with EU and member state officials engaged in development policy.

5.1 Increasing EU visibility

The ability to increase EU visibility is perceived as Team Europe’s main positive aspect. The analysis has shown that Team Europe’s potential to increase the visibility of the development cooperation engagement of the EU and its member states is generally accepted and welcomed as the concept’s priority and main goal. The gradual fading of Western dominance and simultaneous rise of emerging powers, notably the People’s Republic of China, is no longer news but an inexorable path towards a multipolar world. In reaction to this systemic transformation, Europe belatedly, as some would argue, discovered the importance of power politics in a world where authoritarianism is on the rise and the protection granted by long-standing allies such as the US could no longer be taken for granted. Now, the EU seeks to transform itself from a benevolent bystander into a shaping force of global politics, which also incarnates and defends democratic and liberal values.

The EU’s market and regulatory power remain the central tools to realise such ambitions, but increased visibility of its actions to support partner countries can also be an important component of this strategy. In addition, enhanced defence cooperation, highlighted by

initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and the self-presentation of the EU as a defender of human rights and rules-based multilateral order and a force of good in the fight against environmental degradation and socio-economic inequalities, have become instruments to accomplish the Union's leadership ambitions. Under the heading of "open strategic autonomy", the EU propagates a more realist worldview – reducing international dependencies – whilst simultaneously embracing a reinvigorated form of multilateralism, viewing itself as leader of the "free world". By securitising the pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis, the EU has elevated Team Europe to yet another instrument in support of European strategic and economic interests, aligned with EU values and priorities. The considerable traction of Team Europe as a label, now finding its way into political communication beyond the specific domain of development policy, has resulted in different understandings as to what it means, and some potential challenges in terms of expectation management – but it is generally considered to have been successful, particularly in promoting more visibility.

5.2 Striking the right balance

Two issues remain to be addressed in support of Team Europe: trade-offs between EU priorities and partners' ownership and the balance between flexibility and result-orientation. Team Europe represents a promising process in the EU's development policy, enabling further cooperation between the EU, its member states, EIB and EBRD, and contributing to increasing the EU's collective effectiveness in this area. The dynamic and flexible approach taken and the considerable amount of investment in internal dialogue were considered key in both generating and sustaining the political traction of Team Europe. Nevertheless, two key issues are identified, which are not sufficiently addressed in the current debate, and which, if they continued to be neglected, could negatively affect the goals and evolvments of Team Europe.

The first issue concerns the discrepancy between EU ownership and the ownership of developing country stakeholders, including those addressed by the cooperation initiatives concerned. In spite of the efforts made by the EU Delegations to involve developing country stakeholders at an early stage of the programming process, the interview findings suggest that intra-European ownership over Team Europe Initiatives has been given priority over developing country ownership. A frequent assumption among stakeholders appears to be that such ownership can be promoted after the EU has defined its priorities. Neglecting this trade-off could negatively affect the effectiveness of the EU's cooperation, but particularly the sustainability of the results achieved.

The second issue concerns the trade-off between flexibility and results-orientation. While enthusiasm and momentum drive the preparation of Team Europe, evidence of results must sustain it. This enables a moment to formalise the expected results of Team Europe both at the general and the specific level (that of individual TEIs), publicly communicating these and ensuring adequate investment in independent evaluation and dedicated accountability. By striking a fine balance between the much-lauded flexibility and a necessary degree of institutionalisation and predictability, the EU's Team Europe may remain effective over time.

These challenges can be explained by the specific period during which Team Europe has been given further shape, namely towards and after the adoption of the EU's MFF for 2021–2027 and the corresponding periods in which external action spending prioritised for this period are determined (“programmed”). The specific period not only explains the focus on intra-European processes, but also the flexibility that stems from the aim to involve a wide range of member states. During this time the member states' engagement is, moreover, in part driven by the promotion of their national interests and that of their respective implementing agencies and financial institutions, as appropriate.

5.3 Policy recommendations to strengthen Team Europe

An open question at this stage, therefore, is to what extent the focus on and traction of Team Europe will be consolidated beyond the point where decisions on the distribution and management of the involved EU budgetary resources have been made. Beyond the TEIs, member state support for Team Europe appears more fragmented and varied across the themes and regions concerned. Consolidating the traction and support for Team Europe is paramount to ensuring the success of the ambitions and expectations both generated by and emanating from the past period.

Based on the analysis presented in this paper, we elaborate four recommendations for strengthening Team Europe that can be considered by decision-makers:

- 1. Visibility ambitions:** There is a broad consensus that visibility is a key objective for Team Europe. This requires a communication strategy that breaks this down further into how to make Team Europe more visible within the EU, in developing countries, and to the EU's international partners. Further clarifying and differentiating the visibility ambitions of Team Europe and the steps to achieve them is key to informing further communication efforts now that the concept has been put “on the map”.
- 2. Joint evaluation of Team Europe:** One key assumption underlying Team Europe and preceding efforts to promote joined-up action in development policy is that, when working together, the EU and member states can achieve things that go beyond the sum of their individual parts. In order to consolidate this benefit, the EU and its member states should jointly and regularly evaluate their efforts in order to ensure that those responsible for TEIs are held accountable for the results and that lessons are learned. Preparations can be made for these evaluations in parallel to the remaining steps in the programming process. They could build on recent similar exercises, including the joint evaluation of the EU's Emergency Trust Fund for Africa.
- 3. Regular ministerial exchanges within the Council:** While Team Europe is now ubiquitous in the EU institutions' communications on its various international engagements, to date only two political statements have been adopted that express the shared understanding between the EU and its member states as to the overall aims and priorities behind Team Europe. Decision-makers should consider including Team Europe as a regular agenda item for the meeting of EU development ministers in the Foreign Affairs Council that takes place every six months. Such regularly adopted Council Conclusions are important landmarks that guide further action and also provide

a basis for monitoring, accountability, sharing best practices and learning about Team Europe.

4. **Parliamentary dialogue:** As the only directly elected EU institution, the European Parliament represents the people and should play a key role in holding member states accountable for their sustainable development commitments. Against this background, the second geopolitical dialogue between the Commission/EEAS and the European Parliament in relation to the NDICI–Global Europe is planned to take place in autumn 2021. While specifically focused on the single instrument for EU external action concerned, this debate could provide an important opportunity for further involvement of the Parliament in Team Europe, by allowing for exchanges on, and clarification of, the political objectives of Team Europe and enabling parliamentary scrutiny thereof. To this end, that debate should be on record and also include the rotating EU presidency to relay member state experiences to date.

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