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## EU development policy as a crisis-response tool? Prospects and challenges for linking the EU's COVID-19 response to the green transition

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# EU Development Policy as a Crisis-Response Tool?

Prospects and Challenges for Linking  
the EU's COVID-19 Response to the  
Green Transition

*Svea Koch  
Ina Friesen  
Niels Keijzer*

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## Abbreviations

AfC	Agenda for Change
AFD	Agence Française de Développement
COP26	2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference
COVAX	COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	civil society organisation
DEVCO	Development and Cooperation
DG	Directorate-General
DG INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EEAS	European External Action Service
EIB	European Investment Bank
EU	European Union
EUTF	European Emergency Trust Fund for Africa
GNI	gross national income
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LDC	least developed country
MPF	Multiannual Financial Framework
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NEAR	Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
ODA	official development assistance
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TEI	Team Europe Initiative
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization

## Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the world at a time when the effects of climate change and biodiversity loss are becoming increasingly visible and require urgent action to prevent irreversible damage. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing socio-economic inequalities, with a particularly negative impact on developing countries. An effective European Union (EU) development policy response needs to go beyond an immediate response and confront the more complex challenge of having to balance short-term recovery and longer-term transformation towards global sustainable development.

This paper assesses the preferences of EU institutions and member states in defining a development policy response to the pandemic and its implications. It focuses on two research questions: (1) What are the strategies of the EU and its member states to link the short-term recovery of the pandemic with longer-term socio-ecological transformations in their development policies? (2) How does the pandemic affect dynamics within and between the EU and the member states? The paper's analysis is based on a combination of a literature review, document analysis and semi-structured interviews.

The EU's development policy responses to crises in the past two decades show that time and timing matter. Past crisis responses were significantly influenced by the degree to which they could be accommodated within the EU's existing policy priorities and its political and budgetary cycles. The means through which the EU responded to past crises has changed and widened the broader orientation and purpose of EU development policy. Particularly the financial and migration crises have promoted a stronger interest-driven agenda, adding a new layer of complexity and several conflicting objectives to EU development policy.

In effect, development policy has become the EU's "jack of all trades" policy, tasked with addressing a broad spectrum of issues ranging from unmanaged migration, violent conflict, elite corruption and political repression alongside its "traditional" objectives of fighting poverty, inequality, weak governance, climate change and environmental degradation.

Affecting all levels of society and requiring both immediate short-term responses and long-term recovery efforts, the COVID-19 pandemic has only added to this complexity. The EU's response not only needs to address the immediate damage to achieved progress in human development but also ensure that the recovery from the pandemic promotes sustainable development and green transitions, steering the world to the 1.5-degree Celsius path of the Paris Agreement on climate change. The EU succeeded in preparing a joint development policy response under the label of Team Europe that initially focused on providing short-term COVID-19 support in 2020 and subsequently strengthened its emphasis on shared development cooperation packages for the upcoming years. Both phases of Team Europe stressed the need for a just and green recovery, accompanied with the widely used slogan of "building back better".

Our research demonstrates that the pandemic has not changed member states' strategic orientation and priorities but has rather reinforced development policy choices they had pursued prior to the pandemic. This is partially because the pandemic has led to such wide-ranging socio-economic implications that almost any previously planned initiative could now be presented as part of member states' COVID-19 response strategies. Another reason



for the strategic continuity is that the EU's key policies, such as the European Green Deal, had been adopted before the pandemic and are considered transformational in pushing the EU's climate policy. Overall, our interviews suggested that member states position themselves in three broad groups – one group prioritising human development, another group prioritising climate and green transitions, and a third group emphasising migration. These groups are not static: Some member states belong to more than one group, depending on their domestic situation and priorities. The pandemic and its consequences have further advanced the ambitions of some member states and the Commission regarding climate change and green transitions, with some member states devising new programmatic strategies to this end. Member state policy preferences, however, may change in light of the global situation and emerging crisis situations, such as a renewed focus on the security–development nexus as a result of the fragile situations in Afghanistan and the Sahel.

Although no significant shifts can be seen in the substance of overall policy strategies so far, our research suggests that the pandemic has changed the intra- and inter-institutional dynamics through which these are being pursued. For one, the success of Team Europe appears to have contributed to positive attitudes concerning joint action, which is not limited to the EU's short-term response to the pandemic but extends to the EU's overall development policy. The move towards online and virtual communication facilitated meetings between member states and EU institutions, as they no longer required time-related investments for travel. The increased frequency of exchanges subsequently strengthened the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) in a dual role as main architect and process manager of Team Europe. The pandemic has also contributed to a strengthened Franco-German axis, which is gradually being reinforced ever since the 2016 Brexit referendum. The three programmatic orientations in the EU's current development cooperation planning choices (human development, climate, migration) also dominate debates among member states. Although the like-minded group of member states (currently Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Poland and Sweden) continues to be an important informal forum for influence in EU development policy, current cooperation patterns and alliances are instead based on an issue-by-issue basis than on pre-existing partnerships or geographic or historical alliances.

In light of the complexity and the multi-dimensional impacts of the pandemic on developing countries, the EU needs to focus more strongly on its programmatic and strategic choices. This requires defining and operationalising a strategy for “building back better and greener”, which links socio- and ecological objectives within the context of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals as well as the Paris Agreement, and which is warranted under the so-called external dimension of the European Green Deal. In order to consolidate member states' positive attitudes and support, the Commission and the EEAS need to address the issues arising from the respective diverging preferences of various member state groups. The next years will show whether the EU will remain caught up in crisis response and interest-driven development agendas, or if it will step up its game to fully pursue the sustainability agenda. We suggest four recommendations for involved actors' efforts to pursue their sustainable development ambitions in this challenging context.

**1) Define a joint European understanding of “building back better”:** The Commission and the EEAS, together with the member states, need to specify what “building back better and greener” and a “just recovery” mean in the context of the EU's development policy.

2) **Evaluate the long-term effects of the EU's new development policy directions:** The “what gets measured, gets done” tendency implicit in the EU's first response should be counteracted by a sufficiently long-term evaluation agenda for the EU. Rather than limiting these objectives to evaluating the effects of EU development cooperation in terms of developing-country results, such scrutiny should also make the EU's own strategic interests more explicit and determine to what degree these have been served.

3) **“Team Europe” – invest in dialogue on green transition priorities:** An important next step is to better understand how Team Europe and the EU's pandemic response is perceived and appreciated by its partner countries and what their expectations towards the EU are. This dialogue should provide a means to identify how EU cooperation could best promote developing-country ownership and priorities for a green transition.

4) **Engage in multilateral fora and institutions:** The EU should extend its ambition for a better coordinated approach to the multilateral system. Integrating its global pandemic response and its linkages to the European Green Deal into a holistic and joint approach allows partners to better understand the EU's approach and to develop strategic partnerships as a result.



## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic ranks among the most serious global crises since the end of the Second World War, with far-reaching socio-economic, public health and global governance consequences for all countries. Hitting the world at a time when the effects of climate change and loss of biodiversity are becoming increasingly visible and require urgent action to prevent irreversible damage to the Earth System, the pandemic compounds the impacts of climate change and conflict and exacerbates pre-existing socio-economic inequalities, with a particularly negative impact on developing countries. According to World Bank estimates, in 2021 the number of people living in extreme poverty will rise by around 150 million for the first time in 20 years. Human development is expected to decline to conditions equivalent to levels of deprivation in the mid-1980s, with severe effects on income, health and education; the effects of the pandemic on food security in developing countries are feared to cause more deaths than the pandemic itself (United Nations Development Programme, 2020).

Addressing these simultaneous challenges and linking short-term recovery from the pandemic to longer-term sustainability transformations is crucial and widely acknowledged in political and public debates. António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), called on governments to “build back better” by turning the recovery into an opportunity to build more sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies (Guterres, 2020). Yet, despite the considerable enthusiasm generated by this slogan, including in the European Union (EU), turning “building back better” into practice represents a significant challenge.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly so for low-income countries, which have seen years of development progress reversed since the onset of the pandemic in 2020; they are currently preoccupied with repairing the damage done to their development progress rather than making costly investments in a green recovery.

Therefore, the EU’s COVID-19 recovery, both domestically and globally, faces the double challenge of cushioning the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic and accelerating the ecological transformation as laid out in the European Green Deal. The Green Deal was first presented to the European Parliament in July 2019 as one of six headline ambitions for the next European Commission as part of the candidate Commission President’s political guidelines (von der Leyen, 2019). The Green Deal represents the EU’s overarching plan for reaching climate neutrality by 2050 as part of its contribution to the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In early 2020, policy debates began to refer to an “external dimension” of the European Green Deal, with a key role for the EU’s development policy (Koch & Keijzer, 2021). However, the EU’s focus on the Green Deal and green transitions failed to link these to an overarching European strategy to promote the 2030 Agenda. This failure has fuelled the debate on the insufficient linkage of social and ecological objectives (Hackenesch et al., 2021).

The current crisis situation follows past crisis situations such as the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the (ongoing) migration crisis of 2015, both of which have had profound impacts on EU development policy and led to a complex set of different – and at times competing –

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1 Although “building back better” is a popular term in international discussions on COVID-19 recovery, the term was first used in 2009 by former US President Bill Clinton in his capacity as UN Special Envoy to Haiti (United Nations, 2009).

goals positioned between global solidarity and the EU's own interests. Although development policy is broader than development cooperation per se – and, for instance, also involves informing the considerations in other policies that may affect the interests of developing countries – crises typically place claims on its budgetary resources to respond to both the causes and consequences of crises in developing countries.

Since various other objectives are catered for through development policy, adding new priorities comes with trade-offs and (un)intended consequences. The combined effects of the financial and migration crises have led to a gradual change of European development policy, which not only addresses poverty and inequality, democratic governance and human rights, conflict and unmanaged migration, food security, etc., but also the (assumed) root causes of these phenomena (Furness, Ghica, Lightfoot, & Szent-Iványi, 2020). The EU's development policy response to the ongoing pandemic is not limited to addressing its symptoms and consequences in the form of short-term health and economic implications. Instead, the EU is facing the challenge of linking these measures to a longer-term socio-ecological recovery that addresses green transitions in order to both prepare for and prevent future crises.

Finding adequate short- and long-term responses to the pandemic is a daunting task and requires equal doses of rapid and forward-looking decisions. The preferences and interests of EU institutions and member states are decisive in shaping these responses. It is therefore important to understand the current positioning of the different actors and the dynamics between them. This paper aims to do so by addressing two research questions: (1) What are the strategies of the EU and its member states to link the short-term recovery of the pandemic with longer-term socio-ecological transformations in their development policies? (2) How does the pandemic affect dynamics within and between the EU and the member states? The paper primarily focuses on discussing substantive policy changes over the past two decades and key stakeholders' preferences in relation to these.<sup>2</sup> Its target audience concerns EU policy-makers and researchers who follow and contribute to EU development policy.

The paper's analysis is based on the combination of a literature review, document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Following this first introductory section, the second chapter proceeds with a literature review of research on the ways in which recent crises, such as the financial and migration crises, have shaped the EU's development policy and their impact on inter-institutional dynamics and decision-making processes. The third chapter is based on 12 semi-structured interviews, complemented by a document analysis of the internal and official member state and EU strategies, where these were available. The 12 interviewees who contributed to this study consisted of a mix of "headquarter" officials and Brussels-based diplomats and EU officials. Some work in EU departments and others in general policy departments determining bilateral policy strategies of member states. Although not reflecting the full diversity of EU member states, the range of respondents gives a good insight into the variety of policy preferences that circulate in the EU's current policy discussions. The analysis explores how different EU institutions and member states understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on EU development aid policy and

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2 For a description and discussion of key decision-making processes in EU development policy, the authors recommend Orbie (2020).

the extent to which due priority is given to both sustainable development considerations and the green transition. Furthermore, it analyses how the EU and its member states are linking the COVID-19 response to a longer-term socio-ecological transformation, and how they promote their respective preferences vis-à-vis one another. The concluding chapter presents the overall conclusions and offers four policy recommendations.

## **2 The impact of the crisis decades on European development policy**

In light of the current preoccupation with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth remembering that the EU has faced the consequences of a number of challenging crises during the past two decades. These included the economic and financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the related sovereign debt crisis, the (ongoing) migration crisis starting in 2015-2016 and the British decision to leave the EU in 2016. These crises have influenced the EU's political narratives, with the Juncker Commission referring to itself as the "last chance Commission" and von der Leyen's "Geopolitical Commission" similarly seeking to emit a wake-up call. The changes these crises have brought with them lead some to speak of a "crisisification" of European policy-making, which is constituted by a disruption of traditional decision-making processes and actor constellations in the EU, leading to new participation patterns and decision dynamics that change the nature of EU integration (Rhinard, 2019). While confronting these highly publicised crises, the EU is also facing a number of more slowly developing crises such as the global climate and biodiversity crisis and, domestically, the rise of populism and related anti-EU rhetoric challenging the EU's liberal values.

A starting point for this analysis is that a development or event can become a crisis only once it is perceived and responded to as such. This may occur when events are considered to be urgent threats in terms of security, identity or survival. Whether something becomes a crisis depends on the extent to which key triggers, that is, disruptive incidents or trends, are perceived to – and purposefully framed to – contribute to crises or are instead considered to be of a temporary and non-fundamental nature (Henderson, 2014). In the case of the EU, it should be acknowledged that not every crisis will become a European crisis, for reasons including the distribution of its effects across EU member states and different starting points in terms of responding to these. A European crisis response may particularly be expected once EU leaders realise that they can only respond effectively in a collective manner.

After an initially uncoordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020, it soon became clear that the pandemic and the resulting short- and long-term health and socio-economic challenges impacted all levels of society, politics and economics. These challenges also impacted every single policy area of the EU and its member states and required collective, coordinated European action (Schmidt, 2020).

The effects of the pandemic in the EU's partner countries also challenged EU development policy to find immediate ways to respond to the pandemic and support partner countries in their fight against COVID-19. The case for a response of EU development policy was not only driven by the considerable needs of developing countries, but it was also deemed necessary from a foreign policy perspective in view of the geopolitical competition between global players for providing support, which has been referred to as a "politics of generosity" (Burni et al., 2021). Such a response would typically be prepared through intensive consultations between key decision-makers such as representatives of the European

Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the member states and the European Parliament, as well as various other actors, including civil society, multilateral organisations and the media. The pandemic changed the means through which these consultations were conducted – from in-person to virtual online meetings – and the scale of the pandemic also fast-tracked these in terms of their frequency and the number of participants who could be convened.

Before turning to an analysis of the EU’s COVID-19 response in the next chapter, we provide an overview of the ways in which past crises affected the objectives and the orientation of EU development policy. Understanding how these crises shaped EU development policy will help contextualise its status quo at the beginning of the pandemic, which is essential for our analysis of the EU’s response to COVID-19 and the need for socio-ecological recovery and transformation in partner countries. To this end, and without seeking to be exhaustive, two earlier crises and the EU’s development policy responses to them are analysed: the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the EU’s migration-related policy response since 2015. These two crises are examined with regards to objectives, inter-institutional dynamics and decision-making processes.

## 2.1 The impact of past crises on EU development policy strategies

The global financial crisis in 2007-2008 and the European debt crisis it triggered created an international environment that was characterised by austerity and increased global economic competition. The crisis put a heavy burden on European economies, leading to shrinking aid budgets and debates over the best ways to spend the limited resources. The short-term result of the financial crisis and the changing international environment was a temporary decrease of the EU’s official development assistance (ODA). Most member states reduced their ODA budgets as part of their broader austerity packages.<sup>3</sup> The reduced fiscal space had also led to public concerns among parts of the electorate over “wasting” scarce public money on development assistance abroad, which resulted in further ODA cuts and related savings – for example, the closing of embassies in selected countries. However, the drop in ODA was only temporary and in subsequent years, total ODA of the EU surpassed earlier amounts (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020).

In addition to affecting the volume of the EU’s ODA, the financial crisis impacted the objectives of EU development aid, resulting in a stronger emphasis on the EU’s commercial, foreign policy and security interests. This change was driven by the Commission’s Agenda for Change (AfC), which was adopted in 2011 and aimed at modernising the EU’s development policy. Against the backdrop of the austerity measures taken throughout Europe, the Commission’s proposal for the AfC – as first presented in 2009 – initiated an intense debate about “differentiation”. This concept revolved around the question of whether wealthier middle-income countries should continue to receive EU aid or could finance their own national development. This question particularly extended to upper-middle-income countries and emerging economies such as China and India (Koch, 2015). As a result of member states’ concerns over wasting EU aid in corrupt and non-democratic

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3 While in 2008 and 2009 the total ODA disbursed by the EU and its member states amounted to US\$14.7 billion and US\$14.5 billion, respectively, in 2010 EU total ODA had decreased to US\$12.9 billion.

regimes, the EU also launched a reform of its budget support policy, aiming to tie budget support more strictly to the political conditions in recipient countries as part of the AfC (Faust, Leiderer, & Schmitt, 2012).

In addition to these important reforms affecting EU development policy and operations, the AfC also repositioned the policy field itself. The agenda overall shifted the focus of EU development policy from poverty reduction to a broader agenda that was closely aligned with EU foreign policy on security, migration and Neighbourhood. In effect, it promoted a closer connection between foreign and development policy. Furthermore, the AfC endorsed development cooperation that combined governance and economic cooperation and placed a new emphasis on fostering economic growth and cooperation with the private sector as an “engine” for development (Bergmann, Delputte, Keijzer, & Verschaeve, 2019, p. 548). The increased emphasis on economic growth is demonstrated in the EU’s ODA spending between 2008 and 2012. Whereas the EU’s ODA spent on Social Infrastructure & Services increased only slightly between 2008 and 2012, spending for Economic Infrastructure & Services and Production Sectors more than tripled during this time (Agenda for Change, 2011, p. 3; Bergmann et al., 2019, p. 548).

While the economic context created by the global financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis introduced stronger ties between development, economic and foreign policy objectives, the European migration crisis in 2015 had even more profound implications on the design, financing and implementation of the EU’s development policy. Following the arrival of large numbers of Syrian refugees in Europe in autumn 2015, member states pressured the EU to use its development assistance to halt the refugees and migrants, and to make its disbursement of ODA conditional on a country’s cooperation on migration and security matters (Rozbicka & Szent-Iványi, 2020). As a result, the EU development policy’s objective shifted to address the “root causes” of migration and displacement. The focus on “root causes” was accompanied by a change in geographical focus to those countries that were strategically relevant from a migration perspective. Based on the assumption that migration to Europe has been mainly motivated by a lack of economic opportunities and employment in home countries, EU development cooperation also shifted its programmatic priorities to efforts focusing on generating economic opportunities and job creation in partner countries (Knoll & Sherriff, 2017; Rozbicka & Szent-Iványi, 2020). The focus on migration in international cooperation and the response to the refugees in 2015 and 2016 resulted in an increase in total European ODA between 2015 and 2016 (Knoll & Sherriff, 2017, p. 17).

The ways in which the EU interpreted the migration challenge and responded politically has led to a number of conflicting objectives in the EU’s external policies, including development policy. Development policy has become the EU’s “jack of all trades” policy, tasked with addressing a wide range of issues ranging from unmanaged migration, violent conflict, elite corruption and political repression in addition to its “traditional” objectives of fighting poverty, inequality, weak governance, climate change and environmental degradation (Furness et al., 2020). One of the early examples illustrating this change is the European Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), which was launched in 2015 to tackle “the root causes of instability, forced displacement and irregular migration” (European Union, 2021a, p. 1) and which has spurred a significant level of controversy in member states’ parliaments and the European Parliament. Civil society organisations (CSOs) criticised the overall focus of the EUTF and their ability to implement the EUTF, which was restricted to projects



focusing on poverty reduction and the resilience of local communities (Szent-Ivanyi, 2021). Although the main criticism of the EUTF concerned its focus on projects targeting border management and control, it also drew criticism for its overload of objectives, which hindered the evaluation of the initiative (European Court of Auditors, 2018).

### *Post-crisis strategising?*

Keijzer and Lundsgaarde (2018) argue that, as a result of both the financial and migration crises, the EU has moved away from emphasising developing-country benefits as the aim for development cooperation towards the pursuit of “mutual benefit”. In doing so, the EU presents its self-interest as a donor and the needs of development cooperation recipients as two legitimate and simultaneously attainable goals of development cooperation. This represents a shift in policy focus of the EU’s development policy, which – as per the EU treaties – primarily pursues the reduction in, and eventual eradication of, poverty. After the response to the various crises since 2010, and notably after the introduction of the EUTF and the External Investment Plan, the EU adopted an overarching development policy – the 2017 EU Consensus on Development. Informed by the EU’s earlier responses to crises, the Consensus set out a new direction for EU development policy (European Union, 2017). The EU Consensus noted up front that cooperation in relation to the 2030 Agenda – which “must be implemented as a whole and not selectively” (European Union, 2017, p. 3) – promotes mutual benefits to the EU and its partners:

[E]fforts will be targeted towards eradicating poverty, reducing vulnerabilities and addressing inequalities to ensure that no-one is left behind. By contributing to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, the EU and its Member States will also foster a stronger and more sustainable, inclusive, secure and prosperous Europe. (European Union, 2017, p. 4)

The emphasis on mutual benefit is also being pursued by the current Commission under Ursula von der Leyen, who mandated her International Partnerships Commissioner to ensure that the EU’s 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). She also made clear that the geopolitical priorities for her Commission included a closer relationship with Africa. The emphasis on partnerships was subsequently reflected in the name change of the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation (DG DEVCO) to DG for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) and its new mission statement “to contribute to sustainable development, the eradication of poverty, peace and the protection of human rights, through international partnerships that uphold and promote European values and interests” (European Commission, s.a.).

It is important to point out that the changing focus of EU development policy and the expansion of its priorities and demands is not a European invention but consistent with global development policy trends. In 2015, the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs succeeded the Millennium Development Goals, which focused on poverty eradication with a broadening of development cooperation to address the multifaceted and interrelated nature of global development of the SDGs. The broadening of the agenda, as argued by Fukuda-Parr and McNeill (2019), means in practice that every conceivable policy area has become relevant to development. The EU has taken a leading role in negotiating and driving the 2030 Agenda and been one of the most active promoters of the principles of international partnerships.

However, despite this ambition, the EU has not yet become a frontrunner in implementing the SDGs domestically nor abroad (Sachs et al., 2020). Replacing the development cooperation system of asymmetrical donor-recipient relations has proven particularly challenging due to diverging views and preferences within the EU but also among the EU's partner countries.

In addition to changing the objectives of EU development policy, the two crises described above also left their mark on the EU's decision-making processes and dynamics.

## 2.2 Inter-institutional dynamics of EU development policy: Shaped by crisis and diverging preferences and norms

The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (aka the Lisbon Treaty; TFEU) sets out the EU's framework for external relations, including development; defines EU development policy as a shared competence between the EU and the member states; and aims at “the reduction of poverty, and in the long term, the eradication of poverty” (Art. 208 TFEU). EU development policy is therefore neither exclusively subjected to supranational nor to intergovernmental procedures but is organised in a multi-level governance system and developed in parallel by all actors involved (Orbie & Lightfoot, 2017).<sup>4</sup> EU development policy is an amalgam of different parts, diverging interests, preferences and norms as opposed to a coherent whole. The question of how to define and implement policies together – and to increase coordination between all actors and develop joint, coherent and effective policies with lasting impacts – is a persistent challenge (see Orbie & Versluys, 2008).

Both the financial and migration crises added further stress and complexity to the EU development policy system and increased its politicisation. Politicisation, in this context, refers to a three-dimensional process that includes increasing the salience of debates, a polarisation of opinions, and an expansion of actors and audiences involved in European debates and decision-making (Hackenesch et al., 2021). EU development policy has moved from a low-salience, technocratic policy field primarily of interest to development and foreign policy communities to an area of increasing debates and conflict, with a growing number of actors taking an interest in development actions and funds. Particularly the use of ODA for addressing migration causes (both domestically and abroad) has been highly controversial in member states, with parliaments, CSOs and the media taking interests and positions (CONCORD, 2018; Rozbicka & Szent-Iványi, 2020).

For Brussels, the events of the past two decades have led to changing dynamics between Directorates-General (DGs), an increasing interest of other DGs in the EU's aid spending and a general closer alignment of development with foreign policy goals following the establishment of the EEAS. The EU has a dedicated DG who runs the management of the EU's aid portfolio. Over the years, the DG (currently named DG International Partnerships) has seen several re-namings, indicating larger changes of direction. With the signing of the Lisbon Treaty, the EU's framework for external relations including development was changed further by the creation of the new post of High Representative for Foreign Affairs

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4 For further information on how the EU's development policy and operations are shaped, the authors recommend Orbie (2020).

and Security Policy, supported by the newly created EEAS (Furness, 2010). The EEAS was tasked to increase the links between development and foreign policy and has played an increasingly greater role in development since the programming for the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework was negotiated. As such, the EEAS aims to make sure that development adheres to the broader geopolitical and foreign policy priorities of the EU, with the High Representative – who is also a Vice President of the European Commission – holding a hierarchically higher position than the International Partnership Commissioner. The programming of development aid is a joint responsibility of the EEAS and the DG, with many observing an increasing subordination of development goals to strategic foreign and security policy objectives (Orbie, 2020; Tannous, 2013).

Due to the expansion of the issues that are now considered relevant for EU development policy and its increased salience, other Commission DGs, such as the DG for Migration and Home Affairs, have started to take an interest in using EU ODA funds to address issues such as migration management. The migration crisis reinforced the cultural differences between development officials working towards poverty reduction and longer-term economic and social stability, EEAS officials focusing more strongly on immediate security risks and DG Home officials with an interest in immediate measures to reduce migration flows. As a result, “there has been a clash between what might be referred to as the ‘security community’ and ‘development community’” (Youngs & Zihnioglu, 2021, p. 130). However, although the Development DG and DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR) follow a different outlook to EEAS diplomats, the three external-policy actors share a concern over DG Home’s increased influence over aid programming and its leading role in migration- and border-related projects in the regions of the Middle East and North Africa as well as the Sahel (Youngs & Zihnioglu, 2021, p. 130). All in all, the migration crisis in effect reduced the Development DG’s manoeuvring space to define its policies and uphold developmental agendas, with political, economic and geopolitical agendas of the EEAS and other DGs increasingly encroaching on the EU’s development portfolio and spending.

The question of how member states interact with and through the EU level in development is not less complex. In general, the interactions between the EU and the member states take place in three ways: a “bottom-up” approach, with member states uploading their preferences to the EU; a “top-down” approach, with the EU shaping member states’ policies; and a “horizontal” manner, when member states form coalitions (Orbie, 2020). Member states are using both formally organised processes and groups (the European Development Fund Committee, the Council Working Party on Development Cooperation and International Partnerships, Foreign Affairs Council, Comitology, etc.) as well as informal forms of exchange and preference formation in order to voice their national policy preferences (Koch & Molenaers, 2016; Orbie & Carbone, 2016).

Overall, it is fair to say that member states have a strong interest in shaping European development policy in their favour by “uploading” their preferences to the EU level, while simultaneously shielding the EU from interfering in their domestic budgetary sovereignty and control over domestic policies (Koch & Molenaers, 2016; Orbie & Carbone, 2016). As such, the literature on EU development policy generally assumes that the resistance towards Europeanisation – a process of member states adapting to EU policies – is based in a strong desire to maintain control over domestic policies (Carbone, 2008, 2013a, 2013b, 2017; Horký, 2012; Orbie & Lightfoot, 2017).

In order to successfully engage at the EU level and steer debates and policies in their direction, member states have traditionally organised themselves in groups. Originally, the formation took place along geographical lines, with southern and northern member states forming separate cleavages. In 1999, a new informal group called the Utstein Group came to the fore, founded by four female Development Ministers (of the Netherlands, the United Kingdom (UK), Germany and Norway). Together they were lobbying for a strong focus on the poorest countries, on poverty reduction and inequality, and on challenging established norms in development in the EU and on a global level (Saltnes, 2019). Over the years, this group of “like-minded” countries grew larger and more diversified. After the UK’s departure from the EU, this group consists of Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Poland, and it meets on an informal basis to discuss specific issues and agree on joint priorities and proceedings. Their influence is identified by some as being the strongest in EU decision-making processes and as a “like-mindedisation” of EU development policy (Elgström, 2017; Elgström & Delputte, 2016; Olsen, 2013; Saltnes, 2019). In particular, the “like-minded” are considered globalists, objecting to stronger coordination mechanisms within the EU (Horký, 2012, p. 65). Others, however, highlight that the “like-minded” are not as unified as they are often portrayed, and also that they are subject to different “donor identities” and differing ideas, preferences and interests (Elgström & Delputte, 2016). In view of the informal status and nature of the like-minded group, it should also be emphasised that the actual ambitions and orientation of the like-minded group – and indeed what exactly they are like-minded on – are subject to concrete opportunities for cooperation.

The financial and migration crises made it obvious that member states were not static, unitary actors but driven by their evolving political, bureaucratic and economic structures and interests. The crises were also partly driven and promoted by an increasing number of right-wing and populist governments within the EU, with a key difference that the migration crisis polarisation focused on non-European citizens, whereas in the financial crisis, the polarisation focused on creditor versus debtor EU member states. In general, right-wing governments tend to be more risk-averse regarding both reputational and fiduciary risks, and they favour more visible approaches in development policy, which are easier to communicate to their constituents (Faust & Koch, 2014). Populist leaders, in turn, often aim at reducing development aid and shifting its purpose from helping the neediest abroad to more self-serving political and economic ends (Thier & Alexander, 2019). Across the EU, right-wing populist parties played increasingly large roles in governments and lobbied for a strong focus on migration management, security concerns, private-sector support and more results-based aid (Rozbicka & Szent-Iványi, 2020).

In this overall context, a number of previously generous and poverty-oriented donors such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden have, in differing degrees, turned into more restrictive, interest-driven and risk-averse donors, as their governments changed from left- to right-wing (Elgström, 2017). Whereas in some countries (e.g. the Netherlands and Sweden) there was considerable debate in the parliament – and in particular between left- and right-wing parties – about linking migration and development policies, in other countries (e.g. in France, Italy and Belgium), this was not the case (see Lauwers, Orbie, & Delputte, 2021). The shifts of Poland and Hungary towards illiberalism also had implications for the EU’s international development cooperation. Both countries made increasing use of bilateral aid to promote economic objectives and to back up anti-migration rhetoric. In the case of Poland, the refugee crisis led to a re-alignment between Poland and

the EU, as the EU focused more strongly on the securitisation of EU development policy, constituting a welcome change for the Polish government (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020). Although the Visegrad group remains an important forum for exchange and potential joint positioning in relation to other EU policy areas, despite its reduced internal cohesion, there are few coordinated efforts and shared interests in the area of development policy (see Chmiel, 2018).

These examples highlight that, despite the fact that domestic interests heavily influence how member states engage at – and through – the EU level, these interests can change over time and also depend on specific issues. The migration crisis in particular has led to a variety of responses from member states that go beyond the traditional north-south divide or the group of “like-minded” donors. As a result, traditional groupings or cleavages of member states have become more fluid and issue-dependent, including the fact that the “like-minded” might agree on some, but not all issues of interest.

### *EU development policy in response to crises*

This brief overview demonstrated how changes in the international environment as well as internal and external political and economic crises have transformed European development policy in the past two decades. Since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, development policy has been framed as a policy that facilitates the EU’s broader external action. As a result, aid has become increasingly instrumentalised, moving away from the principles of the post-millennium international aid effectiveness agenda to pursuing European interests abroad (Bergmann et al., 2019; Furness et al., 2020). The adoption of the 2016 EU Global Strategy and its call for EU development policy “to become more flexible and aligned with our [EU] strategic priorities” (European Union Global Strategy, 2016, p. 48) also confirm this trend and the EU’s ambition to combine development with other external policies to pursue the EU’s interests globally (Barbé & Morillas, 2019; Hadfield & Lightfoot, 2020; Olivié & Pérez, 2019).

Past crises and external shocks have had a significant effect on the strategic orientation of EU development policy and the inter-institutional dynamics and decision-making processes. Recent years have seen an EU that is largely caught in crisis response and interest-driven development agendas, with the latter trend informing its approach to tackling the former. The next section shifts the focus to the current crisis situation created by COVID-19 and analyses its impact on EU development policy and the extent to which it has changed or reinforced existing dynamics resulting from past crises.

### **3 The EU’s response to the pandemic: Connecting short-term response and long-term support for a socio-ecological recovery**

The pandemic – widely perceived as a “wake-up call” to reconsider the interaction between humans and nature in order to preserve the world intact for future generations – has further intensified the debate about the EU’s contribution to sustainable development. There are important ongoing discussions at the EU level on the question of how, and to what degree, EU development policy should contribute to the 2030 Agenda, and the extent to which it requires adaptation. Starting with the EU’s preparation for the Rio+20 conference in 2012,

which laid the basis for the later 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, the EU's approach over the past two decades has at times been somewhat defensive. This was in part because the 2030 Agenda was set at a time characterised by shifting global relations and ongoing discussions on "common but differentiated responsibilities" (Pauw, Bauer, Richerzhagen, Brandi, & Schmole, 2014). In part pushed by its own austerity measures, which included ODA cuts, the EU and its member states sought to promote a greater level of burden-sharing in international development cooperation, specifically by development cooperation providers that were not in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Lightfoot & Kim, 2017).

A good illustration of the EU's defensive approach is a Communication published in 2016 which broadly argued that the EU's policies across the board were already fully consistent with – and thus contributing to – the 2030 Agenda, claiming that no fundamental reforms were necessary in this regard (Hackenesch & Keijzer, 2016). While in part reflecting the priorities of EU institutions, the stance of the Communication towards the 2030 Agenda and the degree to which it considers EU development policy to be in need of fundamental change also reflects the values and interests of its member states.

In light of the impact that previous crises had on member states' attitudes towards development policy, it is important to investigate whether this crisis had a similar impact on the strategic orientation of the EU and its member states. Overall, our interviewees suggested that the pandemic has not led to a fundamental readjustment of member states' bilateral development cooperation policies. While having to respond to immediate health and economic needs and re-shifting funds for this purpose, most interviewees felt that the overall direction of their development policies has been reinforced and confirmed by the pandemic. This belief is shared regardless of the individual member state's focus prior to the pandemic. Those member states whose bilateral policies prioritised "traditional objectives" of development cooperation, such as poverty reduction and human development, prior to the pandemic, point to the pandemic's devastating effects on these areas and continue to prioritise these objectives. Other member states that focus more strongly on climate change, green transitions and biodiversity equally saw their priorities confirmed by the pandemic and highlight the window of opportunity for green investments and transitions to recover from the pandemic and to prevent future crises. The need to link social and ecological objectives has been recognised by most interviewees, but it has only been translated into policies or strategies by some.

Rather than reflecting an overall strategy as to how to link the short-term response to the pandemic with long-term ecological transformation, the interviews with our interlocutors demonstrated that the current debates on EU development policy are dominated by Team Europe and Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs). This in part is due to the preoccupation with the initial pandemic response in 2020 and the ongoing programming of EU development cooperation for the budget period of 2021-2027, which is traditionally the period when member states seek to "upload" their own policy preferences and interests to the EU.

### 3.1 The 2020 Team Europe package and related initiatives

The EU's primary response to the COVID-19 pandemic was the "Team Europe" approach. Launched on 8 April 2020, Team Europe aimed to support EU partner countries in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences by pulling financial resources from all EU institutions, member states, the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).<sup>5</sup> As stated in the Joint Communication on the EU's global response to COVID-19 from April 2020, Team Europe aims to cover three priorities: 1) support the urgent, short-term emergency response to humanitarian needs, 2) strengthen health systems and 3) mitigate the pandemic's economic and social consequences. With the vast majority of the contributions (more than €12 billion out of €15.6 billion) being dedicated to the mitigation of expected economic and social consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU demonstrated that it was aware of the long-term implications of the pandemic from the beginning and included funding for long-term considerations.

Burni et al. (2021) argue that the main motivation for Team Europe was the strengthening of European cooperation in development policy and the desire to strengthen Europe's profile and collective visibility as a development cooperation actor. The efforts to make EU support more "visible" and strategically communicate the EU's global COVID-19 response can, in part, also be viewed as a response to geopolitical considerations and China's increased power projection from the outset of the crisis. Team Europe was spearheaded by the European Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships, with more complementary roles played by the EEAS and DG NEAR. Due to the popularity of the phrase, it has also been used in other contexts, for example by the President of the Commission in relation to vaccine development efforts and migration policy. The European Parliament has welcomed Team Europe but has played no direct role in shaping the EU's external response under this label (Keijzer, Burni, Erforth, & Friesen, 2021, p. 8), which confirms its peripheral role during major crises (Salvati, 2021, p. 11).

In light of the Commission's past initiatives to better coordinate and harmonise EU development policy and member states' reluctance to follow, the Commission's ability to mobilise member states, the EIB and the EBRD to join forces as Team Europe is a promising process. Member states, whose buy-in is essential for the success and sustainability of the Team Europe approach, welcomed Team Europe due to its unusually fast, less formal and less bureaucratic decision-making processes (Keijzer et al., 2021). This assessment was confirmed by one respondent in the study who pointed out that member states agreed to follow the Commission on Team Europe because they understood that their individual efforts would be insufficient, and that the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic required a concerted strategic effort and a truly joint approach. Over the course of 2020, Team Europe vastly surpassed its initial aim to provide €15.6 billion by pledging more than €40 billion, 65 per cent of which (€26 billion) was disbursed by the EU at the end of 2020 to more than 130 partner countries.

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5 For more information on the process leading up to the introduction of Team Europe and its evolving implementation, please refer to Burni et al. (2021) and Keijzer et al. (2021).

Apart from immediate measures taken through Team Europe, the EU also significantly stepped up support for global health measures, in particular the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access initiative (COVAX) and the World Health Organization (WHO). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU was not a strong supporter of global health issues or WHO, with some highlighting that the ambition expressed by the EU in its 2010 Global Health Council Conclusions was not realised (Bergner, van de Pas, van Schaik, & Voss, 2020). Here, the pandemic led to a shift of focus, with member states and EU institutions providing a large amount of additional funds. Germany, the EU and Sweden, for instance, rank among the top five contributors to the COVAX initiative. The EU's decision to step up support to WHO was partially also a response to the retreat of the Trump administration from WHO over disputes on China's influence in WHO. Germany and France stand out in this respect, with Germany pledging an additional €500 million to WHO in 2020.

### 3.2 Linking short-term to longer-term reconstruction: Comparing key European initiatives and instruments

#### *The EU's programmatic choices to link short- and long-term recovery*

Although originally aimed at delivering a fast-tracked response by repurposing planned projects, "Team Europe" was developed further to link short-term pandemic response to longer-term reconstruction in partner countries. As the EU is planning its future cooperation spending under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)/Global Europe instrument, the Team Europe approach appears to have become a key means to pursuing programmatic cooperation with the member states (Keijzer et al., 2021). In summer 2020, EU Delegations in the EU's partner countries began to prepare TEIs, with Delegations in Neighbourhood countries making similar preparations in 2021 due to their differing planning approaches. TEIs are joint "flagship" activities that combine the contributions by the EU, selected member states and banks in relation to specific themes in a specific country or region or those being pursued at the global level. Together with other member states and, when applicable, the EIB and EBRD, EU Delegations prepared proposals for TEIs, which should bring together the best possible mix of modalities, tools and partners, including CSOs and the private sector.

In February 2021, the European Commissioner for International Partnerships, the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and 25 EU ministers in charge of development policy published a letter addressed to EU Delegations, member state embassies and the offices of respective EU development finance institutions and agencies. The letter, entitled "Team Europe approach for COVID-19 and beyond", presented the long-term vision of Team Europe. It stressed that Team Europe was to be translated into "concrete actions to support our joint vision for a recovery that is sustainable, human rights based, inclusive, green, digital, and which strengthens gender equality and boosts human development", and that TEIs were "to be an integral part of our European efforts to 'build back better and greener'" (European Commission, 2021a). In the Council Conclusions from July 2021, the EU once again emphasised the need "to build back better and greener" with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change as its roadmaps (Council of the European Union, 2021a). In the following, we assess the



programmatic choices of DG INTPA and member states as key players in shaping Europe's response to the pandemic.

The extent to which the pandemic has changed DG INTPA's strategic course of direction is difficult to assess, as the pandemic hit the world at a time when preparations for the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) were already underway. Development does not feature as part of Next Generation EU, the reconstruction programme for Europe. As a consequence, the external recovery spending needs to come from the €79.5 billion<sup>6</sup> NDICI/Global Europe instrument, which was created in the 2021-2027 MFF and brought several pre-existing external financing instruments under one legal roof. The planning of regional and thematic priorities under the new instrument ("programming") was done during the pandemic and affected by its repercussions.

A key aspect of the NDICI/Global Europe instrument concerns the spending targets. With regards to concrete outcomes, there is a spending target of at least 20 per cent for human development, 30 per cent for addressing climate change and associated biodiversity targets (7.5 per cent by 2024; 10 per cent by 2026), and a 10 per cent spending target to tackle the management and governance of migration and forced displacement. In addition, 93 per cent of all funding of the Global Europe instrument should be reportable as ODA. The target for migration was not foreseen in the Commission's June 2018 proposal, while the proposed target for climate spending was increased from the originally proposed 25 per cent to 30 per cent. The biodiversity targets were also added during the negotiations. The regulation moreover stipulates that annual budgets for spending in relation to both targets have to be presented in order to enable monitoring by relevant stakeholders (European Union, 2021b). The separate 20 per cent target for human development was not changed during the negotiations, since it was included in the 2017 EU Consensus on Development, and therefore already considered as having been accepted by the Commission, Council and Parliament.

Many important policies that influence the programming and TEIs were in fact adopted before the pandemic. The European Green Deal stands out in this respect. Presented in December 2019, it is an overarching, constantly evolving plan for making the EU climate neutral by 2050. It conveys the EU's ambition to adjust and "green" its economic growth trajectory as part of its contribution to the Paris Agreement and the SDGs. As such, it is one of the most – if not *the* most – ambitious project of the von der Leyen Commission. Notwithstanding initial doubts, the Green Deal so far has proved resilient to the global pandemic and remains a compass for the European recovery (Koch & Keijzer, 2021). Whereas some are of the opinion that the COVID-19 crisis created a much needed push for EU climate policy, others highlight that the Green Deal in itself was transformational and influential but that it has been advanced further and reinforced due to the pandemic and the growing concerns over the intactness of our planet (Dupont, Oberthür, & von Homeyer, 2020).

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6 A total of €60.38 billion for geographic programmes (at least €19.32 billion for the Neighbourhood, at least €29.18 billion for sub-Saharan Africa, €8.48 billion for Asia and the Pacific, and €3.39 billion for the Americas and the Caribbean); €6.36 billion for thematic programmes (Human Rights and Democracy; Civil Society Organisations; Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention; and Global Challenges); and €3.18 billion for rapid response actions.

The Commission has shown ambition in the timely publishing of legislative proposals, targets and strategies (e.g. the climate law, the circular economy action plan, the biodiversity strategy, the farm-to-fork strategy, etc.), which mostly relate to the domestic “green” restructuring of sectors and the economy at large. Although the external dimension of the European Green Deal has, by comparison, remained largely under the public radar, it has had significant impact on EU development policy (Koch & Keijzer, 2021). To reflect the Green Deal’s priorities, DG INTPA has created a dedicated Directorate within its organisational structure. In addition to climate and biodiversity spending targets, the Commission also aims at mainstreaming the Green Deal objectives throughout the remaining 70 per cent of its spending, with a focus on “doing no harm” to environmental objectives. In addition to providing grants to finance cooperation, the Global Europe instrument also provides means to mobilise private investments to promote sustainable development and include a guarantee, concessional lending and dedicated technical assistance through the European Fund for Sustainable Development+ (EFSD+). The implementation of the European Green Deal and its contributions through development policy can thus be considered a key strategic priority for DG INTPA. This has also been confirmed in our interviews. The assessment that the Green Deal in itself was transformational and influential, but that the pandemic has advanced and reinforced it, also holds true for development policy.

An analysis of the first two batches of TEIs suggest that they are relatively evenly distributed in number (albeit not in financial value) among the three regions (Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean; the Middle East; Asia and the Pacific). Interestingly, however, the vast majority of TEIs’ focus on green transitions and climate measures. Of the 93 TEIs welcomed in the form of two batches during the first half of 2021, around three-quarters focused on green transitions involving energy, agriculture, circular economy and sustainable value chains. In contrast, Human Development – meaning education and health – is largely underrepresented. Although the Commission committed to counterbalance this underrepresentation through additional TEIs in education and vocational training, the present distribution of TEIs has raised discussions among member states on whether the EU is well equipped to link social and ecological objectives.

In addition to changing the inter-institutional dynamics within the EU, particularly the degree of interaction and cooperation between the Commission, the EEAS and the member states, the COVID-19 crisis also prompted a further manifestation of European initiatives in the multilateral system. In line with its treaty-based commitment to advancing multilateral solutions to global challenges, the EU particularly provided strong and public support to WHO in its first international interventions in April 2020.<sup>7</sup> In February 2021, the various multilateral COVID-19 initiatives taken in 2020, which included the EU’s support for the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator and COVAX, informed new policy proposals in a joint Commission/EEAS Communication titled “Strengthening the EU’s contribution to rules-based multilateralism”. This Communication stated upfront that “the EU needs to become more assertive in the light of the more transactional nature of the global system and build and reinforce coalitions of like-minded partners on key priorities”, while also emphasising that “[m]ultilateralism must be effective, fair and deliver results that serve both

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7 See the press release issued on 8 April (European Commission, 2020).

EU and global interests and values” (European Commission & European External Action Service, 2021, p. 2).

*Member states’ preferences and positions in linking short- and long-term responses to the pandemic*

Overall, our interviews suggested that, in the discussion about how best to respond to the pandemic, member states position themselves in three broad groups – one group of member states prioritising human development, another prioritising climate and green transitions, and a third emphasising migration. These groups are not static: Some member states belong to more than one group, depending on their domestic situation and priorities. Although interviewees also discussed policy differences with other member states, the below analysis should not be seen as a complete mapping of all member state preferences, but an indication of key commonalities and differences between them. Our interviews further observed that the like-minded group has changed and its members are increasingly articulating diverging views, although still informally engaging on selected issues of shared interest.

*Member states prioritising human development*

Some smaller member states, such as Ireland, Belgium and Portugal, focus their development policies on “traditional” objectives revolving around human development, concentrating on social protection, resilience, food security, health and education. Some of these member states have placed a traditionally strong emphasis on human development and poverty reduction (e.g. Ireland), whereas others (e.g. Belgium) have renewed their commitment to social protection, job creation and human development as a result of the recent change to a social-democrat-led government. These member states interpret the pandemic as an emergency call to invest more in resilience, social protection, education, and health and are disappointed by TEIs’ strong focus on green transitions and the neglect of human development. They argue that the EU has to focus on human development because no other development actor (China, the United States or the UK) will do so, and they find the Commission’s and other member states’ idea to mainstream gender and human development to count as “co-benefits” to not be convincing.

Interviewees also raised concerns regarding TEIs’ strong focus on middle-income countries and leveraging private investment. Arguing that poor countries and least developed countries (LDCs) will find it more difficult to attract private investments – as investments into health and education are generally considered to be less attractive than investments into green energy and green economy – they are concerned that the EU is losing the focus of these countries. These concerns are merited in view of the 2017 EU Consensus on Development, which commits to providing 0.2 per cent of ODA/gross national income (GNI) to LDCs within the timeframe of the 2030 Agenda (European Union, 2017, p. 50), with the most recent ODA statistics demonstrating a decrease in EU aid to LDCs in 2019 (European Commission, 2021b). Under the Portuguese Presidency, this group of concerned member states worked on “Council conclusions on strengthening Team Europe’s commitment to human development” (Council of the European Union, 2021b), referring to the far-reaching socio-economic consequences of the pandemic on human development, global food security, social cohesion and inequalities. The Council Conclusions call on the Commission and the EEAS to ensure that TEIs and all recovery efforts have a stronger focus on human development, are “human-centred”, and respect and promote human rights. In

this context, it also asks the Commission and the EEAS to take concrete financial actions to achieve the 20 per cent spending target of the new Global Europe instrument.

### *Member states prioritising climate change and green transformations*

A stronger focus on climate change and green transitions is not only the outcome of the pandemic, but has been previously pushed by the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs, the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal. As a result, many member states focus more strongly on climate mitigation and adaptation, climate finance, loss of biodiversity and other ecological objectives in order to strengthen the inclusion of the “Rio” objectives of the SDGs into their development strategies and spending. The pandemic has reinforced this focus on climate change in some member states. Particularly France has become a strong supporter of increasing financing for climate and the environment. President Emmanuel Macron’s pledge to allocate €5 billion to climate finance by 2020 was achieved and already surpassed in 2019. France’s development agency, Agence française de développement (AFD), was also the first among its peers to set an objective of 100 per cent alignment with the Paris Agreement, announcing that it would stop financing projects that go against climate action (France Diplomacy, 2020). France also had a keen interest in increasing the EU’s climate spending target to – and even above – 30 per cent and lobbied for a more progressive biodiversity target in the NDICI negotiations. It promotes a “greening” of ODA, where ODA funds are not only at the forefront of climate and environmental action but also exclude activities that slow down or hamper low greenhouse gas emission and climate-resilient trajectories. As such, France is supporting the Commission’s strong focus on the Green Deal in TEIs and their emphasis on climate objectives. Our interviewees stated that the focus on climate and biodiversity existed before the crisis but that the pandemic has further accentuated the urgency of the challenge. One of the outcomes of this increased emphasis is demonstrated in the “French programming Act on inclusive development and combating global inequalities” of July 2021, a law on development that enshrines the achievement of the 0.7 per cent ODA/GNI ratio into law (France Diplomacy, s.a.).

Other member states, such as the Nordics and the Netherlands, highlighted that they adjusted their development policies due to the pandemic and came up with new initiatives to focus on “building back better” and creating stronger linkages to social and ecological objectives. While placing a strong emphasis on climate, these member states explicitly link climate adaptation and mitigation to social issues, including job creation, youth unemployment, inequality and gender, in order to make the green transformation as inclusive as possible. For Denmark, fostering the green transition is the primary objective of Danish development cooperation. This position is strongly supported by the Danish population and the 2019 elected social-democratic government that placed the green transition at the heart of its policy and pledged to introduce binding decarbonisation goals and reduce emissions by 70 per cent below the 1990 level by 2030 (Farand, 2019). Interviewees stated that, although health has become more important since the start of the pandemic, this does not constitute a major change for their development policies. The respondents stressed that, rather than addressing the health challenge and climate crisis separately, immediate investments and green recovery can be linked together by, for example, investing in solar panels to ensure that people and health facilities have access to energy.

Following the outbreak of the pandemic, Denmark and Sweden have jointly rallied the development ministers of the five Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway,

Iceland) to establish a common position based on their strong values regarding inclusive and fair development to be put forward at the EU and UN levels. In addition to strengthening the cooperation between the Nordics, interviewees also pointed out that they engaged in a close cooperation with countries that also prioritise climate, such as Germany, the Netherlands and France, whereas there were fewer opportunities for cooperation with countries such as Poland and Hungary.

In addition to using the EU to upload their domestic prioritisation of the green transformation, the Nordics recapitalised the Nordic Development Fund and made €350 million available “to boost climate resilient recovery, green growth and to stimulate job creation at the same time” (Finnish Government, 2020). The Nordic Development Fund is the joint Nordic international finance institution established by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden in 1988. It focuses on climate change and development challenges in lower-income countries and countries in fragile situations, and it aims to support activities in supporting resilience to climate change and building back better and greener (Nordic Development Fund, 2020).

The Netherlands are also focussing on a green and just recovery and created an informal inter-governmental working group to address and shape their domestic policy, the European approach (MFF discussions) and a multilateral response (international financial institutions). On the domestic-policy level, the Netherlands government developed a strategy on building back better along four main lines: 1) climate leadership and inclusive economic recovery, 2) resilience at the local and regional levels as well as CSO support, 3) debt and debt sustainability and 4) addressing inequality. With different departments in the Dutch foreign ministry working on different elements of the strategy, the main current challenge is its operationalisation and redirection of policies. In contrast to Denmark, where the government’s climate focus is being supported and pushed for by voters, one interviewee pointed out that the EU’s strong and long-term vision with the Green Deal provides a solid foundation for the member states’ domestic development aid policies. With populist parties entering the political spectrum, the EU’s direction provides guidance for the policy discussions on the domestic level and helps in navigating sensitive discussions.

The Netherlands led an initiative to prepare a joint op-ed in *The Guardian* together with Denmark, France, Spain, Germany, Sweden and the European Commissioner for International Partnerships, asking the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to focus on a green and inclusive recovery and to contribute towards phasing out investments in coal, oil and gas while redirecting funds to green jobs and access to renewable energy; providing a coherent approach to debt restructuring; and addressing structural inequalities to strengthen local resilience. Interviewees considered this initiative to be a great joint success that contributed to the World Bank’s Climate Change Action Plan, which aims to massively increase climate finance to developing countries, reduce emissions, strengthen adaptation and align financial flows with the Paris Agreement goals (World Bank, 2021).

### *Member states emphasising migration*

Last but not least, for some member states, the issue of migration – that is, addressing the root causes of migration and better controlling the influx of migrants to the EU – remains a key issue. This is more strongly the case for those member states facing pressure from domestic constituencies and populist parties (such as France, the Netherlands and

Denmark), and for some of the Visegrad states (particularly Poland and Hungary), whose governments have taken more critical stances on the issue.<sup>8</sup> Whereas some member states, such as Denmark, have made efforts to frame migration within the climate–migration nexus, highlighting that addressing climate change will also help address the root causes of migration, other member states, such as France, take a harder line on controlling illegal migration and focus more strongly on migration management. The intense debates and negotiations around the 10 per cent spending target of the EU’s Global Europe instrument are illustrative of this. Interviewees clarified that agreeing on the 10 per cent NDICI spending target was less conflictive than spelling out what the 10 per cent should be dedicated to and used for, with some preferring to focus on root causes and others favouring stricter migration management. With elections in some EU member states having recently taken place or coming up (e.g. in Germany and France), it can be expected that the discussions about how to link development and migration will regain traction in the near future.

### 3.3 The impact of the pandemic on EU decision-making processes and member state alliances

Overall, Team Europe has contributed to a positive attitude towards joint action. Although the Commission is considered to be the main driver behind Team Europe, the bottom-up process has led to a greater involvement of member states. Member states’ representatives have pointed out that the intensive consultations about TEIs, the Commission’s transparency regarding the planning status and member states’ ability to comment on documents were unprecedented and a welcomed change. TEIs open the possibility for those member states with smaller bilateral ODA budgets and more limited operational capacities to learn from more established development actors, upscale their own development cooperation activities, and engage more in joint activities and EU-funded projects. In addition, the increasing emphasis on the trade and private sectors as well as climate and digitalisation offers an opportunity for member states without extensive experience in traditional development cooperation or with limited field presence to use their sectoral or thematic expertise to increase their engagement in EU development cooperation (Jones, 2021, pp. 9f., 12f.).

For these reasons, smaller member states have welcomed the initiative and the possibility of engaging with partner countries with whom they have not previously collaborated. In practice, however, the fact that the preparation of TEIs has been led “bottom-up” by EU Delegations in partner countries puts those, usually larger, member states with diplomatic representation in the partner countries concerned at an advantage. In addition, partner countries with ongoing joint-programming exercises enjoyed another advantage, as they were already accustomed to regular interactions on cooperation planning and processes (Keijzer et al., 2021). This led to a group of smaller member states making the case for greater inclusivity in EU development cooperation during the Portuguese Presidency in the first half of 2021. The Council Conclusions on Strengthening Team Europe’s Commitment to Human Development from 14 June 2021 (Council of the European Union, 2021b) can

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8 For a detailed analysis of the engagement of the Visegrad countries in EU-Africa relations, please refer to Chmiel (2018).

therefore be considered as a success due to the Portuguese Presidency and other member states having pushed for a greater focus on human development.

The three programmatic orientations (human development, climate, migration) also appear to dominate debates among member states and influence inter-institutional dynamics. Whereas the like-minded group remains an important reference point, as highlighted by our interviewees, cooperation and alliances are based on an issue-by-issue basis rather than on pre-existing “natural partners” or geographic or historical alliances. This means that countries that have diverging views on migration still work together successfully on other issues such as climate change. It also means that alliances can change over time, depending on the topic. Yet, despite this flexibility in working together and forming alliances, the interviews demonstrated that the programmatic orientation also creates rifts among member states, with especially smaller member states feeling dominated by larger states that push the direction of Team Europe towards the Green Deal rather than social objectives.

Contrary to past crises, which resulted in member states dominating debates in Brussels, the pandemic has strengthened the position of the Commission (particularly DG INTPA) and the EEAS and their manoeuvring space, partly due to the success of Team Europe, but also due to the switch to virtual and digital meeting formats. Several interviewees highlighted that the Commission in particular took a strong leading role in moderating joint online meetings, which have attracted a greater number of participants and have become less personal. As a result, the Commission was able to direct member states’ contributions and discussions, perhaps more so than in personal meetings, which involve fewer representatives. Interviews with Commission representatives confirmed that, given the sheer dimension of the crisis and the geopolitical situation – in which the EU’s position is being challenged by China and the United States – the DG considers “scale” to be a key feature for the EU’s global pandemic response.

The Commission is supported in this endeavour for a larger scale and visibility by a strong Germany-France alliance. This is evidenced, for instance, by both countries exchanging information on their respective proposals for their regional TEIs and a list of initiatives on which they would like to cooperate prior to their submission. Whereas France and Germany feature in more than two-thirds of currently foreseen TEIs, followed by the EIB and Spain, smaller member states such as the Netherlands, Sweden and Belgium participate in fewer than 15 TEIs (Gavas & Pleeck, 2021). Some respondents understand the close cooperation between Germany and France, as both countries are attempting to ensure that no other member state can fill the gap left by the UK’s withdrawal. Others have highlighted that some smaller member states ensure that their approach is in line with the Franco-German alliance, as initiatives tend to be accepted more readily when supported by these two member states.

Achieving scale while ensuring inclusivity and bridging the divide of member states’ diverging programmatic interests are the key challenges for the EU’s continuing pandemic response as well as the efforts to link ecological and social objectives.

## 4 Conclusions

This paper has analysed the preferences of EU institutions and member states in defining a response to the COVID-19 pandemic while discussing key patterns of how the EU's development policy has been used to respond to other crises during the past two decades. It specifically focused on examining the ways in which these actors seek to link their short-term pandemic recovery strategies to longer-term socio-ecological transformations and the ways in which the pandemic has changed the inter-institutional dynamics within the EU as well as between the EU and the member states.

Overall, the pandemic has confronted the EU and the member states with development policy challenges of unprecedented scale. Although the financial crisis –and in particular the migration crisis – had already added to the range of objectives being pursued by EU development policy, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly exacerbated the pressures on the EU development policy system. Yet, unlike the financial and migration crises, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought member states and EU institutions closer together, mainly through Team Europe and the conviction that this crisis was too profound for actors to tackle individually. Individual member states also successfully engaged at the multilateral level to promote green investments, mainly at the World Bank and the IMF.

The COVID-19 pandemic developed during the final year of the EU's seven-year financial cycle. This limited the EU's immediate response options to one of redirecting unspent funds planned for the remainder of the year in order to support partner countries' attempts to face the crisis, while continuing negotiations for its next budget cycle. By the summer of 2020, as budget negotiations progressed, the EU initiated preparations for a longer-term response under the label of "Team Europe".

Yet, addressing the immediate damage to human development and jobs while linking the recovery to green and just transitions requires new strategic efforts. The strong support for health measures remains undisputed. However, the strong focus on climate and green transitions and the lack of connections to the broader SDG agenda as well as social and human development have created tensions between certain member states and DG INTPA. Some promote the more "traditional" objectives of development policy and a strong focus on poverty reduction, others focus more strongly on climate change and green transitions, and yet others prioritise migration management.

Due to its strong preference for climate change and energy transitions in the EU's programmatic choices, the Commission has not yet acted as a bridge builder. This is largely a result of the European Green Deal and von der Leyen's mission to ensure that every DG contributes towards and prioritises its implementation. In the Commission's discourse and organisational restructuring, DG INTPA also seems to put a stronger emphasis on the Green Deal than on the 2030 Agenda, which has a broader and more integrative character. In contrast to the EU's COVID-19 response and the Team Europe approach prompted by it, the global sustainable development agenda has been subject to policy debate for decades. Notwithstanding its stated ambitions, the EU has not yet become a frontrunner in its implementation, neither domestically nor through its development policy. The limitations of the EU to be able to link its focus on the Green Deal and green transitions to the broader SDG agenda has laid the grounds for the current situation, in which TEIs are insufficiently integrating social and ecological objectives.



A key challenge ahead in further defining the European response to the pandemic is how to bridge these differing priorities. This not only relates to Team Europe and the programming of the NDICI/Global Europe instrument, but also for a joint European approach to “building back better”.

The Green Deal – and the Commission’s strong interest in promoting it globally through development policy – can be situated and understood as the EU’s contribution to the Paris Agreement and international climate efforts. This ongoing debate in the EU reflects a wider debate about climate finance and the extent to which it can be integrated into current ODA reporting and spending. While past years have shown a tremendous increase in climate finance, with many European donors contributing to this trend, there is also a risk of inflating its reporting. It has also become a key issue that most climate spending goes to middle-income countries, leaving adaptation in low-income countries in a disadvantaged position. The EU needs to tackle these issues head on and find a clear position on securing financing for the SDGs to bridge social and ecological objectives.

In addition, the EU needs to better integrate partners’ perspectives in its policies. The European Green Deal is a reflection of the EU’s interest in convincing partner countries to follow its green transition trajectory. This also explains the critical remarks from the EU’s partners, who highlight the lack of alignment to their priorities for a sustainable development path. The need to better engage with its partners and to convince them of green transitions has been acknowledged in EU policy discussions, yet the preparation of programmatic choices has taken the EU’s policy ambitions as a starting point.

Supporting partner countries in their green transition efforts in an effective manner requires adequately addressing the socio-economic dimension (e.g. social security systems, job creation, education and digitalisation), as green transitions are not only expensive but also require societal acceptance and support. Current discussions between EU institutions and member states that are pushing their preferences onto the EU level put a greater emphasis on the competition of actors’ different objectives rather than on developing a joint European strategy that would reconcile social and ecological objectives. The individual strategies and ideas developed at the member state level should be combined and considered complementary as part of the EU’s contribution to the 2030 Agenda and global efforts for a green and just recovery.

Although the urgency and the magnitude of the situation – in combination with the limited options available – have certainly contributed to the success of the Team Europe approach as the immediate response to the pandemic, the EU cannot rest on this success. As an important next step, the EU needs to define a strategy for “building back better and greener” that is convincing for EU member states and partners alike. To this end, the Commission should provide guidance on how the different dimensions of a socio-ecological recovery in partner countries can be combined and jointly addressed. In order to consolidate member states’ positive attitudes and support, the Commission needs to address the issues arising from the respective diverging preferences of various member state groups.

With its development policy encompassing various priorities and objectives, the EU’s implicit policy imperative has long been “choosing not to choose” and instead emphasising that these various objectives co-exist and can be pursued together. Yet, the current situation suggests the need to move away from this approach and to clearly spell out the EU’s

strategic objectives in development, while slowly moving away from crisis-response mode, in which events determine strategic choices and not vice versa. For those actors inclined to strengthen the prospects of the EU in doing so, we suggest the following recommendations.

- 1) **Define a joint European understanding of “building back better”:** The Commission and the EEAS need to specify what “building back better” means in the context of the EU’s development policy, as member states have different understandings of the term and ideas about the slogan’s implementation. Ideally, this will result not only in a joint understanding of the different dimensions of “building back better”, but also a common approach how individual member states can contribute to this agenda through their bilateral development policies. For this to happen, the Commission and the EEAS need to develop an overarching strategy on how to link the COVID-19 response to the ecological transformation required by the Green Deal. This strategy needs to orient itself strongly around the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and, as a result, address and combine both groups – those who focus on human development and those who focus on climate, thereby allowing each to play to their strengths and expertise without having to change their priorities. After all, integrating social and ecological objectives into one universal agenda is considered a key goal of the 2030 Agenda.
- 2) **Evaluate the long-term effects of the EU’s development policy:** The decision to more explicitly orient the EU’s development policy towards pursuing the mutual benefits of the EU and its partners – including by requiring development policy to become more flexible and better aligned with the EU’s strategic interests – requires adequate scrutiny. EU decision-makers should be cognisant that the responses to the immediate crisis are easier to plan and measure than the long-term sustainability objectives. Rather than limiting these objectives to evaluating the effects of EU development cooperation in terms of developing-country results, such scrutiny should also make the EU’s own strategic interests more explicit and determine to what degree these have been served. Such broad-based independent scrutiny is necessary to determine to what degree the policy choices made deliver “value for money” to the EU and its partners.
- 3) **“Team Europe” – invest in dialogue on green transition priorities:** The EU has been strongly inward-looking in its pandemic response, in the sense that its focus on scale and a joint approach through Team Europe has been primarily guided by its own ambitions and intra-European coordination processes. Turning its view to its partners implies a better understanding of how Team Europe is seen by them and to what extent the EU aligns with its partners’ own green transition priorities. Although the decision to take the EU’s ambitions and objectives as a starting point is justified in view of its overarching external action objectives, its cooperation efforts are more likely to be sustainable and effective when they sufficiently align to its partners’ priorities, choices and dynamics. This dialogue should provide a means to identify how EU cooperation can strengthen “ownership” and developing countries’ own priorities for a green transition.
- 4) **Engage in multilateral fora and institutions:** The EU’s pandemic response efforts have first and foremost focused on joint action by the EU and the member states’ bilateral development cooperation, yet should also extend to EU coordinated action in the multilateral system. This includes promoting the EU’s ambitions in multilateral fora (such as e.g. the climate conference in Glasgow (COP26) and the biodiversity

conference (COP 15) in Kunming, China), and in multilateral organisations (such as the World Bank, the IMF, the United Nations Development Programme, WHO and the World Food Programme). A stronger focus on the external communication of internal policies and initiatives such as the European Green Deal and Team Europe can help the EU to build alliances with strategic partners. In addition, the ability to convince others relies on the EU's own domestic actions and the extent to which it will be able to integrate the different dimensions of its global pandemic response and the European Green Deal into a holistic and joint approach. However, before seeking broader alliances and promoting change in relevant multilateral fora, the EU needs to spell out key issues such as “building back better”, climate finance and the “greening of ODA” within the EU.

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