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Strengthening European development policy: The case for team Europe 2.0

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IDOS POLICY BRIEF 11/2026



Strengthening European Development Policy: The Case for Team Europe 2.0

Svea Koch, Julian Bergmann, Benedikt Erforth, Christine Hackenesch & Niels Keijzer

Summary

The international order is undergoing profound change as rivalry among major powers realigns the global balance. This is also having an impact on European development policy. In many European Union (EU) member states, funding for official development assistance (ODA) is declining. At the same time, EU countries are reforming their development policies and increasingly channelling their remaining resources towards priorities that serve primarily their own interests. So far, these reforms have largely been defined bilaterally, whereas a political debate on the role, added value and joint objectives of EU development policy is largely absent. Yet, without strengthening European cooperation in development policy, Europe will not succeed in providing an adequate response to the current upheavals in global politics.

In this policy brief, we argue that reform efforts in European development policy must strengthen cooperation and complementarity to respond effectively to the changed geopolitical landscape. Our analysis identifies four key policy areas where European actors are pursuing ongoing reforms and where development policy should make significant contributions: 1) promoting economic cooperation and private-sector engagement, 2) security policy, 3) managing and shaping migration and 4) human development including poverty reduction, particularly in least developed countries (LDCs). So far, a joint European strategic direction in these areas has been lacking. Negotiating these shared priorities requires a revitalisation of the political dialogue between EU institutions and member states, as well as further development of the "Team Europe" approach. "Team Europe 2.0" would then have two functions: to strengthen substantive complementarity "internally" through an understanding of how the various actors individually contribute to jointly defined objectives; and "externally" by making visible what Europe stands for strategically.

A key element of Team Europe 2.0 should be an improved substantive dialogue among member states and within issue-specific, informal groups co-facilitated by individual member states and the European Commission. Such "thematic champions" could initiate the development of joint strategies for larger, transformative initiatives. Improved political dialogue and coordination on substance in key areas of European development policy are prerequisites for a united and more strategic external presence of "Team Europe", including in multilateral contexts.

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Introduction

The international order is increasingly characterised by great power rivalries, strategic competition for spheres of influence and the exploitation of economic dependencies. The withdrawal of the United States from development policy has led to a rupture in international cooperation. As the largest collective provider of ODA, this situation offers the EU and its member states an opportunity to present Europe as an alternative to these trends. However, this would require moving forward together, taking a strategic stance on key development policy issues and providing significant impetus for international cooperation.

Yet, the EU is struggling to forge a coherent approach in foreign and development policy. Its ability to act as a unified actor is constrained not only by diverging interests among member states, but also by their growing domestic political polarisation. The growing influence of right-wing populist parties makes it difficult to secure viable political majorities and has intensified the politicisation of development policy (Hackenesch, Bergmann, & Orbie, 2021), which is increasingly the focus of public criticism, partisan attacks and budget cuts.

Ongoing reforms of member states' development policies are being made in pursuit of a dual objective. On the one hand, they serve to provide domestic political legitimacy for development policy vis-à-vis national electorates. Against a backdrop of growing scepticism towards international cooperation, development policy is increasingly being presented as an instrument for safeguarding national interests. Reforms emphasise issues such as migration, economic competitiveness, as well as energy and access to raw materials.

On the other hand, these reforms are intended to position development policy as a strategic instrument for securing geopolitical and economic influence. In an increasingly competitive international environment, the intent is to help expand national and European capabilities, strengthen political presence in key regions and consolidate long-term partnerships in the Global South. Development policy is thus to be more firmly embedded in foreign and economic policy strategies.

At the same time, the EU has so far lacked a unified approach capable of meeting this strategic ambition. Key challenges include: 1) coherence between development, foreign, security, trade and migration policy objectives, 2) complementarity between the measures of member states and those of EU institutions and 3) fragmented decision-making and implementation structures.

With "Team Europe", which initially emerged as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU has taken the first steps towards better coordination of European actors at the country level (Koch, Keijzer, & Friesen, 2024). However, the current global political environment requires this approach to be further developed: Member states' priorities and expertise must be pooled more systematically and integrated more closely into joint strategy-making.

Where does the EU stand in development policy?

If European development policy were to undergo a "health check" in 2026, the result would likely be a "weak pulse, but basic vital functions present". This overall picture emerges from various trends in the member states and at the EU level.

Two key trends in the member states

In the member states, two key developments are shaping the debates: declining ODA funding, alongside reform efforts to align development policy more closely with national interests and make it more efficient.

According to preliminary data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), total ODA from members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) fell by 23.1 per cent in 2025 and by 9.8 per cent in the EU, continuing a broader downward trend from 2024 (OECD, 2026). The main reason for these historic cuts lies in the reduced ODA budgets of five major OECD donor countries, primarily the

United States (responsible for nearly three-quarters of the decline), but also Germany, France, Japan and the United Kingdom. Several EU member states, including Austria, Belgium, Finland and the Netherlands, have also recorded declines in ODA in 2025, according to this most recent OECD DAC data.

The broader picture remains more heterogeneous, with some European donors increasing their ODA budgets in 2025 (such as Italy, Spain and Sweden), planning to do so in the coming years (Spain and Ireland) or have committed to maintaining their high ODA-to-GDP ratio (e.g. Denmark and Luxembourg) (OECD, 2025, 2026). However, the decline in France (-10.9 per cent in 2025) and Germany (-17.4 per cent in 2025), along with further announced cuts in both countries, carry particular weight, as they remain the EU's largest bilateral donors. In 2025, their combined ODA volume exceeded that of all other EU member states combined.

Although the analysis of cross-country trends in Europe often focuses on reform debates and cuts in Germany and France due to the sizes of their ODA budgets and their political significance, it is worth taking a look at all EU member states (see Figure 1) to obtain a more nuanced picture of their different orientations.

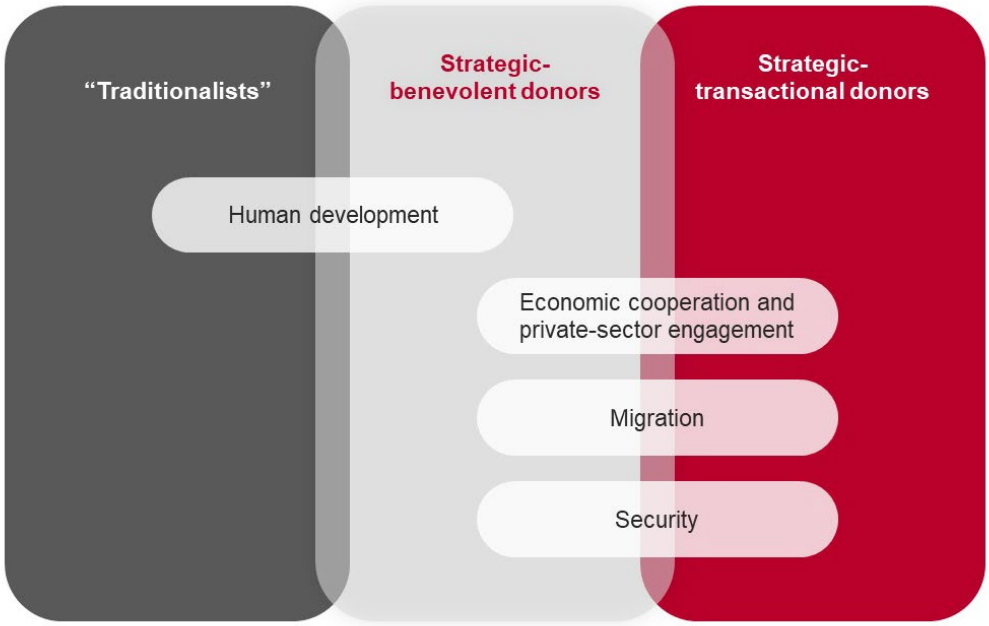
Based on a systematic review and analysis of the thematic focus of European donors' development policy strategies, three ideal-typical profiles can currently be distinguished among them.

First, there is a strategic-transactional group that seeks to use development policy specifically to promote national economic, security or migration policy objectives. The focus is on regions and countries that are particularly relevant for migration, security or economic cooperation. Measures are closely linked to domestic policy priorities such as the management of migration flows or the promotion of national companies operating abroad. Countries such as Finland, Italy, the Netherlands and Austria can be grouped under this profile. The influence of right-wing populist parties – with the exception of Italy – has contributed to reductions in ODA funding and a stronger focus on national interests. The number of countries in this group is increasing.

Second, there are strategic-benevolent donors who take greater account of national interests and consequently prioritise security, migration or economic promotion, while at the same time continuing to emphasise global public goods (such as climate and the environment) as well as traditional development cooperation priorities such as poverty reduction, human development and food security. This group includes, for example, Germany, France, Denmark, Sweden and Spain.

A third group can best be described as traditionalists. These mostly smaller member states prioritise the Sustainable Development Goals and human development (e.g. Portugal, Luxembourg, Ireland). The number of countries in this group is declining. In addition, there are also smaller member states with limited budgets or influence over development policy, for example the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia, Slovenia, Cyprus and Hungary. Hungary, in particular, has recently emerged as a continual "disruptive factor" in EU development policy, for example in the negotiations on the Samoa Agreement (Bergmann, Hackenesch, & Keijzer, 2024).

Figure 1: Typology of EU member states and their thematic priorities



Source: Authors

When interpreting these three groups, it should be borne in mind that within each group there is a considerable number of member states whose own bilateral ODA budgets and implementation capacities are insufficient to contribute to more comprehensive EU initiatives. Nevertheless, as contributors to the EU budget, all these states are involved in EU development policy decision-making processes and can represent their preferences accordingly.

The division into three groups is not intended to suggest that there is, per se, a high degree of consensus or "like-mindedness" among the member states within these groups, or that actors within the groups cooperate with one another. Instead, current patterns of cooperation and alliances between member states are based more on shared interests in specific issues (e.g. migration, climate and the environment, security) than on clearly defined, existing partnerships or geographical or historical alliances (Koch, Friesen, & Keijzer, 2021).

The European Commission as a leading actor in development policy

Although most member states cut their budgets, ODA from EU institutions (i.e. eligible commitments from the European Commission and the European Investment Bank) remained comparatively stable in 2024-2025. The main reason for this is the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) with its seven-year budget cycle. Thus, the combined volume of EU institutions in 2025 amounted to approximately $26 billion. However, in the wake of the mid-term review, there were reallocations and a greater concentration of resources on geopolitical priority areas such as the Ukraine Facility, migration and security, as well as investment programmes. The structure and priorities of European development finance have thus shifted substantially.

This follows the substantive reorientation of European development policy, which the European Commission – and in particular its Directorate-General for International Partnerships (INTPA) – has narrowed to a few priorities in recent years:

the Global Gateway infrastructure initiative, the focus on migration and support for Ukraine. From Brussels' perspective, this represents a paradigm shift. It is characterised by the guiding principle "From Aid to Investment", with greater involvement of the private sector and an emphasis on shared interests with partner countries. However, there is a need to shape the ongoing trend towards a coherent foreign policy more strongly in line with development policy objectives. The overarching goal of poverty reduction, which is enshrined in the EU Treaties as the primary objective of EU development policy, has for many years played only a subordinate role in public discourse and in the programming of development cooperation. Instead, there is evidence of a growing instrumentalisation of EU development policy for security, migration and economic policy objectives, which suggests that the European Commission should be classified as a strategic-transactional donor.

The political balance of power in European development policy has shifted even further towards Brussels in recent years. DG INTPA, in particular, has used the focus on Global Gateway and the concentration of EU development policy on a few select objectives to raise its profile. The European Parliament, which is actually supposed to play an important supervisory role, currently finds itself mainly in an observer role, which it also officially assumes, for example, on the Global Gateway Board. The shift of political influence towards INTPA was also made possible by the fact that, as a result of national budget cuts, many EU member states have substantially fewer financial resources at their disposal than before to pursue independent development policy agendas.

Challenges for complementarity and coordination

If the EU wishes to gain geopolitical weight and use development cooperation for this purpose, a stronger common stance is essential. For all EU member states, this therefore raises the question anew of the extent to which national development policies should be designed to be complementary to or aligned with the EU level. Given tight budgets and a thematic focus at the national level, coordination to ensure a common European approach is becoming increasingly urgent. At the same time, there is a lack of fundamental debate on common goals, desired outcomes and the long-term vision for a European development policy geared towards sustainable development.

A strategic debate on enhanced coordination is further complicated by the fact that most member states no longer maintain separate development ministries. Instead, they have integrated this role into foreign or trade ministries or delegated responsibility to political representatives, junior ministers or state secretaries. Fragmented governance structures at the EU level and the inadequate use of political processes – such as the biannual Council of Ministers meeting on development policy – hinder substantive political dialogue. Decisions in the Council often follow the logic of the lowest common denominator and, at the same time, remain largely invisible to the public. This runs diametrically counter to the aim of significantly increasing Europe's external influence.

Furthermore, no member state has yet assumed a discernible leadership role in strategic debates. Instead, in recent years many member states have focused on raising their own profiles and visibility in Brussels, while the building of strategic alliances for enhanced European cooperation has taken a back seat.

The European Commission has likewise focused primarily on raising its own profile in terms of policy content, with few initiatives or ambitions for strategic debates on a common direction for European development policy.

Prospects for a common strategy in four priority areas of European development policy

Based on the key trends in European development policy and an analysis of reform debates in member states and the EU, this paper identifies

four priority areas that are shaping current reform processes and require a common strategic direction: promoting economic cooperation and private-sector engagement; the security policy contributions of development policy; migration management; human development and poverty reduction (particularly in LDCs).

For this to succeed, the core issues prioritised in national and European reform processes should be framed more strongly within a European context, with the aim of a joint and complementary approach. Below, we outline these priority areas before explaining *how* the EU should adapt its working methods for joint strategy-making in order to increase the global reach and influence of European development policy.

1) Promoting economic cooperation and private-sector engagement – towards a common European strategy

Global Gateway has become the linchpin of European development policy. This is evident both from the European Commission's policy guidelines and communications on Global Gateway and from the Clean Industrial Deal of the second von der Leyen Commission. The idea is to combine Global Gateway with additional trade and investment measures.

However, as Global Gateway was only launched after the adoption of the current MFF 2021-2027, it lacks integration into external financing instruments as well as into country-specific programming. The relationship between Global Gateway and European development policy also remains unclear. While the Commission's communications suggest that it has effectively replaced European development policy, there are still important priorities outside the initiative, for example in the areas of governance, social protection, climate adaptation and gender. This also applies to neighbourhood policy. Here, Global Gateway has so far tended to play a complementary role, while association agreements and comprehensive policy packages linking security, migration, economic and governance objectives form the core of cooperation.

The design of the next MFF will therefore be decisive. Member states should advocate against narrowing European development policy down to Global Gateway and infrastructure investments, and instead place greater emphasis on programmes and projects that promote prosperity in a climate-resilient and socially just manner. At the same time, new forms of complementarity between the forthcoming MFF and national strategies are required.

National reforms aimed at better integrating economic cooperation and development policy, as seen in Germany, France and Italy, have often been designed on a bilateral basis. This is partly because member states perceive their ability to actively shape Global Gateway as limited. However, Global Gateway should evolve from an initiative primarily steered by the European Commission into a European initiative that is jointly designed, communicated and owned by EU institutions and member states. In doing so, it is important both to adapt the governance structure of Global Gateway and to avoid a narrow understanding of it as an investment in "hard" infrastructure. Strengthening the focus on partners, transparency and impact, as well as placing greater emphasis on "soft" infrastructure (e.g. education, legal and health systems, administrative capacities and institutional frameworks), are important prerequisites for the continued development of Global Gateway.

Furthermore, Europe should pursue a more coherent approach in partner countries. In view of geopolitical and economic competition, Global Gateway coordination hubs are needed in partner countries or regions to facilitate both internal European coordination and steering, as well as better partner engagement. This would enhance coherence, visibility and economies of scale, and make the setting of priorities with local governments more structured and consistent.

These local European Global Gateway "hubs" could act more effectively as intermediaries between the Investment Hub, European interests and the partner countries' government initiatives. The management of Global Gateway could thus

be gradually shifted to the country level and linked to the partner countries' national development strategies.

2) Strengthening security policy contributions of development policy

Strengthening its own security and defence capabilities is currently one of Europe's key priorities. Rather than remaining stuck in the traditional dichotomy of security policy versus development policy, EU institutions and member states should jointly promote those aspects of development policy that deliver added value for security policy.

This can be illustrated by the example of Ukraine: For many EU member states, support for Ukraine – particularly for the country's reconstruction, which is already under way – is a core priority of their national development policies. This is illustrated in the proportion of aid to Ukraine within the respective bilateral ODA in Lithuania (2025: 82.4 per cent), Estonia (58.7 per cent), Latvia (27.3 per cent), Poland (33.6 per cent), but also in Sweden (18.1 per cent), Romania (15.9 per cent) and Greece (15.4 per cent) (OECD, 2026, p. 12). Germany and France, in turn, play an important role both within the G7 and at the EU level in the negotiations on financial support for Ukraine, particularly since the United States withdrew at the beginning of 2025. In the negotiations on the MFF, member states should advocate for a robust financial framework to support Ukraine. In view of the United States withdrawing financial support from Ukraine, increasing the Global Europe envelope beyond €100 billion – as earmarked for 2028-2034 – appears justified, in addition to the substantial guarantees for mobilising private investment.

To avoid overburdening the Ukrainian administration's reform and absorption capacities during an ongoing EU accession process, close coordination among European actors on common priorities and a division of labour in supporting reconstruction is necessary.

Beyond Ukraine, engagement in fragile states is of considerable relevance to development and security policy. According to OECD data, 61 states currently exhibit characteristics of high or extreme fragility – including more than a third of the EU's partner countries. Several member states, including Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Luxembourg, Ireland and France, have actively engaged in debates in recent years regarding the EU's engagement in fragile contexts such as the Sahel region and the Horn of Africa (Desmidt, Bergmann, Erforth, & Gianesello, 2024).

Instruments focused on infrastructure investment, such as Global Gateway, can only be deployed in fragile contexts under very specific conditions. The EU should therefore have specific development policy approaches in place for its engagement in fragile contexts beyond Global Gateway. Supporting reconstruction processes following violent conflicts, such as in Syria (or possibly in Gaza in the future), through development cooperation measures can also contribute to crisis prevention and peacebuilding. The Commission's communication on a Commission-wide approach in fragile contexts, expected in spring 2026, provides an opportunity for a strategic debate on how member states and the Commission can strengthen their cooperation in highly and extremely fragile countries.

3) Shaping migration through development policy

Migration continues to dominate public debate in most EU member states and is sometimes a decisive factor in elections. At the same time, national positions differ considerably. Some member states reject the solidarity pool, while others have tightened their border regimes.

Against this backdrop, the EU faces at least three challenges: It must 1) respond in the short term to refugee movements caused by crises and conflicts, 2) strengthen long-term cooperation with countries of origin and transit to tackle the root causes of migration and 3) ensure that the labour needs of its ageing population are met. The reforms under the EU Migration Pact aim to distinguish more clearly between asylum and immigration, speed up procedures at the borders,

make returns more binding and, at the same time, expand legal migration routes. Overall, the reforms are also intended to improve Europe's standing globally.

There is broad consensus on stricter rules, higher return rates and an expansion of the list of third countries classified as safe, as demonstrated by the European Parliament's approval of the Common European Asylum System. Ongoing negotiations on the next MFF envisage the reintroduction of an input target for migration-related measures. However, assessing the intended or unintended effects of these measures on human migration flows remains difficult.

Development policy instruments in the context of EU migration policy can be deployed both as incentives and in the form of negative conditionality. Positive incentives can be linked to migration as well as to other policy considerations, and can therefore function as effective and discreet policy instruments.

Negative conditionality can have adverse effects on other EU policy areas (e.g. trade and investment) and is generally not used by the EU as a result (Keijzer, 2024).

It is important to understand conditionality as a context-dependent instrument with limited scope (McGregor, Godin, Jumbert, & Ike, 2025; Reslow, 2012). The European Commission is currently focusing on promoting investment packages that include components relating to migration management and skills development. In doing so, investment opportunities are presented as a positive condition for those partner countries that are rhetorically willing to cooperate with the EU on migration.

The EU has explored such specific migration partnerships – which integrate migration, trade and development measures – with around 10 countries, including Tunisia, Mauritania and Egypt, and plans to conclude them with additional countries. These partnerships are at various stages of implementation, and they display a general lack of transparency. Instead of further ad hoc agreements, the EU should establish clearly defined framework agreements and set targets for migration partnerships in order to strengthen their accountability and assessability, including with regard to development policy objectives.

The reform of the migration and asylum system is meeting with resistance, particularly from member states in the "traditionalist" group. Nevertheless, the recent vote in the European Parliament shows that there is sufficient intergovernmental consensus, so that the reform course already embarked upon is expected to continue.

4) Human development and poverty reduction as an end in itself – and as a strategic prerequisite for European interests

Over the past 15 years, security, migration and economic policy interests have gained significantly in importance, while the focus on poverty reduction has diminished. At the same time, progress in poverty reduction, food security, health care and education has slowed or even reversed since the pandemic. The "Human Development Report 2025" of the United Nations Development Programme notes that global progress in human development – as measured by the Human Development Index – is at its lowest level in decades.

In parallel, the discrepancy between the geographical distribution of poverty and the allocation of ODA funds has widened. OECD data show that the poorest countries (particularly LDCs) receive, in relative terms, less ODA "per person living in extreme poverty" than economically better-off countries – a reversal of the trend compared to 10 years ago. This trend can also be observed in relation to the development cooperation of EU institutions and some European donors such as Germany, France and Sweden. Furthermore, the share of EU ODA allocated to LDCs has declined both in absolute and relative terms. The latest DAC Peer Review of the EU therefore urges that access to concessional financing be secured for LDCs and the states most affected by fragility.

Progress in poverty reduction and human development is not only an expression of global solidarity but also in the strategic interest of the EU. Shortfalls in basic services, education and income security increase the risks of instability, violent conflict and forced migration, and this undermines the provision of global public goods – from health security to climate protection.

Programmes that primarily target economic cooperation, stabilisation or geopolitical positioning remain only of limited effectiveness if structural poverty and fundamental social inequalities persist or worsen. In this sense, promoting human development is not a "nice-to-have" but a strategic lever for enabling long-term reform processes.

Particularly among the groups of "strategic-benevolent" and "traditionalist" donors, there are certainly efforts to keep the attention on human development and poverty reduction and to combine this with a stronger focus on LDCs. This is also evident in the current German reform process, for instance (BMZ, 2026). These efforts should lead to a joint European debate on how ODA – particularly grants – can be directed more strongly towards LDCs and populations affected by extreme poverty and low levels of human development, including in the next MFF.

Team Europe 2.0 to strengthen European development policy

The implementation of a common strategy in the priority areas mentioned above also requires an adjustment to the way European development policy operates. In 2020, "Team Europe" was launched as an approach to improve coordination between member states and EU actors. Team Europe also aims to increase the visibility of European measures worldwide. Although Team Europe has improved coordination and cooperation between member states in some areas, the inherent flexibility of the concept allows for different interpretations, thereby limiting its strategic impact and visibility (Keijzer, Olivié, & Santillán O'Shea, 2023). Furthermore, the focus of Team Europe initiatives tends to be on technical aspects of joint programming and implementation rather than on a common strategic orientation among European actors regarding specific issues, countries or regions.

To address this, Team Europe would need to be more strongly oriented towards the joint definition of Europe's strategic priorities. "Team Europe 2.0" would then have two functions: to strengthen "internal" substantive complementarity through an understanding of how the various actors each contribute to jointly defined objectives; and "externally" to make visible what Europe stands for strategically.

When the lack of strategic direction in EU development policy is discussed in Brussels, reference is often made to the European Consensus on Development (2017). However, revising this document does not appear to be the way forward, as divergent positions among EU actors and between member states (see Figure 1) would likely result in a solution based on the lowest common denominator. Instead of a formal strategy process, it seems more sensible to achieve a common strategic direction on the four priority areas through enhanced informal coordination among member states and between member states and the Commission. Although it used to be easier to identify a "like-minded" group of member states on European development policy that could have driven such a strategic process, this is currently unlikely due to the divergent trends and shifts in priorities outlined above.

However, this may also present an opportunity for greater coordination and complementarity. The establishment of informal groups on each of the four thematic areas outlined above could help to jointly advance issue-specific strategies and priorities – with the aim of generating larger and more transformative European initiatives, rather than simply bringing together and coordinating small-scale projects under Team Europe. This would also increase the visibility and influence of member states in joint European initiatives.

The first step could be to take stock of which member state is active in each thematic area – as well as how and with what objectives – in order to build on this and develop a strategically coordinated and complementary approach involving all EU actors. Individual member states for which a particular thematic area is a priority could, together with the Commission in the role of "co-facilitators", act as "thematic champions" and organise such informal coordination processes. Depending on the thematic focus, this could thus result in different constellations of actors, which in a second step could also include non-EU countries such as the United Kingdom, Norway, Switzerland or Canada. On the Commission's side, other Directorates-General should be involved on a topic-specific basis alongside DG INTPA.

Research on EU foreign policy shows that informal groupings provide an important framework for coordination, information exchange, mutual learning and consensus-building among member states, and can facilitate decision-making in formal bodies and procedures (Aggestam & Bicchi, 2019; Amadio Viceré, 2023; Lovato, 2024).

Better substantive coordination on key areas of European development policy is a prerequisite for Team Europe to pursue a more united and strategic external approach, particularly in multilateral contexts. Examples from the recent past, such as the climate negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (see Bauer, Koch, & Aleksandrova, 2025), show that the EU often devotes a great deal of time and energy to internal coordination processes, and as a result is only able to take a stance in political processes at a late stage and forge alliances to support these positions. Therefore, "Team Europe 2.0" must also be linked to better coordination of European actors in multilateral contexts and contribute to the development of a common strategy in key multilateral processes such as UN reform, UN climate negotiations or the upcoming negotiations on a post-2030 agenda. Early positioning by the EU in key multilateral processes is necessary, not only to establish a political stance but also to be able to focus greater attention on forging alliances at an early stage with countries outside the EU, particularly with partners in the Global South.

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