

## A DIFFERENT ACCENT OR A WHOLE NEW LANGUAGE? EU DEVELOPMENT POLICY AFTER COVID-19

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### INTRODUCTION

The year 2021 inaugurates a new cycle for the European Union (EU)'s international cooperation. After laborious negotiations, a new budget for the period 2021-2027 is now in place. A brand-new financial instrument for EU external action, the Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe consolidates more than 10 pre-existing instruments and aims to bring more consistency and direction to EU external action and development policy. The programming of this instrument, a process through which the EU decides how to allocate its external resources, is absorbing a good amount of bureaucratic and political energy. Decisions taken within the programming process of the NDICI – Global Europe will impact for the years to come on how the EU will project itself in the world at country, regional and global level.

Since the onset of the NDICI–Global Europe discussions in 2017, ambitions have been to have a more strategically-oriented EU external action and a more consistent European voice worldwide. On top of that, the diplomatic, economic and social upheaval brought by the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened a sense of realism in Europe and a search for more influence on both the international order and in specific contexts. At the same time, the EU aims to project itself as a steward of international cooperation in the name of a „build back better and greener agenda“, including as a reaction to the undeniably high impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on development outcomes worldwide.

In recent years, Africa has gained greater prominence in EU policy-making, including among member-states that had not given much attention to the continent in the past such as those who joined the EU in 2004. Of the 79.5 billion € of the NDICI-Global Europe, at least 37 % will go to sub-Saharan African countries. The EU Neighbourhood continues to be of the highest priority for the EU, as the preferential support given to these countries during the pandemic shows. How Europe and

Africa will shape their partnerships will be a good thermometer of the EU standing and credibility in the world, including on big EU priorities such as green transition and digital transformation.

This article looks at continuities and discontinuities of EU international cooperation and external action policies brought in by COVID-19 in a crucial time for EU decision-making. The first section looks at the EU immediate response to the pandemic to set the scene of what the EU aimed to achieve and ultimately seems to have realised in a relatively short timeframe. The second one explores the continuities and discontinuities of EU international cooperation more broadly and for the longer-term. Then I will draw some conclusions.

The EU is a complex machine not particularly prone to revolutions. In fact, the main thesis of the paper is that the pandemic has certainly brought some innovations in EU external engagements, especially in the form of strengthening some pre-existing priorities or tendencies – for example for stronger cooperation between EU member-states under Team Europe and in the direction of a „build back better and greener agenda“. However, some deep continuities remain as well as the risks of missing the opportunities available, often due to the EU's own institutional functioning rather than external constraints alone.

### AMBITIONS VERSUS REALITY IN THE EU RESPONSE TO COVID-19

One of the remarkable features of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been its multifaceted nature. The EU strived to promote a multilateral response to the pandemic and mobilise funds from different sources to support partner countries. It also sustained decisively open scientific health research for the benefits of all people (Veron/Di Ciommo 2020).

## EU DIPLOMACY

The EU made a large political investment in raising its own profile as a global health leader in the diplomatic arena. The Coronavirus Global Response Pledging Conference of 4 May 2020 was a very visible diplomatic effort to ensure that medical innovations would be available everywhere.<sup>1</sup> The event raised 9.8 billion €, more than its initial target of 7.5 billion €. Later, the EU Commission jointly with Global Citizen, a civil society organization, launched a campaign and an event Global Goal: Unite for Our Future to mobilise additional funds.<sup>2</sup> Both events were a diplomatic and public engagement effort to ensure that medical technologies would be accessible globally and fairly, and build consensus among high-income countries to reserve vaccines also for low- and middle-income countries. Its steadfast support to the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the successful backing of a COVID-19 resolution at the World Health Assembly (WHA) are part of this same picture (WHA 2020).

The EU political messages were appropriate, appreciated and highly needed in the midst of a pandemic which heightened competition rather than collaboration. But, in hindsight, concerns about the EU's ability to follow up on its own ambitions were well placed. European countries themselves struggled to find a balance between protecting their own citizens and ensuring a global fair response to the pandemic, not least due to the limited competencies that the EU holds on health matters. Rather than just an EU deficiency, the failure in global cooperation is of a much larger scale. Still, the EU ambitions to 'securing timely access to vaccines for Member States and their population while leading the global solidarity effort' (European Commission 2020a: 2) have been defeated.

Large vaccine pre-orders from high-income countries under bilateral agreements run against stated objectives of the COVAX Facility, aimed at ensuring fair distribution globally.<sup>3</sup> According to the New York Times Vaccination Tracker, 82 % of vaccines have been administered in high and upper-middle income countries while only 0.3 % in low-income ones.<sup>4</sup> If, on the one hand, the EU resisted the temptation to block vaccine and raw materials exports compared to the US, on the other hand, the European Commission's stance on patent waivers and its alternatives looked confusing versus the stark opening offered by the US Biden administration (Williams/Stacey 2021). Only the EU Parliament expressed support for a temporary waiver on patents (European Parliament 2021).

## HEALTH RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Research and innovation (R&I) efforts have been another notable and highly appreciated feature of the EU response. The EU put R&I at the core of the response to the pandemic already in the **Joint Communication on the EU Global Response to COVID-19** (European Commission 2020b). It took a number of steps in favour of open science through, for example, the Manifesto for EU COVID-19 Research and the European COVID-19 Data Platform.<sup>5</sup> It invested in global coordination and in supporting African research and clinical practice to fight the pandemic, notably through the European and Developing Countries Trial Partnership (EDCTP).<sup>6</sup> In 2020, European and African R&I ministers met for the first time and discussed cooperation on health to fight the pandemic, signalling a growing interest for cooperation in this area (European Commission 2020c).

A full assessment of this support is yet to come. But a provisional appraisal cannot ignore that the EU support to health research was quick and firm as well as geared towards multilateral collaboration. While the new EU strategy on the Global Approach to Research and Innovation leaves no doubt about the continental geopolitical and economic stakes that European R&I needs to serve, it retains an ethos for global cooperation and a commitment towards Africa in particular (European Commission 2021).

## TACKLING THE PANDEMIC ON THE GROUND

The EU support at country and regional level has been much less discernible than its global interventions and far less impressive (Veron/Di Ciommo 2020). The most notable feature of the European response was the 'Team Europe' package. Launched in April 2020, it aims to combine resources from the EU institutions, member states and financial institutions to respond to the pandemic, including the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).

Up to January 2021, Team Europe mobilised 40.5 billion € in commitments.<sup>7</sup> By far, most funds went to tackle the social and economic consequences of the pandemic (28.5 billion €). The objectives of strengthening health and water and sanitation systems (8.5 billion €) and emergency response (3.5 billion €) received way lower

amounts. This is broadly in line with the distribution of resources envisioned in Team Europe package (Council of the EU 2020; European Commission 2020b).

The financial scale of EU action has been criticised for being limited and largely made of reallocation of funds rather than fresh money, partially due to constraints dictated by the end of the EU budget cycle (Jones et al. 2020). The transparency of the interventions has also been questioned since timely, public and disaggregated information on how funds have been allocated to priorities and geographies is still lacking despite some recent improvements (Bilal/Di Ciommo 2020).

## CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES IN EU DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Beyond the short-term response to the pandemic, the far-reaching COVID-19 crisis has had some longer-term implications for wider EU external action and development policy. While it would be tempting to shed light only on the novelties, benchmarking those against the continuities – or slow motions – that characterise EU policy-making helps to delineate a more balanced picture. This section looks at selected aspects of EU international cooperation. Some of those arose during the initial EU response to COVID-19. Others are part of pre-existing trends that the pandemic has often deepened.

### THE EU NARRATIVE ON EXTERNAL ACTION AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Beyond facing the COVID-19 emergency and its socioeconomic impacts, the EU response is rooted in a deepened drive to position itself as a global player. The EU Global Strategy of 2016 already clarified ambitions but still retained a strong focus on the EU Neighborhood and its proximity (European Union 2016). The geopolitical commission of Ursula von der Leyen builds on that document, although espousing a more global outlook and a stronger affirmation of EU objectives. The more competitive and uncertain global environment and the turmoil caused by the pandemic are pushing the EU towards more decisive attempts to assert its global leadership. This is especially around its priorities on climate change, digital development or multilateralism, but also in the discussions on open strategic autonomy, i.e. the intention to make the EU less dependant on

a limited number of foreign countries and suppliers for strategic inputs such as medical supplies or raw materials critical for new technologies or industrial production (e.g.: cobalt, lithium, aluminium...).

The EU has shifted its narrative on international cooperation towards an international partnership approach that aims to forge more equal and mutually beneficial undertakings for the realisation of common goals between Europe and its partners. Development relationships are part of these undertakings that, in aspiration, are political in essence and go beyond development assistance. Already before the pandemic, EU development policy had been tasked to serve the SDGs and the EU Consensus on Development, but also the objectives of EU external action from climate change to migration and beyond.

While there are a number of potential drawbacks for such an approach, advantages also come along the way. One of the potential advantages is sustained and more decisive efforts to 'join the dots' of EU external action across different domains, a tendency already visible in the EU short-term response to COVID-19 as presented in section 2. For example, the Group for External Coordination (EXCO), established in 2019 and chaired by the High Representative, is tasked with coordinating external action across the Commission. In addition, European Commission Directorates-Generals (DGs) seem to have become better at coordinating their work and linking the internal and external dimensions of the Commission's work, for example under the Green Deal. While this does not amount to a turn-around from the habit to work in silos, a better definition of EU priorities and better working arrangements could help overcome some of the past bottlenecks.

The newly established NDICI-Global Europe is a reflection of this new narrative and an attempt to stir a more consistent EU external action as a whole. The instrument covers all countries in the world and aims to finance the EU external action political priorities as well as its development cooperation aspects (European Union 2021).

Figure C: The NDICI-Global Europe structure

NEIGHBOURHOOD, DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION INSTRUMENT (€79.5 bn)		
Geographic pillar (€60.4 bn)	Thematic pillar (€6.4 bn)	Rapid response (€3.2 bn)
European Neighbourhood (€19.3 bn)	Democracy & HR	a) Stability and conflict prevention
Sub-Saharan Africa (€29.2 bn)	Civil Society	b) Strengthening resilience and humanitarian development action
Asia and the Pacific (€8.5 bn)	Stability, Peace and Conflicts Prevention	
Americas and the Caribbean (€3.4 bn)	Global Challenges	c) Foreign policy
Emerging Challenges and Priorities Cushion (€9.5 bn)		

Source: European Center for Development Policy Management (ECDPM)

Resources allocated to EU political priorities and development objectives can become more and more difficult to disentangle, including due to the potential overlap of these objectives in practice or due to the way they are framed in the EU own narrative. Still, most of its funding (93 %) will need to be eligible as official development assistance. Most resources will go to geographies and, among them, to sub-Saharan Africa and the EU Neighbourhood in particular. Both regions are of the highest priority for the EU and its member-states. The instrument also offers more flexibility than in the past, with a non-programmable Rapid Response Pillar and a reserve for emerging challenges and priorities.

A more strategic programming of the NDICI-Global Europe has been tasked to build EU actions around its priorities from the bottom up and, at the same time, ensure ownership of the government and other stakeholders in civil society in partner countries. This latter has been challenging to achieve in the past and the ongoing programming phase is likely to test the EU abilities in this regard this time as well.

## TEAM EUROPE

The Team Europe approach started as a bold attempt of the EU to give a more consistent visibility to its collective response to the pandemic, in particular to contrast with the proactive communication and health diplomacy of other international actors. On the back of the enthusiasm it initially generated in EU headquarters and in European capitals, Team Europe has become a new and potentially longstanding features of EU external action. The intent is to contribute 'to demonstrating EU global leadership, responsibility and solidarity' and ultimately result in 'more than the sum of its parts', being those the EU institutions, its member states and European financial institutions for development, including the EIB and the EBRD (Council of the EU 2020b, 2021).

While COVID-19 has provided the initial inspiration for Team Europe, the concept has acquired a broader remit, including in the current phase of programming of EU resources. Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) are meant to be high visibility, large scale and collective actions at

country and regional level and are an integral part of EU programming. In aspiration, TEIs should build on the collective EU expertise and financing in an inclusive manner. With the EU in the lead, they support the EU priorities around digital or renewable energy or post-covid recovery, in line with the shared priorities with partner countries.

While the concept of stronger coordination and complementarity of EU actors is not new, Team Europe gained political traction due to its linkages to the “Working Better Together” agenda and for being a less bureaucratic approach to collaboration between member-states and EU institutions compared to joint programming (Jones/Teevan 2021). The jury is still out on whether Team Europe will achieve its objective to offer a more cohesive international profile to Europe, including in international fora, and so boost EU visibility. On a more operational level, TEIs could provide some more concrete and impactful examples of how Team Europe could work and its added value. But it remains to be seen whether TEIs will be able to defeat some of the entrenched bottlenecks to EU-wide collaboration such as visibility requirements, different political priorities of EU member-states in certain contexts or cumbersome bureaucratic procedures of the EU. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that experiences vary greatly so far. TEIs seem more promising in contexts where EU delegations can play a leading role and where coordination and collaboration between EU institutions and among member-states is already strong, such as the case of Kenya.

## HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND GLOBAL HEALTH

Other novelties in the EU focus, emphasis or approach could be thematic. Human development seems to have gained some traction in EU policy-making based on the assessment that the dreadful impact of the pandemic on development results calls for a ‘back to the basics’ of development work. Estimates show that poverty levels are likely to rise by 150 million people by the end of 2021. In Africa alone, 46 million more people are projected to fall into extreme poverty, a 10 % increase on 2019 levels (Kharas 2020; Uche Ordu/Golubski 2021). Trajectories towards better education, gender equality, decent job creation along with health outcomes have all worsened (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 2020; Parsitau 2021).

On the one hand, a supporting argument for a more prominent role for human development in EU external action highlights that the pandemic showed how quickly a health crisis can become an economic and political one and that it is in the EU interest to ensure that countries around the world can offer stable and decent living standards to their citizens. Poverty eradication remains at the core of the SDGs and is the primary objective of EU development policy according to the Lisbon Treaty. Jutta Urpilainen, the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, has made a personal investment in the topic and on education in particular. On the other, the political energy behind human development and related topics such as gender equality does not seem to be as strong as in other areas. For example, TEIs are likely to privilege other priorities such as climate change, economic development, agriculture and digitalisation (Chadwick 2021; Teevan et al. 2021b; Veron/Sergejeff 2021). Historically, the EU has struggled to meet its target to dedicate 20 % of its aid to human development, a target reiterated under the NDICI–Global Europe that will need to be monitored closely.

The EU diplomatic visibility and call for global action on COVID-19 has raised the question on whether the EU would become a more prominent actor in global health and realise the vision established in the 2010 communication on this matter. The communication presented the EU as a strong promoter of ‘equitable and universal health coverage of quality health services’, able to act on the social determinants of health through its different policy domains and capable of a unified vision, voice and action between the EU institutions and its member states (European Commission 2010). The momentum behind that vision resulted evanescent and the EU action rather limited as a result, sometimes despite large financial allocations (Aluttis et al. 2014; Bergner/Voss 2020; Ecorys 2012). The restricted mandate of the EU as a global health actor, resistance of EU member-states and a rather fragmented global health community along with the urgency to tackle the global financial crisis are among the reasons for this lost appetite.

The EU has continued to put its mark on the issue. For example, it co-organised the Global Health Summit jointly with Italy, co-chair of the G20, in May 2021.<sup>8</sup> The summit aimed at strengthening preparedness and response to the pandemic and broader multilateral cooperation on future global health crises. However, at a more granular and operational level, the EU seems to offer limited space

for putting health high on the agenda. There is no signal, for example, that health will feature more strongly in programming documents of the NDICI–Global Europe. In reality, too many other priorities are on the list. In addition, the factors that limit the EU role on health, namely the EU limited competencies on the matter, remain unchanged.

## BUILDING BACK BETTER AND GREENER

Getting out of the socioeconomic disarray of the pandemic is an imperative for successes on climate change. At the same time, the pandemic exposed the urgency of a ‘build back better and greener’ agenda. The EU ambitions for a more competitive, sustainable and fairer economy seem to be resting to a large extent on the EU Green Deal. While it remains a predominantly domestic policy framework, the accomplishment of the EU transition plan will ultimately depend on how successful the EU will be in bringing its international partners along to realise its vision of a sustainable and fair transition with concrete steps (Di Ciommo/Ahairwe 2021; Teevan et al. 2021a). Overall, this will depend on how the EU will tackle its own financial, diplomatic and policy assets to influence global standards, mobilise adequate global climate finance and support transitions in partner countries.

The external dimension of the Green Deal is still under construction and it is most likely going to look differently in different contexts. The EU and Africa do not share a fully-fledged climate change agenda but some commonalities around renewable energy and green recovery are emerging (Medinilla 2021a). More challenging discussions may arise around the EU plan to enforce a Carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), a form of carbon pricing on imports, and on how to operationalise the principles of alignment with the Paris Agreement of ‘doing no significant harm’ for the EU external financing within the programming process (Di Ciommo/Ahairwe 2021; Medinilla 2021a; Philipponnat 2020). While the principles are raising the bar on the subject, some have raised concerns about their adaptability and applicability to the reality of many developing countries.

## EUROPE AND AFRICA IN THE POST-COVID ERA

The EU has given high priority to Africa in its response to the pandemic, in line with the relevance that the continent has acquired in the last years. The latest data available

show that 6.2 billion € have been allocated to sub-Saharan Africa under the Team Europe external response to COVID-19 of a total 40.5 billion € globally.<sup>9</sup> The Neighbourhood alone received almost double the amount with 12.2 billion €. The EU initial response focused on support to health security, research and the African Centers for Disease Control (CDCs). But the bulk of resources go to tackling the social and economic consequences of COVID-19.

Both the **Joint Communication Towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa** and the following Council Conclusions on the same subject (Council of the EU 2020a; European Commission, HRVP 2020) reiterate the importance of a mature partnership with Africa based on shared interests and common values. They are essentially European documents that, while having the merit of inviting African counterparts to present their own ‘interests and expectations for the future partnership’ (Council of the EU 2020a: 9), have been considered weak when it comes to alignment with African priorities (Tadesse Abebe/Maalim 2020). Communication and consultation with African counterparts in preparation of the documents is also likely to have been sparse. In this regard, it is telling that the pandemic and the lack of a common agenda between European and African policy-makers delayed the African Union (AU)-EU summit, scheduled for 2020, to possibly 2022. The summit was first delayed due to the pandemic; then a mini-summit involving a restricted number of leaders on both ends was called off just one day ahead by the AU in December 2021. Despite all the difficulties, the AU-EU partnership remains of much higher political standing than the post-Cotonou agreement between the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) and the EU, also to be approved this year (Medinilla 2021b).

This may be a good time for refining differences and clarifying positions, in the context of a much more assertive Africa (Laporte 2020). Economic recovery post-Covid, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) and debt restructuring feature high on the agenda. Global initiatives on the latter have been especially wanting due to the lack of global coordination and the exclusion of several middle-income countries, despite them holding most of global debt among developing countries (Di Ciommo/Sergejeff 2021; Fabricius 2020; Fresnillo 2020; Jensen 2021). These limitations are of great concern as they prevent to create adequate fiscal space for developing countries to invest indigenous resources in the post-

pandemic recovery. Admittedly, the EU itself plays a very limited role in debt restructuring initiatives. However, its support to mobilise creditors can be of value to achieve some meaningful progress and show commitment towards African agendas.

## CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic has brought some novelties in the EU's international cooperation, namely in the deepening of the political narrative that surrounds development cooperation, the EU ways of working, its thematic priorities and its geographic focus towards Africa. However, these novelties amount more to a twist in accent rather than to the acquisition of a whole new language.

The pandemic has heightened a sense of urgency that the EU feels to play a leading role in global affairs and has put more pressure on EU international cooperation to show results against EU priorities. It has also opened new opportunities for better coordination among EU institutions and for closer collaboration with member-states under Team Europe. These ambitions predate the pandemic, but the latter has offered new arguments in their support.

Despite all the commotion around the EU role in global health, the latter domain does not seem to be able to compete with more pressing political agendas around green transition, economic recovery, digitalisation and multilateralism in both the EU and its partner countries. Similarly, there is a strong and partially new rationale for investments in human development in a world turned upside down by one of the worst and longer lasting crises in a generation. But it remains to be seen whether the balance will tip in this direction.

Calls for more international cooperation for a greener and fairer recovery and to overcome the COVID-19 crisis are high. How Europe will respond to those will shape its profile and impact for years to come. How the EU will engage with Africa will be especially telling, given the relevance the continent has for Europe. Another litmus test will be the ability of the EU to confidently and credibly operationalise its Green Deal, including taking responsibility for the impact of the green transition on the most vulnerable people and countries.

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- 7 [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/20210101-team-europe-response-to-covid\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/20210101-team-europe-response-to-covid_en.pdf) (03.11.2021)
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