

STUDY

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The foundations of EU development and cooperation policies



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PE 783.609 - March 2026



EN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving relationship between principles and interests in European Union (EU) development and cooperation policies. Against the backdrop of global fragmentation and heightened geopolitical competition, the EU has increasingly reframed its external action as 'strategic' and 'geopolitical', most notably through the Global Gateway initiative. While the EU Treaties enshrine poverty eradication as the primary objective of EU development cooperation policy, the study finds a significant shift towards integrating development cooperation with EU security, economic, and migration interests. This creates tensions between the normative core and legal foundation of the EU's development policy and its strategic self-interests. Through a combined legal and political analysis, the study assesses the coherence of current priorities against the Union's own benchmarks. It concludes by offering recommendations for the European Parliament to strengthen oversight, transparency, and the operationalisation of development principles within an increasingly complex and contested policy landscape.

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VERSION(S)

Original: English

Manuscript completed March 2026.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCE FOR THIS PAPER

SCHÖGL, Lukas, et al., 2026. The foundations of EU development and cooperation policies. Brussels: European Parliament, External Policies Analysis and Support Unit.

For in-text citations: Schögl, 2026.

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

ACP	African, Caribbean and Pacific States
AU	African Union
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CBAM	Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union
CRMs	Critical Raw Materials
CRMA	Critical Raw Materials Act
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSO	civil society organization
CTIP	Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DEVE	The European Parliament's Committee on Development
DFIs	Development Finance Institutions
DG DEV	Directorate-General for Development and Relations with African, Caribbean and Pacific States
DG DEVCO	Directorate-General International Cooperation and Development
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
DG ENER	Directorate-General for Energy
DG ENEST	Directorate-General for Enlargement and the Eastern Neighbourhood
DG GROW	Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs
DG HOME	Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs
DG INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
DG MENA	Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf
DG TRADE	Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Commission
ECA	European Court of Auditors
ECHO	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
EDF	European Development Fund
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEC Treaty	Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (Treaty of Rome)
EFSD	European Fund for Sustainable Development
EFSD+	European Fund for Sustainable Development
EIB	European Investment Bank
EU	European Union

EUCO	European Council
EUTF	European Union Trust Fund
EUVR	EU Voluntary Review on Sustainable Development Goals
GE	Global Europe
GG	Global Gateway
GNI	gross national income
GPEDC	Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation
HDP	humanitarian-development-peace
HR/VP	High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice President
IcSP	Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace
i. e.	id est
INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
LNOB	'Leave No One Behind'
MDGs	UN Millennium Development Goals
MEDA	Mesures d'accompagnement financières et techniques
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MoUs	Memoranda of Understanding
NDICI-GE	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe
NGO	non-governmental organization
OACPS	Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States
OCT	Overseas Countries and Territories
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCD	Policy Coherence for Development
PCSD	Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development
PHARE	Poland Hungary Aid for Reconstruction of the Economy
RBA	Human-Rights-based Approach
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprises
STABEX	Système de Stabilisation des Recettes d'Exportation
SYSMIN	System of Stabilization of Export Earnings from Mining Products
TACIS	Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States
TEIs	Team Europe Initiatives
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UN	United Nations
VP	Vice-President of the European Commission

Executive summary

EU development cooperation is currently operating in its most charged and complex political environment since the end of the Cold War. The international setting is characterized by increasing geopolitical tensions and fragmentation, where external action is shaped by security concerns, migration politics, climate risks, and a competitive geo-economic landscape. Moreover, tighter fiscal space across Member States leads to heightened expectations that external spending should deliver direct returns for European constituencies. The European Commission's self-characterisation as 'geopolitical' reflects this broader shift toward strategic autonomy and economic security. It marks a departure from the conventional poverty and aid-effectiveness oriented paradigm of previous decades.

This study analyses how the Union navigates the resulting tensions between its long-standing normative commitments and its emerging strategic objectives. A core part of the report maps continuity and change in the principles and goals of EU development cooperation 'from Yaoundé to Samoa', i.e. since the outset of EU development cooperation in the 1960s to the present day. It traces the evolution from early association and preferential trade arrangements to the post-2019 'geopolitical' turn. Across these periods, the study identifies political commitments that have remained central to the EU's self-understanding of development cooperation, including commitments to poverty reduction, human rights, multilateralism around the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), partner country ownership, and the notion that EU 'internal' policies should not undermine development objectives.

We show that the legal and conceptual architecture of EU development policy is increasingly defined by a complex framing that creates an inherent policy tension. Article 208 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) stipulates that the primary objective of development policy is the reduction and eventual eradication of poverty. At the same time, development cooperation policy remains embedded in the EU's broader external action objectives set out in Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which explicitly include safeguarding the Union's values, fundamental interests, and security. The study argues that the normative core of the EU's development policy, which encompasses principles such as poverty reduction and a rights-based approach, still stands, but now operates in a more contested political space. This creates a state of what we call 'conflicted continuity', where canonical goals remain formally in place while priorities and instruments are recalibrated to increasingly serve strategic interests.

Building on this, we examine 'European interests' in the development context as a contested but persistent theme. Rather than treating interests as fixed, we approach them as outcomes of political contestation and negotiation, taking place within broad legal guardrails. Our study develops a typology of development-related interests and distinguishes older, persistent configurations (including securing export markets or maintaining influence in geopolitical spheres) from newer, more salient configurations that have become more visible in recent years. These include a stronger geo-economic focus on competitiveness and strategic corridors, a more pronounced security-development nexus, and an expanding role for energy and raw-material priorities that can be closely tied to the EU's own transition needs.

The report also analyses how interests are articulated and stabilised through EU political processes and then embedded in policy and law. It highlights the role of strategic steering at the highest political level, and the way this steering translates into programming decisions, instrument mandates and 'flagship' initiatives. In this context, Global Gateway is treated as a key narrative and coordination frame, linked to Team Europe Initiatives and to EFSD+ guarantees and structures. The report flags that such arrangements raise recurring

questions about accountability, transparency and the evidentiary basis for development-impact and 'mutual benefit' claims.

Policy coherence is treated as our central legal and normative benchmark. The study reviews the Treaties' consistency requirement across external action and the specific coherence obligation contained in Article 208(1) TFEU, highlighting its nature as an obligation of conduct, not of result. Building on this, the report provides an indicative, qualitative assessment of coherence risks across ten policy domains, ranging from poverty reduction and human development to human rights and civic space, humanitarian action, climate and energy, migration, peace and security, trade, investment tools, raw materials partnerships, and geopolitics/systemic competition. Here, a key finding of the study is that 'mutual interest' language can obscure real trade-offs and tensions.

Three illustrative episodes make this concrete. On migration-linked external financing, the report traces how conditionality and cooperation on return and readmission can reshape agenda-setting and accountability, with uncertain development outcomes and risks to partner ownership. On climate and energy, it argues that alignment is desirable, but carries the risk of partner countries' needs becoming subordinated to EU energy and industrial priorities. On investment mobilisation, the report highlights the political shift toward guarantees, blended finance and investment platforms as a central feature of the current development agenda, alongside concerns raised in oversight and evaluation debates: complexity, additionality and development-impact demonstration, debt implications, and the risk of a de facto reintroduction of tied-aid dynamics.

Ultimately, the study concludes that neither an integrated model that merges development into general foreign policy nor a differentiated model that protects it as a separate pillar provides an absolute safeguard against the marginalisation of development goals. Instead, the focus must be on managing trade-offs openly and maintaining a sound narrative. The European Parliament has a vital role to play in this process through its powers of oversight, budget approval, and law-making.

The study recommends that the European Parliament could focus on setting clear guardrails for the next Multiannual Financial Framework to ensure that development objectives remain operational even when they compete with other strategic priorities. This requires strengthening transparency and scrutiny, insisting on robust evidence chains for investment-led projects, requiring appropriate metrics and providing meaningful protection of core aid targets and themes. We also argue that the EU should move beyond a simplistic win-win rhetoric and engage in an open discussion of trade-offs. The European Parliament remains the key institutional actor for ensuring that the normative foundations of development policy are not sacrificed for short-term strategic gains, but rather integrated into a coherent and principled global strategy.

1. Introduction

1.1 Context and contribution

EU development cooperation is being debated in a more charged political environment than at any time since the end of the Cold War. The international setting has become more fragmented, and the EU's external action is increasingly shaped by security concerns, migration politics, climate risks and a more competitive geo-economic landscape. At the same time, domestic politics within the Union have become less forgiving. Fiscal space is tighter, public support for development cooperation is not evenly distributed across Member States, and external spending is increasingly expected to deliver direct, visible returns for European constituencies.

The Commission's characterisation of itself as 'geopolitical' is emblematic of this broader shift (von der Leyen, 2019). In EU development policy, this has translated into a stronger emphasis on strategic autonomy, resilience and mutual benefit, notably through the Global Gateway initiative. In the chapters that follow, we argue that this should be read not as a clean break with the Union's earlier development agenda, but rather as a far-reaching reconfiguration. The canonical development goals and principles remain formally in place, yet priorities and instruments are being recalibrated, which we refer to in Chapter 2 as a period of 'conflicted continuity'.

Our study starts from a simple observation. EU development policy has a clear normative core and legal framework, but it is now used in a wider set of political projects. Among these are managing interdependence, investing in energy and digital connectivity, increasing European competitiveness, addressing migration pressures, responding to crises in the neighbourhood and competing for influence in a contested global order. The resulting tension is not new. European development cooperation has always been entangled with trade, security and political influence, as we trace in Chapter 3. What has changed is the breadth and explicitness of interest framing and the growing role of financial instruments and investment mobilisation in the EU's own narrative of development.

From the outset of institutionalized EU development policy in the 1960s, development cooperation has been justified in the EU primarily in terms of values and global responsibilities. Legally, this is codified most clearly in Article 208 TFEU, which states that 'Union development cooperation policy shall have as its primary objective the reduction and, in the long term, the eradication of poverty' and stipulates that development objectives must be taken into account in all policies likely to affect developing countries. At the same time, however, EU external action is subject to a much broader set of common objectives, including safeguarding the Union's 'values, fundamental interests, security, independence and integrity', promoting economic interests and managing global challenges.

Politically, the complex framing of poverty reduction as a primary objective, pursued within a wider framework of EU external values and interests, has always created space for debate over *which interests* are legitimate in development policy. Classic aid literature has long rejected a strict dichotomy between altruistic and selfish aid. Hans Morgenthau (1962) already saw foreign aid as a tool of foreign policy ('A Political Theory of Foreign Aid'). More recent work, for instance by Gulrajani (2017), Gulrajani & Calleja (2019), Dreher et al. (2024), Dreher (2025) and others, shows that donor countries' policies, for better or worse, have consistently reflected a mix of moral, commercial, diplomatic and security motivations. As a Commission official put it in background interviews conducted for this study: 'There's always been a return. Maybe not a very obvious *economic* return, but a global good return.'

For the EU, this tension has been particularly pronounced because the Union has often presented itself as a 'normative power' whose external action is guided by universal values rather than narrow national interest. Yet, the political practice of EU development policy from early association with former colonies and preferential trade schemes to today's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE) Regulation and Global Gateway has always intertwined development objectives with economic, political and security considerations (see also Chapter 2.2). The question is, then: What interests are legitimately pursued in development policies? And where are the red lines?

These issues have become more salient in recent years. In the 2000s, the aid effectiveness and poverty reduction paradigms still treated narrow, self-interested donor behaviour as something to be disciplined through principles such as partner country ownership, alignment and harmonisation. Since the early 2010s, and especially after the Lisbon Treaty (2009), the great financial crisis (2007/08), the migration crisis (2015), the EU Global Strategy (2016) and the European Green Deal (2019), the balance in EU discourse has shifted. The EU's Agenda for Change (2011) explicitly highlighted 'inclusive and sustainable growth' and EU economic interests. The New European Consensus on Development (2017) further weaved together the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with security, migration management and, to some extent, concerns for global competitiveness. These were the beginnings of a considerable (re-) politicisation of development policy.

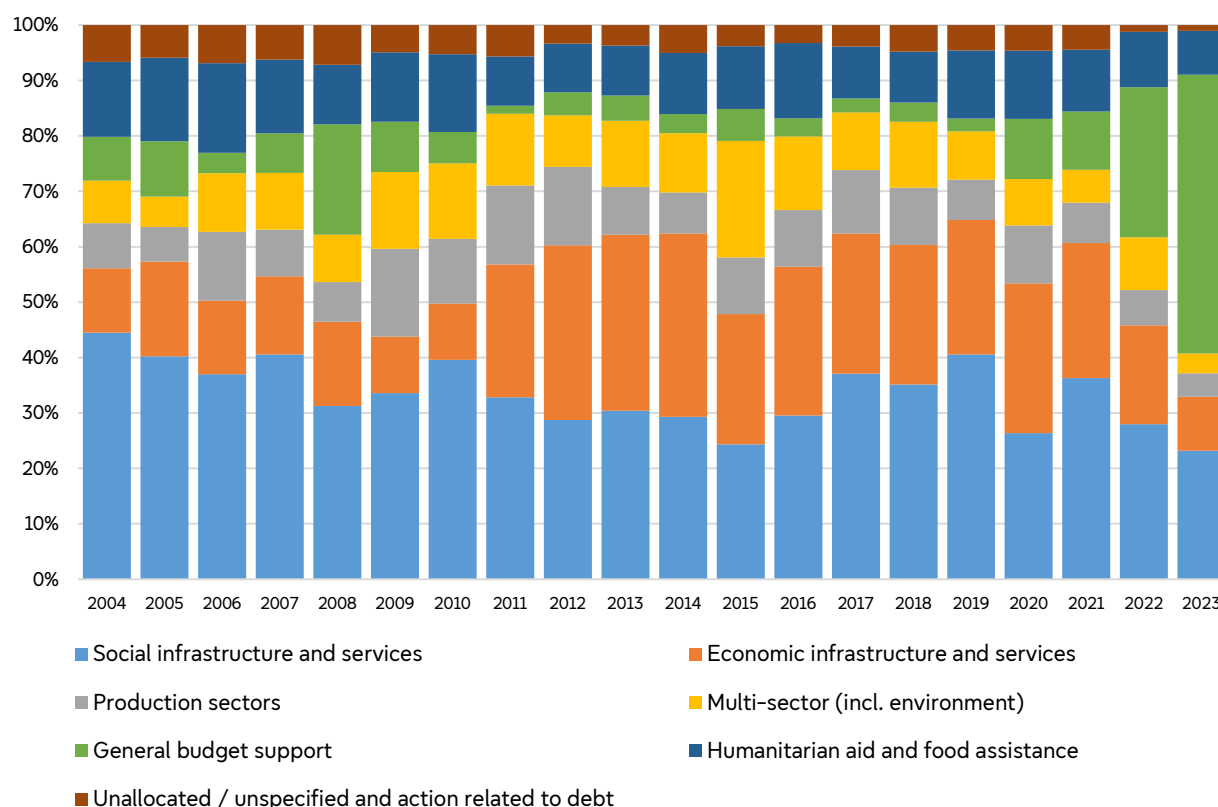
Recent initiatives such as NDICI-GE and Global Gateway make the linkage between development cooperation and EU economic, geopolitical and security interests even more explicit. The NDICI-GE Regulation sets out as objectives both the eradication of poverty and 'promoting the Union's values and interests worldwide', while Global Gateway is described by the Commission and think-tank analyses as a geostrategic framework to secure connectivity, critical raw materials (CRMs) and influence *vis-à-vis* other powers, especially China. Emblematically, the European Commission (EC) has also increasingly branded what was traditionally framed as 'development cooperation' under the label 'international partnerships', most visibly by renaming DG DEVCO (International Cooperation and Development) as DG INTPA (International Partnerships) in January 2021 (DG INTPA, 2021).

The newly proposed Global Europe Regulation, the planned successor to the NDICI-GE Regulation, and the latest evolution of European development politics, makes the focus on European interests more pronounced than ever while appearing to relegate poverty eradication to a more marginal role. This is illustrated by the fact that unlike the NDICI-GE Regulation, which mentions 'poverty' 23 times, including prominently among the stated objectives of the Regulation, the proposal for the Global Europe Regulation in its current form mentions poverty merely two times (recital 23; Art. 23(6)). Notably poverty eradication is conspicuously absent from the overall objectives (Art. 4) as well as the specific objectives for the five geographic and one global pillar (Annex II). By contrast, the Commission's proposal mentions 'competitiveness' 25 times – compared to only three mentions in the NDICI-GE Regulation – which reflects a clear shift as regards the prominence with which European interests feature in the proposed regulation.

Political debates often focus on flagship strategies and buzzwords, but spending patterns also tell a story, revealing effective policy shifts. Figure 1 provides an indicative view of how the sectoral composition of Official Development Assistance (ODA), as reported by 'EU Institutions' – i.e., the European Commission and European Investment Bank (EIB) – has evolved over the past 20 years. Using the OECD DAC

(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee) sector groups, the chart shows a gradual relative reweighting away from social infrastructure and services, particularly in activities related to ‘government and civil society’. While spending on these sectors has increased, both in absolute and real terms, this growth must be viewed in the context of even greater spending on economic infrastructure and services, notably across energy, banking and financial sectors, as well as in relation to the increase in general budget support, owing largely to the macro financial assistance package for Ukraine. Overall, the relative rebalancing documented in ODA is consistent with the broader shift described in later chapters of this study: from a cooperation model centred on social sectors, governance and poverty-focused programming towards one that gives greater weight to infrastructure, investment and security.

Figure 1: Sectoral composition of bilateral ODA commitments by EU Institutions, 2004–2023



Source: OECD DAC statistics. Authors’ calculations. For readability, some sector categories are shown in aggregated form. ‘EU institutions’ refers to the DAC statistical category and encompasses the Commission and EIB.

The geopolitical reframing of EU development cooperation has to be understood against a background of multiple, partly overlapping crises and resulting policy agendas. Security and defence concerns have moved to the centre of EU external relations since Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and in response to growing instability in parts of the Union’s neighbourhood, notably the Middle East. In parallel, geo-economic competition has sharpened the focus on supply security, regulatory standards and strategic sectors, including clean energy technologies and critical raw materials. These priorities intersect with climate diplomacy and the external dimension of the European Green Deal, which increasingly links external partnerships to decarbonisation pathways, industrial policy and market regulation.

Migration and mobility are further driving the broadening of the agenda. Since 2015, migration has remained politically salient in many Member States, and external spending has been expected repeatedly

to contribute to migration management outcomes. This has strengthened demands for flexibility and rapid response, but it has also raised recurrent concerns about the instrumentalisation of development cooperation and the erosion of partner ownership.

Finally, the Union's development agenda is being reshaped by fiscal and governance pressures. When budgets are tight, the temptation is to promise 'more with less' through blended finance, guarantees and the mobilisation of private finance. When political attention is scarce, it is tempting to repackage development policy as a vehicle for 'win-wins' and visible projects. These moves can be sensible, but they also raise difficult questions about what counts as development spending, how development impact is demonstrated, and what democratic oversight looks like when instruments become more complex and more flexible.

The study contributes to these debates from multiple angles. It offers a combined legal and political assessment of the foundations of EU development cooperation, it develops a typology of EU interests in development policy and traces how salient interest configurations have changed over time, and it provides an evidence-based coherence appraisal across key policy domains, making trade-offs explicit. Finally, it concludes with recommendations aimed at supporting the European Parliament in oversight, scrutiny and law-making in a period of institutional change, including in the run-up to the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034).

1.2 Problem statement: Values, interests, law and politics

The central focus of this study is to explore how EU interests are framed, operationalised and balanced with the Union's development principles and objectives. It asks where tensions arise, and where complementarities can be credibly claimed. These questions are not only political, but also have a strong legal and institutional dimension, with EU development cooperation embedded in the EU Treaties and operating under a defined competence and governance framework.

As already mentioned, the Treaties provide for a combination of values and interests in the EU's external action. Article 21 TEU lists common objectives that range from safeguarding the Union's values and security to supporting the sustainable development of developing countries. While development cooperation is to be conducted within the broader framework of these external action objectives, Article 208 TFEU specifically highlights poverty reduction and, in the long run, poverty eradication as its primary objective. This legal architecture creates a requirement to manage overlaps and conflicts, and to justify choices in a manner consistent with the Treaties.

Two fault lines are particularly salient in this context. First, there is a tension between partner-country-oriented development objectives (often expressed through the language of poverty eradication, rights, the SDGs, ownership and 'leave no one behind') and EU self-interests (such as security, economic security, migration control, access to markets or raw materials, and geopolitical influence). Second, there is a tension between politics and law. EU law is the product of political processes, but it also seeks to discipline political choice. Conversely, political actors work within the existing legal framework, but sometimes stretch its boundaries through broad interpretations, flexible instruments, or practice that 'moves ahead' of formal rule changes.

Taken together, these fault lines can be represented, in a very simplified fashion, as a 2x2 matrix (see Table 1). The upper-left cell reflects the legal articulation of 'classic' development cooperation, centred on Treaty objectives and secondary law. The lower-right cell captures the political discourse of strategic

development policy, where interests and geopolitical aims are stated more openly (for instance, in the Global Gateway framing). A key premise of this study, which reflects concerns voiced by many stakeholders in background interviews conducted for this study, is that the lower-right quadrant tends to effectively marginalise the objectives enshrined in the law. The study therefore asks, where the overlap is real and defensible and where current practice risks drifting away from the Union’s own benchmarks.

Table 1: Axes of tension between norms and interests

	Partner-country oriented objectives (‘principles’, development goals)	EU (self-)interest objectives (strategic, economic, security)
Law (Treaties, binding acts)	Legal provisions on development cooperation (e.g., Article 208 TFEU, NDICI-Global Europe)	Legal provisions on EU (external) objectives and interests (e.g., Article 21(2)(a) TEU)
Politics (Strategies, communications, Council conclusions)	Political framing of values-led development cooperation (e.g., European Consensus, SDGs, rights-based approach)	Political framing of interest-led development cooperation (e.g., Global Gateway, strategic autonomy narratives)

Source: Authors’ illustration.

1.3 Approach and methods

The study combines legal and political analysis. Legally, it sets out the primary law framework for EU development cooperation, as well as the relevant secondary legislation and programming instruments. Politically, it traces how interests are articulated, how priorities are set, and how the geopolitical narrative has been translated into concrete instruments and practices. We cannot — and do not aim to — review every policy choice, but rather see the aim of the study in making basic structural trade-offs explicit and assessing coherence against the Union’s own benchmarks, to the extent this can be done at a relatively high and aggregated level of analysis.

Empirically, our work rests on four pillars. First, we performed a structured desk review of EU primary law, secondary legislation, key policy documents and evaluation material. Second, we undertook a legal analysis of competences, objectives and coherence requirements, with particular attention to poverty eradication as the primary objective of EU development cooperation. Third, we analysed a set of selected policy episodes that illustrate how trade-offs play out in practice, including in domains such as migration-linked external financing, investment mobilisation and climate and energy partnerships. Fourth, we conducted a set of six background interviews with EU and Member State stakeholders, including Commission officials, representatives from Member State development-related organisations and representatives of development NGOs (non-governmental organisations). We also approached partner-country institutions, organised business, the Commission President’s cabinet, and selected multilateral organisations. In several instances, it was not possible to secure interviews within the project’s timeframe, which is not uncommon in short-term studies. In other cases, no response was received. Although interviews were conducted on a non-attributable basis to encourage candour, some potential respondents may nevertheless have been reluctant to participate due to the perceived political sensitivity of the topic. Because of these constraints, the interview material is used as contextual evidence rather than as a representative survey. Where interview statements inform the analysis, they are triangulated with the document record and with published evaluations and research.

The policy episodes discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 (i.e. migration, green deal, investment) were selected because they sit at the centre of the current debate and because they reveal different mechanisms through which coherence can be strengthened or weakened. The respective policies all relate to salient crises to be addressed by the Union: climate change, economic competitiveness and social cohesion. Some episodes concern explicit conditionality and incentive structures, as in parts of migration cooperation, while others are about instrument choice and the political economy of delivery, as in investment mobilisation and guarantees. Across several cases, our focus is on how objectives are framed, what governance and accountability arrangements exist, and what kinds of development impact claims can be substantiated.

1.4 Key concepts

Throughout the report, we use EU development cooperation to refer to the Union's development cooperation policy, as anchored in the Treaties (in particular, Article 21 TEU and Article 208 TFEU) and implemented through secondary law and programming frameworks. In practice, this includes the current financing architecture under NDICI-GE and related instruments and modalities, including geographic and thematic programmes, humanitarian aid and crisis-response tools and the investment and guarantee tools linked to EFSD+ and the External Action Guarantee.

Our analysis builds on the idea of a 'normative core' of EU development policy, i.e., a set of principles and values that have persisted across decades even as political priorities have shifted. This core, explored throughout Chapter 2, includes poverty reduction as the primary objective of development cooperation, commitments to the SDGs and multilateralism, a rights-based approach, humanitarian principles, the aid effectiveness agenda and the coherence duty itself. A recurring theme of the study is that the normative core has not disappeared, but that it now operates in a more contested political space.

We use 'interests' in two related ways (for details, see Chapter 3). First, specific interests crystallise and appear as norms and objectives in EU primary law and/or in external action instruments. Second, as politically articulated priorities, they structure agenda-setting and implementation, including European Council (EUCO) conclusions, Council and Commission strategies, Joint Communications and policy frameworks, based on input from Member States. Both dimensions matter because political choices play an important role in how broad legal objectives are interpreted and applied in practice.

Finally, we use 'coherence' in line with EU usage, referring to policy coherence for development (PCD) and policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD). In other words, coherence refers, on the one hand, to the consistency of EU policies with development objectives and principles and, on the other, to the practical challenge of managing necessary trade-offs across policy fields that affect developing countries. In Chapter 4, we use coherence as a political (and legal) benchmark. The question we ask there is whether stated development goals remain operational when they compete with other priorities, and whether governance arrangements enable those goals to remain visible and defensible.

2. Principles and goals of EU development cooperation: Between continuity and change

This chapter discusses the core political and legal pillars that have underpinned the European Union's development cooperation policies since its inception with the Treaty of Rome. We begin with the political pillars (section 2.1), focusing on strategic declarations, communications and statements that have guided priorities, narratives and operational choices in this policy field. In particular, we consider four political

reference points: (i) political compacts (e.g., the European Consensus on Development); (ii) Commission and joint communications that steer priorities (e.g., Global Gateway); (iii) Council conclusions that codify policy approaches (e.g., the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus); and (iv) international norms to which the EU subscribes and which guide its policy making (e.g., the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development). We highlight both continuity and shifts over time, with a focus on the most recent policy episode of the von der Leyen Commissions (2019–2024 and 2024–2029). Section 2.2 then provides a legal perspective, exploring the provisions of EU primary and secondary law setting out the principles and objectives of contemporary EU development policy.

2.1 Political considerations

2.1.1 Eras of EU development policy from Yaoundé to Samoa

Beginnings and consolidation

EU development policy has evolved over time and can be broken down into somewhat distinct eras (see Table 2; see also Bache, 2010; Bergmann et al., 2019; Doidge & Holland, 2015; Hurt, 2010). Part IV of the European Economic Community (EEC) Treaty (1957) associated the European Communities with the Overseas Countries and Territories and created the European Development Fund (EDF, operational from 1959). The association was formalised in the Yaoundé Conventions (1963, 1969) and the Arusha Agreement (1969). This early phase linked project finance and trade preferences to newly independent African countries. The early association and Yaoundé years created an aid-trade partnership with a relatively narrow geographic focus.

The successor Lomé Conventions (the first of which was signed in 1975) broadened the scope and instruments. This era (1975–1988) consolidated an African, Caribbean and Pacific States (ACP) identity and a corresponding narrative of ‘partnership’ with the Global South. The Lomé preamble pledged to create ‘a more just and more balanced economic order’ and to offer ‘a model for relations between developed and developing states’ (ACP & EEC Council of Ministers, 1984). The Convention paired non-reciprocal trade preferences and commodity protocols (e.g., sugar, bananas) with compensatory finance: STABEX (Système de Stabilisation des Recettes d’Exportation) for agricultural price shocks from Lomé I and SYSMIN (System of Stabilization of Export Earnings from Mining Products) for minerals from Lomé II. The ACP Group, created by the Georgetown Agreement (1975), and the three-letter acronym ‘ACP’ became the visual and political shorthand for the entire system established by Yaoundé and Lomé.

The post-Cold War era ushered in what could be called a ‘normative turn’ in development policy, in general, and EU development policy in particular. Human rights, democracy and the rule of law were brought to the fore. Lomé IV, with its 1995 revision, introduced the notion that ‘respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law [...] shall constitute an essential element of this Convention’ (ACP & EEC Council of Ministers, 1996). That clause, and its linked ‘non-execution/appropriate measures’ procedure, made political conditionality part of the EU-ACP compact. It established that ‘in case a State Party was of the view that another party disrespected any of the essential elements of the Lomé Convention, it could ‘take appropriate steps’ including partial or full suspension of Lomé cooperation’ (Arts, 2018: para 43). In

parallel, Maastricht (1992) recognised development cooperation as a Community policy and introduced the basic coherence duty (TEC, Article 130u–130y)¹.

The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) consolidated these changes. Regionally, cooperation diversified beyond ACP (e.g. the Barcelona Process/MEDA (Mesures d'accompagnement financières et techniques) with the southern Mediterranean), while new financial instruments such as PHARE (Poland Hungary Aid for Reconstruction of the Economy) and TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States) supported transition in Central/Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space. The European Investment Bank (EIB)'s external mandates expanded alongside the European Development Fund. The EU also institutionalised humanitarian action with the creation of the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations department (ECHO) in 1992 and the 1996 Humanitarian Aid Regulation (Council Regulation 1257/96, OJ L 163/1), confirming that EU humanitarian aid needs to be based on the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (see also EU, 2008; Pusterla & Pusterla, 2020).

In short, from the Treaty of Rome onward, the EU's development approach combined grants with trade preferences for a defined group of partners, initially linked through association. The Yaoundé conventions formalised this model, and the Lomé conventions later expanded it with non-reciprocal trade preferences and stabilisation schemes for commodity exporters. This architecture coupled aid and trade under a single political umbrella. Long-term agreements prioritised predictability and partnership language well before the aid effectiveness era.

Poverty reduction and human rights

With the turn of the millennium, the Cotonou agreement (2000) as successor agreement to the Lomé agreements reframed ACP relations as a contractual partnership with structured political dialogue and needs- and performance-based aid allocation with regular reviews. Its 2005 and 2010 revisions anchored the Agreement in the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which promoted a poverty-reduction paradigm and underpinned subsequent EU development strategies. The EU also aligned with the aid effectiveness agenda that had been developed at the high-level forums on aid effectiveness, Rome (2003), Paris (2005), Accra (2008) and Busan (2011). Internally, the EU pushed for a division of labour between EU donors and Member State donors in development cooperation (the '2007 Code of Conduct'; cf. European Commission, 2007) and joint programming pilots between the Commission and Member States (Council, 2009).

The European Consensus on Development (EU, 2005) – negotiated between the Commission, the European Parliament and the Member States – became the shared political framework under which the EU and Member States united. It implicitly contrasted the market-centric 'Washington Consensus'² with a vision of development cooperation centred on ownership, social sectors and human rights. The 2005 Consensus embedded the principles of the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (ownership, alignment, harmonisation, results, mutual accountability; see in detail OECD, 2005) and also helped mainstream Policy Coherence for Development (PCD). The Lisbon Treaty (2009) subsequently established poverty eradication as the primary objective of EU development policy. It reorganised external action and

¹ This duty was later strengthened in the Treaty of Lisbon, with Article 208(1) TFEU stipulating that 'the Union shall take account of the objectives of development cooperation in the policies that it implements which are likely to affect developing countries'.

² 'Washington Consensus' refers to the liberalization-centered economic reforms suggested as development paradigm by the US, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund since the 1980s; see in more detail Irwin & Ward (2021).

provided for the setting-up of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2010 and enshrined PCD in EU primary law (Article 208(1) TFEU). The 2014 Toolbox on the rights-based approach mainstreamed human rights across the project cycle.

After 2015, the UN 2030 Agenda (UN General Assembly, Resolution A/RES/70/1), and the therein contained Sustainable Development Goals led to a broadening of the EU-specific PCD concept enshrined in EU law into PCSD (Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development), while the migration crisis linked development and foreign-policy tools (the 2015 European Agenda on Migration). The Partnership Framework (2016) explicitly linked aid programming, positive/negative incentives, and overall bilateral relations to cooperation on returns, re-admission, and border management. The EU Global Strategy (2016), developed by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) upon request of the EUCO (European Council, 2015: p. 5), recast external action through 'principled pragmatism' (HR, 2016: pp. 9, 16). It prioritised security of the Union, state and societal resilience, and an integrated approach to conflicts. In this context, the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus (i.e., a framework for 'co-ordination and coherence between humanitarian, development, and peace-building efforts'; OECD/UNHCR, 2024: p. 11) gained traction in Council conclusions (e.g., Council, 2017). By 2017, the New European Consensus on Development replaced the 2005 text, and aligned EU development policy with the SDGs' 'leave no one behind' ethos (EU, 2017). It also reaffirmed aid effectiveness and human-rights commitments. Financially, the EU scaled up blending facilities and launched the External Investment Plan, and the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD) in 2017, foreshadowing the later EFSD+ architecture. By the beginning of the first von der Leyen Commission, the *acquis* had combined a poverty-and-rights-centred consensus, effectiveness and coherence norms, expanded regional partnerships, and a growing reliance on investment platforms.

Table 2: Eras of EU development policy

Era	Priorities	Political milestones	Instruments
1957–1974: association	Association with Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT). Solidarity with newly independent African states. Creation of the EDF. Project-based development support tied to association. Early trade preferences.	Treaty of Rome, Part IV (association with OCT) and creation of the European Development Fund (EDF). Yaoundé I (1963) and II (1969) Conventions with Associated African States and Madagascar (AASM). Arusha Agreement with the EAC (1969).	Commission (Directorate-General (DG) VIII later). EDF I–III. EIB external lending mandates begin to emerge.
1975–1989: preferential trade	Consolidation of an ACP identity. 'Partnership' narrative. Non-reciprocal trade preferences. Commodity stabilisation to manage price volatility.	Lomé I (1975) introduces STABEX. Lomé II (1979) adds SYSMIN. Lomé III (1984) extends cooperation. commodity protocols (sugar, bananas, etc.).	EDF IV–VI. EIB risk-sharing/mandates. Joint ACP-EEC institutions. Sizeable project and programme aid.

Era	Priorities	Political milestones	Instruments
1990–1999: governance, human rights	Post-Cold War: Emergence of human rights, democracy and rule-of-law as ‘essential elements’. Political dialogue and conditionality. Macro-economic ‘structural adjustment’. Early coherence debates. Regional diversification beyond ACP.	Lomé IV (1989) and 1995 revision (‘IV bis’) codify essential-elements clauses and conditionality. Maastricht Treaty (1992) establishes EU development policy objectives and coherence duty. Amsterdam (1997) consolidates. Creation of ECHO institutionalises humanitarian aid (1992). Barcelona Process/Euro-Med (1995) and MEDA Regulation expand regional programming.	Commission DG VIII (later DEV/DEVCO). EDF VII–VIII. PHARE/TACIS (transition instruments, para-development). EIB external mandates. Nascent joint programming concepts.
2000–2009: MDGs, effectiveness	Poverty reduction (MDGs). Contractual ‘partnership’ with ACP under Cotonou. Aid effectiveness agenda. First EU code on division of labour.	Cotonou Agreement (2000). Paris (2005), Accra (2008), Busan (2011) effectiveness principles. EU Code of Conduct on Complementarity and Division of Labour (2007). EU Consensus on Development (2005).	DG DEVCO/EEAS (post-2010), ECHO, EIB external lending. Joint programming pilots.
2010–2015: Coordination	Lisbon Treaty (2009) and consolidation. Rights-based approach mainstreaming. SDGs and PCSD framing. Migration pressures post-2015. Integrated approach to conflicts/crises.	RBA Toolbox and Council conclusions (2014). Council conclusions on HDP/Integrated Approach (2017/2018). New European Consensus on Development (2017).	EEAS/INTPA, ECHO. Blending (EFSD precursor). Joint programming. Coherence reporting.
2016–2019: SDGs, PCD	From MDGs to SDGs. security-development-migration link intensifies. Private capital narrative strengthens. Policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD) narrative.	2017 New European Consensus on Development (2017). EU Global Strategy (2016). Migration Partnership Framework (2016)	External Investment Plan/EFSD (2017). Compacts with partners.
2020–present: Geopolitics	Joint response to COVID-19. Team Europe narrative. resilience. Africa Strategy. External dimension of migration. Green Deal global framing.	Team Europe approach (2020). Joint Communication on a comprehensive Strategy with Africa (2020). Humanitarian action communication (2021).	INTPA/EEAS/ECHO. NDICI programming. Team Europe initiatives (TEIs). Continued Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC) engagement.
	Global Gateway phase I. Connectivity and investment mobilisation. Open strategic autonomy. SDG alignment. AU (African Union)-EU reset (2022).	Global Gateway (GG) Joint Communication (2021). PCSD reframing (2019–2021). EIB Global launch (2022).	EFSD+ under NDICI. EIB Global. TEIs. EU Delegations as coordinators. OECD-DAC/ GPEDC standards.
	Global Gateway phase II (scaling). Competitiveness and partnerships. Reframing EU–OACPS relations.	Announcements to lift GG target. NDICI mid-term reviews. Samoa Agreement provisional application (2024).	INTPA/EEAS. EIB Global. TEIs. OACPS-EU institutions under Samoa protocols.

Source: Authors’ illustration. Chronology based on EU political and legal documents in combination with Bache (2010); Bergmann et al. (2019); Doidge & Holland (2015); and Hurt (2010).

Geopolitical turn

Since 2019, a self-described 'geopolitical Commission' has added new political priorities. The von der Leyen Commissions retained the SDGs and poverty canon as guiding commitments in principle, yet re-weighted priorities through three projects: the European Green Deal, Team Europe, and Global Gateway.

The European Green Deal (2019) has become a primary frame for EU external action in the von der Leyen Commission. It mainstreams climate and environmental objectives across development cooperation and external financing. It pushes the EU to project Green Deal-related rules and standards outward through trade, investment and partnerships (e.g., on sustainable value chains). And, it also ties external engagement more explicitly to the EU's own transition needs, i.e. resilience and 'strategic autonomy' via secure access to clean energy, critical raw materials and diversified supply chains.

The Team Europe approach (2020) is a coordination modality that assembles European actors around joint initiatives and a common 'brand', as well as a co-financing platform and cooperative implementation practices, including joint analysis, programming, financing, and implementation. Relatedly, in 2022, the EIB launched EIB Global as its development arm to intensify operations outside the EU and align with EU external priorities. It operates with EFSD+ guarantees and Team Europe initiatives.

Global Gateway (2021) has become the flagship external initiative of the von der Leyen Commission and was framed as a response to China's Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI). The respective Joint Communication (2021) positions it as the EU's offer for sustainable and values-based infrastructure, aligned with climate goals and the SDGs, implemented through Team Europe and utilising EFSD+ and EIB Global. The spirit of Gateway, as framed by the Commission, was to create 'links and not dependencies' (von der Leyen, 2021). Subsequent statements emphasised scaling ambitions and a pipeline of Team Europe initiatives, including digital, energy and transport corridors. At the same time, the Samoa Agreement, signed in 2023, also renewed the ACP partnership framework.

The 'geopolitical' turn in EU development policy is, arguably, best read not as a hard rupture but as a (far-reaching) reconfiguration. The Samoa Agreement builds on a long lineage from Yaoundé and Lomé through Cotonou and preserves core 'essential elements' but updates the partnership's scope and regional protocols. Likewise, the Team Europe approach continues long-standing efforts to address donor fragmentation. The agenda was already manifest in the '3 Cs' (Coordination, Complementarity, and Coherence) of the Maastricht Treaty at the beginning of the 1990s. The European Green Deal's external elements clearly build on the UN's 2030 Agenda and the Rio legacy by prioritising climate, biodiversity, and the just transition for external action. EFSD+ similarly follows on from a decade of EU blending facilities and the 2017 External Investment Plan, reflecting the Monterrey/Doha/Addis/Sevilla financing-for-development vision of mobilising private capital alongside ODA.

However, notable discontinuities are also evident. Across these most recent 'geopolitical' initiatives, political discourse links development more explicitly to competitiveness, de-risking and strategic autonomy than in earlier periods. Global Gateway links ODA to resilient supply chains and access to critical raw materials. It reimagines development cooperation as connectivity and de-risked investment aligned with European interests, competitiveness and 'strategic autonomy'. In some dossiers, the EU also leans more openly on incentives and conditionalities around migration cooperation, energy transition and regulatory alignment. This explicit strategic framing represents a departure from prior eras. That said, long-standing reference points, such as humanitarian principles, a rights-based approach, and the SDGs, remain in place, at least rhetorically so, notwithstanding shifts in strategic emphasis.

In sum, the current era of development policy builds on and integrates older strands from the historical trajectory into an overtly geopolitical, interest-led narrative. There was broad consensus among interviewees that EU development policy has long been influenced, to some extent, by internal European political and economic interests, despite its orientation towards external development objectives. Interviewees acknowledged that the current shift simply reflects a stronger emphasis on a particular configuration of those interests — though they differed in their assessment of the extent to which this narrative shift has led to a specific policy shift (we return to this topic in Chapter 3).

2.1.2 The ‘normative core’: Continuity and change

Formally, the primary political objective of EU development policy has always been, and continues to be, the eradication of poverty. This objective is grounded in the EU Treaties. Core principles — including the human-rights-based approach (RBA), the humanitarian principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence)³, development effectiveness (Paris-Accra-Busan and GPEDC) and a commitment to policy coherence (transitioning from PCD towards PCSD alongside the 2030 Agenda) — have persisted over time.

The 2017 New European Consensus on Development, though unmistakably rooted in an earlier era, remains formally in force as the authoritative soft law compass and overarching political framework for EU development policy. The NDICI-Global Europe (henceforth: NDICI-GE) Regulation explicitly states the instrument ‘should be guided by the [2017] European Consensus on Development’. The Consensus situates EU action within ‘a rules-based global order, with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its core’ and commits the Union and Member States to SDG-aligned cooperation and a ‘leave-no-one-behind’ ethos. The EU, further, codified a rights-based approach, that is, operational guidance that puts duty-bearers and rights-holders at the centre, via Council conclusions and the Commission’s description of an RBA ‘encompassing all Human Rights’ (Council, 2014). Together, this suggests a degree of stability at the normative core: dignity, rights, equality (including gender equality), and SDG-consistent partnership delivered through country-owned strategies and UN-centred multilateralism (see Table 3).

On the humanitarian side, the EU repeatedly reaffirms that assistance is guided by the four classic principles (‘humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence’) and is allocated strictly based on need. On the development-cooperation side, the Paris/Accra/Busan effectiveness canon remains a reference, contained in the five principles ‘ownership, harmonisation, alignment, results and mutual accountability’, though a looser effectiveness vocabulary, increasingly tied to ‘mutual interests’, is becoming more common in communication. The EU still aims to mainstream this agenda through joint programming, transparency and use of country systems but with uneven uptake in practice, and increasingly complemented, or eclipsed, by Team Europe Initiatives. Further, the Union’s long-standing commitment to policy coherence also still requires that non-aid policies not undermine development aims.

Yet, in recent years, development policy has been marked by several discontinuities. First, the balance between public grant finance and private capital mobilisation has clearly shifted. Since the External Investment Plan (2017) and, more clearly, with EFSD+ under NDICI, guarantees and blending have been

³ Throughout the study we distinguish humanitarian assistance from development cooperation, where appropriate: humanitarian aid is needs-based and guided by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, while development cooperation is oriented towards longer-term poverty eradication and sustainable development. Moreover, it should be noted that the two policies are subject to different legal bases. Whereas the EU’s competence in the field of humanitarian aid is set out in Article 214 TFEU, the competence for development cooperation is set out in Articles 208 ff TFEU. At the same time, both policies overlap in practice — especially in crises and displacement contexts — through the humanitarian-development-peace (‘triple nexus’) approach and through EU instruments that combine crisis response, resilience and longer-term programming. This section references both domains where relevant, while being attentive to their distinct mandates and principles.

central to EU narratives about scale, leverage, and strategic impact. This reorients delivery towards bankable projects and risk-sharing with Development Finance Institutions (DFIs). All interviewed experts mentioned the renewed focus on private sector companies. Grant-based support for social sectors and governance reforms does remain sizable but is not at the centre of political framing. Representatives of a Member State implementing agency and of a development NGO further emphasised the retreat of budget support (which, to be fair, experienced a recent comeback of some form in the context of support to Ukraine; see Chapter 1). Second, connectivity and competitiveness have moved closer to the core of development discourse via Global Gateway, linking partner-country outcomes with EU geo-economic aims: resilient supply chains, digital standards, critical raw materials, and clean energy. The inclusion of increased European competitiveness as an aim in European development policies was echoed by interviewees, some of whom questioned whether development instruments were suitable for this goal. Third, the security-development-migration nexus is more explicit in programming and communications, even as humanitarian principles and the poverty-eradication objective remain formally unchanged. Lastly, PCD has been reframed as PCSD, embedding coherence within a universal SDG logic while also accommodating an increasingly wide set of EU interests.

Table 3: Key normative commitments and current direction of change

Principles and Goals	Textual foundations	Current direction of change
Poverty eradication	New European Consensus on Development (2017)	Formal continuity, but relative deprioritisation in the narrative amid competitiveness and strategic framing. Delivery increasingly channelled through TEIs and investment platforms.
SDGs and multilateralism	2017 Consensus. UN 2030 Agenda. 2016 EU Global Strategy	Sustained alignment, yet political messaging centres more on strategic autonomy and partnerships serving EU interests.
Humanitarian principles	European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid (2008). COM(2021) on humanitarian action	Principles intact. Operational pressure has increased due to nexus/foreign policy linkages and sanctions. Guardrails repeatedly reaffirmed, but risk of instrumentalisation in complex crises persists.
Rights-Based Approach (RBA)	Council conclusions and RBA Toolbox (2014)	Nominal continuity.
Policy Coherence (PCD, PCSD)	PCD Report (2019). SDG-driven PCSD framing	The shift from PCD to broader PCSD under the SDGs is confirmed, but monitoring remains patchy, and there are trade-offs (e.g., Critical Raw Materials – CRMs, CBAM – Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, migration conditionalities).
Gender equality	GAP III (2021–2025)	Still central in the <i>acquis</i> , yet at risk of dilution as the next (Multiannual Financial Framework) MFF proposal re-aggregates instruments.
Climate and green transition	European Green Deal (2019). NDICI climate targets	Marked upgrade: climate became a structuring external-action narrative. The next MFF debate signals possible retuning of earmarks (at least 30 % of the financial envelope for climate objectives).
Private investment and connectivity	Global Gateway (2021)	Strong pivot and scale-up: Gateway reframes cooperation via connectivity and standards. A structural shift toward de-risking and investment mobilisation.
Critical raw materials and resilient value chains	Global Gateway communication. EU strategic autonomy discourse (e.g. Critical Raw Materials Act – CRMA)	New emphasis: supply-chain security and Critical Raw Materials (CRMs) moved near the core of external action under GG. A break in priorities vs. classic poverty-first framing.

Principles and Goals	Textual foundations	Current direction of change
Migration: external dimension	European Agenda on Migration (2015). Partnership Framework (2016)	Intensified salience and clearer use of incentives, conditionality in cooperation with third countries. Enduring tensions with development and humanitarian principles and ownership.
HDP Nexus, Integrated Approach	Council conclusions on the Nexus (2017) and Integrated Approach (2018)	Consolidation. Stronger crisis and peacebuilding framing, sometimes blurring humanitarian independence.
OACPS partnership	Samoa Agreement (2023)	Broader thematic scope (including migration and climate) and updated governance.
Institutional and financing architecture	NDICI-GE (Reg. 2021/947). MTR Council conclusions (2024). Next-MFF (2028–2034) proposals	System-level shift underway: next MFF proposal points to a more strategic, interest-driven external pillar, potential consolidation of instruments, and re-weighting toward competitiveness and flexibility (with implications, in particular, for earmarking and targets).

Source: Authors' illustration.

Overall, the new era is thus perhaps best characterised as a time of 'conflicted continuity'. The canonical development goals persist, but priorities and instruments are undergoing a decisive recalibration.

2.2 Current EU legal framework

2.2.1 Competences

The EU and its Member States share competence for development cooperation (Article 4(4) TFEU). While their respective policies 'complement and reinforce each other' (Article 208(1) TFEU), EU development cooperation policy is to be conducted within the framework of the principles and objectives of EU external action.

EU development cooperation can be based on autonomous EU measures or international agreements. Autonomous EU measures are subject to the ordinary legislative procedure (Article 209(1) TFEU). International agreements are subject to the procedure set out in Article 218 TFEU and require the consent of the European Parliament (Article 218(6)(a)(v) TFEU). In addition, the European Commission increasingly relies on political (partnership) agreements (MoUs) that cover a variety of aspects closely related to EU development cooperation policy. A recent example is the first Clean Trade and Investment Partnership (CTIP) signed by the EU and South Africa, which the European Commission describes as a 'fast and targeted [instrument], designed to match real business opportunities and local development needs' (European Commission, n.d.). The CTIP builds on the EU-South Africa Strategic Partnership and the EU-SADC Economic Partnership Agreement. While its focus is on strengthening supply chain security, decarbonisation and clean tech cooperation, the EC emphasizes that CTIPs are also 'designed to match ... local development needs'⁴. Moreover, partnership agreements such as CTIPs may channel Global Gateway funds⁵.

⁴ Cf. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/factsheet-eu-south-africa-clean-trade-and-investment-partnership-ctip_en.

⁵ The kick-off of CTIP negotiations with South Africa in March 2025 was accompanied by the announcement of a €4.7 billion Global Gateway Investment Package, cf. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_774.

2.2.2 Objectives and scope

While Article 3 TEU sets out the EU's aims and objectives in broad terms, Article 3(5) TEU lists specific objectives to which the EU shall contribute in its external relations. Building on this provision, Article 21 TEU sets out the common objectives of EU external action. Article 21(1) posits that the principles which inspired its own creation also guide the EU's action on the international scene, explicitly mentioning 'democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law'. Article 21(2) then lists the common objectives of the EU's external action as follows:

- (a) safeguard its values, fundamental interests, security, independence and integrity;
- (b) consolidate and support democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law;
- (c) preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security, in accordance with the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, with the principles of the Helsinki Final Act and with the aims of the Charter of Paris, including those relating to external borders;
- (d) foster the sustainable economic, social and environmental development of developing countries, with the primary aim of eradicating poverty;
- (e) encourage the integration of all countries into the world economy, including through the progressive abolition of restrictions on international trade;
- (f) help develop international measures to preserve and improve the quality of the environment and the sustainable management of global natural resources, in order to ensure sustainable development;
- (g) assist populations, countries and regions confronting natural or man-made disasters; and
- (h) promote an international system based on stronger multilateral cooperation and good global governance.

Specifically with a view to development cooperation, Article 208(1) TFEU further specifies 'the reduction and, in the long term, the eradication of poverty' as the EU's 'primary objective'⁶. However, this explicit focus on poverty reduction/eradication, which was introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon⁷, does not mean that combating poverty is now the *only objective* of EU development cooperation (e.g., Cremona, 2014; Eeckhout, 2011). Rather, the provision makes clear that EU development cooperation remains embedded in the broader framework of the principles and objectives of EU external action⁸. The emphasis on poverty reduction/eradication thus indicates the 'particular weight' of this specific objective for the EU's policy formulation (Broberg & Holdgaard, 2015).

⁶ Note that in the context of EU development cooperation policy, 'poverty' is understood as 'multidimensional and relat[ing] to economic, social, environmental, cultural and political aspects', cf. The New European Consensus on Development 'Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future', OJ C 210/01, 2017 (subsequently 'New European Consensus') paras 22 ff.

⁷ Prior to the Treaty of Lisbon, Article 177(1) EC listed 'the sustainable economic and social development of the developing countries, and more particularly the most disadvantaged among them, the smooth and gradual integration of the developing countries into the world economy, [and] the campaign against poverty in the developing countries' as the objectives of EU development cooperation.

⁸ Cf. also Article 205 TFEU. Moreover, Article 208(2) TFEU brings relevant international law and frameworks such as the SDGs or the Addis Ababa Action Agenda into the purview of EU development cooperation, cf. Klamert 2019, para 3.

Despite their binding nature, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) emphasizes that the objectives enshrined in Articles 3 and 21 TEU ‘merely lay down a programme’ (CJEU, C-149/96: para 86) rather than ‘clear and unconditional legal obligations’ (CJEU, C-484/08: para 46). Thus, their implementation depends on concrete measures and actions of the EU and/or its Member States (CJEU, C-149/96: para 86). Importantly, such implementation does not occur in a legal vacuum and the Treaties require the EU to ensure consistency between the different areas of its external action and between these and its other policies (Article 21(3)(2) TEU; cf. Cremona, 2011; Van den Sanden, 2022). That said, due to their lack of direct effect, the EU’s external action objectives do not provide a basis for individuals seeking to challenge EU implementation acts⁹. The CJEU, however, frequently refers to the objectives in competence-related disputes when assessing the choice and scope of legal bases for specific EU measures (CJEU, Opinion 2/15: para 142; C-779/21 to C-799/21: para 133). According to settled case law, ‘the choice of the legal basis for an EU measure must rest on objective factors amenable to judicial review’ (e.g., CJEU, C-180/20: para 32; C-244/17: para 36). Moreover, where an EU measure pursues multiple objectives or has multiple components, the Court applies a centre of gravity-test. If one objective/component is predominant, while the others are merely incidental, the measure must be founded on a single legal basis; by contrast, if the multiple objectives are ‘inseparably linked without one being secondary and indirect in relation to the other[s]’, the measure must principally be founded on the various corresponding legal bases (CJEU, C-377/12: para 34; C-130/10: paras 42 ff). Yet the possibility of relying on multiple legal bases is excluded if the required procedures are incompatible (CJEU, C-377/12: para 34; C-130/10: para 45).

These general considerations also apply when seeking to define and demarcate the scope of the EU’s competence in the field of development cooperation. The CJEU recognises that EU development cooperation ‘is not limited to measures directly aimed at the eradication of poverty but also pursues the general objectives of the European Union’s external action’ (CJEU, C-180/20: para 49; C-377/12: para 37; C-91/05: para 67). While the Court interprets the primary objective of poverty reduction/eradication broadly, referring to the European Consensus and secondary EU law as reflecting the broad scope of EU development cooperation policy (CJEU, C-377/12: paras 42 f; critically Broberg & Holdgaard, 2015), relevant measures may still touch upon other objectives including, for example, preserving peace, preventing conflicts, and strengthening international security, as well as fostering sustainable economic, social and environmental development in developing countries (CJEU, C-180/20: para 49; C-377/12: para 37).

On the one hand, the objectives of development cooperation are thus broad enough to cover ‘measures required for their pursuit [which] concern a variety of specific areas’ (CJEU, C-180/20: para 50; C-377/12: para 38; C-91/05: para 67; C-268/94: para 37). On the other hand, the Court emphasises that in order to fall within the scope of EU development cooperation policy, measures must ‘contribute to the pursuit of that policy’s economic and social development objectives’ (CJEU, C-91/05: para 67). EU development cooperation therefore does not provide a basis for any measure, which somehow contributes to the economic and social development of developing countries. Rather, the Court draws the line where it finds that the ‘main purpose’ of a measure is to implement another policy (CJEU, C-377/12: para 44). Overall, the cases discussed thus show two things: For one, the Court seeks to strike a balance so that EU development cooperation becomes neither ‘devoid of substance’ (CJEU, C-268/94: para 38), nor a fuzzy

⁹ For example, in the context of the CFSP the Court has refused to assess concrete acts in light of the objectives expressed in Articles 3 and 21 TEU, cf., CJEU C-220/14, para 46. Cf. also Larik 2016, 156; Kassoti & Wessel, 2020.

catch-all competence¹⁰. For another, whether measures in specific areas (typically contained in EU agreements with third countries) fall within the scope of EU development cooperation requires a case-by-case assessment taking into account the concrete content of the measure at issue.

An instructive example of the Court's approach is the dispute concerning the EU-Philippines Framework Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation, where the Court had to determine whether the agreement that covered the readmission of nationals in the context of migration could be concluded under the development cooperation competence. There, the Court found that the competence for development cooperation could cover not only declaratory statements but also specific legal obligations regarding the readmission of nationals of the contracting parties. According to the Court, this was because (1) the readmission obligation was contained in a provision on migration and development, without, however, (2) 'being covered at this stage by detailed provisions enabling its implementation', which would have to be fleshed out in a future readmission agreement (CJEU, C-377/12: paras 57 f)¹¹.

In sum, the Treaties impose a 'constant duty' to pursue the objectives set out therein 'within the margins of feasibility' (Larik, 2016: p. 157). Due to their vagueness, the objectives largely function as broad guardrails, providing some normative guidance for EU external action. For example, it can be argued that in light of the changes introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon 'the EU's specific development initiatives must always (also) pursue a goal of poverty reduction' (Broberg & Holdgaard, 2015). On the other hand, development cooperation remains a broad and multifaceted policy field and the CJEU retains its broad understanding of the EU's development objectives, which it developed pre-Lisbon (cf. CJEU, C-377/12: para 19; C-180/20: para 49). According to the Court, 'the eradication of poverty has many aspects' and may therefore require 'the implementation of many development activities' (CJEU, C-377/12: para 42). Consequently, a variety of agreements whose main focus was not on poverty eradication have still been found to contribute to EU development objectives¹². That said, the merely incidental contribution to the economic and social development of developing countries is not sufficient to bring measures mainly pursuing other policies within the scope of EU development cooperation (CJEU, C-377/12: para 44). Thus, for example, an agreement with a developing country in the field of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) also including some assurances of assistance in legislation and capacity-building in law enforcement was not regarded as development cooperation (CJEU, C-658/11).

By way of further substantiation, Article 208(2) TFEU provides that the EU and its Member States must 'comply with their commitments and take account of the objectives that they have approved in the context of the United Nations and other competent international organisations'. The overall effect of the provision, however, remains limited. While the CJEU occasionally refers to international commitments of the EU and/or its Member States (e.g., the Paris Agreement, cf. CJEU, C-541/20 to C-555/20: para 1033), it is

¹⁰ Highlighting the 'constitutional significance' of the proper choice of legal basis in this context, Opinion of Advocate General Mengozzi, delivered on 23 January 2014, CJEU Case C-377/12 para 43.

¹¹ By contrast, the Opinion of Advocate General Mengozzi, paras 71 f, had emphasized that the relevant provision promotes a defensive vision, which 'places European interests first', making 'the link with the objectives pursued by development cooperation appea[r] much more tenuous'. Critical on readmission as part of a 'migration-development nexus' also Silga (2015, p. 451) stating bluntly: 'Regarding the primary objective of long-term poverty eradication, it seems very difficult to imagine how forcibly returning people to a developing country might actually contribute to alleviating poverty'.

¹² Regarded as contributing to both CFSP objectives and development objectives was a contribution by the EU to ECOWAS in the framework of the Moratorium on Small Arms and Light Weapons in CJEU, C-91/05; regarded as contributing to development and trade objectives was a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with Armenia in CJEU, C-180/20; also within the scope of development objectives were clauses covering drug abuse control and cooperation in the protection of intellectual property in a Partnership Agreement with India in CJEU, C-268/94.

important to keep in mind that the objectives approved in the context of the UN are not legally binding commitments. This is also the case for important policy documents, such as the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which contains the SDGs.

2.2.3 NDICI-Global Europe regulation

For a more fine-grained understanding of the EU's approach to development cooperation, it is necessary to take a closer look at secondary legislation, in particular, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument-Global Europe (NDICI-GE) (Regulation 2021/947/EU, OJ L 209/1). The NDICI-GE is financed through Heading 6 ('Neighbourhood and the World') of the multiannual financial framework (MFF 2021–2027) (Council Regulation 2020/2093, OJ L 433 I/11). Apart from the NDICI, Heading 6 also covers pre-accession assistance, humanitarian aid, and the common foreign and security policy. The European Peace Facility was created outside the EU budget to fund actions with military and defence implications under the common foreign and security policy (Lilyanova, 2021). Each of these instruments has its own legal basis. Under the proposed MFF 2028–34, many of these elements, though not the common foreign and security policy and the European Peace Facility, are planned to be merged within the Global Europe proposal (European Commission, 2025a).

The NDICI-GE seeks to 'uphold and promote the Union's values, principles and fundamental interests worldwide, in order to pursue the objectives and principles of the Union's external action, as laid down in Article 3(5) and Articles 8 and 21 TEU', but also adds further objectives, such as combating climate change and irregular migration (Article 3(1)(a) NDICI-GE). These focus areas are justified with reference to 'a new reality' of '[r]egional conflicts, terrorism, economic inequalities and growing migratory pressures, [...] climate change and environmental degradation' (European Commission, 2018b: p. 1). Furthermore, security, despite not being listed as an objective in Article 3 NDICI-GE, features prominently in the NDICI-GE (Art. 4(4), Art. 8(11), Art. 9), including in the rapid response actions, in one of the four thematic programmes, and in the fund for 'capacity building of military actors in support of development and security for development'. This is partly owed to the fact that the NDICI-GE is also the successor to the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) Regulation (Regulation 230/2014/EU, OJ L77/1). In particular the remnant of the IcSP in Article 4(4) which provides for rapid response actions thus allows the pursuit of foreign policy objectives beyond development objectives.

It should be recalled that the NDICI-GE was also the successor to various other pieces of legislation, some of which formed part of EU development cooperation policy,¹³ some of which were part of other EU external actions¹⁴. To safeguard development objectives from being diluted by other EU interests (as anticipated by the impact assessment accompanying the NDICI Regulation: European Commission 2018a, 23), Article 3(4) NDICI-GE stipulates that 93 % of expenditure under the Regulation must fulfil the criteria for Official Development Assistance (ODA). This means they must be used in countries listed as ODA recipients by the OECD Development Assistance Committee, have a concessional character (indicated by a minimum grant element), and serve the economic development and welfare of recipient countries (Rogerson &

¹³ Regulation 2014/233/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a financing instrument for development cooperation for the period 2014–2020, OJ L 77/44; Regulation 2017/1601/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD), the EFSD Guarantee and the EFSD Guarantee Fund, OJ L 249/1.

¹⁴ Regulation 2014/232/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a European Neighbourhood Instrument, OJ L 77/27; Regulation 234/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Partnership Instrument for cooperation with third countries, OJ L 77/77; note how the Commission proposal for the new multiannual financial framework envisages the merging of even more instruments into one Global Europe budget: Commission, 2025a: p. 15.

Ritchie, 2020). According to EC reports on the implementation of the EU's External Action Instruments, this expenditure requirement has consistently been achieved (European Commission, 2022: p. 205; 2023: p. 218; 2024b: p. 204). In part, however, this appears to be due to the continuous renegotiation of ODA's conceptually broad criteria by donor countries, as demonstrated by the cases of concessionality for in-donor refugee costs¹⁵, and security-related spending, which have been subject to much debate (Hynes & Scott, 2013). In 2023, in-donor refugee costs of EU Member States amounted to almost 17 % of ODA reported by Member States (Concord, 2024: p. 16). This appears problematic as such costs – that are spent in the donor country itself – were never intended to account for such a large part of ODA (Staur, 2023).

The EC's current proposal for a new Global Europe Regulation aims to lower the threshold of commitments that must fulfil ODA criteria to 90 % (Article 6(5)). The proposed lowering from 93 % to 90 % can likely be attributed to the inclusion of facilities in the Global Europe Regulation that do not follow development objectives and therefore had no ODA targets previously. However, the Global Europe Proposal goes further by proposing to empower the EC to change this percentage through delegated acts (Article 6(6)). An interviewed representative of a Member State development agency noted that granting such power to the EC would represent a considerable risk to the ODA target, which has served an important function as an anchor of development cooperation in the NDICI-GE. This 'anchoring function' might be pivotal in the years to come, if increasing geopolitical volatility makes the use of development funds for other foreign policy objectives even more tempting.

Curiously, the proposal does not explicitly mention poverty reduction as an objective of the new instrument (Article 4 Global Europe Regulation Proposal). While references to Articles 3(5), 8, and 21 TEU remain, Article 208 TFEU, which prioritises poverty reduction, is only mentioned in recital 23 of the proposed regulation. A representative of another Member State development agency, as well as a representative of a development NGO, also noted with concern that targets for gender equality, social inclusion and human development that were included in the NDICI-GE, are absent in the Global Europe Regulation proposal. EC officials stated that, because they had 'targets to follow', the EC assessed the impacts of Union action on these factors *ex ante*. In other words, the targets contributed to shaping EU development cooperation by being a lens through which action was assessed before being implemented. The omission of development-specific targets is only partly remedied by the proposed climate and environmental spending target in the Proposal for a Regulation establishing a budget expenditure tracking and performance framework and other horizontal rules for the Union programmes and activities (European Commission, 2025c: Art. 4(2)). Interviewees linked the absence of development focussed targets in the proposal with efforts to establish 'maximum flexibility' for the EC in applying funds in response to global challenges, and saw major problems with EU development policy as becoming increasingly 'Commission-driven'.

The NDICI-GE is operationalised through a variety of funding forms, including the EFSD+ and the External Action Guarantee. The EFSD+ aims to achieve the same objectives as the NDICI-GE in general, with the particular focus on the eradication of poverty (Article 31(2)). EFSD+ operations are supported by the External Action Guarantee, with Annex V of the NDICI-GE setting out the priority areas of the EFSD+ operations covered by the External Action Guarantee. While the text of the NDICI-GE emphasises the Fund's objective of poverty eradication, the EFSD+ was also made the 'main financial tool for mobilising

¹⁵ In-donor refugee costs are the costs for refugees and asylum seekers in donor countries; in the first year, these costs can be qualified as ODA (see discussion in Staur, 2023).

investments under Global Gateway', a strategy that does not focus on poverty reduction (European Commission & High Representative, 2021).

The proposed new Global Europe Regulation does not provide for a specific successor to the EFSD+. Instead, the full budget of the Global Europe instrument would be available to support all objectives of the Instrument¹⁶. Unlike in the first EFSD (2017), and the EFSD+ under NDICI-GE, the provisions on blending and budgetary guarantees under the new proposal are no longer guided only by developmental objectives, and rather can be used to fund any objectives that will be stipulated in the new Regulation. This gives more flexibility to the employment of funds but risks a further overshadowing of development objectives in favour of other objectives.

Lastly, it should be noted that the proposal for the Global Europe Regulation is subject to the ordinary legislative procedure. Both the European Parliament and Council as co-legislators can therefore seek changes and thereby shape the eventual outcome. Thus, the identified risks that the current proposal entails for the safeguarding of development objectives, may be resolved in the further legislative process.

2.2.4 Institutional considerations

The NDICI-GE is currently the central autonomous EU legislative and funding instrument in the field of development cooperation. It gives the EC considerable power to implement and concretise the goals of the Instrument, in particular, through adopting delegated acts (cf. Articles 4(6-7); 6(5), 31(4-5), 35(10), 41(9)) and implementing acts.

As regards delegated acts, both the European Parliament and the Council may object under Article 44(6), thereby preventing their entry into force. Moreover, both Parliament and Council could revoke the delegation of power to the Commission (Article 44(3)). Apart from these substantial oversight powers — which neither body has thus far used — the EC has various obligations to inform the Council, the Parliament, and the NDICI committee.

As regards implementing acts, Parliament and Council can neither veto such acts nor revoke the Commission's power to adopt them. That said, the Member States have some control over the Commission's exercise of implementing powers in the comitology procedure (Article 11 Regulation (EU) 182/2011 laying down the rules and general principles concerning mechanisms for control by Member States of the Commission's exercise of implementing powers, OJ L 55/13). In the context of development policies, the relevant committee is the NDICI committee (Art. 45 NDICI-GE).

During our interview, a representative of a Member State implementing agency and former EC employee raised a number of concerns with these arrangements. For one, they noted that the NDICI committee consisted largely of employees of the Member States' Ministries for Foreign Affairs, mostly specialising in foreign policy rather than development cooperation. For another, the EC would often simply provide diplomatic responses to the questions raised in the committee and then proceed as planned, which would show that the committee has essentially very little power to effect changes to policy acts. An NGO representative also expressed frustration with the lack of clarity and transparency regarding funds, especially the use of grants, and called for the European Parliament to more actively inquire into Global Gateway spending (as the Parliament has budgetary oversight; see Art. 319 TFEU).

¹⁶ Note, however, that there are specific objectives set for the five geographic pillars as well as the global pillar in Annex II of the Global Europe Regulation Proposal.

This third point ties in with the overarching concern regarding the lack of transparency and information, especially when it comes to Global Gateway projects (see e.g. Bilal & Teevan, 2024; Eurodad et al., 2024), echoed by several interviewees. As one person, who had previous experience working for the EC, put it: ‘We also have very negative experiences from how Team Europe initiatives are being developed. I mean, there are so many different modalities, and there is no transparency, and you really just have to be in the corridor where somebody mentions something. And then there is a lot of lobbying going on.’ The lack of specific legal regulations governing procedures and the resulting lack of clarity about institutional roles are major concerns for various stakeholders, especially with respect to the governance of Global Gateway projects and Team Europe initiatives. One interviewee who works with investors even remarked that investors themselves found it difficult to adjust to the changing governance structures of Global Gateway, which are not outlined anywhere in the current legal framework. The policy documents offering guidance for Team Europe or Global Gateway fall short of a legal framework and do not establish checks and balances, such as rights to veto (see for Team Europe in particular: European Commission, 2025d; for Global Gateway see: Council, 2022). As one civil society organization (CSO) representative explained, in the absence of clear institutionalised procedures, the extent to which different voices are heard, even where a wide variety of stakeholders is consulted, is determined by underlying power relations.

With regard to the External Action Guarantee and the EFSD+, the EFSD+ Strategic Board is composed of representatives of the EC, the HR/VP, the Member States, and the EIB, while the European Parliament holds observer status. In addition, the operational boards of regional investment platforms advise the Commission in defining priorities and selecting counterparts eligible for the External Action Guarantee (Articles 33 ff.). Under the proposed Global Europe Regulation, this body – with the same composition – is called the ‘Investment Board’ (Article 25). While the EFSD+ Strategic Board serves as an advisory body concerning the strategic orientation of External Action Guarantee investments (except for the Western Balkans)¹⁷ under the EFSD+ and operational guidance was offered by the regional operational boards (Article 34), the Global Europe Investment Board is envisioned to offer both strategic and operational guidance related to the budgetary guarantee and blending instruments as such.

The EC’s proposal for a new Global Europe Regulation moreover explicitly addresses the ‘Team Europe’ approach, which so far has only been touched upon in policy documents as a form of collaboration between the EU, its Member States, the EIB and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). However, while the EC and Member States are called on to ‘aim to closely coordinate their actions’ (Article 11(1)) and to ‘aim to ensure timely consultations and frequent exchanges’ (Article 11(2)), cooperation is not formalised or institutionalised beyond these rather vague provisions. Concerning programming a similar reluctance to formalize at the expense of Commission flexibility is noticeable: Whereas the NDICI-GE foresaw ‘where possible and appropriate’ joint programming (for the multiannual indicative programmes) by the EU and the Member States (Art. 14(4)), the Global Europe Regulation proposal only states that the multiannual indicative programmes shall be based on a variety of different documents, one of which is a ‘joint document between the Union and Member States’ (Art. 15(3) GE Regulation Proposal).

Against this background, several interviewees expressed concerns about the practical implications of this limited institutionalisation. In particular, concerns were raised that the envisaged new Investment Hub

¹⁷ A separate strategic board in the management of the EFSD+ operations for the Western Balkans was established by Article 12 of the IPA III Regulation (Regulation 2021/1529/EU establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance (IPA III), OJ L 330/1). This is not foreseen to continue existing separately in the Global Europe Regulation Proposal.

could intensify negative impacts on local communities, with civil society left out of the project planning phase and corporate interests strongly represented. At the same time, three interviewees viewed the recent proposal of the Commission’s 360-degree approach to Global Gateway projects as a potentially positive development in terms of the institutional set-up for EU development policy. Even so, however, there was consensus among these interviewees that this approach would still need further specification, strengthening and formalisation in order to address the concerns identified.

From an institutional perspective, another noteworthy development is the EC’s increasing reliance on non-binding political (partnership) agreements (Memoranda of Understanding, MoUs) (Koch et al., 2025). This first became apparent in the ‘migration deals’ that were concluded with Turkey and other countries neighbouring the EU since 2015 (Leboeuf, 2020). For ‘traditional’ international agreements on development cooperation, the EC or, in matters of CFSP, the HR/VP can recommend opening negotiations. Yet, according to Article 218 TFEU, the Council must authorise these negotiations as well as the signing and conclusion of an agreement. Moreover, the conclusion of such an agreement requires the consent of the European Parliament (except agreements relating exclusively to CFSP; see Art. 218(6) TFEU). An important example of such an international agreement is the Samoa Agreement¹⁸. The Samoa Agreement, which is the successor to the earlier Cotonou Agreement¹⁹, covers a wide range of topics (human rights, democracy and governance in people-centered and rights-based societies, peace and security, human and social development, inclusive, sustainable economic growth and development, environmental sustainability and climate change, migration and mobility) and forms the framework agreement for relations with individual Member States of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS).

By contrast, in the context of MoU-style partnership agreements, the procedural requirements set out in Article 218 TFEU – including parliamentary consent – do not apply. These legally non-binding agreements may focus on a broad range of issues such as decarbonization, deterring irregular migration, connectivity and raw materials, security and/or energy, and are increasingly considered a cornerstone of the EC’s interactions with third countries (cf. von der Leyen, 2024: p. 5).

3. European interests in the development context

3.1 The politics of a contested but persistent theme

Three points guide our analysis throughout this section. First, interests have always mattered in EU development policy, though to varying extents. Historical work on European aid shows that trade promotion, geopolitical alignment and domestic economic policy formed part of cooperation with ACP countries from the outset (cf. Grilli, 1993; Bartels, 2007; Hurt, 2010). Poverty reduction and human rights emerged later and never *fully* displaced these original motives. For instance, tied aid practices, where recipients were obliged to purchase goods and services from firms in the donor country, were still common well into the 1990s (see, e.g., OECD, 1998). The aid-effectiveness agenda of the 2000s sought to curb such interest-driven practices whenever they were deemed to hinder the effectiveness of aid. Currently, there is a growing political push to reintroduce forms of ‘European preference’ in aid spending. This backstory

¹⁸ Partnership Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and the Members of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States, of the other part, OJEU L 2023/2862.

¹⁹ Partnership agreement between the members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States of the one part, and the European Community and its Member States, of the other part, OJEU L 2000/317.

also suggests that lessons from earlier periods can and should inform an assessment of today's renewed emphasis on donor interests in development cooperation.

Second, some uses of development policy genuinely create joint gains in the realm of global public goods, for example, with respect to climate cooperation or pandemic preparedness. Others are, potentially, one-sided, asymmetrical or come with debatable degrees of mutuality, for example, using aid to secure raw materials, prevent migration, or gain diplomatic leverage. Generally, while the language of mutual interests has analytic merit, it can also blur this distinction (for recent discussions of mutual interest in development cooperation, see Dreher, 2025; Heidland et al., 2025; Dercon, 2025). In the present chapter, we prepare the ground for discussing this tension before exploring it further in Chapter 4, where we identify conditions under which mutual interests are more likely to be developmental rather than serve EU security, commercial, or geopolitical aims.

Third, we work from the assumption that what counts as European interest is not an objective given, as interests are always negotiated and, hence, contested. All three interviewed representatives of Member States' implementing agencies warned against too narrowly defined 'European interests' and reminded us that the question of what truly lies in Europe's interest is also a question of framing. Interviewed NGO and CSO representatives warned more explicitly against assuming that European interests are synonymous with corporate interests in Europe. Just like the principles and goals of development cooperation, European interests are negotiated among EU institutions and Member States and shaped by shifting discourses, for example, on global public goods, mutual benefit, strategic autonomy, competitiveness or geopolitics.

In other words, we take the political reality of interests in development policy seriously. Rather than treating interests as a deviation from an otherwise purely normative EU development policy, we start from the premise that EU development cooperation has, to a certain extent, always reflected a configuration of interests. However, there have been continuous struggles to keep interests in check and to preserve certain core principles of aid giving (see sections 2.1 and 2.2), be it for normative or for instrumental reasons such as 'aid effectiveness'. Interests are always politically defined and continuously renegotiated, and the key analytical questions are, therefore, how these interests are defined, by whom, and with what consequences for development outcomes, partner-country ownership, and coherence with the Treaties' overarching poverty-reduction objective. Against this background, in the next section we derive a typology of EU interests in development cooperation based on political documents. We then trace how new interest configurations have shaped the debate in recent years. Chapter 4 will then subject these new interests to a coherence test.

3.1.1 A typology of EU interests in development cooperation

For the purposes of this study, interests are understood as politically salient, relatively stable goals that EU actors seek to advance via development policy instruments, beyond or alongside the legally defined poverty-reduction objective. This builds on donor-interest debates in the aid literature, which commonly distinguish economic/commercial benefits (trade, investment, export promotion), geopolitical and security benefits (allies, stability, migration control, counter-terrorism) and normative, values-based benefits (projecting a particular identity or order) and which commonly separate these from mutual and global-public-goods benefits. For recent discussions in that vein, see e.g. Dreher (2025), Heidland et al. (2025) and Dercon (2025).

Table 4: A typology of development-related interests

Domain	Older, persistent interests	Newer, salient interests
<i>Trade and production structures</i>	Securing export markets for EU goods and services (e.g. trade preferences, Lomé/Cotonou). Access to cheap raw materials and agricultural products.	Advancing EU firms' position in global value chains. Investment promotion. Using connectivity and infrastructure (Global Gateway) to expand the EU's economic presence in strategic corridors.
<i>Security, stabilisation and crisis management</i>	Cold War-era alignment and stabilisation of friendly regimes. Post-1990s state- and peacebuilding.	Explicit security-development nexus. Using ODA as a crisis-response tool (e.g. EU neighbourhood). Focus on counter-terrorism and stability of regimes considered as partners in migration control or resource supply.
<i>Migration management and demographic concerns</i>	Long-standing concern with irregular migration, but often marginal in classic development discourse.	Since the mid-2010s, migration has been central, addressing so-called 'root causes of irregular migration', strengthening border management and readmission through ODA.
<i>Climate, energy and environmental concerns</i>	Support for multilateral environmental agreements. Some climate mainstreaming.	Climate diplomacy as core external priority. Using development finance to support EU Green Deal objectives, including decarbonisation of value chains. Securing access to critical raw materials and low-carbon energy sources for EU transition (e.g. Global Gateway projects).
<i>Geopolitical and systemic competition</i>	Maintaining influence in traditional spheres (ACP, neighbourhood) <i>vis-à-vis</i> other Western donors, Soviet Union, etc.	Explicit framing of development policy as a geostrategic tool in an era of great-power competition (notably <i>vis-à-vis</i> China and, to a lesser extent, Russia and the Persian Gulf). Use of Global Gateway, Team Europe and NDICI guarantees to project EU power, support like-minded partners and promote strategic autonomy and de-risking.
<i>Normative, identity-based and reputational interests</i>	Projection of the EU as promoter of human rights, democracy, gender equality and multilateralism. Rules-based order.	Reframing EU identity as a 'geopolitical' or even 'lifestyle' superpower that can combine values with hard interests. Defending the multilateral order against rivals.
<i>Domestic political and bureaucratic interests</i>	Maintaining development budgets. Sustaining national implementing agencies. Visibility for Member States.	Using development policy to show responsiveness to domestic concerns (migration, jobs, Ukraine war). Expanding roles of non-traditional actors (finance, interior, defence ministries, private sector).

Source: Authors' illustration, based on a synthesis of sources (Grilli, 1993; Hurt, 2010; Olsen, 2005; Bartels, 2007; Holden, 2016; Gulrajani, 2017; Furness et al., 2020)

Recent empirical work on donor benefits and mutual interests confirms that these dimensions can co-exist and that donors, including the European Commission, increasingly make explicit reference to win-win rationales (e.g. DAC, 2025). For the EU, interests manifest mainly in three overlapping arenas beyond the treaty-level mandates addressed in the previous section: first, grand strategies such as the Green Deal or Global Gateway; second, budgetary and institutional politics (for example, MFF negotiations, etc.); and third, Member State and domestic politics.

Table 4 presents a typology of development-related interests in EU development policy. It is deliberately schematic and intended as a guiding map for the analysis that follows rather than a rigid classification. The typology organises interests first by substantive domain (economic, security, climate, migration, etc.) and then distinguishes older or persistent interest logics from new or newly salient ones that have gained prominence since the 2010s. Of course, many concrete policies cut across several categories in practice. This typology will be used analytically in the remainder of this study to trace how the relative weight and

interaction of these interest clusters have shifted over time, how they are articulated in key political texts, and where synergies and tensions with development objectives lie.

Overall trajectory and turning points

As already laid out in section 2.2, early European development policy in the post-colonial and Cold War era tied association, preferential trade and aid to political alignment and economic integration with former colonies. Interests in that era centred on access to raw materials, export markets and political influence, framed within North-South solidarity or anti-communism.

In the post-Cold War era from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, there was an emphasis on poverty reduction, human rights and good governance. This was influenced by and converging with the MDGs and the aid-effectiveness agenda (see Chapter 2). Economic interests did not disappear but were kept in the background in EU-level rhetoric. In the late 2000s, the Lisbon Treaty then introduced a new legal framework for EU external action and the explicit requirement that all external policies be conducted in line with the objectives – a mix of values and interests – found in Article 21 TEU. At the same time, the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing domestic austerity reinforced pressure to demonstrate ‘value for money’ and national returns. The Agenda for Change (2011) advocated a stronger focus on inclusive growth and private-sector-led development. Already at this time, CSO critiques warned of the risk of diverting aid to economic and security interests (cf. Concord, 2011).

The migration crisis and increased salience of climate politics marked a re-politicisation of EU development cooperation. The New European Consensus on Development (2017) integrates the Agenda 2030 but also states that the EU and its Member States will ‘step up efforts to address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement, and to promote the better management of migration in partner countries’ (European Consensus on Development, 2017: p. 17). It commits to stronger links between development, security and migration policy. In parallel, the proliferation of special instruments, notably the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, institutionalised the use of ODA to pursue EU migration-management objectives. Analysts increasingly describe EU development policy as a crisis-response tool, especially after the Eurozone crisis and later the COVID-19 pandemic (Koch et al., 2021).

The launch of the European Green Deal, NDICI-GE and the Global Gateway strategy from 2019 onwards mark a further shift towards geo-economic and climate-industrial interests (see Chapter 2.2.). NDICI merges most geographic and thematic instruments and explicitly couples poverty reduction with ‘uphold[ing] and promot[ing] the Union’s values, principles and fundamental interests worldwide’ (Art 3(1)(a), Regulation (EU) 2021/947). Its investment arm, EFSD+, is designed to mobilise private finance for infrastructure, energy, digital, and other sectors aligned with EU strategic priorities. Interviewees echoed the increased importance of the private sector for the EU’s current development policy. Global Gateway, officially a strategy to promote sustainable connectivity and support partners’ strategic autonomy, is widely read as the EU’s response to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (cf. Bilal & Teevan, 2024; Furness, 2024). It is a central vehicle for securing infrastructure, critical raw materials and influence in the Global South. Recent policy debates and media coverage frame it as an instrument for ‘geopolitical relevance’ and for competing with China and other powers in Africa, Latin America and Asia (Bilal & Teevan, 2024; Eurdodad et al., 2024). Five interviewees mentioned the EU’s aim of competing with China or, as one implementing agency representative put it, other ‘systemic rivals’ of the Union.

Looking back, the balance between economic, security, climate and normative interests has changed considerably across these phases. This is not least because the underlying EU political economy has changed, notably through EU enlargement, several major crises, the rise of far-right parties, and, most recently, an increasingly contested multilateralism. These have all been major catalysts which have shaped interest configurations. On the other hand, some continuities are equally striking. Long-standing links between aid, trade and European private-sector interests, the recurring securitisation of development in times of crisis, and enduring claims that European and partner interests can be reconciled through enlightened self-interest have been with us since the outset of EU development policy (cf. Raffer & Singer, 2001; Olsen, 2005; Holden, 2016; Zajączkowski, 2016).

3.1.2 Old and new interest configurations

How do the new interests outlined in Table 4 tie in with or depart from earlier interest configurations?

First, the currently salient configuration of EU interests in *trade and production* structures links development cooperation to global value chains, investment promotion and connectivity. Under NDICI-GE and Global Gateway, development finance is increasingly deployed to 'de-risk' private investment, build transport and digital corridors and support regulatory convergence in ways that insert both EU firms and EU standards in partner economies. The emphasis is on trade-led growth, integration into global markets and securing reliable, rules-based conditions for European investors and exporters (cf. European Commission & High Representative, 2021; Bilal & Teevan, 2024; Pérez, 2024).

This could be argued to build on, but also to rework, an older configuration in which trade preferences and association agreements with the Global South served to maintain privileged access for European manufactures (most notably, under the Yaoundé regime of reciprocal trade preferences, but also under Lomé). The early approach was also meant to secure supplies of raw materials, while offering some, though often relatively limited, tariff advantages for selected imports from partner countries (cf. Hansen & Jonsson, 2014; Martin, 2014; Migani 2013; Raffer & Singer, 2001). As noted in section 2.1.1, in that early period, the dominant North-South model was still one of post-colonial preferential trade and commodity protocols, framed in the language of partnership but focused mainly on stabilising export earnings and preserving historical economic ties. Today, there continues to be a focus on the coupling of aid and trade, while the main concern has shifted to positioning EU firms in strategic value chains, the increased use of complex financial instruments, and the stronger focus on connectivity and standards.

Regarding the domain of *security*, EU development policy has contained a stabilisation logic for decades: the EU-ACP partnership under Cotonou embedded peacebuilding and conflict prevention in cooperation (Cotonou Agreement, Arts. 8 and 11), and EU strategy documents progressively framed development as part of a broader security agenda (European Security Strategy 2003; EU Global Strategy 2016; European Consensus on Development 2017). A significant share of EU external spending on conflict prevention, crisis response and stabilisation was nevertheless channelled through dedicated 'stability' instruments, notably the 'Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace' (IcSP), which is not a development finance instrument. The IcSP's scope was later widened to allow, under exceptional circumstances, capacity building for partner security actors (Regulation 2017/2306/EU, OJ L 249/1). Under President Von der Leyen's 'geopolitical Commission', several major external financing instruments were merged into the NDICI-GE, which has widened the political space for security- and stabilisation-oriented programming, even though the security dimension of Global Gateway remains limited to supply-chain resilience (see Jones et al., 2018).

The creation of NDICI-GE, generally, contributed to blurring what counts as development cooperation at EU level because it merged formerly separate envelopes (development, neighbourhood and foreign-policy/crisis instruments) into a single framework and added flexibility features. NDICI thus combines long-term, poverty- and SDG-oriented programming with a rapid-response pillar and an 'emerging challenges and priorities' cushion that are meant to address stability and broader external-policy priorities (NDICI-GE Regulation). This has allowed for issues of crisis response and the security of the European neighbourhood to gain prominence in spending. In practice, COVID-19 and Russia's war against Ukraine have absorbed a large share of flexible funding (European Commission, 2024a; European Court of Auditors, 2023).

Importantly, this is not the same as using NDICI to fund military operations: the NDICI-GE Regulation contains explicit exclusions and limits regarding military expenditure and defence-related support (Art. 9). In addition, ODA eligibility rules also remain restrictive when it comes to security and peacekeeping activities (OECD, 2024). Still, since 2022, EU institutions and Member States have deployed an unprecedented package of macro-financial assistance, budget support, humanitarian aid and reconstruction funding for Ukraine. For EU institutions, spending on Ukraine alone accounted for around half of their net ODA in 2024 (cf. Chapter 1). The package is complemented by large-scale military support through the off-budget European Peace Facility and a dedicated Ukraine Assistance Fund, which, to be sure, does not use development funds. Whether the focus on Ukraine resembles an exception or foreshadows a strategic reorientation towards aligning development cooperation with strategic security objectives in the neighbourhood, remains to be seen.

In the current configuration, *migration* has also become a further central organising interest in parts of EU development cooperation (cf. European Court of Auditors, 2024b; Castillejo, 2016; Talleraas et al., 2025). Development instruments are used to pursue a bundle of objectives in this sphere, in particular, addressing irregular migration, supporting border management and asylum systems in partner countries, incentivising readmission and returns, and financing projects in regions of origin and transit deemed critical for EU migration control. This has arguably been triggered by strong domestic political pressures in Member States and by institutional actors such as DG HOME and interior ministries, whose priorities have gained growing influence over external funding (cf. Zaun & Nantermoz, 2023; Cassarino's 2025).

Historically, migration concerns, while more diffuse, were also always present, and there has been a longstanding wish to manage irregular migration and to portray development as a way to create a viable alternative to migration. Before the mid-2000s, however, migration appeared mostly at the margins of development discourse as an issue of brain drain, remittances or refugee protection. There were relatively few dedicated instruments aimed at steering mobility through development cooperation. Even when the 'global approach to migration' was adopted in 2005 (later extended in 2007/08, and re-framed in 2011), it took time before substantial aid resources were actually linked to migration objectives (cf. Niemann & Zaun, 2023; Faure et al., 2015). In contrast, what we are seeing now is certainly the greater scale and centrality of migration management as an explicit interest in programming decisions, the institutionalised use of development envelopes to induce cooperation on returns and borders, and the depth of linkages with internal security policies. The emphasis on migration in EU development policy has led to cuts to existing programmes of about 4.5 billion in 2024 (Picum, 2024). Regarding the evolution of EU external migration policies over time, see Niemann & Zaun (2023).

Currently, EU development policy is deeply intertwined with the Union's *climate and energy* transition agenda. There is a 30 % target for climate-related funding in NDICI (Recital 49 NDICI-GE Regulation), and

climate finance is becoming increasingly entangled within the development policy landscape. Development cooperation has become a vehicle for supporting Green Deal priorities, supporting partner-country energy transitions and, crucially, securing access to low-carbon energy and critical raw materials needed for European industries (Küblböck et al., 2025; Bofo et al., 2025). Infrastructure, energy and mining projects in partner countries are framed as contributions to both global climate goals and EU energy security and are typically pursued under the Global Gateway banner (Council, 2024c).

In earlier configurations, pre-NDICI, environmental and climate concerns were primarily cross-cutting issues and served as support for global environmental conventions (see Chapter 2). Thus, while projects on natural resource management, conservation, or adaptation existed, they did not shape the overall orientation of development cooperation. Energy security interests were focused on conventional oil and gas supply chains and were less systematically linked to development instruments. The latter are now systematically linked to renewables. Therefore, while environmental and energy issues have long been part of external relations, there is now a renewed centrality of climate as a core *raison d'être* of external action, and an explicit articulation of development interventions with decarbonisation, energy security, and raw materials strategies. That said, the current Global Europe proposal reverses that trend and does not foresee a separate climate target (see GE Regulation proposal; Jones, 2025).

The present interest configuration treats development cooperation as an instrument in broader *geopolitical competition*, particularly *vis-à-vis* China and, to a lesser extent, Russia and the Gulf states (cf. Koch et al., 2025; Furness, 2023). Global Gateway, Team Europe Initiatives and revamped partnership strategies are all framed not only in terms of supporting partner-country development but also as ways to demonstrate that the EU remains a consequential global actor. The goal is to offer an alternative model of connectivity to China's Belt and Road, and to cement alliances with like-minded countries in a more fragmented international order (European Commission & High Representative, 2021; European Commission, 2021b). This includes a focus on strategic regions such as the Indo-Pacific, the Horn of Africa or parts of Latin America where influence is contested (see Council, 2024c).

Earlier, during the post-Cold War phase of EU external action dominated by a *norms- and values-centred framing* (cf. Chapter 2), development cooperation was certainly part of the EU's identity as a global actor. Yet the primary narrative was one of multilateralism, universal norms and post-colonial partnership, less explicitly framed around rivalry with specific powers. Even in the Cold War era, geopolitical interests were mediated through decolonisation and East-West competition, but without the current emphasis on value-chain competition and infrastructure races. Development continues to be used as an expression of global presence and as a tool to cultivate alliances, but now with far greater emphasis given to explicit great-power competition and to programme selection and branding as means of assertive positioning in this landscape (see Damen, 2022 and Kassoti & Wessel, 2020 for the more recent 'values vs interests' tension).

Since the 1990s, the EU has continued to portray itself as a promoter of human rights, democracy, gender equality, social inclusion and multilateralism through its development policy. Today's configuration, in contrast, is situated within a more openly dual identity, namely the Union as both a values-based actor, on the one hand, and a geopolitical or strategic one, on the other. Development instruments sustain this self-image through funding for civil society, support for electoral processes, human-rights dialogues and visibility measures that underline European solidarity and leadership on global norms.

In the previous configuration, especially from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, normative ambitions were arguably more central in the official narrative (see Chapter 2). Documents and speeches emphasised the

uniqueness of the EU as a 'civilian' or 'normative power' whose external actions were primarily driven by universal values rather than interests (cf. Manners, 2002). At the same time, even then, reputational considerations, that is, the desire to be seen as a leader on development and human rights, already played a role in shaping approaches to development cooperation. There is arguably a strong continuity in the enduring importance of identity and reputation — the EU has consistently used development policy to project a particular image of itself — yet normative claims now coexist more explicitly than before with strategic and material interests, with tensions between rights-based rhetoric and other priorities becoming increasingly visible to observers and partners. The Union's self-understanding, or identity, in its role as a provider of development assistance has thus changed.

In sum, the current configuration places considerable weight on domestic and EU interests in the shaping of development cooperation. Development budgets are expected to demonstrate 'value for money' to taxpayers, support domestic employment and businesses, and respond to salient electoral concerns such as migration, energy prices or perceived competition from China (cf. Gulrajani, 2017). The Commission has swapped 'development cooperation' language for 'international partnerships' (DG INTPA, 2021). Within the EU machinery, a wider range of Directorates-General and national ministries beyond traditional development portfolios seek influence over external funds, including finance, interior, defence and industry. This creates complex bureaucratic coalitions around specific themes (such as migration or climate) and fosters competition for control over instruments like NDICI and EFSD+ (see Jones et al., 2018; Lundgren et al., 2022).

Historically, domestic and bureaucratic interests were, of course, always present. Aid was used to support national implementing agencies, signal international responsibility and secure diplomatic standing, and ministries defended their mandates. Division of labour among donors and the 3 C agenda (Coordination, Complementarity, and Coherence) (see Chapter 2) proved notoriously hard to implement (European Commission, 2007; Council, 2009). Yet, development cooperation often enjoyed a somewhat more *distinct identity*, with dedicated ministries and agencies able to articulate a relatively coherent development perspective, even if they still had to negotiate with foreign affairs or finance.

What has remained persistent is the way in which development policy is embedded in domestic politics and institutional self-interest. What has shifted is the intensity of cross-sectoral competition for development resources. This includes the explicit expectation that aid will serve multiple domestic agendas simultaneously and that development actors must frame their work in terms of delivering co-benefits to European societies to retain political support. This can be read as the result of a wider crisis of legitimacy of the policy field of development cooperation (see Kumar et al., 2025; Sumner & Klingebiel, 2025). As one implementing agency representative put it: The emphasis on co-benefits 'is a way, also, to save this [development] policy, basically'.

3.1.3 The political processes of defining European interests in development policy

Article 3(5) TEU stipulates that '[i]n its relations with the wider world, the Union shall uphold and promote its values and interests'. Its wording indicates that the provision imposes a general obligation on the EU to actively advance both its values and interests in its external relations. Yet, neither its normative effect nor its substantive content is entirely clear (see Kassoti & Wessel, 2020). One aspect that appears remarkable

is that while the EU's values are set out in Article 2 TEU (cf. Wessel & Kaspiarovich, 2022), the interests mentioned in Article 3(5) TEU are not further specified in the Treaty²⁰.

As noted earlier, this is also true for EU development cooperation. Rather than a legally predefined set, interests are the outcome of political struggles, institutional bargaining and discursive work. Determining what EU interests are, which interests are prioritised, and how development instruments are mobilised in their service occurs in arenas that cut across law, budgeting, organisational mandates and public narratives. Understanding EU development policy today, therefore, requires not only cataloguing interests, as we have done throughout this Chapter, but also tracing the political processes through which they are defined and stabilised.

As discussed in further detail through sections 2.2 and 3.2, Articles 21 TEU and 208 TFEU set out a broad menu of external action objectives, including safeguarding the Union's values, interests and security, promoting sustainable development and the eradication of poverty, preserving peace, supporting democracy and human rights, and contributing to environmental protection. We argue that these provisions are deliberately open-ended. They do not specify how to balance poverty reduction against security, trade, climate or migration concerns. Instead, they create a permissive legal space in which different coalitions can advance their preferred readings. The interpretation (and thus concretisation) of constitutionally broadly stated interests thus lies with policymakers and is subject to processes of political negotiation.

At the highest level, the EUCO is tasked with identifying the EU's strategic interests and objectives. Where no such guidelines exist for EU development cooperation, the 2017 European Consensus provides important guidance and functionally fills this gap (Hoffmeister, 2025). Against this backdrop, an important arena is inter-service and inter-institutional politics, including Member States and key stakeholders such as the business community and organised civil society. Within the Commission and the broader EU institutional framework, different Directorates-General and bodies represent distinct policy logics. DG INTPA, DG MENA, DG ENEST and the European External Action Service (EEAS) carry the legacy of development and foreign-policy communities that tend to emphasise long-term structural change, partnership and multilateralism. DG HOME, DG TRADE, DG ENER or DG GROW come with their own imperatives around migration management, market access, energy security and industrial competitiveness. National ministries for development, foreign affairs, interior, defence, finance or economy add further priorities and preferences. The political definition of European interests is, in practice, the result of how far these various actors succeed in inserting their priorities into programming documents, country allocations, instrument mandates and joint initiatives.

It is noteworthy in this context that, though there is generally convergence in the way EU interests are characterised by the EUCO and the Council, there are also differences in nuance. For instance, the conclusions of the EUCO show a preoccupation with the Union's geopolitical positioning, particularly regarding Ukraine, Russia, and the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood²¹. Climate neutrality is rarely

²⁰ This silence is striking, given that the TEU refers to the EU's interest(s) no fewer than 14 times, sometimes adding qualifiers that suggest different (types of) interests ('fundamental interests', 'strategic interests', 'general interest'). Importantly, the Treaty also refers to the common or general interests of Member States. This juxtaposition indicates that the Treaty presupposes the existence of EU interests which are independent of or go beyond the sum of the interests of its Member States (Ruffert, 2022).

²¹ Conclusions on Ukraine are present in all the European Council Conclusions cited here. Further conclusions concern 'the Middle East', usually referring to the war in Gaza, less frequently to the situation in Lebanon, and Syria, e.g. in EUCO, 2025a, paras. 4 ff; EUCO, 2024b paras. 20 ff; EUCO, 2024c paras. 4 ff; concerning Türkiye EUCO, /24c paras. 9 ff; concerning Moldova EUCO, 2025c

portrayed as a European interest, and if so, under the heading of the overall goal of competitiveness (EUCO, 2025a; 2025b). In its conclusions on the revision of the MFF, the EUCO advocates for substantially increasing funds for Ukraine, for Migration and Border Management, the European Defence Fund, the Flexibility Instrument, and the Solidarity and Aid Reserve (EUCO, 2024a). While the EUCO also proposes increasing funds for the 'Neighbourhood and the World' heading, these funds are framed to prevent migration to Europe (EUCO, 2024a: para 11).

The Council, on the other hand, in several conclusions, insists on the SDGs as the yard stick for EU development policy (e.g., Council, 2025b; 2024a; 2024b), stresses the importance of ODA (Council, 2024b), and states that the Global Gateway's investment-driven model 'may not be suitable or effective' in all partner countries (Council, 2025b: Annex para 9). Regarding priorities for EU action within the UN, which are set by the Council, the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda generally play a strong role, as does climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution (Council, 2025a). Security is framed as human security rather than carrying any overtly geopolitical meaning.

Returning to the issue of political process, concrete strategies such as the 2016 EU Global Strategy, the Green Deal, the Strategic Compass or the Global Gateway then move one step closer to practice by re-ordering fundamental but abstract objectives in light of changing circumstances. They 'translate' those objectives into more concrete political projects, for example, a 'resilient' Union, a 'geopolitical' Commission, 'strategic autonomy', a 'green and digital' twin transition. Development policy is integrated into these projects and becomes one instrument among others through which these overarching interests are pursued.

The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa is a good example. Created in 2015 in response to increased arrivals of asylum seekers and migrants, it was officially mandated to promote stability and address the 'root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa' (European Commission, 2015: p. 1). Its governance brought together the Commission, Member States and EEAS, yet interior ministries and DG HOME assumed a prominent role in steering these priorities (cf. Faure et al. 2015; Castillejo, 2016; European Court of Auditors, 2024b). The choice of focal countries, the emphasis on border management and surveillance, and the use of development funds to leverage cooperation on readmission and returns demonstrate how a particular understanding of European interests, fixated on containing irregular migration, became embedded in programming. Development actors were not absent, and many projects resembled conventional livelihood or resilience initiatives. Yet, the fund illustrates how crisis-driven political pressures and institutional configurations can tilt the balance between development and other interests within a single instrument.

Budgetary and regulatory decisions represent a further arena of interest definition. They play an important role in prioritising certain interests and goals. The negotiation of the MFF and of the NDICI-GE Regulation is a good illustration. Here, the Commission, the Council, and the Parliament clashed over the architecture of external financing (cf. Jones et al., 2018; Lundgren et al., 2022). To what extent should formerly distinct development instruments be merged with neighbourhood and foreign-policy tools? How much flexibility should the Commission enjoy to reallocate funds between geographic and thematic priorities? Should there be dedicated envelopes for migration, security or crisis response, and how tightly should they be constrained by the poverty-reduction objective? The final Regulation represents a compromise. It confirms

para 28 f; EUCO, 2025b para 56 f; concerning the Western Balkans, EUCO, 2025c para 40; concerning Georgia, EUCO 2024d paras 36 ff; EUCO 2024e paras 45 ff.

poverty eradication and the SDGs as primary objectives, but also states, in language mirroring the Treaties, that the instrument shall promote the Union's values and interests. It creates specific windows for migration, security and investment, and it equips the Commission with rapid-response tools that can be adapted to emerging political priorities. In this way, what might look like technical decisions on headings and sub-headings becomes a codification of which interests will have privileged access to EU external resources.

The discursive element is clearly also significant. Interests are not only negotiated behind closed doors but are assembled and legitimised through public and bureaucratic language. Phrases such as 'mutual interests', 'win-win partnerships', 'tackling the root causes of irregular migration' or 'supporting strategic autonomy' play an important role in rallying support and smoothing over tensions. They allow very different objectives, such as poverty reduction, export promotion, migration control, climate mitigation, critical raw materials, or the assertion of a geopolitical role to be presented as part of a single, coherent agenda. The Global Gateway strategy offers a case in point. Officially, it promises 'smart, clean and secure' connectivity, high social and environmental standards and a 'positive offer' for partner countries (European Commission, 2021; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2021). At the same time, political speeches and think-tank analyses explicitly describe it as the EU's answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative and as a vehicle for securing infrastructure, supply chains and influence in strategic regions (cf. Bilal & Teevan, 2024; Furness, 2024). The label Global Gateway thus condenses and partly conceals a bundle of economic, geopolitical and normative interests, making them appear mutually reinforcing.

As shown below in section 3.2, the relevant Treaty provisions contribute little to clarifying *what* EU interests are, despite mentioning them and containing provisions regarding who is responsible for their formulation. While they refer to 'the interests of the Union' and assign roles to the institutions (and, in foreign and security policy, to the European Council), they do not specify which interests should be pursued in a given domain, how to prioritise competing objectives, or how to trade them off against the legally stated development aims. For analytical purposes, this means that the study of EU interests in development policy cannot be limited to a review of relevant Treaty provisions. It must also encompass close reading of key political texts, attention to institutional and domestic politics, and sensitivity to the language through which interests are framed. The Treaty provisions identify a wide range of open-ended objectives that can be weighted differently and thus support very different policy orientations – a more solidary, poverty-centred policy, a security-driven crisis response at Europe's borders, or a mandate for geo-economic competition and green diplomacy. Because the objectives set out in the Treaties are manifold and open-ended, the boundaries they impose on policymakers are limited. Which of the various readings should prevail is thus not primarily a question of legal interpretation but of political contestation.

Contestation and conflicts

Once one looks at European interests as politically contested and negotiated rather than given, the current landscape of EU development policy appears as a field of complex compromises rather than a neat hierarchy. Interests associated with migration management, climate and energy, connectivity and critical raw materials, private-sector promotion or domestic political responsiveness coexist and overlap with long-standing commitments to poverty reduction, human rights and multilateralism. They are not always incompatible, but they pull in different directions and create tensions that need to be managed at the level of programming and implementation. There are, of course, questions of degrees: some interests clearly

pull in different directions; others only sometimes and depending on how they are configured and on how tensions are managed.

Migration is perhaps the clearest example of this ambiguity. As noted above, instruments such as the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa and migration-related actions under NDICI-GE (pursued through the thematic programme on migration and forced displacement) link development spending, in part, to objectives including reducing irregular migration, strengthening border management and supporting return and reintegration. Official discourse frames this as addressing the 'root causes' of irregular migration and as part of comprehensive, mutually beneficial partnerships, including support for refugees/displaced people and host communities. In reality, the empirical evidence (cf., for example, Talleraas, 2025) that development cooperation reduces irregular migration in the short- to medium-term is weak. More importantly, though, many partner governments' priorities lie in expanding legal mobility, protecting their citizens abroad or addressing domestic political grievances rather than in acting as Europe's border guards (Talleraas, 2025). The same projects can thus be read as efforts to promote livelihoods and resilience in poor regions, as instruments to buy cooperation on containment, or as a mix of both. CSOs and some Member States have criticised what they see as the instrumentalisation of aid for migration control. They warn that the poverty-reduction mandate risks being displaced by short-term political imperatives originating in EU domestic debates (cf. Latek, 2017).

A second arena of contestation concerns the intersection of climate, energy and critical raw materials. On paper, the EU's commitment to support partner countries' green transitions and to align development cooperation with the Paris Agreement and the SDGs is fully compatible with its own interest in decarbonising its economy. In this vein, the EU's climate related spending under ODA does focus significantly on green energy generation, grid extensions and decarbonisation. However, there is also a scramble for access to lithium, cobalt, rare earths and other critical minerals, and the push to develop green hydrogen or renewable-energy corridors, which have the Union's security-of-supply and industrial-competitiveness concerns in mind. Strategic Partnerships on Raw Materials, Global Gateway flagships and EFSD+-backed infrastructure projects are presented as 'mutually beneficial', but are regularly perceived to prioritise export-oriented extraction and long-distance energy exports over local value addition, energy access and diversification of partner economies (cf. Küblböck et al., 2025). Governments and social movements in parts of Africa and Latin America have begun to push back against what they perceive as a new wave of 'green extractivism' driven by a Northern decarbonisation agenda. In such cases, the same initiative can be described as supporting partner-country development and climate resilience, or as primarily serving EU industrial and geopolitical interests, depending on which aspects one foregrounds.

Third, the expansion of private finance and blending instruments under NDICI and its predecessors reveals another line of tension. The turn to guarantees, risk-sharing and blending of private capital is justified by reference to the scale of investment needed to achieve the SDGs and by the desire to involve European firms and financial institutions as partners in development. It also responds to domestic calls for 'modernising' aid and ensuring that scarce budgetary resources catalyse larger flows (and such calls have, for instance, been met by the OECD through an expansion of the rules governing ODA eligibility). Yet evaluations and independent analyses have repeatedly questioned whether these instruments disproportionately favour commercially bankable projects in middle-income countries, leaving more fragile, less developed states behind (Pérez et al. 2023, 2025). More fundamentally, these instruments have

raised the question as to whether development additionality²² is conflated with the profitability for European investors (cf. Attridge & Engen, 2019). Here, too, interest configurations are mixed. There may be genuine potential for developmentally useful investments, but they are embedded in a political economy that also seeks to create markets and opportunities for European capital.

Finally, the definition of European interests in development is continually contested between EU-level and Member State actors – and between the different policy communities within them. Some Member States have traditionally defended a strong poverty focus and multilateral orientation (especially Nordic countries, in particular Sweden; cf. Kjær et al., 2022). Others have consistently linked ODA to trade promotion, security or migration management. Parliament, audit bodies and civil-society coalitions periodically challenge the drift of policy, pointing to incoherencies between legal objectives and practice. That has been the case, for example, when ODA is counted toward in-donor refugee costs (Concord, 2024), when large shares of development budgets are used in response to crises at home or in the immediate neighbourhood (Chadwick, 2022), or when partnerships are formed with repressive regimes on the grounds of stability or migration cooperation (e.g., concerning the Strategic Partnership on raw materials with Rwanda: European Parliament, 2025). These disputes have rarely resulted in victories for one side. More often, they produce compromises in which references to priorities such as human rights, ownership, and poverty reduction retain some influence but are sometimes overshadowed by provisions that enable the pursuit of other interests.

In conclusion, the gist of the discussion in this Chapter is not that EU development policy has been ‘captured’ by interests in any simple sense. Interests, including legitimate ones such as climate mitigation, conflict prevention or regional stability, have always been part of the narrative of development policy. Nor is the picture uniformly negative, as there are areas where European and partner interests can be aligned in ways that reinforce rather than undermine development outcomes. Rather, the key point is that the contemporary geopolitical turn has made the politics of interest definition more explicit, more significant and more contested. Making the interest configurations visible and subjecting them to scrutiny is a necessary condition for assessing the coherence of EU development policy and for formulating realistic proposals to steer it in a more development-friendly direction. Chapter 4 will explore this particular matter further.

3.2 EU interests in development-related EU secondary law and policies

Article 3(5) TEU stipulates that, in its external relations, the EU ‘shall uphold and promote its values and interests’. However, as noted above, the Treaties do not materially define what these interests are, instead leaving their identification and further concretisation to a range of different actors. In the area of development cooperation policy, we find that key EU instruments, such as the NDICI-GE and Global Gateway, reflect a prioritisation of certain political and economic interests, relating, in particular, to competitiveness, geopolitics, security, migration prevention/mitigation, and to a lesser extent, to climate and digitalisation. Moreover, as shown below, the EC’s power in the implementation of these instruments gives it considerable leeway in prioritising specific interests and goals.

²² ‘Additionality’ refers to the idea that public development finance should enable extra financing and/or development impacts that would not have occurred on comparable terms without the intervention. The term became prominent in the development banking world as a core justification for why public finance should intervene, namely to do something beyond the market while not ‘crowding out’ private finance.

NDICI-GE

Article 8 NDICI-GE reflects a broad range of interests and, on the face of it, does not appear to prioritise any specific (institutional) interests over development objectives or other priorities. That said, the NDICI-GE also aims to enable the pursuit of EU interests in security and migration prevention/mitigation alongside development objectives (European Commission, 2018b). Specific spending targets, principally in line with targets established in the MFF, are set out for social inclusion and human development (recital 22), gender equality (recital 44), climate and biodiversity objectives (recital 49) and management and governance of migration and forced displacement (recital 51), and point to important aims of the Regulation. A certain prioritisation of security, migration, and other geopolitical-related objectives can be observed when it comes to the allocation of funds from the ‘emerging challenges and priorities cushion’ that the Commission can use to increase any of the budgets of the NDICI-GE through adopting implementing acts (Article 6(3), Article 17). This cushion was used for COVID-19-related measures, for supporting the Ukrainian government, specifically concerning internally displaced persons, and for supporting forcibly displaced people from Syria as well as ‘migration-related actions in North Africa’ and various thematic programmes (European Commission, 2022: p. 19; 2023: p. 24; 2024b: p. 30). In its mid-term evaluation of the NDICI-GE, the EC noted that this cushion had already been almost entirely depleted, arguing that, in the future, more such flexible funds would be required (European Commission, 2024c). The EC also found that the scale of support needed for Ukraine could not be financed solely by the NDICI-GE, leading to the creation of the Ukraine Facility (*ibid.*). In fact, the new proposal for the 2028–2034 MFF and the accompanying proposal for a regulation establishing Global Europe push for greater flexibility and for the use of funds for geopolitical leverage, especially with respect to the war in Ukraine (European Commission, 2025a; 2025b).

The prioritisation of interests relating to climate, digitalisation, security and migration is also apparent from the Commission’s delegated regulation to the NDICI-GE (Commission Delegated Regulation 2021/1530/EU, OJ L 330/27), which set out the areas of cooperation under the regional NDICI-GE geographic programmes (and their respective financial envelopes). The focus on migration in this context is particularly interesting, with eight out of twelve of the listed regions including migration as a priority area for the NDICI-GE. Yet, while migration-related activities were prioritised in the use of the emerging challenges and priorities cushion in North Africa, the Middle East, the Americas, and the Eastern Neighbourhood, migration prevention or mitigation was not prioritised at all in the Pacific, or the Caribbean – not because migration levels in these regions are lower overall, but because migration to the EU from these regions is comparatively limited (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024).

Global Gateway

Global Gateway is not directly based on the NDICI-GE Regulation but is instead a strategy mobilising funds that are in part provided from the EU budget with NDICI-GE as a legal basis – EU funding under Global Gateway therefore must be compatible with the provisions of NDICI-GE whenever it is funded through the instrument. In its initial presentation, Global Gateway emphasised geopolitical objectives, competitiveness, reduced dependence on China, security, and climate goals (von der Leyen, 2021). Yet explicit references to development objectives – such as poverty eradication – are notably absent (*ibid.*). Instead, mutual interests in infrastructure and investments in digital and climate-related projects are highlighted, and investment priorities are framed in terms of digital, climate, energy, transport, health, education and research. The EC later argued that projects with health-related objectives developed under Global Gateway contribute to the goal of eradicating poverty (European Commission, 2022: p. 15), yet such

projects amount to less than 10 % of Global Gateway flagship initiatives (Bilal & Teevan, 2024, for 2025 see Council, 2024c).

In a 2021 Joint Communication on Global Gateway, European interests are also clearly present — particularly with regard to climate and security — but they do not take centre stage, as the programme is framed primarily to serve the interests of partner countries. One example of this framing is the objective of creating ‘investment-friendly environments’ abroad (European Commission & High Representative, 2021). While attracting more foreign direct investment is presented as beneficial for partner countries, this framing obscures the fact that the investments promoted are primarily European, thereby also ultimately serving the interests of potential European investors.

The EC’s proposal for the new 2028–2034 MFF builds on changes introduced in the previous MFF in terms of reducing the number of funding instruments, and increasing flexibility ‘to reallocate funds between envelopes’, alongside a stronger strategic alignment of budgets with European (geopolitical) interests related to security, defence, and economic competitiveness (European Commission, 2025a: p. 15). Partnerships are to be aligned to ‘EU internal priorities’, a list that closely reflects the European interests articulated by the Commission in the Political Guidelines and Mission Letters (ibid.: p. 16).

4. Exploring the coherence of principles and interests

4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses political coherence, comparing the EU’s stated principles and policy frames on development and global solidarity with the interests, instruments, and practices mapped in Chapter 3. In other words, it examines how well current priorities in development policymaking align with self-proclaimed normative commitments. The point of this chapter is not to label instruments as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, nor is it to argue whether or not they conform with the Treaties. Instead, it is to make trade-offs visible. Many of today’s coherence and alignment disputes relate to how development objectives sit alongside other political priorities and whether poverty reduction and partner country ownership credibly remain the *primary* impetus.

Two features of the current landscape make this exercise particularly relevant. First, the Union’s development narrative increasingly rests on the discourse of ‘mutual benefit’, ‘synergies’ and ‘partnership’. This includes the Global Gateway framing and broader strategic approaches that link external action to the Union’s economic security, climate agenda, migration management and geopolitical ambitions. This narrative does not necessarily conflict with development aims. It can, in fact, help secure domestic political support for external spending, as was argued by some of our interview partners. The coherence question is whether this political packaging reflects a genuine overlap of objectives and symmetric profile of gains, or whether it creates a permissive frame in which development language becomes harder to operationalise and defend when priorities collide. A helpful note of caution here, which we reference throughout the Chapter, comes from Dercon’s (2025) argument that evidence for genuine donor–partner win–wins is often limited, with only a narrow set of cases plausibly qualifying as mutual benefit in the strict sense.

Second, as we showed in Chapter 2, the instrument mix has shifted. Under NDICI-GE, the EU consolidated funding streams and strengthened flexibility, while also scaling up investment tools and guarantees, including the EFSD+ and the External Action Guarantee. This expands room for strategic choice but also raises familiar political economy questions of who sets priorities, whose risks are socialised, what counts

as development impact, and what kind of transparency and accountability is feasible when funding moves from grants to financial instruments. In its opinion on the Commission's evaluation of the External Action Guarantee, the European Court of Auditors (2024a) highlights precisely these governance and reporting issues.

We start by introducing the concept of coherence by revisiting Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) as an important political norm and legal obligation in the *acquis*. In the spirit of this concept, we then proceed by offering an indicative coherence assessment of the new development agenda. Methodologically, we employ the Treaty objectives and the Union's core development frames as political benchmarks (see Chapter 2 for what we referred to as the 'normative core'). The New European Consensus on Development is the main reference point for the shared vision of EU development cooperation, including the poverty focus, the 'leave no one behind' (LNOB) logic, and the reaffirmation of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD). We also draw on NDICI-GE as the current framework for development financing and on the Global Gateway Joint Communication as a political framework for external investment and connectivity. To address coherence as a practical governance challenge across policy fields, we draw on the European Parliament Research Service's evaluation of PCD implementation and other recent empirical work to serve as a reality check on typical gaps and institutional constraints.

4.2 Policy coherence as a central legal and normative benchmark

Article 208(1) TFEU: PCD as a legal obligation

According to Article 21(3) TEU, the EU must 'ensure consistency between the different areas of its external action and between these and its other policies'²³. Importantly, the Treaties do not create a general hierarchy between different EU external policies or policy objectives (Cremona, 2011; Kaddous, 2011; for a 'relative priority' of objectives depending on the policy field see Müller, 2015: p. 171 f). Thus, coherence is primarily to be achieved through coordination and complementarity²⁴.

That said, some provisions in the Treaties explicitly set out overarching policy priorities (e.g. Articles 10-12 TFEU on non-discrimination, environmental protection, and consumer protection). As far as relevant here, Article 208(1) TFEU provides that the EU is to 'take account of the objectives of development cooperation' when implementing other policies which are likely to affect developing countries²⁵. Different EU bodies have repeatedly emphasised the importance of PCD (Council, 2024a paras 8 ff; 2024b para 4; 2025b para 11; European Parliament 2023; New European Consensus for Development 2017 para 10; cf. also Samoa Agreement, Article 4(3)). For example, the EC highlights that PCD is crucial to advancing the EU's development cooperation objectives and to implementing the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs (2023: p. 305). Yet, as pointed out by the European Parliament, the visibility of PCD – despite its political importance and legal standing – has clearly diminished over the past few years (European Parliament, 2023). Moreover, the European Parliament has observed that, while the EC has mechanisms to implement PCD, 'the extent to which these arrangements are used varies' (European Parliament, 2023).

²³ On the terminological confusion stemming from the use of the words 'consistency' (i.e. absence of contradictions) and 'coherence' (i.e. aiming at synergies) in different language versions of the Treaty see e.g. Hillion (2008) with further references; Duke (2011).

²⁴ NB. In terms of vertical coherence, Article 210(1) TFEU similarly emphasizes the need for cooperation to ensure the complementarity of EU and Member State development cooperation policies.

²⁵ Cf. also Article 5(1) NDICI-GE. To date, the latest report of the EC taking stock of PCD at the EU and Member State level stems from 2019, cf. Commission, 2019.

Such inconsistencies could raise legal issues, as Article 208(1) TFEU establishes a Treaty obligation that must be respected. The extent to which the PCD-obligation is enforceable, however, remains unclear. Some commentators find it 'hard to imagine' that a failure to take sufficient account of PCD (or similar policy priorities) would be sufficient to successfully challenge a given measure (Cremona, 2011). As far as can be seen, the CJEU has not addressed the PCD issue to date²⁶. That said, in a 2023 decision, the Court found that the obligations set out in the first subparagraph of Article 208(1) and in Article 210(1) TFEU on the coordination and complementarity of EU and Member State development policies were too general to create individual rights that could be raised against the EU or a Member State (CJEU, C-15/22: para 60 f). The Court emphasised that the 'precise arrangements for such cooperation depend on a range of parameters which it is exclusively for the Member States and the European Union to define' (CJEU, C-15/22: para 61). At the same time, the Court clarified that, unlike individuals, the EU and its Member States 'are able to rely on those obligations' (ibid.).

The PCD obligation has a similar 'institutional' thrust. However, this does not imply that the obligation is not justiciable. Unlike the CFSP (see Article 275 TFEU), the Treaties do not limit the scope of the CJEU's jurisdiction in the field of development cooperation or with regard to the PCD obligation (Article 19(1) TEU). That said, Article 208(1) TFEU clearly frames the PCD obligation as an obligation of conduct rather than of result (cf. 'take account of'; Bartels, 2016). In other words, to comply with the PCD obligation, the EU institutions must *consider* development objectives when designing a relevant policy, but are not required to give them primacy. In particular, the horizontal objectives set out in Article 21(2) TEU provide a legal entry point for other (more self-serving) policy considerations that the primary objective of poverty reduction as well as conditionalities attached to development cooperation measures need to be balanced against (Schmalenbach, 2022; for details on such conditionalities, see Shah, 2018). As a result, Article 208(1) TFEU does not prescribe specific policy outcomes, and therefore leaves the EU institutions with broad discretion (Schmalenbach, 2022). That said, a measure may nevertheless be liable to annulment if development objectives were not adequately taken into account in its adoption (Bartels, 2016 focusing on the disproportionality of such a measure; Streinz & Kruis, 2018).

PCD as a continuous obligation

In addition, Article 208(1) TFEU requires the monitoring and evaluation of PCD impact throughout the implementation of relevant EU policies, and not only in the initial stages of policymaking (cf. Ioannides & Eisele, 2024). A failure to continuously monitor or evaluate the implementation of specific EU measures could, therefore, trigger an action under Article 265 TFEU (on the shortcomings of this remedy, see Bartels, 2016). In this regard it is also important to note that, while in 2019 the EC still emphasised the 'fundamental difference between PCD and PCSD' (European Commission 2019), in its practice, reporting on PCD has now become 'part and parcel of a comprehensive reporting on SDG implementation' (EU Voluntary Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 2023: p. 20). Thus, for example, the EC's 2024 Annual Report on the implementation of the European Union's External Action Instruments in 2023 simply refers to the first EU Voluntary Review (EUVR) on SDGs, which would detail how PCD contributes to implementing the EU's SDG strategy (European Commission, 2024a p. 4; 2024b: p. 26 f). The EUVR contains a separate chapter for each SDG with a section on EU external action addressing *inter alia* 'Internal/external coherence including policy coherence for development', 'Main policy orientations

²⁶ Whether a measure aims at poverty reduction and thus comes within the scope of EU development policy, by contrast, has been discussed in several cases concerning the choice of legal basis for a specific EU act (see Chapter 2).

and initiatives for external engagement', and 'Examples of EU actions (with a focus on Global Gateway and Team Europe initiatives)' (EUVR 2023: p. 31 ff). Moreover, in its statistical and analytical annexes, the EUVR sets out synergies and trade-offs between SDGs. Overall, the EUVR provides a valuable but highly aggregated overview of select EU measures aimed at advancing the various SDGs. It is not, however, concerned with monitoring or evaluating concrete EU measures from a PCD perspective, or assessing potential negative effects of EU policies on countries outside the EU. In a similar vein, the EC Staff Working Document accompanying the 2024 Annual Report on the implementation of External Action instruments presents the 'main achievements of the EU's actions [...], alongside illustrative trends in relation to respective associated SDGs and the respective available results' (European Commission, 2024b: p. 30). Neither of these important contributions thus appears geared towards fulfilling the continuous PCD-specific monitoring/evaluation obligations.

Actors involved in ensuring PCD

The horizontal/institutional division of competences in the field of development cooperation policy is characterised by the interplay of several EU actors. The Commission not only has the power of initiative regarding legislative acts but is also responsible for the implementation of EU development cooperation instruments (Article 9(1) and (4) Council Decision 2010/427/EU 'EEAS Decision'; see Klamert, 2024). The Council and European Parliament are co-legislators in the field of EU development cooperation (Article 209(1) TFEU). Moreover, Council conclusions and Parliament resolutions form part of the overall policy framework for the implementation of the NDICI-GE (cf. Article 7 NDICI-GE)²⁷. It is worth mentioning that the NDICI-GE also underlines the importance of regular multi-stakeholder dialogues 'at an early stage and throughout the programming process' and identifies joint programming (with the Member States) as the preferred approach for geographic programmes²⁸. With respect to Member State involvement, the comitology procedure (Article 45 NDICI-GE and Regulation 182/2011/EU; see Chapter 2 for further discussion) also plays a central role.

Although the HR/VP is not responsible for the EU's external representation in the area of development cooperation (Article 17(1) TEU), they play an important role in the management of the institutional division of competences in EU external relations, including in development cooperation policy (Van den Sanden, 2022). Given the increasingly intertwined EU interests in fields such as development, trade, security, or migration, the need for coordination indeed appears to be growing. In the capacity as a Vice-President of the Commission, the HR/VP is responsible for coordinating the work of all commissioners engaged in external relations (Article 18(4) TEU). Moreover, the HR/VP chairs the Foreign Affairs Council (including FAC-DEV) and assists the Commission and Council in ensuring consistency across different areas of (CFSP and non-CFSP) EU external action (Article 21(3) TEU).

Finally, together with the Commission, the EEAS plays a central role in development cooperation programming. The EEAS is responsible for preparing Commission Decisions on the strategic, multiannual steps within the programming cycle (Article 9(3) EEAS Decision; Article 48 NDICI-GE). In doing so, the EEAS 'should seek to ensure that the programmes fulfil the objectives for external action set out in Article 21 TEU [...] and that they respect the objectives of the Union's development policy in line with Article 208 [TFEU]' (Recital 4 EEAS Decision). In the early days of the EEAS, concerns were nonetheless raised that

²⁷ See in more detail the institutional roles set out in Chapter 2.

²⁸ Cf. Article 12(2)(c)-(d) NDICI-GE. See also the more limited formulation in Article 13(2) of the proposed Regulation establishing Global Europe ('The Commission shall consult other donors and actors [...] where relevant').

short-term foreign policy interests could override long-term development goals in its aid programming (European Think Tanks Group, 2010). However, it should be noted that programming remains a collaborative process. As Article 9(3) EEAS Decision clarifies, 'throughout the whole cycle of programming, planning and implementation [...] the [HR/VP] and the EEAS shall work with the relevant members and services of the Commission'. This is consequential, since the EEAS's proposals must eventually be submitted to the Commission for adoption.

4.3 An indicative coherence assessment of the current development agenda

Table 5 provides an indicative, qualitative assessment for each thematic domain. The table brings together our exploration of the normative core of EU development policy (Chapter 2) with our mapping of interest configurations (Chapter 3), and it indicates which instrument families are most salient in each theme. The rightmost column of the table offers key evidence supporting our assessment.

The table is ordered by risk of incoherence, as evidenced in key literature. In the thematic domains at the top (marked in green), the dominant policy framing and the way key instruments are typically used are broadly compatible with the EU's stated development principles. Trade-offs exist, but the incentives and safeguards tend to keep development objectives politically salient throughout the decision-making and implementation cycles. The domains in the middle (marked in yellow) show mixed alignment. Development goals remain, but the domain's political logic creates recurring tensions that require active mitigation through safeguards, partner ownership, transparency, and credible development metrics. Domains at the bottom of the table (marked in orange) carry the greatest risk of weak alignment, in our literature-based assessment. Development objectives risk getting subordinated in practice, or the domain is structured in a way that makes development commitments residual unless strong counterweights are in place.

Our assessment thus mainly reflects alignment with stated principles and frames on an aggregated policy level. It cannot replace instrument-by-instrument evaluation, and it inevitably compresses variation across regions and sectors. We consciously de-emphasise instrument performance as such because many questions of effectiveness depend on project-level evidence that is uneven across domains. Where we do refer to performance, it is to the extent that reputable evaluations show recurring patterns that plausibly affect alignment (for example, where governance and reporting gaps reduce the credibility of development claims, or where a domain's logic plausibly diverts resources towards non-development priorities).

Table 5: Coherence of norms and interests across policy domains: an indicative risk assessment

	Policy domains	Normative commitments	Instruments and modalities	Risks of incoherence and typical trade-offs	References
Risk of incoherence and trade-offs Lower ----> <---- Higher	Poverty reduction and human development	Treaty development objectives as a political benchmark. EU Consensus on Development. Agenda 2030. 'Leave no one behind' framing.	NDICI geographic programmes (grants). Thematic spending on human development. Budget support. Team Europe Initiatives, when framed around social sectors.	Poverty reduction remains the classical formal benchmark. It still structures parts of programming, but political prioritisation has widened. In practice, geographic and thematic choices increasingly reflect a blend of poverty goals with stabilisation, neighbourhood priorities, and strategic partnership logics. The current coherence issue is not outright abandonment, but dilution through multiple concurrent priorities and a tendency to treat poverty outcomes as one objective among several, rather than the primary objective.	Dercon (2025); European Court of Auditors (2023); Furness et al. (2020); Ioannides & Eisele (2024); Pérez et al. (2025)
	Humanitarian aid and crisis response	Humanitarian principles and Treaty framing for humanitarian aid. Needs-based allocation and independence of humanitarian action. HDP Nexus.	DG ECHO humanitarian aid. Crisis response mechanisms and coordination with development instruments. Rapid response elements under NDICI where applicable.	The EU's humanitarian architecture has strong principled commitments to a needs-based logic. Coherence risks arise when humanitarian action is pulled into broader stabilisation, resilience, or migration-management narratives. The typical trade-off is between operational independence and a whole-of-government comprehensive approach framing, especially in protracted crises. The HDP nexus can improve alignment, but it also increases the need to protect humanitarian independence when political objectives are salient.	Dany (2015); European Court of Auditors, (2021); Land & Hauck (2022); Orbie et al., (2014); Pontiroli et al. (2013)
	Democracy, human rights, rule of law, civic space and gender equality	Treaty objectives and EU human rights and democracy commitments. EU Consensus on Development rights-based approach. 'Values' framing in external action.	NDICI thematic programme on human rights and democracy. Civil society support. Election observation. Conditionality and political dialogue. Targeted restrictive measures where relevant.	EU external policy documents contain an extensive set of commitments on values. In some contexts, these also shape programming and, even, conditionalities. Tensions arise when the Union gives higher weight to short-term stability, migration cooperation, energy partnerships, or geopolitical alignment. Political will and Member State positioning often determine how firmly the benchmark is applied in practice. The result is a pattern of selective application or softening, visible across cooperation modalities, not only aid.	Damen, 2022; Eurodad et al., (2024); Lein (2020); Silga, (2025)

	Policy domains	Normative commitments	Instruments and modalities	Risks of incoherence and typical trade-offs	References
Risk of incoherence and trade-offs Lower ---^ Higher v---	Climate, energy transition, environmental action	Paris alignment and climate commitments. Agenda 2030. PCSD. EU Green Deal external dimension as a political frame.	NDICI climate and environment spending and mainstreaming. Global Gateway energy and connectivity packages. EFSD plus windows and guarantees supporting green investment.	Climate action is now a central frame in external policy and can strongly align with global public goods and partner resilience. The coherence challenge is the competition between transition objectives and EU energy security or industrial strategy, including choices about technology pathways, standards, and who captures value in supply chains. Where partner-driven transition plans exist, alignment is easier. Where projects primarily secure EU supply or market access, tensions increase.	Boafo et al. (2025); Eurodad et al. (2024); European Court of Auditors (2024); Raimondi et al. (2022)
	Trade policy, market access and economic partnership	SDG framing in trade policy. PCSD commitments. Agenda 2030 consistency claims in trade and investment policy. World Trade Organization rules (differential treatment, GSP systems).	Free trade agreements and Economic Partnership Agreements. Trade and Sustainable Development chapters and dialogue mechanisms. Aid for Trade support and trade facilitation. GSP and conditionality where applicable.	Trade instruments can support growth, jobs, and diversification, and can reinforce development when asymmetries are managed and adjustment support is credible. Tensions arise where agreements prioritise market access for EU actors and regulatory export interests, while local policy space, development safeguards and participation mechanisms remain weak. A typical coherence problem is the development language attached to trade liberalisation packages without sufficient fiscal and capacity-building adjustment support.	Hoekman & Shingal (2024); Ioannides & Eisele (2024); Langan & Price (2021); Orbie et al. (2016)
	Private sector instruments and investment agenda	'Sustainable development' and SDG contribution claims. Development effectiveness and transparency expectations as political benchmarks.	EFSD+. External Action Guarantee. Blending and guarantees. EIB and EDFI-type delivery channels. Global Gateway project branding and Team Europe Initiatives are linked to investment.	These instruments can expand finance for infrastructure and productive sectors and can support development where additionality, standards, and partner benefit-sharing are credible. The coherence risk is that political incentives favour large, visible, bankable projects (often in middle-income countries), while poverty targeting, transparency, and accountability become harder to verify. A common tension is between mobilisation narratives and the difficulty of demonstrating development impact and additionality.	Bilal (2019); European Court of Auditors (2024); Pérez et al. (2023, 2025)
	Peace, security, stabilisation and conflict prevention	Integrated approach and conflict prevention commitments. Human security language in EU external action. Policy Coherence discussions around security-development linkages (HDP).	NDICI rapid response and conflict-related actions. CSDP missions and civilian crisis management. European Peace Facility and security-related assistance, where relevant.	Security and development agendas overlap in fragile settings, but they also compete. Coherence improves when conflict prevention and governance objectives drive programming. It weakens when stabilisation becomes primarily about containing spillovers or supporting security forces without credible governance conditions. The typical conflict is between short-term stability gains and longer-term legitimacy, accountability, and inclusion.	Furness et al. (2020); Furness & Gänzle (2017); Keukeleire & Raube (2013)

	Policy domains	Normative commitments	Instruments and modalities	Risks of incoherence and typical trade-offs	References
Risk of incoherence and trade-offs Lower ----> Higher <---->	Geopolitics and systemic competition	Treaty external action objectives and the EU's self-framing as a rules-based actor. UN-centred multilateralism. EU Consensus on Development and partnership language.	Team Europe approach. Global Gateway as a strategic narrative. Reprioritisation within NDICI programming.	System competition does not necessarily conflict with development. It can support partner agency if it increases options and finance on fair terms. Coherence weakens when donor-driven competition logic drives short-term horizons, transactional bargains, and reputational project selection. The challenge is that 'mutual interest' language expands political room for manoeuvre, but genuine mutuality is often harder to demonstrate than the rhetoric suggests.	Dercon (2025); Heidland (2025)
	Raw materials and industrial policy	Sustainable development and mutual benefit partnership framing. PCSD and 'do no harm'. Climate and just transition narratives. Local value addition.	Strategic raw materials partnerships and MoUs. Global Gateway corridors and value-chain projects. DFI support for mining, processing, and logistics.	This area is close to the core of the current geo-economic narrative. The dominant political driver is supply security for the EU's green and digital transitions. That can align with partner industrial ambitions only if agreements credibly support local value addition, governance, fiscal benefits and high environmental standards. Without binding commitments and enforceable standards, the typical outcome risk is an extractive pattern with limited local upgrading and high social and environmental costs.	Boafo et al. (2025); Detsch et al. (2024); Küblböck et al. (2025); Heidland (2025)
	Migration and mobility	EU commitments to development effectiveness and 'do no harm' to development objectives. Policy Coherence for Development (PCSD) and related debates. Partnership framing.	NDICI actions addressing so-called root causes. Migration dialogues and compacts. Trust-fund style approaches and flexible financing. External cooperation on returns and border management when linked to aid.	This is the most structurally tension-prone area because the political objective often becomes short-term control outcomes (returns, readmission, border management). Development frames, however, emphasise long-term welfare, rights, and ownership. The political logic of migration management thus creates structural tension with development principles. Instruments can support protection and regular mobility, but in contested political moments, they also enable conditionality and short-term signalling. A recurring coherence issue is using development cooperation to pursue cooperation on containment, returns, or deterrence, which can distort partner priorities and weaken ownership.	Langan & Price (2021); Rietig & Walter-Franke (2023); Silga (2025); Talleraas (2025); Heidland (2025)

Note: Background colour in green: lower risk of PCD non-alignment; colour in yellow: medium risk; colour in orange: higher risk.

Source: Authors' illustration and references stated above.

Even a careful assessment invites disagreement, especially from implementers who might see project-level complexity and from Commission officials who can point to procedural safeguards and real development gains in many programmes. Before we turn to illustrative examples, we need, therefore, to engage with potential areas of contention.

A first source of dispute may lie in the difference between principle-level compatibility and political decision-making under pressure. Migration is the clearest case. Few would argue that addressing forced displacement, protection needs, and decent work is inconsistent with development aims²⁹. The coherence problem comes from the political sequencing — when the operative benchmark becomes ‘cooperation on controlling irregular migration’, development objectives tend to become instrumental, both in narrative and in resource allocation. The ECA’s (European Court of Auditors) assessment of the EU Trust Fund for Africa is relevant here not because it denies any positive effects, but because it points to a pattern where *multiple objectives* and crisis politics reduce strategic focus and clarity. Zaun & Nantermoz’ (2023) analysis complements this by showing how crisis framing and trust-fund governance can depoliticise the development trade-offs, shifting attention away from hard choices about priorities.

A second objection may arise in relation to the narrative of ‘mutual interest’ itself. In discussions with both Commission and Member State officials, the mutual benefit frame is often defended as realism — external spending needs political support, partner governments value investment and jobs, the EU values stable supply chains and climate progress. In background interviews, Commission officials presented this as a partnership of ‘equals’, or ‘adults’. That is not implausible, in principle. Yet, the coherence question is whether ‘mutual interest’ is used as a disciplined organising concept, or as a broad umbrella that blurs conflicts. Dercon’s (2025) warning is helpful precisely because it is not anti-strategy. It argues for clarity about when interests truly align and when they do not, rather than assuming that strategic framing automatically creates a win-win; something called for in particular by representatives of implementation agencies.

A third potential source of dissent concerns the shift to investment tools. Many practitioners can point to real constraints in grant finance and to partner demand for large-scale infrastructure, energy systems, and private-sector activity. The critical issue for coherence is not mobilisation *per se*. It is whether the governance and reporting environment enables credible claims of alignment with poverty and inequality objectives, rather than simply asserting alignment through high-standards language. This is where the opinion of the European Court of Auditors (2024) matters. Its core message is that evaluation, reporting, and transparency provisions are insufficient, thereby creating a predictable political vulnerability for the entire model. The European Parliament study on EFSD+ implementation (Pérez et al., 2023) makes a similar point in a different register, focusing on whether reimbursable aid and guarantees can, in practice, be steered towards inclusion and vulnerable groups. In background interviews conducted for this current study, representatives from the development NGO community voiced serious concerns regarding the additionality and transparency of the investment agenda and even described impressions of corporate capture.

Finally, a common pushback from policy actors is that coherence analysis can overemphasise EU agency and underestimate how much outcomes are shaped by partner preferences and geopolitical competition. For instance, in fragile contexts or competitive settings, the EU often faces partner governments with their

²⁹ Although forced displacement and protection needs are core issues of humanitarian assistance, there is little argument to be made that addressing these issues would run counter to development aims.

own strategic priorities, as well as other external actors offering finance without governance strings attached. We do not discount this. However, while it does not eliminate coherence responsibilities, it changes the feasible set of choices. That is precisely why the table rates several domains as being at higher risk of incoherence — the core issue is not the existence of tensions, but whether the system is built to manage them, or whether it relies on optimistic assumptions.

4.4 Illustrative episodes

To complement our cross-domain assessment, we examine three episodes that make the political trade-offs concrete. Cases are selected on the basis that they sit at the intersection of development commitments and high-salience non-development interests, and that they are sufficiently documented in reputable evaluations or peer-reviewed work from which we can draw cautious, evidence-based conclusions. The respective policies relate to salient crises to be addressed by the Union: climate change, economic competitiveness and social cohesion. Some episodes concern explicit conditionality and incentive structures, as in parts of migration cooperation, while others are about instrument choice and the political economy of delivery, as in investment mobilisation and guarantees.

4.4.1 Migration-linked external financing and conditionality

Since 2015, irregular migration has remained a high-salience domestic issue in many Member States, and this salience has translated repeatedly into demands that external financing deliver on migration management. In practice, this has produced a continuum of approaches, from softer priority-setting (increasing spending on displacement, border governance, or so-called root causes) to more explicit conditionality and incentive structures linked to cooperation on return and readmission.

The ECA's Special Report on the EU Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa (ECA, 2024b) provides a good entry point for assessing coherence, as it examines a flagship instrument explicitly established in the crisis context and tied to migration and displacement concerns. The ECA describes the Trust Fund's focus on stability and the management of migration flows and notes that support remains unfocused despite new approaches. For coherence purposes, the key point is not that migration-relevant programming is inherently non-developmental. Rather, the political impetus behind such instruments often privileges speed, flexibility, and visible action, which tends to weaken strategic discipline around poverty, inequality, and long-term institutional development.

Some academic research argues that governance structures such as these can — for better or worse — depoliticise trade-offs, i.e. move these out of visible political contestation and into more technocratic/procedural arenas. Zaun & Nantermoz (2023), for example, look at the EUTF Africa instrument, analysing how its crisis logic relates to the politicisation of development aid. They argue that the EUTF Africa was created under pressure to react to increased migration flows to Europe. This matters because coherence is not only a matter of what projects are funded, but also of who has agenda-setting power and how accountability is structured. The argument here is that by reframing migration as a technocratic problem to be addressed via development aid, political choices and accountability can get obscured.

Conditionality dynamics are also visible beyond EU Trust Funds. Cassarino's (2025) work on using development aid as leverage in EU external relations analyses the incentive and conditionality logic around readmission cooperation, including how visa-related instruments have been discussed and used as pressure points. This indicates a coherence tension that is difficult to resolve through technical fixes alone.

When the dominant political objective is compliance on migration control, development cooperation becomes a bargaining chip. Even if some funded interventions yield social benefits, the macro-logic can still be misaligned with the EU's stated development benchmark because it shifts the purpose of development spending from partner-defined development to EU-defined compliance.

The Commission and implementing actors may reasonably – and correctly – respond that the EU can pursue multiple objectives and that stabilisation, jobs, and protection in origin and transit countries are legitimate development concerns. However, the coherence implication is more specific. Where migration management becomes the primary political justification, the EU should expect (and plan for) recurring accusations of instrumentalisation, and strengthen safeguards to keep development aims at the heart of projects. In practice, this means, at minimum, transparent criteria for programming decisions and reallocations, clearer separation between development objectives and enforcement objectives where possible, and explicit partner impact diagnostics that go beyond root causes language, because the causal chain from projects to migration outcomes is uncertain and often politically contested.

4.4.2 Climate and energy

Climate and energy partnerships are often presented as the most plausible 'mutual interest' domain. In principle, this is convincing – decarbonisation, adaptation, and resilience are shared needs. The Union's external climate agenda also fits well with its own policy frames, including SDG commitments and the Consensus' emphasis on green transition and responsible investment. The coherence challenge lies in the distributional politics of the transition and in the way the Union's domestic energy and industrial priorities can reshape external choices.

The post-2022 energy context, shaped by the Ukraine war, has reinforced the link between external energy cooperation and EU security-of-supply concerns. Under time pressure, the EU has pursued new partnerships and infrastructure decisions in ways that can compress deliberation over local costs, local value creation, and long-term lock-in risks (e.g. the 2022 gas deals with Azerbaijan and with Israel/Egypt to boost exports to Europe, and early hydrogen-export partnerships such as with Namibia). The coherence question is thus not so much whether the EU should pursue energy security in principle, but whether the external action narrative and instrument choices remain faithful to the development benchmark of poverty eradication in sustainable development terms, rather than treating partner countries mainly as means to solve EU problems.

Dercon's (2025) comments on mutual interest are relevant here again. He argues that 'evidence of genuine donor-recipient benefits is limited' and that only a narrow set of areas qualify as credible exceptions. Climate cooperation may be one of the more plausible candidates for overlap, but only if the EU treats the 'mutual' part as an outcome of negotiation and design rather than as a label. If the EU's interest in energy security dominates, mutuality becomes rhetorical, and partner incentives to cooperate may depend on side payments that have weak development rationale.

The Global Gateway framing tries to address this risk by emphasising high standards and by presenting the initiative as a positive offer that 'forges links and does not create dependencies'. Such language signals sensitivity to partner perceptions in a competitive environment. The coherence test, however, is practical – are standards credible and enforceable under political time pressure? This connects to the governance concerns raised in the ECA's opinion on the External Action Guarantee. If reporting, evaluation quality, and

transparency are weak, it becomes harder to demonstrate that climate and energy projects advance partner welfare rather than simply serving as strategic branding.

A takeaway for implementers is that coherence in this domain is less about choosing between 'EU interest' and 'development', and more about insisting on design disciplines. First, it requires explicit distributional analysis (who benefits, who bears costs, what compensation is built in?); second, it demands partner ownership that is substantive, not performative, including space for *partners'* industrial strategies, and third, it needs robust measurement that includes social and inequality metrics, not only tonnes of CO₂ avoided or megawatts installed. Without these disciplines, climate and energy will remain a domain with potential for alignment, but predictable political trade-offs.

4.4.3 Investment mobilisation

One of the strongest and most consequential political shifts in EU development cooperation has been the growing role of investment mobilisation and guarantees. This is often defended as a necessary adaptation to fiscal constraints, to partner demand for infrastructure, and to the need for scale in climate and digital transitions. The European Consensus already anticipates the use of investment channels, including blending and private sector engagement, alongside social and governance priorities. Global Gateway then elevates this logic into a flagship political project, explicitly framed as a values-based alternative offer and a tool to 'forge links' in a competitive environment.

There is widespread agreement that such instruments can, in principle, play a role in contributing to development. From a coherence perspective, the question is whether the political and administrative architecture enables alignment with development principles and the preservation of democratic accountability when large shares of external action flow through financial instruments.

The ECA's (2024a) Opinion is important for this assessment because it focuses on the Commission's evaluation of the External Action Guarantee and, by extension, the EFSD+, which represents the largest share of the guarantee capacity. The ECA flags shortcomings that go to the heart of coherence politics — if evaluations are incomplete, if reporting and transparency obligations are not met, or if key concepts such as 'additionality' are not credibly operationalised, then even well-designed projects become politically contestable under parliamentary and public scrutiny. This is not a marginal technical concern. It is a structural vulnerability for a model that asks democratic institutions to accept higher complexity in exchange for higher scale.

The European Parliament's study, mentioned above (Pérez et al., 2023) adds a second, complementary angle. It focuses on whether guarantees, loans, and other reimbursable instruments can, in practice, be steered towards inclusive development goals, drawing on evidence from the EFSD predecessor and case studies. This is a coherence issue in a strict sense. If the instrument gravitates towards bankable projects and more creditworthy environments, its alignment with 'leave no one behind' and focus on poverty reduction becomes contingent. That does not mean the instrument should not be used, but that the political commitment to inclusion needs hard steering mechanisms, not only intention statements.

A further coherence issue in the investment agenda concerns the risk of tying aid in practice, even where the EU formally commits to untying. While some now defend 'European preference' on level-playing-field grounds, the traditional case against tying is that it raises costs and weakens effectiveness and partner ownership by restricting competition and choice. Politically, initiatives such as Global Gateway are communicated as part of an EU offer that mobilises European public and private finance and supports

European economic interests. This framing creates a PCSD risk. If projects, standards, and contracting patterns systematically channel benefits to EU firms, partners may reasonably read this as a modernised form of tied aid, because supplier preference can start to shape project selection, design and value-for-money.

The OECD DAC's Recommendation on Untying ODA was adopted (in 2001) precisely to increase effectiveness by widening competition and reducing donor capture. Evaluations of untying reforms and the tied-aid literature generally find that restricting procurement to certain suppliers or nationalities reduces competition and partner choice and tends to worsen value-for-money for comparable specifications (OECD, 2006; Clay et al., 2008). This is not an argument for 'cheapest price': value-for-money can, and increasingly does, include quality, ESG and due-diligence requirements. The effectiveness concern arises when those aims are pursued through *eligibility restrictions* rather than open competition.

Currently, the applicable legal framework in the EU regarding (un)tying is fragmented: Where funds are directly managed by the Commission's services or indirectly with a partner country, the framework is set out in the NDICI-GE Regulation and the Financial Regulation (Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2024/2509), which in its revised Article 136 permits the narrowing of eligible entities for reasons of security and public order of the EU and its Member States. Where funds are managed by pillar-assessed entities, they apply their own eligibility-rules, not the rules applied to direct management (Council, 2024e). It should be noted in this context that the current Global Europe Regulation Proposal of the Commission foresees, by way of derogation from Article 198 of the Financial Regulation, grants to be awarded without a call for proposals, including directly to private entities established in the EU (Art. 23(4)(3) GE Proposal).

Even without formal tying, *de facto* tying can emerge through eligibility rules, technical standards that favour familiar suppliers, large contract sizes that exclude local firms, or delivery via European finance institutions with established European networks. The coherence implication for the investment agenda is therefore practical. If the EU wants Global Gateway and EFSD+ to be defensible as development policy, it needs procurement and partner-benefit logic that is visible, contestable, and demonstrably open, rather than relying on broad claims about standards.

A further PCSD-related concern is debt sustainability, especially where the instrument mix shifts from grants to loans, guarantees, and other forms of reimbursable finance. In several partner countries, fiscal space is already constrained, and infrastructure projects do not reliably generate local-currency revenue streams to service external debt. A Parliament-commissioned synthesis of evidence on aid effectiveness (Pérez et al., 2025) argues bluntly that, while the evidence base comparing loans and grants is limited, loan-based aid can clearly tighten debt burdens and reduce policy space, including for financing core services. UN reporting has also warned against a shift from grants to loans in highly indebted settings (UNCTAD, 2025).

In political terms, this is an argument for debt-related safeguards in project selection and financing terms. Where debt risks are high, coherence with the Union's stated development aims depends on whether the EU (i) aligns major financing decisions with credible debt sustainability analyses, (ii) uses grants or highly concessional terms where needed rather than maximising volume, and (iii) treats contingent liabilities and public-private partnership-type structures as part of the debt profile rather than as mechanisms for keeping liabilities off the public balance sheet. The transparency and reporting gaps highlighted by the European Court of Auditors in relation to the External Action Guarantee also matter here because weak public reporting makes it harder to verify whether 'sustainable financing' claims hold in debt-vulnerable

contexts. The International Monetary Fund–World Bank Debt Sustainability Framework is designed to guide borrowing decisions so that financing needs match a country’s capacity to repay over time.

Overall, coherence in the investment domain depends heavily on governance choices, and in our background interviews, civil society partners and others raised important concerns in this regard. If reporting is thin, transparency partial, and development additionality weakly specified, then the political equilibrium does not guarantee verifiable development outcomes. Conversely, if the EU strengthens evaluation quality, publishes meaningful information on what is financed and why, and operationalises development additionality in a way that withstands scrutiny, then the investment shift can be made more compatible with the EU’s stated principles. The opinion of the European Court of Auditors (2024a) should be read as a warning that the current system does not yet meet that bar.

4.5 Conclusions

Three conclusions follow from our coherence analysis. First, as outlined in Chapter 2, the EU’s development principles and frames remain clear and ambitious. The European Consensus restates poverty eradication as the primary objective and places Policy Coherence for Development at the centre of the 2030 Agenda implementation logic. These benchmarks provide a strong political basis for coherence claims. The problem is thus not a lack of stated norms. It is the growing distance, in some domains, between those norms and the dominant political justifications that drive prioritisation and instrument choice, including funding allocation. In the NDICI-GE Regulation, the Consensus is referenced multiple times in the recitals, including prominently in recital 12, which states that the instrument’s implementation should be guided by the Consensus. In contrast, the Global Europe Regulation Proposal omits all mentions of the Consensus. The statement given to us by a Commission official in a background interview that Commission external action in the field of development would not need to be evaluated for PC(S)D, as this framework was only for policies that do not have development objectives at their core, is put into question by certain inconsistencies between different instruments and development objectives as revealed by the coherence analysis. Against this background, we revisited the PCD principle, which is centrally concerned with inconsistencies of this kind.

Second, we have shown that coherence tensions are not evenly distributed. Some domains, in particular human development, remain comparatively well aligned but risk marginalisation when strategic agendas dominate. Other domains, in particular migration-linked financing, are, in our assessment, structurally prone to incoherence because domestic political salience inside the EU pushes towards short-term control logics that sit uneasily with development effectiveness and partner ownership. The ECA’s findings on the Trust Fund for Africa and the scholarly analysis of the migration crisis framing help explain why these tensions persist across instruments and over time.

Third, the shift towards investment mobilisation constitutes a major coherence battleground for the coming years. This is where readers within the EU institutions, in particular in the Commission, should view this chapter as constructive rather than accusatory. The coherence challenge is not a critique of using private finance or earning returns as such, but a problem of governance and credibility. When the EU asks democratic institutions and partner governments to accept more complex instruments, it must also provide stronger evidence, clearer development additionality, and better transparency. The ECA’s opinion and the European Parliament’s EFSD+ inclusiveness study assert this point from different angles, and our background interviews with civil society representatives corroborate a need for action.

A final cross-cutting implication concerns the ‘mutual interest’ narrative. It can be politically useful and, at times, substantively true, especially for global public goods and in certain stabilisation settings. Yet, it becomes coherence-eroding when it is used as a general-purpose justification for instruments whose incentives predictably privilege EU-defined priorities. Dercon’s (2025) caution is, therefore, not a reason to abandon mutual interest framing, but a call to apply it with appropriate circumspection. Where mutual interests are claimed, the EU should specify what is mutual, for whom, under what conditions, and how trade-offs are managed and transparently reported.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study set out to identify the normative foundations of the EU’s development cooperation, examine how the field has been shaped by European interests over time and assess the implications for coherence today. Across the three empirical chapters, our analysis traced the legal and political foundations of EU development cooperation, mapped salient interest configurations and assessed where current choices align comfortably with the Union’s development objectives and where they create predictable tensions.

Our main conclusion is that, though European interests have, to some extent, always been part of development policy, the current geopolitical and competitiveness turn raises the stakes because it increasingly changes both the narrative, instruments and institutional practices. If the EU wants to align development cooperation with European interests without eroding its credibility or development impact, it needs strong guardrails and an honest account of trade-offs. The European Parliament, as co-legislator and through budget decisions and scrutiny, has a central role to play in shaping this.

5.1 What the study finds

A complex mandate is built into EU development cooperation. EU law and political commitments place poverty eradication, human rights and sustainable development firmly at the core. But EU external action is also, and increasingly, expected to advance the Union’s wider interests and objectives.

What is new about this tension is an *explicit* framing of development policy as a strategic instrument across a broader range of domains, as well as the speed with which priorities have been recalibrated. Such recalibration occurs in the context of a broader shift in the aid system, and recent analyses describe a tipping point at which the challenge is not only budgetary but also normative (Sumner & Klingebiel, 2025). Longstanding assumptions about the purpose of aid and how it should be delivered are increasingly being contested, reframed, and, in some cases, rejected.

We find that what counts as ‘EU interests’ is the outcome of political negotiation processes and may not always line up neatly with partner needs. Our mapping exercise showed that interests are not homogenous but are historically contingent and subject to processes of interest formation. Interest discourse spans security and stability, climate action, access to markets and resources, migration cooperation, industrial policy and even value-based diplomacy. In practice, interests across domains and stakeholders pull in different directions. A credible development strategy needs to prioritise, explain and accept that not all objectives can be fully achieved at the same time.

We show that pressures on coherence are particularly concentrated in a handful of familiar areas of contention. These include the use of development finance for border management and returns, the temptation to treat geo-economic competition as an overriding logic for infrastructure and extractive policies, and the tension between short-term neighbourhood stabilisation goals and long-term institution

building in fragile contexts. In these areas, coherence problems are rarely technical — rather, they are political choices about who bears costs and who reaps benefits.

The ‘mutual interest’ narrative can help justify spending to domestic audiences, but it can easily become a rhetorical convenience. Recent work on aid politics warns against treating mutual benefit as the default. Dercon (2025), for instance, cautions against a euphemistic reliance on ‘mutual interest’ and argues that evidence of genuine donor–recipient benefits is limited, albeit with some obvious exceptions. In a similar vein, Dreher (2025) argues that when aid is used to pursue multiple objectives that pull in different directions — such as geopolitical, commercial, and humanitarian goals — its ability to support sustained development in recipient countries is weakened (see also Dreher et al., 2024). This also matters for EU credibility. Partners are quick to detect overpromising, especially when objectives are presented as fully aligned even when trade-offs are obvious on the ground, as in the case of migration management or the promotion of EU business interests.

Instrument choice also shapes outcomes. While the expanding use of guarantees, blended finance and repayable instruments can bring scale and speed, it also changes risk allocation, incentives and accountability. The turn to the private sector agenda was viewed with particular scepticism by some of our interview partners for this study. It raises well-known concerns about the distribution of value between European and partner-country firms, communities, societies, local beneficiaries, as well as the debt implications of using more loans in settings where fiscal space is already tight. Where these risks are not carefully managed, they can harm both development outcomes and the EU’s standing as a partner.

Against this background, we see instrument and institutional design mattering as much as discussions about strategic frames. The more EU interests are to be included in development policy, and the more discretion is concentrated in the executive on how this is done, the more important it becomes to strengthen transparency, scrutiny, and predictable standards. This, too, was a recurring concern in our interviews with stakeholders. The point is salient in the Commission’s July 2025 proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework’s external action instrument, ‘Global Europe’ (European Commission, 2025b). The proposal seeks further simplification, envisages the removal of thematic spending targets, and enhances flexibility, *inter alia*, by providing for delegated acts to amend the share of expenditure fulfilling ODA criteria and the maximum amount of the EU budgetary guarantee.

5.2 Two governance models: Integrated vs. differentiated

Two governance logics are plausible under the given parameters of development policymaking. The first is an *integrated*, or global, model. In this logic, development cooperation becomes a flexible instrument that explicitly balances development objectives with strategic interests and draws on a broad range of tools, from grants to guarantees, to support partner countries and donor country agendas alike. This approach aligns with the current EU trajectory of ‘international partnerships’.

The advantage of this model is its flexibility for policymakers, yet there is a risk that traditional ODA will be superseded by new interests and diluted budgets (for example, if the envisaged 90 % ODA target is subsequently lowered via delegated act). The challenge is also that this model sits somewhat uneasily with the clear normative foundations of EU development cooperation, which originate from a ‘pre-geopolitical’ era of sustainable development and partner country ownership. If pursued further, the integrated model will need to seek, sooner rather than later, a broader and more formal political mandate, such as through an updated European Consensus. Moreover, if the integrated model were to relegate poverty eradication

to a subordinate, rather than the primary objective of EU development cooperation, it would arguably get into conflict with the current Treaty provisions and require their revision.

The second is a more *differentiated* model with a clean separation of responsibilities. This would mean an architecture with a protected, poverty-focused core for the poorest and most fragile contexts, combined with separate partnership windows for global public goods and wider EU strategic priorities, i.e. several financing instruments. The differentiated model would be characterised by clear distinctions in motivations, norms and instruments, including budgetary matters, and separate institutional responsibilities. The advantage of this is greater levels of transparency, particularly in terms of which programme operates under which logic and how much money is allocated to which purposes. It also leads to better coherence with the status quo of the development-related acquis. The disadvantages are that managerial flexibility is reduced and, while the model aligns well with the normative foundations, it sits more uneasily with the political *Zeitgeist* and domestic political considerations in a shifting international system.

Regarding model choice, history offers a useful warning. When development cooperation is pulled too closely into trade, security, or industrial policy, the incentives to demonstrate developmental outcomes and protect partner-country ownership weaken. This is why donors have, over the years, agreed to maintain clear boundary lines between export promotion and development finance, backed by separate disciplines on export credits and tied aid. The DAC's long push to untie aid reflects this lesson. Its 2001 Recommendation on untying ODA to the least developed countries aimed to improve value for money and give partners wider freedom to procure goods and services rather than channelling spending back to donor firms (OECD, 2025). A similar logic sits behind ODA eligibility rules, which, for instance, maintain a clear distinction between development spending and core peace and security purposes. Military equipment is excluded from ODA, and peace and security expenditure are only reportable under limited, defined conditions (OECD, 2024: p. 39 f.). In line with the integrated approach, the EU has recently pushed for stronger 'collaboration' of export and development financiers and has lobbied for more expansive eligibility rules under the most recent ODA 'modernisation' package.

Both the integrated and the differentiated models can work, in principle, provided the underlying trade-offs are handled openly. The integrated model needs strong internal firewalls to prevent *flexibility* from becoming *fungibility*, in which development resources become interchangeable funding for other priorities (for example, by significantly lowering the envisaged 90 % ODA target). It also needs clear development tests for any operation that claims ODA status. The challenge is to prevent a slide into 'everything is strategic', where development purpose becomes hard to distinguish from general foreign policy objectives. The differentiated approach, on the other hand, reduces conceptual confusion and can protect poverty reduction priorities, but it risks fragmentation and duplication if coordination is weak. However, it is important to state frankly that neither model is a guarantee against any further marginalisation of development cooperation. The integrated model bears risks through instrumentalisation and goal drift, and the differentiated model through ODA budget cuts and stronger issue competition with the dominant political mainstream.

For the European Parliament, the practical question is not whether European interests should matter. The question is rather how to ensure that interest alignment is guided by development objectives, partner ownership and credible standards. This question is about deciding what falls within development cooperation proper, what belongs to adjacent instruments, and how coherence is enforced across the

whole of EU external action. In institutional terms, this points to a simple rule – when *flexibility* increases, *accountability* must also increase.

5.3 Recommendations for the European Parliament

Moving beyond the overarching questions of governance and narrative, the recommendations below are framed around the Parliament’s main levers – legislative instruments, including the next Multiannual Financial Framework package; budgetary authority; and political scrutiny. They build on the study’s diagnosis of where the current trajectory creates risks for development integrity, partner trust and EU credibility. The core issue is not the existence of tensions between interests and development principles, but whether the system is built to manage them, or whether it relies on optimistic assumptions.

5.3.1 Setting guardrails

The European Parliament could require that any measure reported as ODA be justified by a clear development rationale, including poverty reduction and inequality impacts, rather than primarily by European strategic priorities. In particular, the Parliament could consider:

Recommendation 1: protecting core targets from quiet dilution. In the 2017 Consensus, the EU committed to reaching 0.20 % of gross national income (GNI) as ODA to least developed countries by 2030 (restated in recital 22, NDICI-GE), yet reporting shows the collective level remains well below this goal (Council, 2024d). Delivery on this and associated reporting duties could be included within the next instrument and be treated as binding political commitments rather than optional aspirations.

This would also include reintroducing meaningful thematic protection where it matters most. If fixed thematic targets are reduced for reasons of flexibility, they could be replaced with a smaller set of protected floors for poverty-focused spending, human development and support to civil society and human rights defenders, coupled with clear reporting and governance reforms.

Recommendation 2: keeping flexibility in check. If an ‘emerging challenges and priorities’ cushion is maintained as foreseen in the GE proposal, transparent triggering criteria, time limits and strong *ex post* reporting requirements could be defined. Arrangements that permit large reallocations without a clear political record of the underlying changes and their rationale should be avoided.

This would also mean circumscribing delegated powers by clearly defining their objectives, content, scope and duration of the delegation of power, to avoid that they affect the basic political contract. Parameters that fundamentally shape the development character of the instrument, such as ODA-related targets, should be set in the regulation itself and adjusted through the ordinary legislative procedure or, at a minimum, through clearly defined delegated acts. Moreover, the regulation should contain more granular transparency requirements regarding the implementation of spending that counts towards the ODA target.

5.3.2 Strengthening transparency and scrutiny

The European Parliament could push for more meaningful scrutiny. This means that the Parliament receives timely programming information that is substantial enough to allow for meaningful scrutiny and not only aggregated *ex post* reports. Systematic exchanges of views on the annual programming cycle, including around the use of reserves and major reallocations, could be scheduled. The core message of a recent opinion of the European Court of Auditors (2024a) on the external action guarantee is that evaluation, reporting, and transparency provisions are insufficient, thereby creating a predictable political vulnerability for the entire model. Against this background, the Parliament could, in particular, consider:

*Recommendation 3: **requiring open data on projects and contracts***, including Global Gateway. It could demand publication of project documentation, indicative terms for major financial operations and procurement outcomes as well as evaluation and reporting data in a machine-readable format. This improves accountability and helps stakeholders assess who benefits in practice.

This could further mean creating a public '**Global Europe**' transparency hub. The Parliament could use a set of indicators to track development outcomes, ODA integrity, debt implications, and European co-benefits, so that performance can be assessed beyond annual political cycles. Making the interest configurations visible, and subjecting them to scrutiny, is a necessary condition for assessing the coherence of EU development policy and for formulating realistic proposals to steer it in a more development-friendly direction.

5.3.3 Making the private sector agenda development-proof

Regarding the investment and private sector agenda, the Parliament could, in particular, consider:

*Recommendation 4: **pushing for stringent application of economic, social and environmental standards***.

Investment operations could be better aligned with human rights obligations, labour standards and climate and biodiversity objectives, even at a time of strong political push for deregulation. While all supported investments are required to comply with GE principles, in practice investors have at times failed to obey the standards imposed on them (Pérez, 2024). Better alignment with these standards would also mean treating **debt sustainability as a first-order constraint**. Debt sustainability analysis and transparent reporting of loan terms could be made a standard requirement for any operation that increases public debt exposure for partner countries. Where debt risks are high, grants, concessionality, risk-sharing and support for domestic revenue mobilisation could be prioritised.

*Recommendation 5: **strengthening safeguards against a reintroduction of tied aid*** by the back door.

There is currently a growing political push to reintroduce forms of 'European preference' in aid spending. Untying remains the safer development standard: it maximises competition and partner choice, improving value-for-money and ownership, and it protects credibility by ensuring aid is driven by development results rather than supplier interests. Retaining open procurement while enforcing robust ESG due-diligence achieves strategic aims without sliding back into donor capture. Where EU-backed finance supports European firms, transparent justification and safeguards should continue to be required to ensure procurement remains open, competitive, and aligned with partner priorities. Our recommendation to strengthen safeguards against a reintroduction of tied aid is particularly pertinent as the current Global Europe Regulation Proposal of the Commission foresees, by way of derogation from Article 198 of the Financial Regulation, grants to be awarded without a call for proposals, including directly to private entities established in the EU (Art. 23(4)(3) GE Proposal).

5.4 Towards an honest narrative – Concluding thoughts

More than fifty years ago, the so-called Pearson Commission argued in its famous UN report 'Partners in Development', that 'national self-interest is a rational basis for policy in aid and anything else, but only if it is enlightened and farsighted and looks beyond its own boundaries' (Pearson, 1970: p. 7). The Pearson Commission called for a 'new strategy for global development' at a time when it saw donor-country support eroding amid a major crisis of confidence. In other words, the discussion of self-interest in development, in a world of competing agendas, is as old as the field of development policy itself.

The current context gives rise to similar debates. It is now, arguably, a time for honesty about 'mutual interest'. There is little doubt that pursuing co-benefits, including economic opportunities for European firms, is legitimate, but it is politically risky to present them as universal win-win outcomes. A more robust message is that development cooperation is one instrument among several to manage interdependence. It can reduce risks and build shared capacity, but it cannot substitute for hard domestic policy choices in Europe, nor for political agency in partner countries.

In recent years, European institutions, in particular the Commission and the EU Member States themselves, have sometimes implied that traditional ODA, as a value-based activity, is no longer fit for purpose in a world driven by national interests and geopolitical competition. The impression this created was that ODA is an altruistic and ineffective luxury that Europe can no longer afford. As a result, there are political forces openly advocating its abolition. However, the constructed dichotomy between EU values and interests fails to withstand scrutiny and has proven strategically counterproductive. Many aspects of traditional ODA do have important functions — soft power, among them — that are clearly in the interest of the European Union, regardless of whether they are considered as values or not.

A credible development narrative, however, should avoid overclaiming. It should be explicit about where EU and partner interests converge, where they do not and what the EU is prepared to do when short-term domestic pressures clash with long-term stability, prosperity and climate goals. Recent work on development cooperation narratives in Europe suggests that public support is more likely when the purpose of aid is explained in plain language, linked to concrete outcomes and paired with honesty about constraints (Kumar et al., 2025; OECD, 2014). Selling development cooperation as capable of delivering on each and every political priority at a given time is neither honest nor compelling.

In sum, the EU should resist a narrative slide into purely transactional logics and back a storyline where development cooperation remains a core expression of the Union's values as well as a practical investment in a safer, more stable and more sustainable world. The aim should be to normalise a dual truth, namely that development cooperation can serve, and has always served, European interests, yet that it retains its integrity and effectiveness — including at promoting such interests — only if it protects the poorest, respects partner ownership and remains accountable primarily to development results. In practical terms, the Parliament can reinforce this narrative through hearings, reporting requirements and the way it frames budget debates.

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PE 783.609
EP-EXPO/2023/OP/0001/DEVE/LOT4/R/2

Print ISBN 978-92-848-3498-3 | doi: 10.2861/7186054 | QA-01-26-061-EN-C
PDF ISBN 978-92-848-3497-6 | doi: 10.2861/1950059 | QA-01-26-061-EN-N