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DISCUSSION PAPER No. 340

The EU, geopolitics and human development: Insights from Zambia, Kenya and Guinea

By Katja Sergejeff, Ennatu Domingo and Pauline Veron

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Human development remains a key area for the EU's added value, despite recent EU initiatives to increase investments in hard infrastructure. Our research confirmed this in three partner countries, namely Guinea, Kenya and Zambia. The EU's support to human development sectors is appreciated and essential to bolster the EU's standing as a key partner.

The current geopolitical discourse that is prominent in Brussels' circles does not seem to have reached the partner countries. These are more focused on the impact of the EU's support to human development sectors and whether the EU responds to their needs. Local stakeholders see the support that the EU provides to partner countries as complementary (rather than competing) with that of the US or China.

The fact that its support in human development sectors is appreciated but not framed through a geopolitical lens should encourage the EU to strengthen its support and partnerships in those sectors. This might give the EU more appreciation than narratives that are not tailored to the realities of the countries concerned, particularly when combined with increased funding for human development projects under key initiatives such as the Global Gateway.

Yet the EU's geopolitical objectives need to be aligned more effectively at the country level and human development must fit in that framework. In this paper, we provide recommendations towards more comprehensive, politically informed and tailored approaches to enhance the EU's added value in these sectors.

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Acronyms

AFD	French Development Agency
APP	Anti-corruption Pilot Project
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CLIP	Country-level Implementation Plan
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DG INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
EC	European Commission
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
ECED	Early Childhood Education and Development
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
GAP	Gender Action Plan
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHA	Global Health Advocates
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
HDI	Human Development Index
HDRs	Human Development Reports
HQ	Headquarters
MIP	Multiannual Indicative Programme
NDICI-GE	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument-Global Europe
ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OECD CRS	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Credit Reporting System
ProDEG	Programme Décennal de l'Éducation en Guinée
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
TEIs	Team Europe Initiatives
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UHC	Universal Health Coverage
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNSTATS	United Nations Statistics
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar

1. Introduction

Human development is one of the key areas of the European Union (EU)'s development cooperation and one of the most tangible areas of the EU's international cooperation in Africa. While political attention to it has varied over time, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the topic came to the forefront of the EU's international political agenda (Veron and Sergejeff 2021). Our previous analysis of the EU's Multiannual Indicative Programmes (MIPs) with partner countries showed that human development has received a higher priority in the programming of the EU's €79.5 billion Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument-Global Europe (NDICI-GE) instrument for external action than was originally planned when the programming started in 2019 (Sergejeff et al. 2021; Sergejeff et al. 2022). This has partially been a consequence of the human impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing interest and needs in human development both in the EU and partner countries, and the overall political leadership from the European Commission (EC) and Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) (Sergejeff et al. 2022). Human development features in over 90% of the MIPs either as a specific priority area or mainstreamed across other priority areas. This is a good indication that human development is still a major policy priority for the EU's international cooperation, despite many recent policy initiatives launched from Brussels focusing on infrastructure and private sector development. The focus on human development is also very much a reflection of how the EU sees itself in terms of where its added value lies over other potential international partners.

This paper complements the findings of ECDPM's previous work on human development (Sergejeff et al. 2022; Veron and Sergejeff 2021), and looks at the EU as a human development actor at the partner country level. It asks how the stakeholders in three partner countries, namely Guinea, Kenya and Zambia, perceive the EU's offer in human development sectors, and what they see as the key challenges. It also points to opportunities for the EU to strengthen relations with its partners in human development sectors.

We found that the EU's support to human development sectors is highly appreciated in the three countries and actually helps bolster the EU's standing as an important and reliable partner. Yet the more recent geopolitical discourse and framing that is prominent in Brussels' circles does not seem to have reached partners. Partners are more focused on the effective delivery and impact of the EU's support to these sectors, and whether the EU responds to their needs and priorities. At country level, there are a number of aspects that the EU can further improve in order to strengthen this added value in human development sectors, in terms of its support to governance, involvement and support to local actors including civil society organisations (CSOs) and the government, coordination with other donors and finally linking human development with other priorities.

The paper starts by analysing the perception of the EU's 'offer' on human development, and how it links to the EU's narrative of geopolitical competition. It then looks at the links between human development, governance and politics, the actors to work with at all levels, donor coordination and finally integrated approaches. The paper ends with recommendations to strengthen the EU's support to human development and ultimately to further bring out the EU's added value in these sectors.

We acknowledge that human development is a very broad concept, including multiple thematic areas. In our analysis, we have focused on health, education and social protection. We chose to focus on the experiences in Guinea, Kenya and Zambia to provide a diversity of contexts and geographic areas and for the way human development was addressed in the MIPs in these countries.¹ The paper builds on desk research and country missions

¹ While the paper itself provides the overall findings from the countries, and each section also includes country-specific examples, more information on the country contexts, human development challenges, largest ODA providers present in the country as well as the EU's priorities can be found in Annex 1.

in these three places. It brings together the views and perceptions of over 50 interviewees from CSOs, governments, EU delegations, EU member states and other development partners.

2. Stakeholders across the board appreciate the EU's support in human development sectors

In the first paper of a two-paper series, we analysed whether human development was a key priority of the EU amidst the policy changes undertaken in Brussels to respond to the increasingly geopolitical context (Sergejeff et al. 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic brought human development needs into the spotlight, thereby creating momentum to increase attention and resources for it. However, **as the EU focuses on reallocating and mobilising funds to its major geopolitical priorities such as the green and digital transitions, there is a concern that investments to human development are left behind** (GHA 2022; Chadwick 2023). For example, under the €300 billion Global Gateway, there are only seven initiatives on health and three on education out of over eighty projects (Chadwick 2023). The EU's geopolitical ambitions are also changing the EU's approach to human development at country level by expanding its areas of focus, building capacity on topics such as gender, digitalisation and, in some cases, shifting the EU's support from one sector to another. These changes of priorities, which are pushed from EU headquarters (HQ) in Brussels in a logical follow-through of high-level political objectives and broadly applied in all EU delegations across sub-Saharan Africa, might not reflect the reality in some partner countries. Nevertheless, the EU's recent policy changes are also having a positive impact on how the EU engages with partner countries, as it aims to become a stronger geopolitical and more strategic actor through its international partnerships.

According to our interviewees, the EU is seen as a more proactive human development actor in engaging with the main players in the sector and integrating partner countries' key priorities in the new programming cycle, and this is highly appreciated. A survey of public, private and civil society leaders from 2020 also shows that when donors align their support with partners' national development priorities and work closely with in-country stakeholders, they are generally perceived as more influential and helpful in the eyes of the partner countries (Custer et al. 2021; Custer et al. 2023).

In Zambia, the EU has strategically responded to the new Government's priority for human development by adding education to the MIP (UNICEF 2022). The MIP for Zambia was also elaborated in alignment with Zambia's 8th National Development Plan and considering the country's debt burden, which reduced the country's investment capacity in social services in the past years (EC 2021a). As a result, even though the EU looks at human development holistically, the MIP has a clear focus on early childhood education and development (ECED). The focus on ECED is strategic as it targets a sector that has, until now, received very limited attention from the donor community.

In Kenya, the EU has a strong interest to align its priorities with the Government, as the country is leading in digitalisation in the Eastern Africa region, focusing on economic self-sustainability, as well as playing a key regional role in peace and security (Chadwick 2023). The new Government, which has set very ambitious milestones for its first year, is, in turn, putting pressure on the EU to deliver on its promises to support the Government's efforts, especially in deepening digital transformation and addressing governance issues. For instance, the Kenyan Government aims to digitalise all government services by June 2023 (Republic of Kenya 2022).

However, the EU's support is not always comprehensive and this can limit the EU's impact in partner countries as support in the targeted sector might not lead to the expected results. In Guinea, for instance, where education is a new priority sector for the EU, the focus is on vocational training. The EU is absent in the primary education sector where a few other donors are active – for example, the French Development Agency (AFD), supporting the

Programme Décennal de l'Éducation en Guinée (ProDEG) and the German Development Agency (GIZ). Yet basic/primary education has long been neglected in Guinea, investment needs are still huge and literacy levels are still extremely low. A stronger coordination under the Team Europe approach between the EU and member states like France, who are supporting other aspects or cycles of the education sector (for example, primary education) (Jones and Sergejeff 2022), can thus ensure that a more holistic support is provided to the education sector as a whole, without overstressing the EU's resources. In Kenya, the EU is focusing on the twin digital and green transition as strategic areas where it can showcase the best value-added proposition and achieve transformational impact (ECA 2020). However, our interviewees noted that Kenya still has huge challenges in terms of poverty reduction and inequality, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and are likely to be deepened by climate change. Despite the EU's focus on areas that are of geopolitical relevance, such as investment in digital and green infrastructure, which indeed can help it to become a more strategic global actor, there is still demand for support to human development. Further, the geopolitical relevance of human development should not be underestimated as this is one of the EU's areas of strength (Koch et al. 2023). **While the EU should use its resources strategically, a shift away from traditional human development might leave significant gaps in its support to a partner country's sustainable economic growth.**

While the EU responds to the changing geopolitical context, it should not forget that it can achieve its geopolitical ambitions by strengthening its human development support to partner countries. In particular, the EU should reconcile its more geopolitical and interest-driven international cooperation agenda with its demand-driven development agenda to build partnerships that can deliver (Teevan and Domingo 2022). The EU's support to human development sectors is widely appreciated by actors across the board, even if, in terms of the official development assistance (ODA) disbursements, the EU institutions are not a leading donor in human development sectors in Kenya, Zambia or Guinea (see Annex 1 for data). Yet its contribution was considered relevant and necessary by the interviewees in all three countries. Further, while the EU is an influential partner globally and in sub-Saharan Africa overall, it could improve its influence in social sectors for instance, by becoming more helpful and responsive to partner priorities (Custer et al. 2021). In the new programming cycle, simply put, the EU needs to continue doing what it does best and address some of the challenges that are preventing it from having more impact. These challenges will be looked at in more detail in the following sections.

3. The EU's discourse on geopolitical positioning has barely reached the partner country level

There is a strong geopolitical undertone in the EU's engagement in some human development sectors. For instance, in the MIP for Guinea, the promotion of EU values and interests is prominent, and the EU clearly aims at becoming a strong partner driven by principles and values that distinguish it from other international partners that are characterised as pursuing a "purely predatory approach" (EC 2021b). The MIP also emphasises the fact that education and human capital development remain a key tool for 'soft power' and the promotion of the European way of life and values.

Geopolitical rivalries in Zambia are not highly visible, but some interviewees mentioned that the change of government has marked a shift towards an increasing alignment with the EU and the United States (US), even if China remains the biggest creditor (IMF 2022). President Hakainde Hichilema, who has increased diplomatic engagement with the EU since becoming president in August 2022, has called for deeper Zambia-EU political and economic cooperation (Embassy of Zambia 2022). For the EU, Zambia is seen as an ally in a volatile region and a long-standing partner. The war in Ukraine has re-emphasised the fact that maintaining good relations with countries like Zambia is important for the EU's (geo)political standing, for instance, in the context of aligning the votes in the

United Nations General Assembly. Therefore, there is an interest for the EU to support Zambia and strengthen political relations with the country. In practice, this entails highlighting the value of the support to sectors where the EU can stand out from other international actors and bring value-based options, including in human development.

In Kenya, on the other hand, the EU's geopolitical discourse is very visible, especially in the digital sector. It intends to use its projects in the country to roll out and demonstrate the impact of the Global Gateway infrastructure projects in sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, following the commitments under the Global Gateway and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment initiatives in December 2022 during the meeting of the Trade and Technology Council – a platform for bilateral cooperation that responds to geopolitical challenges – the EU and the US selected Kenya as the first country where they will start their digital partnership by coordinating on financing digital infrastructure projects (US-EU 2022). They will support the implementation of the [National Digital Masterplan \(2022-2032\)](#). Furthermore, compared to Guinea and Zambia where digitalisation is mainstreamed in human development through integrating digital tools in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) projects, the EU's digital projects in Kenya are very extensive. In collaboration with GIZ, the EU has a list of projects on digital economy and digital governance including projects on e-government, data protection and digital entrepreneurship and skills as well as the digitalisation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Compared to China and the US, the EU has very little presence in the digital sector in partner countries, especially in the digital economy, and thus these projects will help build its capacity at the EU delegation level and its contribution to Kenya's digital transformation. However, from a human development perspective, these initiatives do not spell out clearly how digitalisation is improving access to basic services such as education, health or social protection (Sergejeff et al. 2022; Lani et al. 2022). The EU has committed to supporting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and education and poverty reduction are important priorities for partner countries. Thus, the EU's Global Gateway and Team Europe digital projects should build on the EU's areas of strength and build on the EU's added value stemming from its development cooperation.

The support that the EU provides to partner countries seems to be seen by local stakeholders as complementary (rather than competing) with that of the US or China (infrastructure). It is quite telling that the geopolitical (re)positioning of the EU – which dominates the discourse at Brussels level – did not seem to mean much to local stakeholders interviewed in these three countries. The EU's efforts to reposition itself as a credible and leading actor in human development, reflected in its [Global Health Strategy](#), NDICI-GE and the MIPs, have either not reached partner countries (they do not see any difference) or are not meant for them altogether (but more for a European audience and multilateral institutions) (EC 2022a). **For many local stakeholders, the EU's geopolitical ambitions and its communication efforts to this end seem to be completely overshadowed by the enormous needs on the ground.** As a result, European concepts and policy initiatives such as Team Europe or the Global Gateway were hardly mentioned by our interviewees in the three countries (see Farand 2021). According to some of them, changing branding and concepts does not help the EU in becoming a strong and visible partner, but rather creates confusion and misunderstanding for its partners. One of the purposes of Team Europe and Global Gateway is to increase the EU's visibility. Yet to be successful, brands need to be built over time and multiple and changing brands may end up working against the EU's visibility (Teevan et al. 2021). It is worth pointing out however that the perception and understanding of those concepts might be different in other African countries.

At the country level, EU delegations and member states have been struggling to balance the reality on the ground with Brussels policy demands, resulting in mixed communication about the EU's more geopolitical approach. For instance, the Global Gateway and its implementation at the country level is not very clear for many European member states in terms of what is expected from them, and how human development fits within a discourse highly focused on hard infrastructure. While the Global Gateway integrates both geopolitical and development cooperation sides, and they should speak to each other, at the communication level, the EU's geopolitical ambitions, in particular investments in energy and digital infrastructure, overshadow what the Global Gateway can do for

human development at the country level (Teevan and Domingo 2022). Some EU member states have expressed the concern that the EU is more of a ‘payer’ than a ‘player’, as the amount of ODA it provides to human development sectors does not translate into political weight in partner countries.

Overall, it seemed that there was a need for a deeper reflection within the EU institutions, member states and the private sector on how to align their geopolitical objectives more effectively at country level and on where development cooperation fits in that framework. Given the discrepancies between the discourse in Brussels and the reality in partner countries, it might be worth articulating better what the added value of the EU is in those countries to find a balance between its geopolitical goals and its support to human development objectives (Sergejeff et al. 2021). **The fact that its support in human development sectors is appreciated but not framed through a geopolitical lens might actually be an encouragement to strengthen and improve its long-standing support and partnerships in those sectors.** This strategy might indeed give the EU more appreciation than narratives that are not tailored to the realities of the countries concerned.

4. What to consider when strengthening the EU’s support to human development in partner countries

Despite the fact that human development was largely supported, there is still significant scope to improve the EU’s support and to enhance its partnerships. In the study, we identified seven key areas on which the EU and wider Team Europe could focus to further strengthen the added value of its support to human development.

Integrating anti-corruption more strongly into the support to human development

This research revealed how human development intersects with governance and politics, which can either work in favour of better human development or become a barrier to it. All three countries have set up regulations to tackle corruption, and have ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention against Corruption (UN 2021). Yet corruption has remained a major problem. The interviewees across the board brought up corruption as the main obstacle to human development, with examples of major health sector corruption cases brought up in Kenya and Zambia during the COVID-19 pandemic (Aikins 2022; Nyambe 2021). In Guinea, one of the most fragile countries in the world, similarly, corruption was widespread under Alpha Condé and scandals have erupted in the Ministry of technical education and vocational training and the Ministry of Health (Kaalaa 2020; Africa Press 2022).

Corruption significantly affects the accessibility, quality, efficiency and equity of basic services. It affects the most vulnerable groups of society and exacerbates inequalities, including gender inequalities, by hindering the ability of women to access basic services and their efforts to seek justice and protection from exploitation (Camacho 2021). Corruption is a cross-cutting problem, and due to its largely hidden nature, it is difficult to measure. It is strongly entrenched in the power relations of the society, serving the powerful, who may therefore have little incentives to tackle the problem. Analysis, for instance in Kenya, has pointed out that the Government’s fight against corruption over the years has mainly stemmed from outside pressure from international investors and citizens, and has lacked genuine commitment from the leaders (Van Rij 2021).

The ability to significantly reduce corruption often has to do with gradual endogenous processes, combined with momentum to address the issues (Ronceray and Sergejeff 2023). The success stories of anti-corruption are driven by the country’s internal dynamics, which is why the donors’ role is largely to complement and nurture the existing dynamics to support anti-corruption, for instance by identifying actors and coalitions that seek to address the issue

(Ronceray and Sergejeff 2020). The interviewees pointed out that on sensitive issues like corruption, finding entry points to tackle the issue, or common ground with the power holders in the country, is often a challenge.

The momentum to advance anti-corruption could appear for instance at the moment of elections. In Zambia, the change of leadership has created a promising window of opportunity to fight the endemic corruption in the country. The government has expressed a strong commitment to fight corruption and uphold the rule of law. Similarly, in Guinea, since the coup d'Etat in September 2021, the fight against corruption has become a high priority of the transition government which has pushed thousands of civil servants to retire in order to "clean" the civil service and replace them with younger individuals (often coming from the diaspora). However, windows of opportunity to fight corruption tend to open and close according to the political life of a country. **It is important to make use of such political momentum by supporting reformists, while at the same time remembering that announcements alone are not evidence of genuine support to anti-corruption efforts, and that anti-corruption could also be used to attack political opponents** (Ronceray and Sergejeff 2023).

While there is a lot of awareness of the negative impacts of corruption on human development sectors, the EU has at times struggled to integrate anti-corruption concerns into its support to human development. The limited integration of anti-corruption concerns in interventions around health, education and social protection was pointed out by a recent evaluation of the EU's support to rule of law and anti-corruption in partner countries (Bossuyt et al. 2022). This is linked to constraints in capacities and expertise but also a lack of clear policy frameworks and guidance (Bossuyt et al. 2022). Better integration of anti-corruption concerns into the EU's support to human development sectors would require strengthening the capacities of the staff focused primarily on human development sectors and providing them with guidance and support in integrating anti-corruption. One step to do this will be through internal guidance, which DG INTPA is preparing for the EU delegations (EC 2022b). Further support could include sharing good practices, ideas and analyses between experts in different countries or dedicated trainings where there is interest.

Some good initiatives also exist in partner countries. In the Zambian context, the Anti-corruption Partnership Pilot (APP) has been launched by Sweden. It is a multi-stakeholder initiative to implement an anti-corruption project based on best practices. Under the programme, Sida and U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre have undertaken an analysis of corruption in the health sector. In the education sector, GIZ is also carrying out an analysis of corruption. The results from these will help to identify the specific drivers of corruption in human development, entry points and context-specific approaches to address corruption in these sectors, and ideally, the analysis could work as a basis for Team Europe actors to bring together capacities and expertise from different member states.

Unlocking the potential of locally-led human development

In all three case study countries, local governments bear a major share of responsibility for meeting the basic needs and providing infrastructure for the communities. For instance, in Kenya, the health sector as well as some aspects of education (including pre-primary education and TVET) are devolved functions (see KIPPRA 2018). Therefore, looking at decentralisation and devolution, and the politics around it, is crucial for better impact in human development sectors. The engagement of local authorities is crucial for the overall success of the 2030 agenda, as a majority of the SDGs' sub-targets will not be achievable without the proper involvement of local authorities (OECD 2019). Ultimately, working at the local level and with local authorities enables better response to the needs of local populations and more efficient and effective service delivery (Vij 2023). This has, for instance, been the case in Guinea, where local authorities have been more involved and shown interest in vocational training programmes to show their ability to provide jobs for young people.

However, decentralisation is not a panacea to guarantee better basic services. Decentralisation and devolution processes are inherently political, and **despite commitments made at the policy level, the central government may be reluctant to transfer power and responsibilities to the local level**, which can lead to slow progress or stalling of local government's initiatives (see Resnick et al. 2019; Gutiérrez 2021). Indeed, in some contexts, the relations between national and local authorities are characterised by political competition, which undermines the legitimacy and credibility of local authorities (see Gutiérrez 2021). Furthermore, in many countries, both national and local authorities lack (human) resources and capacities to effectively carry out decentralisation, which was also a common problem in the three countries according to our interviews. Finally, several interviewees brought up the **lack of funds and unpredictability of disbursements** from the central level as a key issue. For instance, in Kenya, delays and unpredictability in the disbursements of funds from the central government have become a major issue, hampering the effectiveness and quality of service delivery (Kairu et al. 2021; Tsofa et al. 2023).

Another important factor either driving or hindering the impact on human development is the political prioritisation at the sub-national level. Our interviewees in Kenya pointed out that there is a lot of variation in terms of how counties prioritise health concerns. Previous analysis of the Kenyan health sector suggests that together with the level of national prioritisation on health, the local political interests, equity considerations, and the relationships between various actors involved in the priority-setting process tend to drive the county-level priority setting around health (Tsofa et al. 2023). Political prioritisation and strong leadership at a county level may be factors explaining why some counties are successful in health system reforms, including introducing universal health coverage (UHC) or abolishing user fees in health services (Kairu et al. 2021).

The crucial role of the local authorities in human development points to the need for the EU to support local authorities for better impact in human development sectors (Brand 2023). Several interviewees, particularly from CSOs, expressed hopes that the EU would engage more strongly with local governments and leaders, and make more consistent efforts to reach rural and underserved communities. Many suggested that the best way to have a sustainable impact at the community level is to provide holistic and multi-sectoral support that takes into account the local needs and political dynamics. These types of approaches do exist (and they are not exclusive to the local level). For instance, in Zambia, the EU has taken a life-cycle approach that aims at integrating all elements needed to enable proper child development – from health to nutrition; education; water, sanitation and hygiene; and gender equality. There is a wide agreement on the necessity of multi-sectoral approaches but the challenge is bringing all relevant stakeholders together, from local authorities to line ministries (as necessary). A further challenge is linked to the capacities and expertise available in partner countries. The Team Europe approach can be a valuable asset for the EU, helping to bring together the capacities and expertise of the member states and their implementing agencies in the country.

However, there are some constraints for the EU to engage with local authorities. These are linked to, for instance, its funding modalities, the capacities of the delegations as well as the regulations in the countries (Gutiérrez 2021). First, the delegations tend to lack knowledge and training to foster proper involvement of local authorities in county-level programmes. Second, while it is widely acknowledged that supporting local governments is crucial for sustainable human development outcomes, some have pointed out that the NDICI-GE may not be well placed for this. With the NDICI-GE, the specific budget line for local authorities has been removed, and support to local authorities is meant to be mainstreamed in the geographic programmes. Support to local authorities is also included in the Global Challenges programme, which is meant to strengthen the European and global networks and associations of local authorities. However, for the local authorities themselves, this means greater competition for funding with an increasing number of actors (UCLG 2021). Finally, engaging directly with sub-national partners may not be feasible for the EU in all countries. This is due to the number and geographic dispersion of local governments, but also to the internal political competition between levels of government, that prevents local governments from being consulted or involved as decision-makers (Gutiérrez 2021).

The dilemma of working through government

The EU has set many targets under the NDICI-GE, the Global Gateway and the Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs), but to be able to meet its commitments it will have to work at the level where it can best ensure impact. The national government (and local authorities) cannot be overlooked, given its key role in delivering and sustaining services such as health or education in the long run. Further, **the experiences of the interviewees show that to sustainably advance human development priorities, a government has to have ownership and a sustained political interest from the national to the local level.** Yet in some contexts, particularly fragile ones, supporting human development through government (for example, through budget support) can be seen as risky. Guinea is a good example, where the EU is not providing budget support to the Government but solely supporting human development through CSOs, the UN and member states with a view to responding to the direct needs of the population – despite the fact that civil society in Guinea faces significant capacity issues – just like the Government – and is highly politicised and fragmented. As such, there is no ‘perfect partner’ to work with and, as an interviewee in Guinea emphasised, “the EU cannot trap a country because of its leaders”. Even if a government is not democratically elected, there is a need to find ways to work with authorities at the national or regional level on selected issues of common interest, alongside civil society where possible.

This points to the importance of contextual and detailed political economy analysis, for example, regarding capacities available, governance structures and systemic weaknesses. This will determine the right mix of partners and ways of working, which need to be adapted to a fragile context such as Guinea (for example, strict procedures, or criteria). **As much as possible, governments should be seen as partners while local organisations are being empowered to voice their needs and eventually get institutional support.** Elections and subsequent changes of government can open windows of opportunity to tackle key challenges in human development sectors. For instance, in Zambia, the current president has made extensive commitments to improve health and education services, which signals potential high-level buy-in to scale up the support to human development (Hichilama 2022; Lusakatimes 2022). The Government has also increased investments in social sectors in Zambia (Zipar 2023a), but the share of government spending in education and health is still low – 3.9% and 3% of the gross domestic product (GDP) respectively (Zipar 2023b). While the very limited fiscal space and the high level of debt make major increases in government investments in social sectors unlikely, interviewees did express some optimism in the Government’s interest and ownership of the human development agenda (see Gbadamosi 2023). Spurred by the change of government, discussions over potential budget support have also emerged in the EU. While the commitment to reforms in Zambia seems promising, interviewed European member states pointed out that from their point of view, starting budget support would still be too early and risky, for instance, due to systemic corruption.

Our interviews with government actors in Kenya, Zambia and Guinea indicate that supporting human development was unsurprisingly a key priority for the officials. As mentioned above, the national development plans of Kenya, Guinea² and Zambia all include provisions on human development sectors. While the inclusion of human development in national development plans gives an indication of political buy-in to supporting these sectors, these plans are often very broad including multiple – and at times conflicting – priorities. Furthermore, the inclusion of a priority in the development plan does not necessarily mean that the political elite is willing to drive reforms or devote resources to it, and priorities without sufficient funding rarely bring about the desired change (Fourie 2023; Custer et al. 2022).

Multiple priorities combined with limited funding capacity may prevent the allocation of adequate resources to human development sectors, watering down the accessibility and quality of services. Therefore, creating and supporting political drive for better human development should take place at all levels of the government and across

² Guinea currently does not have a national development plan, but the previous one (2016-2020) did include human capital as a priority.

society. One way of doing that could be to identify and work with ‘champions’ that have a high level of interest in improving the services in human development sectors as well as the power to bring about change.

Working with local and national government actors and alignment with their policies are important for political buy-in and ownership of the EU’s support to human development. However, as this section points out it needs to be coupled with a more nuanced and granular understanding and analysis of not only the key needs and priorities in the country – paying specific attention to the needs of the most vulnerable and underserved communities and capacities of different actors – but also the drivers for change and the real political, bureaucratic and commercial incentives for these changes at country level. Interviewees pointed out that during the programming of NDICI-GE, delegations undertook significant analytical work, which can be drawn from this more nuanced analysis of political drivers. While DG INTPA does not use political economy analysis systematically (see management response in the context of rule of law) (EC 2022b), they might be useful on a case-by-case basis to gain a deeper understanding of the political dynamics around human development.

CSOs can be key drivers and champions to support human development but they need resources and capacity to absorb those

The EU is a long-standing supporter of CSOs and to demonstrate its commitment it has developed a thematic programme for civil society organisations, with €1.5 billion earmarked under the NDICI-GE programming in addition to the support to CSOs provided at country level (EC 2021c). CSOs are key partners for the EU to implement projects and programmes in partner countries in which human development is a key priority but where governments have limited fiscal space and capacities to carry out reforms. They play an important role in providing basic services and advocating for equality and better resourcing for education, health and social protection. In Kenya, 69% of basic education is offered by the church, while in Zambia, 25% of schools are community-based schools working outside of formal government structures.³ Aside from their role as service providers, CSOs also play a role in advocacy, creating bottom-up demand for better human development and holding governments accountable (Kamstra 2017; Kamstra 2014). Yet despite their role, CSOs in the three countries struggle to find domestic funding and therefore tend to be largely dependent on donors (see Blansky and Fields 2019 on Zambia; and ACEPIS 2021 for Kenya).

The EU’s engagement with CSOs varies across countries and there is ample room for improvement (EC 2020a; AidWatch 2022; Youngs 2021). During the programming of the NDICI-GE, the EU delegations carried out extensive consultations with CSOs, but smaller CSOs and those operating in rural areas without internet access faced difficulties in getting their voice heard (AidWatch 2022; Makszimov 2021). The EU has acknowledged this issue and is taking steps to improve its engagement with CSOs. For instance, in Kenya, the CSO roadmap (2019-2022) pointed to the need to improve the dialogue between the EU and its member states and CSOs. It should be more predictable, structured and more open to CSOs’ suggestions (EC 2020a).

Aside from dialogue and consultations, the EU’s preferred funding modalities may not be enough to empower local organisations. In 2019-2020, the majority of the EU’s ODA to and through CSOs went to the implementation of donor-initiated projects, as opposed to funding to the CSOs’ own initiatives, which received only €5 million from €2.2 billion. The majority of the funding went to either CSOs based in Europe, or that are international, while approximately 20% of the funding was directed to local CSOs (OECD 2022). These observations are not exclusive to the EU though but reflect the wider observation that the funding opportunities for CSOs that are favoured by donors tend to limit the possibilities for longer-term capacity building (see ACEPIS 2021). The interviewed CSOs indeed pointed to the limited support from the EU to initiatives that are led and programmed by CSOs, urging the EU to address some of those challenges. This would include making the EU’s funding system more accessible and flexible,

³ The information is obtained from an unpublished document provided by an interviewee.

together with providing technical assistance to build the capacity of CSOs to fill the funding and reporting requirements. Institutional support as opposed to solely project-based support (Maruru 2022) can also contribute to the sustainability of CSOs. The EU cannot provide core funding to CSOs, but it certainly can develop calls for proposals better tailored to the different types of organisations.

The EU is making efforts to support more local CSOs, for instance, by increasing direct funding to grassroots groups and increasing sub-granting to reach small community-based groups (Youngs 2021). EU and member states' interviewees also reaffirmed their willingness to work more with CSOs. However, some pointed out that in practice, this is not an easy exercise. While increasing efforts to reach smaller community-based organisations is desirable, they often do not have the capacity to absorb the funds effectively. Some also mentioned that training local organisations takes a significant amount of resources. Also more broadly, capacity constraints seem to be a key reason hindering the EU's ability to engage with smaller local CSOs. For instance, during the programming process, EU delegations used a combination of consultation methods including surveys, workshops and focus group discussions, but not all EU delegations had the capacity, resources or the drive to involve all key CSOs (Maksimov 2021).

The efforts to engage more with local organisations are a key step and should be coupled with technical assistance to foster the CSOs' ability to absorb funding and build networks for coordination. Greater coordination between key stakeholders in the sector would also help address overlaps in human development work as well as promote effective resource management. Furthermore, the interviews echoed the need for the EU to involve local CSOs more in the formulation of actions and to take steps toward the co-creation of projects and programmes (see Vij 2023; Haines et al. 2019). This could provide opportunities to increase ownership and sustainability of actions in human development sectors.

Improve donor coordination beyond Team Europe

As part of its efforts at implementing its multisectoral approach in the three case studies and being more efficient in its support to human development, the EU needs to also improve coordination with other players in the sector. In all three case studies, there are coordination systems/platforms for donors and key local actors. The EU participates in platforms for the sectors in which it is active. The lack of clear coordination at these meetings, and low engagement of some donors and government ministries have resulted in overlapping efforts as donors tend to work in silos.

It is clear that governments need to be in the driver's seat on donor coordination, although this is more realistic in some contexts than others. In Zambia particularly, stakeholders hoped that the Government would adopt a more proactive approach to coordination. There are pockets of good examples where a critical mass of donors and their interests align with the Government, which can help revitalise the coordination. For instance, in Kenya, the coordination around gender seems to work, although there is room for more follow-up.

As for the role the EU delegation can play when it comes to coordination, this also varies greatly according to the context, the number of member states present in the country as well as the sectors in which the EU is most active. Several stakeholders, from other donors to EU member states in Zambia and Kenya, expressed the wish for the EU to take more of a coordinator role with different donors, yet there was limited appetite in the delegations to do so due to capacity issues.

Another challenge in coordination concerns the role that EU delegations are able to play in terms of conveying the policy decisions made in Brussels to the European actors and partners at country level. EU member states have their own structures to ensure communication between capitals and embassies, but some interviewees from EU member

states were hoping delegations could play a stronger role in informing them about policy decisions in Brussels. For instance, some of them were surprised when the Global Health Strategy was released in November 2022 as the launch of the strategy was not communicated to member states in partner countries. Keeping strong communication between DG INTPA and the ground is key for EU delegations to both play an active role in implementing the Strategy and coordinate with member states.

There is a recognition among EU member states of the added value of TEIs in terms of speaking with one voice and giving more political weight to the EU and its member states. In human development sectors, as in other sectors, Team Europe is seen as a platform for networking, mobilising political weight and knowledge exchange, as well as access to high-level discussion particularly for smaller member states. There is more potential for collaboration than there was before, although the EU and member states still have to align their messaging under the TEIs.

The three countries offer different contexts in terms of the presence of member states, their capacity and expertise in the priority areas. **While there is overall political buy-in of TEIs and the Global Gateway amongst EU stakeholders, there are discrepancies around communication and their implementation at country level.** In Zambia, the overall spirit of Team Europe is reportedly high, and the member states present in the country⁴ have opted to create a joint strategy in Zambia. In Guinea, five member states⁵ are present, with varying degrees of cooperation. The Team Europe approach reportedly works well there in human development sectors (seen as less controversial), but less so in more political and governance sectors in which some member states tend to favour their bilateral relations. This was also the case in Kenya, where member states had more difficulties aligning their projects and messaging under the Team Europe Initiative on human-centred digitalisation. The EC, Estonia and Germany (GIZ) are leading much of the EU's digitalisation work in Kenya and are in discussion with other member states that are still building their digital capacity.

While there are good examples of coordination either between the EU and its member states or with its international partners, there is room for improvement in terms of finding complementarities and synergies in human development sectors. The EU and its partners cannot cover all human development needs, which is why coordination is so crucial. The EU's support to human development would thus benefit from further clarification of how the Team Europe approach and TEIs can best contribute to that support. Enhancing coordination in those sectors would certainly be impactful geopolitically and in terms of the EU's perception by partner countries. Further, implementing the EU's more integrated external policy means that it has to improve collaboration between European actors and its partners across different sectors. As will be explained in the following sections, despite the EU's efforts to provide a more integrated response to human development challenges, in practice, it still needs to enhance linkages between its key priorities.

Support to human development needs to be gender transformative

Gender inequality is a prevalent challenge in the three countries. According to the Gender Inequality Index, which ranks 178 countries, in 2021, Guinea was 157th, Zambia 138th and Kenya 128th (see [Human Development Reports \[HDRs\]](#)). Gender is a crucial factor in human development. For instance, women often are more dependent on public service provision due to their role as primary caretakers in many countries. Furthermore, there are gender-specific barriers to services like education, that lead to worse human development outcomes (see Annex 1). Guinea, Kenya and Zambia have government structures and policies in place to advance gender equality. They have all ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#)). Both Zambia and Guinea (EU

⁴ Czech Republic, Finland, France (+AFD), Germany (+GIZ, BGR and KfW), Ireland, Hungary, Italy, and Sweden (+Sida) as well as the Netherlands and Switzerland.

⁵ France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, and Spain.

2021) have quite strong legal and regulatory frameworks in place to advance gender equality and to prevent gender-based violence. In Kenya, gender equality concerns are embedded in regulations across the different sectors.

Yet the implementation of policies to promote gender equality is often slow and further hindered by a lack of resources. Despite policies and commitments on paper, a sustained prioritisation of gender equality may be difficult to achieve. For instance, in Zambia, the interviewees revealed that although the current Government seems to be open to gender equality topics in theory, this is yet to turn into concrete improvements and drive for change. One indication of this is the relatively weak position of gender in the governance system. The Gender Ministry under the previous Government had been perceived as a place where unsuccessful government officials were demoted, which made the staff fairly unmotivated. The Ministry was later discontinued and replaced by the Gender Division which – albeit motivated – lacks expertise, resources and decision-making power for example, in budgetary issues. Indeed, even when the political will is there, the leaders may struggle with funding due to already constrained budgets and a high debt burden that many sub-Saharan African countries have. The challenges in the countries led to at times paying lip service to gender equality. As an interviewee in Guinea put it: *“while everyone agrees on the importance of supporting gender equality in theory, not much happens in practice”*.

Some interviewees found that gaining political interest in gender equality is easier when there is a solid macroeconomic argument. However, to better address the needs of the population as well as to be able to provide evidence of the positive macroeconomic effects of promoting gender equality, there is a need to invest in analysis and data collection. In Zambia, GIZ and the EU have joined forces on an analysis of the costs of unintended early pregnancies, to provide evidence of the economic effects and hence gain political traction.

The slow implementation of policies is also linked to gender and broader societal power imbalances. Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) was a particular area that the interviewees deemed difficult to promote. In the case of Kenya, previous research has indicated that the (adolescent) sexual and reproductive health (SRH) agenda has been largely driven by donors, with few champions in the Kenyan administration, and thus the level of political prioritisation of the topic has remained low. Political elites have an interest to stay in power and are guided by their own cultural and religious beliefs, which contributed to them shying away from controversial topics like SRHR (Onono et al. 2019). The broader power relations also affect the opportunities for the EU to advance gender equality. For instance, in Guinea, the EU mostly supports women’s access to vocational training and employment but it recognises that challenging the power relations between genders and the societal and cultural norms behind them is difficult.

Although gender equality and mainstreaming have been long-standing priorities for the EU’s external action,⁶ in all three countries, there is a general recognition that both the EU and member states could do better in terms of gender mainstreaming. This is a recurring challenge also brought up by evaluations (DG INTPA 2022; ECA 2021). Yet a lot of progress has been made in the last few years. The EU has appointed 141 gender focal persons in EU delegations, and there is increasing willingness and knowledge of gender mainstreaming in the delegations, which was considered encouraging by the interviewees (EC 2022c). However, the focal points often lack resources and time to dedicate to their tasks, thus hindering transformative impact. They may also lack the position in the hierarchy in terms of their seniority to be able to effectively push the gender equality agenda in the EU’s programming. Furthermore, while everyone agrees on the benefits of multisectoral approaches, organisational silos hinder

⁶ Beyond a target to mainstream gender in 85% of the new actions under the NDICI-GE, and having gender equality as a primary goal in 5% of them (as per the NDICI-GE regulation), the EU’s work on gender equality is rooted in the Gender Action Plan (GAP) III (EC 2020b), which is an ambitious strategy to promote gender equality in the EU’s external action. The GAP III priorities are adapted and operationalised in country-level implementation plans (CLIPs), which outline how the EU intends to implement the commitments to gender equality in a given country context (Di Ciommo et al. 2023).

opportunities for identifying and scaling up good practices. As a result, the pockets of good experiences and ideas remain pockets instead of becoming wider practices.

Similarly, to date, there is very limited information on how the TEIs will mainstream gender considerations. There are no binding requirements for the governance structures of the TEIs, but rather, the governance is meant to be adaptable to the realities of each context. This increases the flexibility of the TEIs, which is crucial to secure political buy-in from the member states. This also applies to indicators, meaning that the EU and member states can agree on a case-by-case basis on some indicators they want to report on. While such flexibility is desirable, there is in practice very little chance that gender-related indicators would systematically be reported on at the level of TEIs (Sabourin and Jones 2023).

Climate change creates new needs in human development

Vulnerability to climate change, including variable rainfall patterns leading to droughts or floods, extreme temperatures, food insecurity and epidemics, has quickly brought up new human development challenges in all three countries: [Guinea](#); [Zambia](#) and [Kenya](#). Particularly in Kenya, climate change was brought up as one of the key concerns for human development, which is linked to the current drought crisis (ReliefWeb 2022).

There is a growing wealth of evidence on the importance of an integrated approach in addressing climate change and human development challenges. For instance, integrating climate adaptation into social protection programmes could be key in strengthening the capacities and resilience of the most vulnerable groups (IPCC 2022; Tenzing 2019). In the health sector, the **One Health approach** brings opportunities to address human, animal and environmental health in an integrated manner, and the approach has attracted a lot of interest in recent years. For instance, the Ministry of Health in Guinea expressed commitment to the approach – as part of its commitment to health security in the face of the multiple epidemics the country is constantly facing – and would welcome the EU’s support in implementing it.

While there is wide agreement on the importance of multi-sectoral approaches, including One Health, their implementation has proven to be tricky in practice. One of the challenges is linked to organisational silos and the difficulties of breaking them. Not only does implementing multi-sectoral approaches require bringing together sectoral experts at the level of the EU, but often the administrations in the partner countries also have their own silos. Similarly, other actors involved in the implementation, like CSOs, tend to work in their chosen sector. At the same time, better coordination is costly. It requires time and resources and it can, at worst, become just another additional burden to already packed schedules. Another challenge brought up in the interviews is linked to the wider system around development cooperation. For donors, the administrative burden in terms of reporting and contracting is often easier when initiatives follow clear sectoral lines. To interviewees from CSOs, this issue led to difficulties in obtaining funding for cross-sectoral initiatives. Furthermore, implementing integrated approaches requires new capacities. Both the government authorities in partner countries and the EU and other donors lack the capacities and expertise to address multi-sectoral issues when it comes to climate change and human development.

Despite these difficulties, the interest in One Health is there and the topic is gaining momentum in Africa. Several African countries have for instance national One Health Platforms. In Kenya, the establishment of a coordination platform has proven to be key in implementing the One Health Approach in the country (Munyua 2019). An analysis of African One Health Platforms pointed to increased momentum around One Health and provided indicative evidence that One Health approaches are increasingly institutionalised, and the multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms more formalised (Fasina 2022). The multisectoral coordination and integrated approaches that One Health embodies offer a lot of promise, and the key outcomes of multisectoral initiatives should be used as evidence to provide decision-makers with information and data on the effectiveness of One Health (Fasina 2022). Indeed,

data gaps and lack of evidence on effective policies addressing climate change and health are still an issue in Africa, and there have been calls to address that (Jerving 2023).

The EU's new Global Health Strategy, which recognises health as a geopolitical sector and is key to positioning the EU as a leading actor in this area, puts a strong emphasis on applying the One Health approach (Leclerc 2023). Going forward, this needs to translate into support to the delegations in implementing it. However, at the moment, it is not yet clear how the Global Health Strategy will foster the implementation of One Health at the country level, beyond the [regional TEI on sustainable health security using a One Health approach in Africa](#).

Digital transition brings new opportunities, but also new inequalities

Governments across Africa and elsewhere are introducing digital technologies to improve governance and service delivery. In human development, digitalisation is being used to identify the beneficiaries of social protection schemes, facilitate access to education for remote communities, create demand for SRH services, and bring awareness about social justice issues, for instance. Indeed, digital technologies are key to promoting human development but they can also exacerbate already existing inequalities if issues around affordability, reliability and access to digital infrastructures are not addressed.

The Governments of Kenya and Zambia are putting an emphasis on deepening digital transformation by developing standalone e-health, and e-education strategies. Guinea lags behind in terms of digital readiness. Despite significant advancement at the policy level, there are important gaps when it comes to integrating digital tools in human development work. The interviewed CSOs that are using digital tools to facilitate access to services claimed that while there is a strong political will to digitalise human development sectors, government and international efforts should help address internet connectivity issues and the lack of digital skills in rural areas.

Kenya is leading digital transformation and financial inclusion in Africa but there are segments of society which do not benefit from digital technologies (Armstrong 2022; Teevan and Domingo 2022). The Kenyan Government is leading Smart Africa's Digital Economy Blueprint and has also developed a National Digital Masterplan (2022-2032). These strategies identify digital skills as one of the key pillars to enhance digital transformation. The Kenyan digital ecosystem is very competitive and there are already many international actors providing digital skills, therefore, the EU and member states are focusing on helping build the ecosystem and creating frameworks for digital skills for youth, women and entrepreneurs as a sustainable model to promote digital innovation in partner countries. One of the components of the TEI on human-centred digitalisation is the digitalisation of the TVET programme, which focuses on making TVET relevant and responsive to the Kenyan digital economy labour market. The EU's support in this sector includes digital services for teachers and pupils, digital skills, and last-mile connectivity for schools in remote areas.

In Zambia, the Government has made significant progress in the use of digital technologies to achieve development outcomes, and this was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the government has successfully advanced the digitalisation of the financial sector, but more efforts at digitalising other key sectors such as health or education are needed (UNCDF 2022). One of the key strategic areas under the 8th National Development Plan is enhancing the country's digital capacity, which includes creating a national digital strategy and expanding digital infrastructure to rural areas. According to our interviewees, the EU is a new actor in the digital sector in Zambia but its attention to the digitalisation of human development sectors is very appreciated. The EU has mainstreamed digitalisation in the priorities of the MIP, including promoting investment in digital solutions to learning and teaching, digital skills as part of TVET, and distance and digital learning as part of its support to Early Childhood Education (EC 2021a). But these commitments are symbolic since the EU delegation has not yet developed any concrete projects supporting the digitalisation of human development sectors. International actors such as GIZ and the United Nations

Children's Fund (UNICEF) have started discussions with CSO to support the digitalisation of education projects, which shows that the EU is still in the scoping phase.

In Guinea, there is a strong digital component in the [government's commitments for education](#), which include the development of digital skills, including for teachers, as well as the use of online modalities to ensure affordable, accessible, convenient and sustainable learning for all children. The EU's MIP for Guinea states that vocational training will be provided in innovative sectors, including digital, and e-learning should remain a privileged tool, and be used proactively to bridge the "digital divide" between men and women, young and old, rural and urban populations (EC 2021d). It also mentions the fact that digital health tools can support universal health coverage and aims to support a reliable digital civil registration system which would be the basis for citizens' access to services (social protection, health, education, et cetera.) among other things (this intervention will reportedly be supported by a national digital strategy). In Guinea, digitisation seems to be a significant cross-cutting theme in the priority area of governance mostly, and the links between the EU's support to human development sectors and its support to digitalisation seem to be in their early days in terms of implementation.

The three case studies offer very different contexts in terms of the EU's support to digitalisation. In Zambia and Guinea, where the level of digital maturity is lower, there is more demand for hard infrastructure and connecting the unconnected is essential to deepen the countries' digital transformation. In the three case studies, interviewees reported that in rural areas, where there is still very limited access to technologies, the level of digital literacy is very low. In supporting partner countries to address these challenges, the EU should emphasise the digitalisation of human development sectors, including supporting the development and implementation of policies. The EU should also clarify how human development fits in key external digital policy tools such as the Global Gateway⁷ and, conversely, how digitalisation can be further promoted as part of the implementation of policies such as the Global Health Strategy at country level (beyond the TEI on digital health for health system strengthening and universal health coverage to support strong and digitally enabled health systems in Africa).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

This analysis has shown that by and large the EU's support to human development sectors is necessary, broadly in line with needs and widely appreciated by governments, CSOs and the private sector in the three countries as few actors provide that kind of support. While the priorities and geopolitical considerations in HQ and Brussels drive the programming, the EU has made an effort to align its priorities with those of partner countries, and often it was even seen to fill key gaps.

However, the geopolitical ambitions in Brussels did not yet reach the partner countries, where the narrative around the EU's support was coloured by the immense needs in human development sectors and the different domestic political realities in the countries. This highlights the fact that what matters most in partner countries is not a geopolitical competition but the concrete impact of the support and how it responds to local and national contexts.

While the geopolitical narrative is relevant and unlikely to disappear any time soon, in partner countries, the EU should focus on strengthening its existing support and leveraging its added value, including in human development. In these sectors, it is indeed not competing with other powers such as China or Russia. This might require some reframing of the current narrative of geopolitical competition emanating from Brussels and a more nuanced understanding of the role of human development as a part of the EU's added value as a values-driven partner. As

⁷ So far, of the 87 Global Gateway flagship projects for 2023, just 11% cover human development (seven on health and three on education).

most partner countries have no wish to be caught in a 'new Cold War' or geopolitical competition, this more nuanced approach may help the EU 'win friends and influence people', or at least not undermine its current position.

The investments in human development – when brought to their full potential – can strengthen the EU's added value as a partner that sets it apart from other actors. Bringing in more comprehensive, politically informed and tailored approaches could also turn into stronger geopolitical standing through stronger partnerships that deliver results (Teevan and Domingo 2022). The overall message to the EU is encouraging: the EU needs to continue doing what it does best and address some of the challenges that are preventing it from having a better and more sustainable impact. Based on our discussions with different stakeholders, we have developed the following key recommendations to strengthen the EU's work on human development and be able to respond to the needs of the partner countries. This may, in turn, contribute to strengthening the EU's positive role in the world.

Recommendations to strengthen the EU's support to human development at the partner country level:

Create buy-in for better human development and leverage political momentum to tackle sensitive issues

- At the level of the EU delegations, identify and support change agents in governments that have a high interest in providing better services and also influence to make a change. Creating a community of champions can help the EU spur wider interest and nurture political will to invest in human development sectors, including in more controversial areas such as SRHR. It is also important to seize windows of opportunity, such as the period post-election, when new individuals come in to build relationships and a common agenda.
- Both delegations and HQ can work to strengthen the efforts to tackle corruption in human development sectors. There is a wealth of evidence pointing to corruption as a major obstacle to development. It hampers aid effectiveness and exacerbates inequalities, including between genders. Therefore, anti-corruption efforts should be effectively integrated into human development programmes. The upcoming guidance on anti-corruption by DG INTPA, together with analytical work, such as the one carried out in Zambia, is a useful step towards better integration of corruption concerns and equipping the experts on health to integrate anti-corruption in their programmes.

Improve coordination to foster multi-sectoral approaches

- While there is a broad agreement on the value of comprehensive and multisectoral approaches to human development, more thought is needed in the EU institutions to address the practical challenges hindering their implementation. Improving the cooperation and coordination within the EU delegations between different sectors, and also between cooperation and political sections would be key to fostering multi-sector and cross-cutting approaches. The increased dialogue and coordination between cooperation and political sections in delegations could help address the governance issues that hinder progress on human development. However, breaking organisational silos is a gradual process that takes resources and time. Indeed, improved coordination within the EU comes with a cost, and successful coordination requires ensuring that the delegations have (human and financial) resources and capacities. The EU should ensure that there is sufficient expertise and capacity at country level to enhance linkages, collaboration and coordination between various teams and sectors. This could be done through the secondment of experts, as suggested by the Global Health Strategy to strengthen specific health expertise, for example. It will be particularly crucial to implement the One Health approach, for example, which requires cross-sectoral and transdisciplinary expertise (Veron 2021).
- There is also room for the EU to support cross-sector work in the partner countries. For instance, in Kenya, the establishment of a coordination platform between human and animal health has proven to be key in implementing the One Health Approach. Drawing from good examples, the EU could strengthen its support to similar government-led initiatives.

Ensure coherence and complementarity in Team Europe and beyond

- Stepping up coordination efforts would be widely welcomed by the Team Europe members. It is important to ensure a strategic use of the Team Europe approach and TEIs in each partner country by articulating complementarities and the added value of the EU, its member states and other actors taking part in TEIs. All actors do not need to support all human development sectors: some actors have long-standing experience and expertise in some sectors and this support should be coordinated with and complementary to the support of the EU. However, the existing coordination structures should not be duplicated, but rather revitalised.
- Furthermore, the EU should clarify how the Global Gateway can respond to human development needs and what its added value is in each partner country, as well as what the role and contribution of member states can be. It can do so by integrating development policy objectives in the communication around the Global Gateway, investing more in education and health projects under the initiative and bringing to the forefront the links between infrastructure projects and the EU's commitments to achieve the SDGs. The EU's impact on human development issues will determine significantly how it is perceived by partner countries and their larger societies.

Involve local actors

- The EU should work towards ensuring that its funding system is more accessible to and flexible for local organisations, including in fragile contexts where capacities are weak and more operational and technical support is needed. CSOs often have better access to the local population and vulnerable communities. Yet particularly smaller organisations have trouble accessing EU funding, due to bureaucratic constraints linked to for example, reporting requirements. Furthermore, they may not have capacities to absorb larger grants. There are good emerging practices to make smaller grants available to CSOs, coupling that with technical assistance. These should be identified and assessed to provide evidence of their impact and potentially scale them up.
- Localisation and locally-led development also require deeper involvement of local actors in the programming processes. In that context, CSOs expressed the desire to see the EU invest in the co-creation of the projects and programmes in a way that involves the national and local stakeholders (including the private sector which is key for vocational training for instance) at an early stage and lets them be part of the creation of the logical framework of the action. While the EU is constrained by financial regulations related to its granting processes which may hinder any fundamental changes to the formulation process of actions, moving beyond simple consultations towards more meaningful engagement with local partners could contribute to a more sustainable impact.
- The EU should analyse capacity issues and systemic weaknesses both on the government and civil society/private sector side and use that analysis to determine the right mix of partners and ways of working. Based on that analysis, the EU should provide capacity-building and adapt its procedures if the context is found to be too fragile, requiring less strict procedures and criteria and more accompaniment. The EU should not shy away from working with governments as much as possible, alongside civil society partners.

On the EU's geopolitical approach

- There is a need for deeper reflection within the EU institutions and member states on how to align the EU's values and geopolitical ambitions more effectively with the needs and realities at country level and on where development cooperation fits in that framework. Given the discrepancies between the discourse in Brussels and the reality in partner countries, it might be worth articulating better what the added value of the EU is in those countries and finding a balance between its geopolitical goals and its support to human development objectives. The absence of geopolitical competition in the EU's support to human development might play to the EU's advantage: it might indeed give the EU more appreciation and influence than narratives that are not tailored to the realities of the countries concerned.

Annex 1: Key information about the focus countries

Zambia

Human development as a priority

The current Government has strongly prioritised human development sectors, particularly education, with several reforms including removing school fees and hiring new teachers. Yet among the interviewees, there was a clear understanding that the recruitment of new teachers is only part of the solution to tackle the challenges related to the quality of education.

Health is also one of the important priorities of the Government, yet it is less at the forefront of the political agenda compared to education. The key initiative in 2022 was to hire 11,000 new healthcare workers (IMF 2022).

Budgetary allocations to health, education and social protection have increased in the last few years. Spending on social protection is projected to more than double from 0.7% of GDP in 2020 to 1.6% by 2025 in line with the plans to increase the Social Cash Transfer programme. Similarly, both the health and education sectors have seen budget increases (Zipar 2023a).

Human development challenges in the country

Source: [HDR Zambia](#)

Human Development Index (HDI), ⁸ year	2001	2011	2021
	0.425	0.534	0.565

Zambia has a young population and fast population growth. An increasing number of the youth need access to social services and employment while these are already constrained. Poverty in Zambia has grown drastically in the last decade. The proportion of the country's workers and their families living on less than \$1.90 per person per day increased from 45.0% in 2000 to 55.9% in 2021 ([UNSTATS](#)).

While access to education has improved in Zambia, the quality of education remains a major issue. Indeed, stakeholders have described the country to be in a 'learning crisis'. Gender disparities are prevalent in education, as demonstrated by for example, girls' higher dropout rates in secondary schools.

In the health sector, particular issues are linked to access to basic health services, their affordability and SRHR, with only 37% of women having access to family planning.⁹

	Male	Female
Prevalence of stunting % of children under 5	38%	31%
HIV prevalence	7.5%	14.2%
Literacy	82%	66%
Out of school rate, upper secondary	44%	61%

Source: elaborated by ECDPM based on data from [UNICEF](#) and World Bank ([literacy](#) and [stunting](#))

EU's priorities in Zambia (MIP)

- Green partnerships for sustainable recovery, growth and decent jobs. €191.3 million, 64%
- Supporting the people of Zambia to reach their potential and build resilience, €65.9 million, 22%
 - Strong focus on Early childhood education and development (ECED)
 - Adopting a life-cycle approach, which covers several issues and domains from maternal health to nutrition and young adults
- Fair, inclusive and peaceful society. €35.8 million, 12 %

TEIs

- Human development
- Green deal

Information on donors

Table 1: ODA spending in the country by donor, 2021. USD million, disbursements, funds and multilateral channels excluded. Popul. refers to population policies and programmes for reproductive health, SP to social protection (source: OECD CRS database).

Donor	Total	Education	Health	Popul.	SP
US	401,6	17,6	70,2	255,6	0,7
EU Inst	82,9	1,7	3,2	0,0	0,0
Sweden	56,1	1,3	9,9	4,8	7,3
Germany	44,4	1,5	4,3	1,4	3,4
UK	35,5	1,5	11,4	0,0	1,2

⁸ The HDI combines measures of life expectancy, expected years of schooling, school-entry age and mean years of schooling of the adult population with gross national income/capita. The index varies between 0 (lowest human development) to 1 (highest).

⁹ As measured by [Modern method contraceptive prevalence rate](#)

Guinea

Human development as a priority

Health and education are increasingly being prioritised by the Guinean (transition) Government. Training of teachers is a particularly important priority at the moment. While education has previously been neglected by the government, there is now a commitment to make primary and secondary education free for all as well as to mobilise and increase national resources allocated to education from 12% in 2022 to 16% in 2025, and then to 20% by 2030. Allocations to the health budget also increased from 4-5% to 8% and the objective is 12%.

Human development challenges in the country

Year	2001	2011	2021
HDI	0.352	0.420	0.465

Source: [HRD Guinea](#)

Guinea, the 12th most fragile country in the world in 2022, is also a country with a young population and fast population growth. The fertility rate (4.8 in 2018) is among the highest in the world ([fragile states index](#)). The Guinean population faces difficult living conditions (exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic) and governance and social service delivery remain weak. The youth particularly faces a lack of economic opportunities. The lack of qualified personnel and a skilled workforce remains a major challenge for the development of the private and public sectors. Matching training to employment is therefore seen as a priority in Guinea.

Gender inequalities persist due to a combination of factors: the existence of a patriarchal ideology and intra-family pressures, the persistence of harmful traditional practices (female genital mutilation¹⁰ and child marriage), the high illiteracy rate, precarious socio-economic conditions, poor access to adequate sexual and reproductive health services, for instance.¹¹

Despite the efforts undertaken by the state, health coverage is still low. The results of the 2019 National Health Accounts survey show that the population bears 57% of total health expenditure, clearly above the 43.5% target of the National Health Development Plan.

	Male	Female
Prevalence of Stunting % of children under 5	34%	27%
HIV prevalence	0.9%	2%
Literacy	61%	31%
Out of school rate, upper secondary	50%	73%

Source: elaborated by ECDPM based on data from [UNAIDS](#), World Bank ([stunting](#) and [literacy](#)), [UNICEF](#).

EU's priorities in Guinea (MIP)

1. Transition and green economy - €81 million, 33.9%
2. Human development - €69 million, 28.9%
 - Water and sanitation
 - Education/vocational training
 - Health
3. Democracy, governance and migration management - €77 million, 32.2%

TEIs

1. Green and blue economy
2. Stability and good e-governance in Guinea

Information on donors

Table 2: ODA spending in the country by donor, 2021. USD million, disbursements, funds and multilateral channels excluded. Popul. refers to population policies and programmes for reproductive health, SP to social protection (source: OECD CRS database).

Donor	Total	Education	Health	Popul.	SP
France	74,2	25,8	2,3	1,7	0,0
EU Inst	60,7	0,0	5,5	0,1	0,0
US	42,0	1,2	21,4	5,2	0,0
UAE	15,7	0,0	14,2	0,0	0,2
Belgium	11,6	0,0	0,7	1,1	0,0

¹⁰ 93% of women aged between 15 and 49 are mutilated.

¹¹ Access to contraception is almost non-existent (2%).

Kenya

Human development as a priority

The Kenyan Government priorities are: agriculture; micro, small and medium-sized enterprises housing; healthcare; and digital and creative economy (Parliament of Kenya 2022). The new Government has committed to reducing poverty by increasing support for human development sectors.

The Government has set ambitious goals to improve the quality of the education system including addressing teacher shortages, increasing the number of secondary schools, etc. In the health sector, the Government plans to enhance UHC. Contrary to other sectors, management of health funds is success devolved to county governments (PSI 2019).

The Government has promised to increase the budget for education, health and social protection sectors. In the 2022/23 budget cycle, the education sector takes the biggest share of the total government budget (Okoth 2022).

Human development challenges in the country

Source: *HDR Kenya*

Year	2001	2011	2021
HDI	0.485	0.050	0.575

Kenya's rapid population growth and urbanisation are key challenges to the country's development (Ombok 2022). With 5.4 million people without jobs in 2022, Kenya records one of the highest unemployment rates in East Africa (The East African 2022). In order to create economic opportunities for people, especially youth and women, the government is developing projects to scale up their skills. The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened poverty and unemployment in the country. It has also contributed to slowing down the country's GDP growth, which is now projected to grow by 5.9% on average in 2023/24 (World Bank 2022).

Under Kenya's Vision 2030, the Government aims to promote equitable and quality healthcare. Yet corruption, and medical shortages are limiting the government's and CSOs' healthcare delivery (Aikins and Cilliers 2023). Kenya is recognised as the second country in e-health innovation, but poor infrastructure, low literacy, inadequate technical expertise, unreliable power supply, limited funding, and lack of government involvement in e-Health projects remain big challenges (ITA 2022).

	Male	Female
Prevalence of stunting % of children under 5	29.9%	22.4%
HIV prevalence	2.6%	5.4%
Literacy	85%	80%
Out of school rate, upper secondary	9%	11%

Source: elaborated by ECDPM based on data from [UNICEF](#), [UNAIDS](#) and World Bank ([stunting](#) and [literacy](#))

EU's priorities in Kenya (MIP)

1. Green transition - environmental sustainability and resilience - €147 million, 45%
2. Leave no one behind - human development and digital inclusion - €83.5 million, 26%
 - Education skills for employment
 - Empowering women and youth
 - Inclusive and resilient urbanisation
3. Democratic and economic governance - €83.5 million, 26%

TEIs

1. Green Deal
2. Human-centred digitalisation
 - Digitalisation of TVET
 - Digital governance: data protection and e-governance
 - Digital economy: SMEs, digital upskilling, et cetera

Information on donors

Table 3: ODA spending in the country by donor, 2021. USD million, disbursements, funds and multilateral channels excluded. Popul. refers to population policies and programmes for reproductive health, SP to social protection (source: OECD CRS database)

Donor	Total	Education	Health	Popul.	SP
US	693,8	10,2	88,0	315,8	0,0
Japan	251,2	3,2	43,3	0,3	4,0
EU Inst	136,8	0,4	1,7	0,0	0,8
Germany	103,5	15,4	1,7	0,7	0,4
UK	92,2	2,0	6,2	8,1	8,4

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