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A necessary shake-up: EU PROGRAMMING FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

MFF

By Mariella Di Ciommo and Alexei Jones

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This paper looks at the next programming phase for the European Union (EU)'s external resources and asks how programming can be harnessed as a space to make EU external action more consistent and innovative in aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its own external action objectives. We conclude that, while opportunities exist, the risk of institutional inertia and an unchanged programming process is high. If the EU is to deliver on its commitments and ambitions, some thought needs to go into how to steer innovation, including through active engagement of the new EU leadership.

Much work has already gone into preparing programming to make the EU more strategic, purposeful and adaptable. How ready is the EU to programme according to its own political commitments and ambitions? Making choices around priorities will be a tough but necessary task for the next programming phase to exploit synergies as well as manage tensions among different EU objectives. Solid analysis could be used to help identify pathways for change at country level and the EU's role in steering this.

The SDGs require new ways of working and using resources through more integrated, cross-sectoral and systemic approaches. But there is no recipe that fits all purposes and contexts. Sectoral approaches can fulfil the objectives of some partner countries, while being too rigid to tackle multilayered political issues in others. This time around, the EU aims to work more closely with other actors, including member states and the UN, as well as across its own institutions. Programming is the space where such innovations need to happen.

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Acronyms

DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DFID	The Department for International Development
DG DEVCO	DG for International Cooperation and Development
DG NEAR	DG for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
DG RESEARCH	DG for Research and Innovation
EC	European Commission
EDF	European Development Fund
EEAS	European External Action Service
EFSD	European Fund for Sustainable Development
EIB	European Investment Bank
EIP	European Investment Plan
EU	European Union
HQ	Headquarters
HR/VP	High Representative and Vice President
NAOs	National Authorising Officers
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TOSSD	Total Official Support for Sustainable Development
UN	United Nations
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework

1. Gearing up for EU programming

The EU institutions are gearing up for the next phase of programming EU aid and wider international cooperation for the period 2021 to 2027. This is a hugely complex process through which the EU will set its priorities for cooperating with partner countries and decide how to deploy EU resources of its external financing instruments, in particular a planned €89.2 billion under the proposed consolidated Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) (Herrero et al. 2018). Significant changes have happened at global level and in the EU itself since the previous programming exercise in 2012. A renewed and full-fledged policy framework (the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development/SDGs, EU Global Strategy, European Consensus on Development) is now in place to guide the EU's external action and development cooperation.

The programming process will be the first opportunity to turn new policy orientations and commitments into practice, as well as to pursue more policy- and interest-driven EU external action. A related objective would be to equip the EU to adapt in a flexible manner to multiple and volatile contexts. Yet, the ongoing negotiations on the EU's Multi-Annual Financial Framework 2021–2027 and the future NDICI leave a number of unanswered questions on the level of ambition and resources the EU will have to achieve these objectives.

The programming phase will start in earnest in 2020, but the EU institutions have already started preparing the ground for it (see timetable in Annex). The pre-programming phase included preparing country, regional and thematic assessments as well as drafting concept notes for cooperation. These documents are meant to provide the basis to inform programming in 2020. In the meantime, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP)/European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission will soon be issuing programming guidelines and sending them to the EU delegations who do the groundwork for country-focused bilateral programming. These guidelines will provide detailed instructions and clarify the policy principles to be followed throughout the process.¹

The proposed NDICI regulation already presents some general principles for programming such as ownership, synchronisation with partner countries' cycles and tailor-made cooperation based on their needs, capacities and commitments to reforms. The two most notable additions are the preference for joint programming and the allocation criterion on “the partner's capacity and commitment to promote shared interests and values, and to support common goals and multilateral alliances, as well as the advancement of Union priorities” (EC 2018a: 34).

The new Commission leadership will give political validation to the outcome of pre-programming work and will certainly seek to use this opportunity to push for its political priorities, namely climate, migration and security, and possibly steer some innovation in the process. NDICI earmarking requirements on climate change, social development, gender and migration will also need to be fulfilled. Finalising programming “in line with our sectoral policy objectives” is a key task for the International Partnerships Commissioner; meanwhile the future HRVP is tasked to “ensure our external financing instruments are used strategically, to contribute to our wider political aims and enhance Europe's leadership and influence in the world” (von der Leyen 2019c and 2019d). This is also the rationale behind the Commission's proposal for the NDICI,

¹ The guidelines in 2012 included the following seven policy principles that were meant to steer the programming exercise: 1) ownership, 2) comprehensiveness and coherence, 3) synchronisation and flexibility, 4) differentiation, 5) sector concentration and choice of sectors, 6) blending for growth, 7) coordination and joint programming (EC 2012).

which seeks to enhance the overall agility and flexibility of EU external financing by facilitating coherent responses and exploiting synergies between external policy fields (Sherriff 2019).

Commissioner-designate for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, stated that “traditional measures of aid delivery are not enough. They are not enough to meet the SDGs. They are not enough to forge the kind of partnerships that are fit for the new global realities.” (European Committee on Development 2019: 5). The new global context and the renewed ambitions of the EU indeed call for a substantial rethink of the way the EU engages with partner countries and new ways of working. They need in particular more sophisticated and efficient programming of aid resources (planning, implementing and measuring development cooperation) and more refined external engagement at multiple levels.

This paper looks into the extent to which the next programming phase can further operationalise EU political commitments and ambitions. We focus on the need to manage synergies and tensions between the EU commitments to achieve the SDGs, to pursue more cohesively European interests and to agree on mutual objectives with partner countries. We also highlight the need to bring innovation into the way the EU works. Our work is based on a review of policy documents of the EU and other key players (member states, UN), an assessment of some state-of-the-art research around programming and interviews with 27 policymakers in Brussels (14 women and 13 men). Our findings point to, among other things, a need to clarify objectives and identify priorities, to adapt ways of working towards a more integrated and strategic approach, and to work better with other players.²

2. The SDGs and EU interests: Same entry point for programming?

A challenge for the EU will be to agree on whether to approach the next programming phase from the SDG angle or from the EU interests angle, or more likely how to strike the right balance between the two. Rather than considering them as separate entry points, the EU needs to identify the synergies and manage the tensions between the commitment to the global sustainable development agenda and the stronger emphasis on the pursuit of EU strategic interests. Both of these have been strongly emphasised by the new political leadership as key priorities of EU external action and development cooperation.

2.1. The EU has made a strong commitment to the SDGs...

The EU commitment to the SDGs has been confirmed on numerous occasions at the highest political level, including in the 2017 European Consensus on Development where the EU and member states committed to “implement the 2030 Agenda across all internal and external policies in a comprehensive and strategic approach, integrating in a balanced and coherent manner the three dimensions of sustainable development, and addressing the interlinkages between the different SDGs as well as the broader impacts of their domestic actions at international and global level” (EC 2017: 5). More recently, Ursula von der Leyen, President elect of the new Commission, indicated that the new Commissioners will be collectively and individually responsible for the overall implementation of the goals (von der Leyen 2019a–l).

In spite of these statements, which suggest that the Commission is now more serious about promoting the SDGs both in its internal and external policies, the EU has a poor track record of SDG integration. This

² ECDPM will continue to research, follow and engage in the programming process including in processes linked close to the front line of implementation. For information please contact Mariella Di Ciommo (mdc@ecdpm.org) and Alexei Jones (aj@ecdpm.org).

needs to be set into a context in which concrete steps for SDG implementation at the EU level has been rather slow and, despite policy discourse and repeated declarations at the top level, the traction of the SDGs in EU bureaucracy is uneven and its systemic capacities to implement the SDGs are weak. The need and call for an effective and integrated European SDG implementation strategy is still unanswered. This carries the risk of an EU which does not walk the talk on its own international development ambitions. This might also bring a huge blow to the SDG process at a time when political commitment around multilateral agendas is waning.

A question is whether SDGs will effectively be given more weight in EU external action and the work of the future Commission, and if so, what should be the implications of building a programming narrative around the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs? How can the EU best support partner countries' overarching sustainable development priorities?

2.2. ... but is also aiming to pursue more interest-driven external action

Against the backdrop of an increasingly volatile global environment and changing power dynamics, the EU is poised to reaffirm its role as a global power and to pursue more strategic, political and interest-driven external action (Teevan with Sherriff 2019). This includes making use of all EU external policies and instruments, including development cooperation, in a more strategic and integrated manner to achieve wider political priorities (notably climate, security, migration and multilateralism). Increasingly, development is seen as a core part of this renewed ambition for EU external relations. EU development cooperation must fulfil its Lisbon Treaty commitment to the eradication of poverty but undeniably – yet not uncontroversially – has a political dimension that today is gaining more and more importance.

The ambition of a geopolitical commission that harnesses the EU's potential to become a strong international actor requires setting priorities and making choices that take into account EU interests but do not shy away from the reality that partner countries have their own agendas and an increased ability to choose among different partners.

While the political discourse sees no contradiction between the SDGs and the EU political narrative and rather stresses, on the contrary, that both agendas reinforce each other, there are inherent tensions that need to be carefully considered. One is the EU's renewed strong commitment to climate change in the new Commission versus its long-standing preoccupation with energy security that makes it one of the largest importers of polluting fossil fuels. Some member states still depend highly on coal – for economy and energy – and have resisted attempts to make more ambitious commitments for climate change at EU level. The way the EU has externalised implementing its migration-related policy objectives to third countries and increasingly used aid conditionalities to address migration issues has revealed contradictions with some of its other policies, such as its support to African continental and regional agendas promoting free movement of persons (Bisong 2019). More broadly, these policies have had negative consequences for migrants' human rights, and thus tarnished the EU narrative around values, making it more difficult to promote them abroad.

Such tensions also reverberate at institutional level. The EC's Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) attributes strong importance to the SDGs versus the prominence of the Neighbourhood Policy and foreign policy objectives under the Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and the EEAS.

3. Setting objectives to enhance EU external action

Programming will be the main process through which these tensions will need to be dealt with and synergies exploited. The quest for more agility and purpose in EU external action and the pressing deadline to realise the SDGs are driving an internal reflection on how to approach programming. Our research reveals that setting objectives will be a key task for the next programming cycle, jointly with establishing a credible path to achieve them. Strategy setting will need to take into account the interconnected nature of the SDGs, the complexity of the EU role in the new political scenario and the contexts in which the EU operates.

The EU policy framework is vast and programming needs to follow a large array of policy directions for implementing the NDICI.³ These documents often emphasise different policy directions and hardly identify the priorities. Their ability to support the EU to make needed but hard choices and EU bureaucracy to operationalise them through programming varies greatly. Similarly, the SDGs are quite ill-suited as a source of policy prioritisation (Kenny 2018, Donoghe and Khan 2019).

Programming has traditionally started from choices around which tools to use (for example, budget support versus project-based interventions). Indeed the EU has been heavily criticised for too often adopting a technocratic and instrument-led approach. This time around, the “policy first” approach implies that ‘what the EU wants to achieve’ defines the ‘how to get there’, if it is to realise the ambitions of a more strategic external engagement. DEVCO, DG NEAR and the EEAS have invested in presenting a forward-looking perspective on future EU engagement through development cooperation and wider external action based on geographic and thematic assessments. The pre-programming work and preparation of these assessments provides the EU institutions with a stronger analytical basis than previously. This can help to establish EU and mutual priorities with partner countries, identify synergies between development and external action and clarify potential paths for change.

The assessments’ main innovation is to provide a more political perspective on the EU and member states’ interests and priorities in the country. Development and the SDGs are among the wider elements to be considered. The country assessments include the identification of potential mutual interests between Europe and partner countries and a feasibility analysis of joint programming. They also take into account the political and social context of partner countries and where the EU fits in.

Yet, it is not clear how these assessments will inform the next stages of programming and decisions on resource allocations. This pre-programming work will be synthesised and go through the political validation of the incoming Commission. This is an essential step to ensure alignment in the EU itself on both objectives and process for programming. It could prevent the heavy hand of EU HQ leading to a change of sectors for cooperation, as has happened in past programming at a late stage in the process, unwelcome to EU delegations and country partners alike (Herrero et al. 2015). However, the risk is high that the assessments will feed only marginally into future decision-making, especially in the face of a strong political push for new priorities from the European Commission or due to institutional battles between the Commission and the EEAS.

³ These comprise: “Association agreements, partnership and cooperation agreements, multilateral agreements, and other agreements that establish a legally binding relationship with partner countries, as well as, European Council conclusions and Council conclusions, summit declarations or conclusions of high-level meetings with partner countries, relevant European Parliament resolutions, communications of the Commission or Joint communications of the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy” (EC 2018a: 30).

In the previous programming exercise, the EU missed the opportunity to use the so-called Joint Framework Documents to integrate all aspects of EU external action beyond development, and outline the broad range of EU interests and priorities in particular countries or regions. These documents hardly materialised in practice and, when they did, seldom fed into programming choices (Herrero et al. 2015). A key question for EU policymakers is how to best use the pre-programming inputs to ground EU action in contextual realities and approach EU overarching priorities from an aspirational yet realistic perspective.

In addition, some assessments capture better than others country contexts and member states' interests. They have also been prepared with a different degree of involvement of national stakeholders – government, civil society, private sector – or member states. Therefore, another risk is that EU priorities will not match the choices of partner countries and are a weak basis for joint programming. Analytical tools such as theories of change, political economy analysis, conflict analysis and more specific sectoral or thematic analysis could provide insights to identify a path for change and the EU's role in this. The EU is using these tools more now although still not consistently. The ability of EU bureaucracy and leadership to confront the hard choices that arise from these analyses is uneven too.

Programming guidelines could indicate how to use the outcomes of the politically validated geographic and thematic assessments and the concept notes for cooperation for preparing programming documents. The pre-programming work could be used as a strong basis for consultations with stakeholders in partner countries and with member states for joint programming. Heads of delegation will have a key role in steering collaboration between their operations and political sections. Lessons from the past suggest that a good balance between bottom-up processes led by EU delegations and top-down HQ guidance could bring the best results in identifying mutual interests and priorities, joint programming and EU credibility at country level (Herrero et al. 2015).

4. Using more integrated approaches to realise the SDGs

Most countries have recognised the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda and emphasised that the SDGs should be implemented holistically rather than in isolation (Sachs et al, 2019). However, acknowledging the interconnected nature of the SDGs is merely a first step. A key difficulty lies in understanding how the goals and targets interact with each other, how to take into account those interactions in policymaking by maximising synergies and minimising trade-offs – both at the goal level and among targets, and how to adopt systemic thinking on their implementation. Fully realising the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda implies that the numerous interactions between all goals and targets are well understood and acted on (Donoghe and Khan 2019).

4.1. Understanding and acting on the SDG interlinkages

In the European Consensus, the EU and member states underlined that “the implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires comprehensive national sustainable development strategies that factor in the SDGs and their interlinkages” (EU 2017: 8). They committed to paying “particular attention to such interlinkages and to integrated actions that can create co-benefits and meet multiple objectives in a coherent way” (EU 2017: 8) when planning and implementing development cooperation. The draft NDICI regulation uses similar language and provides a hook for the EU to support implementing the goals in an integrated manner. The

need for more integrated approaches within EU external action as well as across internal and external policies has been widely recognised.⁴

In most EU member states' strategic development policy documents, references are made to the SDGs and the concept of policy coherence. Yet, the format and level of integration vary and there are no indications that EU member states are moving away from sectoral approaches when operationalising their cooperation. Some member states include the 2030 Agenda as primarily a background narrative for national development strategies, while others have actively placed the SDGs at the heart of their development strategies and are still working to integrate them in their operational approaches.

The first Joint Synthesis Report on the implementation of the European Consensus on Development (EC 2019a) provides general examples of how the EU and member states are working to achieve several SDGs together, ensuring close linkages between development and other external policies, and enhancing policy coherence for development. Yet, it also recognises that "more integrated approaches are needed to ensure that limited resources deliver on multiple SDGs, for instance by further mainstreaming of environment and climate or integrating labour and environmental dimensions in trade policies" (EC 2019a: 15). The ensuing Foreign Affairs Council conclusions "strongly encouraged the use of increasingly integrated approaches that create co-benefits, ensuring that resources deliver on multiple SDGs" (Council of the EU 2019).

However, it appears from our research that most donors, including the EU and member states, are still struggling to shift from the siloed approach of the Millennium Development Goals to a more integrated approach under the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Policymaking is still mostly carried out based on sectoral perspectives and in silos (Kenny 2018) and many donors continue to approach the SDGs with clear sector priorities. Yet, keeping a narrow focus on single-sector or siloed and linear, simple cause-and-effect approaches, and simply linking current work to the SDGs is not enough. There is an inherent risk in continuing business as usual (European Court of Auditors 2019).

In such a context, it is difficult to establish a direct and robust link between the SDGs and specific sectors, such as health, energy, water and agriculture (OECD 2018b). Policies and support measures that adopt a more integrated approach and actively seek to build on the interlinkages between sectors require critical changes in how development interventions are funded, designed and delivered across the economic, social and environmental sectors (Runde 2016; High-level Political Forum 2018).

Tools are needed that can help policymakers better understand policy interactions and their implications to support more coherent decisions in implementing the SDGs. Growing research on the SDGs is trying to fill this gap through mapping interlinkages, including examples of synergies and trade-offs between the SDGs and their targets (Le Blanc 2015, Weitz et al. 2017, International Council for Science 2017, Nillson et al. 2018). For example, the EU's Joint Research Centre has set up the [KnowSDGs](#) platform which provides interactive and easy-to-use data visualisations of these synergies and trade-offs. A recent report from the Joint Research Centre aims to identify and deal with interlinkages in a systemic way and proposes an operational method to develop policy implementation strategies at goal and target levels which can help improve overall policy coherence for sustainable development (Miola et al. 2019). The 2019 Eurostat monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context contains a brief overview on

4 They usually consist of comprehensive programmes that cut across several policy fields with a view to better addressing complex issues through multidimensional and cross-sectoral interventions. Yet, integrated approaches can be interpreted differently and their scope may differ widely depending on the issue they seek to address, the level at which actions are taken (global, regional, national, local) or the range of actors involved (the EU and member states, the EU and the UN).

interlinkages between the SDGs through multipurpose indicators (Eurostat 2019). Such reports and analyses are useful to strengthen the knowledge base on SDG interactions and consider synergies and trade-offs, and should be further encouraged. Yet, they remain quite theoretical and cannot provide the necessary guidance or venture in the political choices to manage priorities and address trade-offs.

4.2. Being more accountable to the SDGs: Can reporting change practices too?

The EU is more clearly linking its activities to the 2030 Agenda and may be pushed to do it more due to the stronger mandate to realise the SDGs for all new Commissioners. The reviewed EU international cooperation and development results framework attempts to connect the SDGs and the European Consensus on Development with the objective of exposing the contribution of the EU towards partner countries' progress. However, alignment to the SDGs indicators framework is only partial and limited to one of three levels of the EU results framework. NDICI indicators are not the same as the ones in the EU results framework either (Herrero et al. 2018). The extremely complex, top-level and evolving SDGs indicators framework renders full alignment difficult and not necessarily desirable. In addition, EU specific institutional needs for reporting, accountability, transparency and visibility may not necessarily be fully addressed by a results framework that aligns to the UN one (EC 2018b). Alongside this, DEVCO's internal reporting systems allow for activities to be tagged against up to 10 SDGs.

The EU co-chairs the International Task Force on Total Official Support for Sustainable Development (TOSSD), a statistical measure that aims to capture inputs beyond official development assistance for sustainable development. TOSSD requires input flows to contribute to at least one SDG without being substantially detrimental to another. However, it does not track outputs, outcomes or impact.

Interviews revealed a desire that improved results frameworks and connected accountability exercises – such as DEVCO annual reports, the joint synthesis report on the Consensus and reporting to the UN High Level Political Forum – will steer a more results-oriented culture in the organisation and potentially a common approach to reporting results with member states, for example in the context of joint programming. They also exposed some scepticism that reporting alone could foster more integrated approaches or a change in practices, at least in the short term.

The SDGs follow-up and review process and its accountability framework provide incentives to show results (Janus and Klingebiel 2016; Mahn Jones 2017). Aligning programming more closely to the SDGs and programming guidelines that endorse a more objectives- or results-oriented approach could provide useful tools for such a change. While better tracking of results is an important step for better programming and accountability, evidence shows that programmes that follow, more strictly, a results-based logic seem to work under certain conditions that depend on the context, recipient and donor – but not in all circumstances.

The UK's Department for International Development (DFID)'s Payment by Results Strategy and the World Bank's Program-for-Results financing instrument are probably the most well-known cases in which results have been put at the centre of the aid system and recipients paid against performance. The theory is that such approaches emphasise achieving certain outcomes and therefore increase autonomy, innovation and performance of recipients. Donors will see their funds go further and have more to show for their investments. However, evidence is thin and positive results on performance in some instances are counterbalanced by many cases where results were the same or even worse than those realised through other approaches (Clist 2018; Duvendack 2017; Clist 2017; World Bank 2016). For example, the EU

Governance Initiative had a financial incentive component whose results were limited due to design and implementation shortcomings (Africa Governance Institute/ECDPM 2011).

Linking current priorities and activities to the SDGs through reporting systems and results frameworks is certainly useful, but does not exhaust the work that needs to be done. If more integration, exploitation of synergies, managing of trade-offs and collaboration do not become the keywords of EU action, the transformative potential of the SDGs will not be fulfilled.

4.3. Moving towards cross-sectoral programming by the EU

The EU has been promoting cross-sectoral interventions in various areas with more or less success. For example, it has worked towards multi-sector action to improve nutrition through its EU Action Plan on Nutrition. While there is room for improvement, EU action has been in line with these commitments (Smit-Mwanamwenge, 2018; EC 2019b). EU priorities include enhancing international mobilisation and political commitment to nutrition, strengthening country-level action and improving knowledge and data on nutrition. Programmes integrate domains from health to female empowerment, agriculture and food security, water and sanitation as well as policy work with national ministries. Meanwhile, the EU's integrated approach to conflict and crises seeks to ensure that all European external policies and programmes address the underlying causes of conflicts through a multidimensional, multi-phased, multilateral and multi-level approach. But bold policy statements were not followed by a truly system-wide change in practice (ADE 2011). Where this happened, at least partially, the EU contribution to positive outcomes was clearer, such as in the cases of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast (ADE 2011).

Sectoral approaches have been the standard in EU international cooperation. An ECDPM analysis of country programming documents for 2014 to 2020 shows that, of 215 areas of intervention identified, only 31 had a recognisable multisectoral approach, and these largely fell in the fields of agriculture, food security and nutrition. In the Neighbourhood, multi-sector approaches were more common, with 23 instances out of 57.⁵ Instances of multiple initiatives clustered under a single broad sector, for example governance or public sector reforms, were common but with weak linkages between the different initiatives at the level of narrative, objectives or indicators. In most instances, programming documents did not explicitly address the synergies between different actions in the same areas of intervention, let alone across them. Beyond leaving a high degree of subjectivity in undertaking this exercise, whose results need to be taken with caution, they also reflect the need for further thinking on more synergistic EU action and stronger theories of change.

The National Indicative Programme for Burundi presents a quite unique example of cross-sectoral integration. The EU work in the energy sector was explicitly linked to interventions in health, rural development and nutrition. The exploration of the linkages between different areas of EU interventions in the same country – or even with member states and the UN – seems to be a potential avenue for better integration of the EU portfolio at country level. Some European countries have implemented a somewhat similar approach where they look at the different initiatives at country level and try to establish synergies between different programmes. Joint programming offers opportunities to scale up the search for synergies across the portfolios of different European donors. However, integrating work that occurs at different levels or under different services can be a daunting task in EU bureaucracy. The last mid-term reviews of EU

⁵ The analysis covered only country programming excluding regional documents: 142 countries plus 13 countries in the Neighbourhood. We classified as 'multi-sector' programmes with some linkages between different objectives and components. Where multiple sectors were mentioned under an overarching objective but links were not clear, programmes were defined as 'clustered'.

external financing instruments signalled improvements in the internal consistency of each. But consistency between regional and national actions and synergies between different instruments remains a ‘complex task’ (Bossuyt et al. 2017: 10). A broad instrument like the NDICI holds the promise of enhanced synergies but is not a panacea as many challenges are around implementation rather than instrument design alone. Even under the SDGs, sectoral interventions can still be of value. On the one hand, sector approaches can be too rigid to meet political objectives and the SDGs when complex and multilayered political issues are at stake. On the other hand, sectoral focus is considered important by some countries with particular sectoral objectives. One challenge for programming of multi-sector interventions is to work with a range of national authorities in partner countries and/or to involve the right expertise on the European side. A stronger emphasis on working with other actors and a more politically aware approach to cooperation could offer insights on how to go beyond such constraints in the next programming phase.

4.4. Learning lessons from the EU sector concentration policy

The guidelines of the 2014–2020 programming of the European Development Fund (EDF) and Development Cooperation Instrument included the principle of sector concentration arising from the EU’s policy laid out in the Agenda for Change (EC 2011), which required the EC to focus aid on maximum three sectors. They stated that sector concentration would also consider consultations with partner countries, joint programming and division of labour with member states. Development effectiveness, higher impact as well as increased visibility of the EU drove the principle, which had limited exceptions for contexts of fragility and conflict and work with civil society and local authorities. While our research and interviews suggest that the principle of sector concentration may be off the menu of the programming guidance this time around, it is still important to recall some lessons from the past for the upcoming programming phase.

Evidence shows that applying the sector concentration principle, coupled with some *faux pas*, did not lead to more effective development cooperation (Herrero et al. 2015). EU HQ influence went a step too far and overrode the sectoral indications of many EU delegations and national consultations, weakening country ownership in some cases. Sector concentration exacerbated this directive approach to the point that joint programming suffered as “final sector choices were not always in line with member states’ preferences” (Herrero et al. 2015: 57).

It remains unproven that sector concentration focused EU engagement more. According to the EU DAC Peer Review, it was implemented but “at the same time, the thematic funding, trust funds, investment funds and the European Investment Bank do not necessarily finance the three priority sectors in each country. Thus, further effort to consolidate EU-wide activities around priority sectors could be explored” (OECD 2018a: 18–19). The ECDPM mapping exercise adds that, in some cases, national programming documents defined sectors quite loosely, and sometimes widely. One of Kenya’s sectors is sustainable infrastructure, under which independent energy and transportation objectives are included (EC/Government of Kenya nd). In Tanzania, the good governance and development sector included actions on public fiscal management, provision of social services and economic growth (EC/United Republic of Tanzania nd). In the Philippines, job creation and access to sustainable energy fall under the same sector with an unclear link between the two (EEAS/EC nd).

5. Challenges and opportunities in involving other players in programming

The next EU programming phase sees a stronger push for working more closely and systematically with other players. This offers opportunities for innovations and complementarities and could instil a stronger and shared strategic view into future EU external engagement. Yet, there are also challenges and a need to overcome differences in approaches and diverging interests to work better together.

5.1. Ensuring democratic ownership

The programming of the 11th EDF has been criticised for not having been fully respectful of country ownership and preferences, especially when it came to the choice of sectors (Herrero et al. 2015). The risk seems even higher this time around due to the stronger push for pursuing EU political priorities and the prescriptive approach to programming that this may entail (Herrero et al. 2018).

The timely and meaningful involvement of partner countries in the programming process is an essential aspect to preserve. Partner countries' approaches to the SDGs and their priorities matter hugely, and the EU will need to ensure its support is aligned behind partner countries' own strategies and priorities. In doing so, it will be important to support domestic SDG strategies while recognising that the SDGs are not always a relevant framework nationally. The 'domestication' and integration of the 2030 Agenda in national policies also proves very difficult for developing countries and the need to prioritise often prevails.

To support national and local ownership, the EU should have a sophisticated understanding of political economy dynamics in partner countries. This should include reaching beyond national government, National Authorising Officers (NAOs) under the EDF or ruling parties and paying attention to structural path dependencies and vested interests across ministries that underpin national choices and might contribute to maintaining the status quo for EU development assistance.

5.2. Working better and more systematically with member states

According to the draft NDICI regulation, joint programming between the EU and member states should be the preferred approach for the new EU programming cycle (EC 2018a). This means that the EU will promote joint programming as the 'by-default' option and, as the only programming document for the EU and its member states, seek to use joint programming documents in as many countries as possible. In the pre-programming phase, EU delegations were requested to assess the possibility of undertaking joint programming with member states, and to duly justify where this is not possible and consider how such a process could start in the future.

Foreign Affairs (Development) Council Conclusions from 2016 emphasise the added value of joint programming for delivering the 2030 Agenda and for a coordinated and strategic EU response (Council of the EU 2016). In theory, using the SDGs as a common framework could optimise complementarities and synergies, increase EU policy leverage in favour of the SDGs and build on the knowledge and experience of others.

Joint programming is being redesigned around the SDGs, by encouraging SDG integration in joint programming documents and results frameworks, but this is still at an early stage, country-specific and subject to the buy-in of partner governments. According to a recent study, joint programming is still an

“underused means for SDG promotion” (Koenig 2019). SDGs have merely been used as an “added reference” in existing joint programming documents and the EU and member states tend to add SDG objectives to programmes without changing their approach or practices.

There is room for integrating the SDGs more strongly into joint programming processes and joint strategies, including through policy dialogue, support to data collection and analysis at country level, and better division of labour and coordination among EU donors. Joint programming holds the potential to foster mutual learning between the EU and member states on how to operationalise the 2030 Agenda, especially by encouraging peer exchange on different SDG approaches used by member states (e.g. mainstreaming thematic priorities, localisation of SDGs, climate co-benefits). Several member states are also pushing the EU to move faster and deeper on SDG integration.

Joint programming is not the magic bullet for more integrated approaches as sectors might remain the easiest way to get member states to agree to some form of coordination. In practice, division of labour among EU actors proves difficult to realise: our interviews and literature highlight that some member states fear that division of labour would leave them alone in key sectors and that donor coordination, although not always an easy path, could hold better results (Hagen 2015; Delputte and Orbie 2014). Joint programming may also not suit all circumstances, depending on the context and member states’ preferences (Helly et al. 2015).

Joint programming will remain a voluntary option and is resisted by some member states, especially where interests and priorities differ widely at country level or the added value of the additional work needed is not clear. Joint programming around EU interests implies that the EU and member states agree on the key priorities for all of them. This will be easier on essential EU priorities (e.g. core values), or when the focus is on horizontal matters that benefit everyone (e.g. business climate) but might be trickier when stronger vested economic/trade interests are at play, or for that matter when long-preferred sectors of development aid spending are questioned.

5.3. Programming the EFSD+ and involving the European Investment Bank

The emphasis on leveraging EU resources beyond aid with the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) in NDICI and better working with the European Investment Bank (EIB) will have to be reflected in programming. This will require the involvement of the EIB and other development finance institutions under the EFSD+.

A closer collaboration between the EIB and the EC would be a major step, not least because the EIB disburses 27% of EU aid (OECD 2018a). So far, coordination between the EIB and the EC has been ad hoc. A more systematic approach could improve policy alignment, synergy and coherence in the EU portfolio, including as part of the EFSD+ and the other two pillars of the European Investment Plan (EIP) (i.e. technical assistance and investment climate) (OECD 2018a; Große-Puppenthal and Bilal 2018). Other opportunities include a strengthening of the EIB ability to adapt to local circumstances as well as a stronger integration between its lending and other EC actions such as budget support and policy dialogue (Bilal 2019; Buhl-Nielsen et al. 2016).

Cooperation with other financial institutions should also be enhanced. Regional and country investment platforms could be set up to better coordinate EU investment support, for example drawing lessons from the Western Balkans Investment Framework (Bilal, 2019). The structure of the EFSD+ could be aligned to the EU geographic and thematic priorities, and through the EU delegations in partner countries.

How the programming of the EFSD+ and of the EIB activities will unfold is still unclear. From the perspective of the EIB, a more strategic approach that agrees on common objectives would be easier to handle and would still leave the EIB space to define its portfolio. The EC may want to get a more detailed project pipeline as part of the programming process and steer operations towards countries and populations where development finance institutions have less involvement, such as least developed countries, fragile contexts and people living in poverty.

5.4. Collaborating with the UN to deliver the SDGs

Another opportunity the EU should seize in the programming exercise is to work more closely with the UN. This is not only in line with the EU commitment to strengthen EU–UN collaboration, but could also create needed complementarities and synergies to support partner countries in reaching the SDGs. The new UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF – previously the UN Development Assistance Framework) now guides the entire UN programme cycle by outlining the UN development system’s contributions as a whole to reach the SDGs by following an integrated and multidimensional programming approach (UN Sustainable Development Group 2019). The latter identifies how working on and advancing one SDG can maximise synergies and positive impacts and minimise potential trade-offs. A range of analytical tools for integrated policy support are being promoted and used to this end, including the UN common country analysis, the identification of SDG ‘accelerators’ and the link to the integrated national financial frameworks.

The next EU programming process should seek to link as much as possible to the work carried out by the UN to support partner countries’ own efforts to better address interlinkages, synergies and trade-offs through whole-of-government approaches. And it should aim to develop new financing strategies through the use of integrated national financial frameworks.

The new UN framework is still in its infancy and needs to be tested in practice, including the extent to which the UN can overcome its own institutional hurdles and incentive system, not least the competition for funds between UN agencies. Many challenges lie ahead for the UN to start delivering as one and for the EU to agree internally before identifying a shared agenda with the UN as a basis for programming. Yet the improvements in the UN’s in-country architecture could provide a good basis for enhanced and effective EU–UN collaboration on the ground, including SDG analysis and policy dialogue. To be as strategic and effective as possible, conducting joint EU–UN dialogues and consultations at country level may be best done on a case-by-case basis (Medinilla et al. 2019).

6. A change of course for the next programming phase

The next programming cycle will be a tough task for the EU leadership and the EU bureaucracy if they are to live up to their own ambitions towards the SDGs and the EU political vision. Beyond the important technical and financial decisions about how much resources should go where, strong investment should be put into clearly defining objectives and priorities.

Our research also highlights that, while the policy framework is in line with the SDGs, there is a strong need to adapt ways of working towards more integration and adaptability to context. Working with other players in Europe and beyond will also be key. And such moves could benefit the EU ambition of pursuing foreign policy objectives, although careful attention needs to be paid to the tensions between those and the SDGs.

The big questions remain of how ready the EU is to change course and how such change can happen in the well-established yet complex bureaucratic process that is programming. The changes in the international landscape, the updated EU policy framework and the programming process itself offer opportunities for new ways of working but, four years on from the approval of the SDGs, three from the Global Strategy and two from the EU Consensus on Development, turning policy into practice seems to be a daunting task.

The room to change for the next programming process of EU institutions is indeed quite limited and the risk to underdeliver on both the SDGs and EU foreign policy objectives considerable. Programming is a very bureaucratic exercise where institutional battles converge and path dependency is high. The incentives to disburse funds quickly, work with partners with whom a proven relationship already exists and stick to ways of working, modalities and sectors that – although not the most effective – still guarantee smooth running of projects, are strong.

Moving beyond sector approaches where needed and considering development cooperation interventions in a more integrated manner requires skills and expertise that are yet to be built within the EEAS, Commission and EU delegations (for example, working beyond single sectors, mainstreaming cross-cutting themes, identifying and exploiting co-benefits, scaling up political engagement and linking it to policy dialogue). EU delegations are still largely structured around sectoral areas as are policy dialogues with partner countries. Policy orientations take a long time to trickle down to the institutional mechanics, both in HQ and in the delegations, and need a strong and sustained push at senior management level. From our interviews, it seems that the latter is quite divided on the extent to which the SDGs should fundamentally change the way EU development and international cooperation is programmed and the resources that should be put to this end.

Resistance to change can be long standing and some factors are likely to reverberate over the future EU cycle too. Cross-institutional collaboration based on common objectives is a weak spot for the EU institutions, being this collaboration across DGs, with the EIB or with member states. Beyond the SDGs–EU interests conundrum, research shows that different institutional objectives can lead to different priorities. DG Research and Innovation and DG DEVCO are such cases – both have legitimate priorities on domestic and international cooperation policies (Di Ciommo and Thijssen 2019).

The priorities of the next EU political leadership, its ability to steer change in its own system and the commitment it shows towards more effective EU external action will make a big difference. The programming guidelines will be one tool to hopefully allow the EU to advance and hone its strategic and integrated approach to development cooperation. We list below a set of issues that the upcoming programming guidelines should seek to clarify:

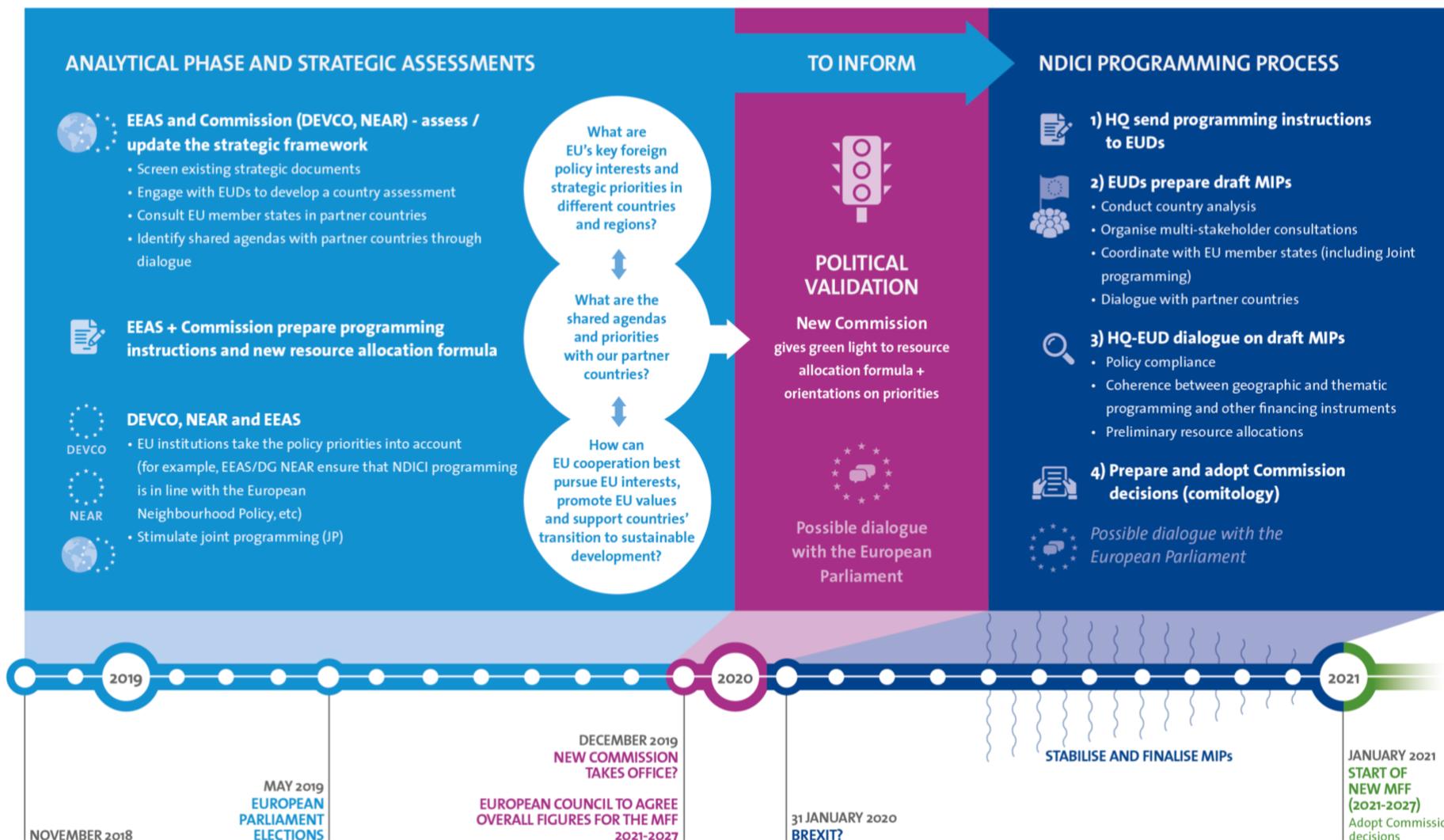
- The central role of geographic and thematic assessments and concept notes for cooperation in the programming phase
- How to agree on lead donors of EU interventions in specific sectors or areas, and ensure the effective coordination of joint implementation with member states
- The relevance of a strong analytical base and how to use analytical and context analysis tools to underpin strategic choices
- How partners at country level are to be meaningfully engaged going beyond country ownership defined as government actors to include societal stakeholders
- Whether the SDGs will be the entry point for programming and how to minimise trade-offs and tensions within them and with EU foreign policy objectives including cross-cutting themes

- How to best harness efforts to improve reporting practices of the EU in line with the SDGs to steer innovation at the implementation level – this needs to be thought through from the outset
- How to best use the EU's full extent of resources, including development finance from EU banks, in the programming phase to promote the SDGs

Annex 1

GEOGRAPHIC PROGRAMMING OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD, DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION INSTRUMENT (NDICI)

This is not an official timeline. The information provided here is based on our interpretation of the process, based on insights gathered through interviews.



Acronyms

EEAS = European External Action Service

DG DEVCO = Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development

EUD = EU delegations

DG NEAR = Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations

MIPs = Multiannual Indicative Programmes

MFF = Multiannual Financial Framework

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HEAD OFFICE
SIÈGE

Onze Lieve Vrouweplein 21
6211 HE Maastricht
The Netherlands *Pays Bas*
Tel +31 (0)43 350 29 00
Fax +31 (0)43 350 29 02

BRUSSELS OFFICE
BUREAU DE BRUXELLES

Rue Archimède 5
1000 Brussels *Bruxelles*
Belgium *Belgique*
Tel +32 (0)2 237 43 10
Fax +32 (0)2 237 43 19

info@ecdpm.org
www.ecdpm.org
KvK 41077447