DRIVING PROGRESS FOWARD

EU actorness on the Sustainable Development Goals

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SUMMARY

Over recent years, EU actorness has increased when it comes to legal authority, autonomy, external recognition and attractiveness, while internal cohesion among EU Member States has dwindled. Two case studies, on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) and on standards for sustainability reporting, show the varying level of the EU's effectiveness in sustainable development policy.

This CEPS In-Depth Analysis report analyses the EU's capability to act and be effective in sustainable development governance, looking at the period from the 2000s to today. It finds that several factors will affect the EU's ability to pursue the SDGs in the near future.

Depending on the global momentum around ambitious reforms, the EU may be able to implant its agenda into global agreements. Internal dynamics will also determine whether the EU will be able to retain sufficient authority, autonomy and cohesion to effectively project its agenda on a global scale.

This report is part of a series drawing on the outcomes of the EU-funded TRIGGER (Trends in Global Governance and Europe's Role) project that ran from 2018 to 2022.

Using the conceptual framework developed as part of TRIGGER, this report moves beyond observing the characteristics of the EU as an actor to explore its actorness/effectiveness over time in a specific policy domain – this case, the Sustainable Development Goals.

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is an essential precondition for the flourishing and long-term survival of human life on earth. While pessimistic analysts of the past century of human economic activity can point to a long history of environmental destruction and short-termism, optimistic observers can point to a growing framework of governance arrangements and policy initiatives designed to foster sustainable development. This report analyses the governance of sustainable development and focuses on the EU's capability to act and be effective in this domain.

Our analysis of sustainable development proceeds in four interrelated chapters. In Chapter 1, we provide an overview of the main global and EU governance arrangements. At the global level, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a crucial institutional framework for the global fight against poverty and for sustainability. International bodies like the UN and the World Bank, supranational organisations like the EU, private corporations and civil society all play an important role in working towards achieving these goals. At the EU level, the EU's political action for sustainable development is determined by a complex interplay between the different EU Member States in the Council as well as other supranational institutions, such as the European Commission and Parliament.

We then evaluate the EU's actorness in sustainable development policy in Chapter 2. Using the TRIGGER actorness model outlined in the introduction to this deliverable, we analyse the level of EU actorness across seven dimensions during two phases: the 'MDG phase' after 2000 and the 'SDG phase' after 2015 (until 2021). The analysis is summarised in a quantified expert judgement on the level of actorness for each dimension. We find that EU actorness increased when it comes to legal authority, autonomy, external recognition and attractiveness; it remained stagnant regarding the EU’s credibility and opportunity to act; and it decreased when it comes to internal cohesion.

We move on to examine the EU's effectiveness in sustainable development policy. Defining effectiveness as goal attainment, in Chapter 3 we start by outlining the main goals and instruments of the EU when it comes to promoting sustainable development. We dive deeper into two case studies, on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement trade agreement and on standards for sustainability reporting, to study the degree of goal attainment in these two instances. We find that the EU has attained its goal of integrating sustainability provisions into trade agreements, but their enforceability remains unclear. Regarding sustainability reporting, the EU has not been the main standard setter in the past decades, but recent legislative initiatives could lead to a higher degree of effectiveness.

Lastly, in Chapter 4 we conclude our report by outlining the main challenges and opportunities lying ahead of the EU. Meaningful action for sustainable development is both urgent and possible, even in the wake of catastrophes like the Covid-19 pandemic.

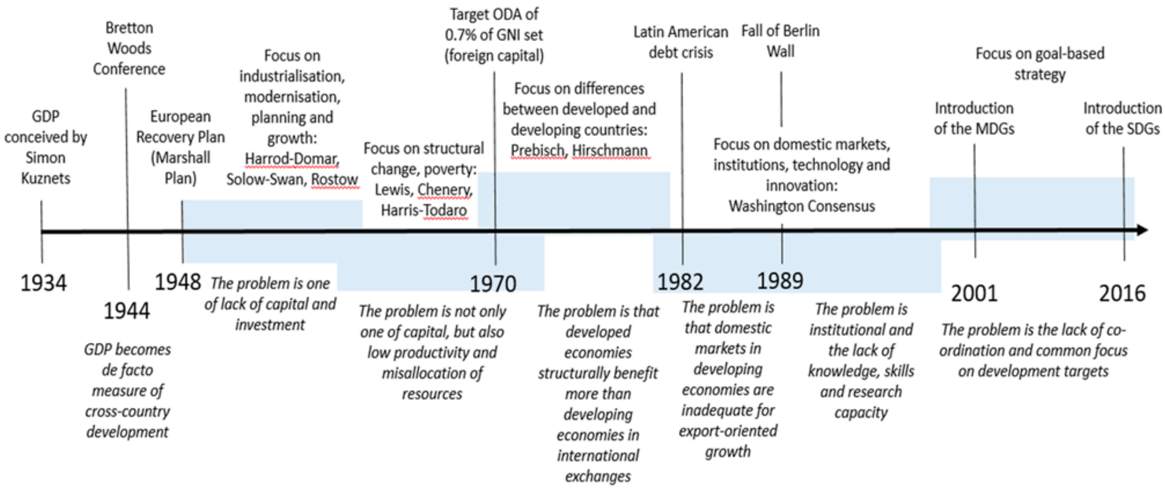
1. GLOBAL AND EU GOVERNANCE OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

It was not that long ago that the global community was at the peak of its optimism. In 2015, both the Paris Agreement on climate change and agreement on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were reached. These were two historic moments, which were hailed as a shift towards building a better, more sustainable world. The role of the European Union in this process was important, but also featured peaks and troughs of commitment. Speaking in Paris on the occasion of COP21, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker stated that 'we cannot tell future generations that we did not know because we are aware today of the risks that lie in store for us tomorrow. We know the threats; we know the risks and we can prevent them.' Today, in the light of Covid-19, these words sound less evocative than they did at the time, and the ongoing fragmentation of global governance and emergence of new tensions among countries calls for a strong actor in the development domain.

The problem is real, and urgent. Over the past few decades, recognition of the unsustainability of human activities, including in particular the neoclassical economics approach to GDP growth, has led scholars to gradually realise the need to transition towards a more multidimensional, long-term framework for global governance. Moreover, sustainability has challenged the traditional approach to governance. The complexity of the endeavour – i.e. reconciling the economic, social and environmental dimensions within a common framework for people, the planet and prosperity – has led to new ways of orchestrating multi-stakeholder dialogue. It has also entailed combining traditional top-down, hierarchical governance modes with bottom-up market-oriented governance, and later more comprehensive network governance. This has required a flexible, goal-oriented, polycentric approach that scholars have termed 'metagovernance' (Meuleman 2018) to indicate the new imperative of blending different forms of governance to calibrate the ever-changing balance between local empowerment and global goal setting.

Nowhere has this been more evident than in the quest for common sustainable development goals. From the framework of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (still very mono-dimensional) to the current SDGs, the world has learned a lot about governance. The need for a broader involvement of all stakeholders was firmly stated already at the UN Rio Earth Summit in 1992, and found real operationalisation over the years, especially with adoption of the open working group method by the UN. Today, designing a sustainable development strategy without the use of all three main governance modes (hierarchies, markets and networks) appears hardly conceivable: indeed, the role of the private sector and the empowerment of local communities have become much more salient in the debate on sustainable development over the years.

Figure 1. Phases and paradigms in development policy

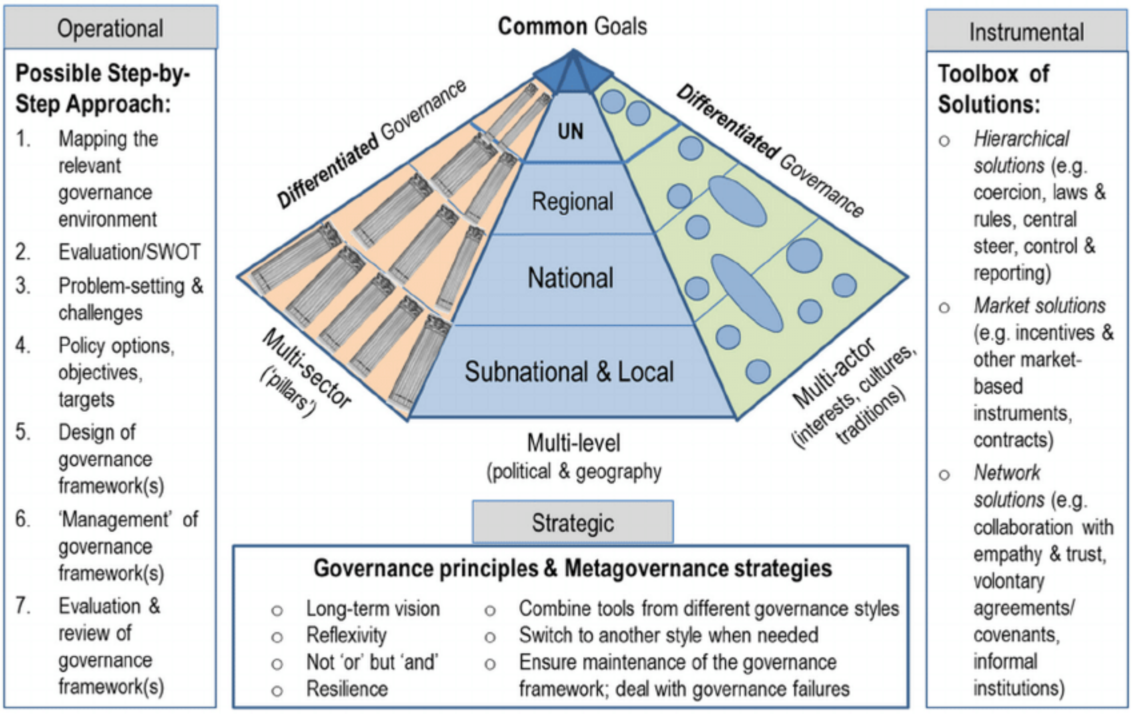


Source: OECD (2019).

At the same time, communicating and practising sustainable development and using the SDGs as a litmus test for the viability of public policies has proven to be extremely complex. The more that countries face emergency situations, as well as growing inequality, the less immediate is a political message that looks beyond the short term. The difficulty of putting the vision of sustainable development into action is also intimately related to the need to change both the vocabulary and the toolkit of public decision-makers, in a way that is more consistent with the SDGs. There can be no effective sustainable development strategy if the global community continues to measure and reward progress only by GDP. There can be no organic, comprehensive sustainable development policy if new laws and standards are gauged through the use of neoclassical cost-benefit analysis, often coupled with high inter-temporal discount rates and the tendency to attach very low values to non-market benefits such as social and environmental impacts. There can be no sustainable development if the private sector continues to be run for the sole benefit of company shareholders, and lawmakers fail to provide incentives for businesses to align with the social good.

Meuleman and Niestroy (2015) analyse the complexity of the resulting governance framework in terms of assembling multilevel governance, different modes of governance and operational constraints. These include balancing goal setting and step-by-step operationalisation of the reforms needed to reorient the economy towards sustainability.

Figure 2. Common but differentiated governance – a 'mind map'



Source: Meuleman and Niestroy (2015).

Humanity's quest for sustainability is clearly hampered, if not completely jeopardised, by the gradual deterioration of the global order. The rise of administrations with limited or no sensitivity to sustainable development, such as the Trump administration in the US and the Bolsonaro one in Brazil, did not help the already daunting task of coordinating various levels of government in a common, but differentiated governance effort. The emerging rivalry between the US and China, which increased after Covid-19, was a further obstacle to a global consensus on sustainable development.

Even in the EU, an institution traditionally oriented towards sustainability, reaching consensus has proven to be an uphill battle. The lack of policy coherence (Ashford and Renda 2016; European Commission EIR 2017), the difficulty of empowering all levels of government, and the lack of EU competence in specific social, environmental and governance domains have become enemies of sustainable development, giving oxygen to the arguments of populists and reflecting short-termism. After significant progress during the Juncker Commission (2014-2019), the von der Leyen Commission has promised continuity and an even more ambitious agenda. That agenda includes a stronger commitment to good governance (i.e. with the creation of DG REFORM), a gradual reorientation of the European Semester and the Better Regulation agenda towards the SDGs and the launch of an ambitious European Green Deal, presented as the new growth strategy of the EU and nested in the twin transition (green and digital). The European Commission's Better Regulation Communication published in 2021 makes some clear references to the Commission's ambition to '[m]ainstream the United

Nations' sustainable development goals' (European Commission 2021a: 1). The actual implementation of the ambition remains to be seen.

All this leaves the EU, a laboratory *par excellence* for metagovernance, in a unique position to lead the world in the quest for sustainable development, but with very few allies. Is the European Union willing and able to play this leading role? Would such a strategy have a chance of succeeding, in the absence of support from other large(r) superpowers? To answer these questions, in this section we look at the evolution of the EU's role in the governance of sustainability. Section 1.1 below introduces the notion of governance and its specific meaning in the context of sustainability. It discusses the global process of mainstreaming development goals, from the MDGs in 2000 to the SDGs and describes the current pillars of SDG governance. Section 1.2 analyses EU governance arrangements for achievement of the MDGs and the SDGs.

1.1 THE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY: AN OVERVIEW

The first traces of a global consensus on sustainable development are found in the early 1970s, with the formation of the Club of Rome and the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, marked by the Russian boycott and emerging hostility between the United States and China. A decade later, the UN General Assembly welcomed the establishment of a special commission that would prepare a report on the environment towards the year 2000 and beyond, including proposed strategies for sustainable development. The commission was later named the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The WCED report in 1987 (known as the Brundtland Report) introduced the concept of sustainable development and explored the causes of environmental degradation. It attempted to understand the interconnections between social equity, economic growth, and environmental problems, and to develop policy solutions that integrated all three areas. The Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

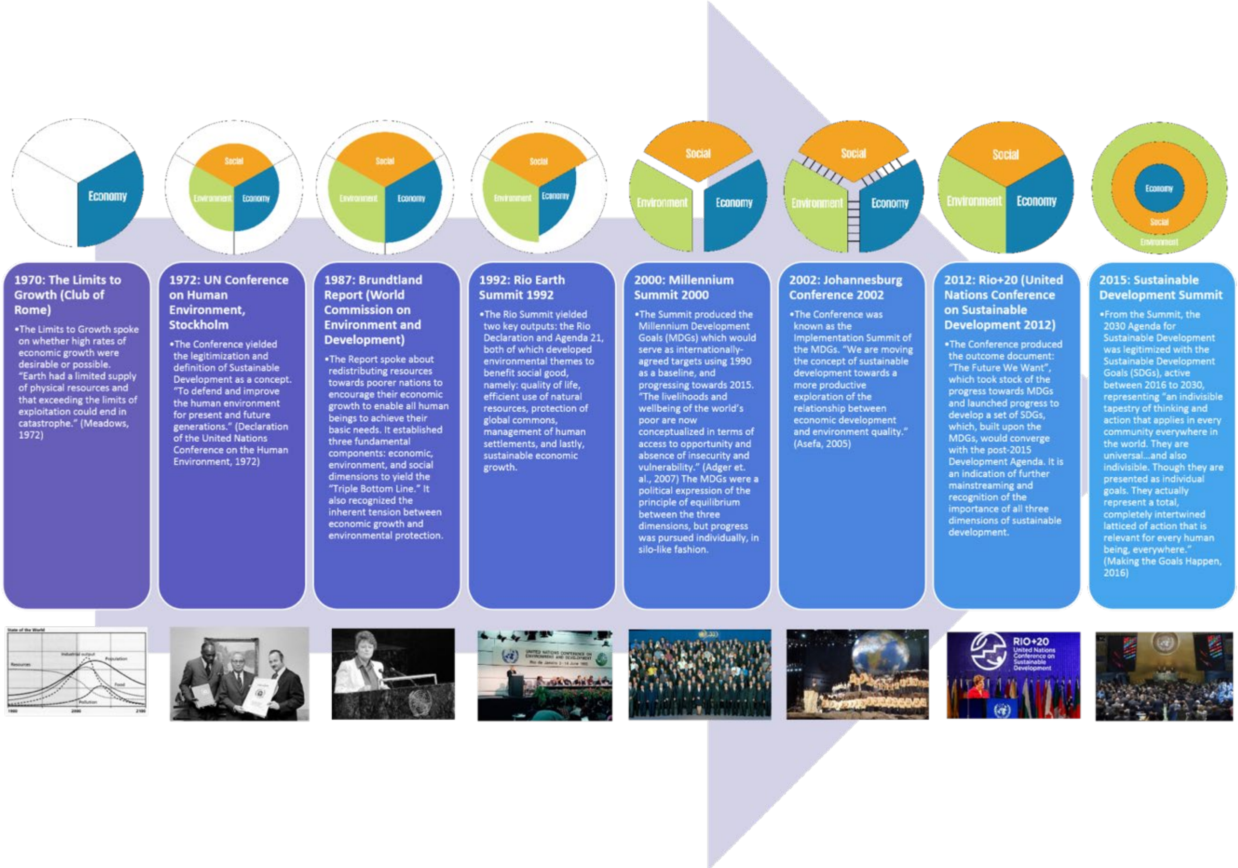
The Brundtland Report laid the foundations for the Rio Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which then ultimately led to the creation of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development that same year. At the Earth Summit, 178 governments signed three new agreements:

- the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, which set out 27 principles to guide the behaviour of nations towards more environmentally sustainable patterns of development;
- a voluntary action plan called *Agenda 21*, aimed at providing an agenda for local, national, regional, and global action into the 21st century; and

- a ‘non-legally binding authoritative statement of principles for a global consensus on the management, conservation, and sustainable development of all types of forests’.

These agreements were accompanied by two international conventions, each signed by representatives of more than 150 countries: a Framework Convention on Climate Change, and a Framework Convention on Biological Diversity.

Figure 3. The gradual integration of economic, social and environmental dimensions into global governance, 1970-2015



Source: SDG Help Desk E-Learning (https://imgur.com/PXJSGzd).

1.1.1 The Millennium Development Goals

In September 2000, leaders of 189 countries gathered at the United Nations headquarters and signed the Millennium Declaration, in which they committed to achieving a set of eight measurable goals that range from halving extreme poverty and hunger to promoting gender equality and reducing child mortality, by the target date of 2015 (as officially stated by the Sustainable Development Goals Fund website).

Figure 4. The Millennium Development Goals

Source: United Nations (2000).

The MDGs were a path-breaking initiative, which created one common framework for evaluating development, allowing for clearer measurement of progress and communication of the development aims. There is widespread agreement that the relative simplicity of the MDGs made them easy to communicate and contributed to raising awareness about global poverty. Also, the concrete, time-bound and quantitative standards set in the Millennium Declaration became widely accepted by the main stakeholders, such as national governments, international agencies, activists, politicians etc. (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019). However, critics were drawn to the perceived over-simplification of the concept of development, an inherently complex process. This raised concerns about the establishment of an incomplete framework, which would focus attempts on tackling development in a narrow and non-comprehensive way, with an excessive emphasis on targets (Fakuda-Parr et al. 2013).

First, the process that led to the creation of the MDGs raised widespread objections to its bias towards representing the interests of the global North. Several papers point out shortcomings in the design of the MDGs in measuring progress, which resulted in bias against some parts of the South, especially African countries (Easterly 2009). According to Richard et al. (2011), the reductionist approach, resulting from a process that included few stakeholders and inadequate involvement of developing countries, favoured a narrow understanding of development. This approach concentrated on the problems encountered mostly in developing countries, undermining universal development challenges beyond meeting basic needs.

Second, considerable criticism has been voiced in relation to the measurement methodology. The MDGs (as well as the SDGs, which will be examined in the following subsection) follow a goal-target-indicator approach: a statement of a social and political priority (goal), a time-bound quantitative outcome to be achieved that sets benchmarks of performance (target) and a measurement tool to monitor progress (indicator).

Although quantitative measurements facilitate identification and communication of progress, they can also lead to a shift of attention away from issues, which are outside the measurement framework (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019). Considering that the measurement framework defines the understanding of the concepts at hand, its framing is subject to a political game, often used by dominant organisations and states to exert influence over the policy agendas of other stakeholders.

The MDGs were a first attempt to present an internationally agreed framework addressing issues of global development. During their implementation, it became clear that the global development agenda could not be comprehensively addressed without taking into account broader issues of, for example, energy, governance, food security or systemic inequalities, or activate efforts and resources universally all over the globe (Caballero 2016). Researchers are divided on the impact of the MDGs on social standards, and particularly on whether improvements in the social conditions between 1990 and 2015 can be attributed to the MDGs (Fukuda-Parr 2010; Friedman 2013).

1.1.2 The Sustainable Development Goals

At the 2010 High-Level Plenary Meeting of the UN General Assembly (MDG+10 Summit), which aimed at reviewing progress towards achieving the MDGs, governments decided to launch a process of intergovernmental negotiations with the goal of advancing the development agenda beyond 2015 (HLPF 2014). Several initiatives have been taken as a result, ranging from a UN System Task Team (performing multi-stakeholder consultations at the national, regional and local levels) and a High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons (making recommendations for the new agenda) to appointing a Special Adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning. Next to this 'post-2015' development agenda led by the UN Secretary-General, a parallel process was launched during the Rio+20 Conference on the Environment and Development (Rio+20), the follow-up summit to the 1992 Earth Summit. The latter adopted a commitment to develop a set of goals that would incorporate a wider development agenda, focusing on environmental, social and economic priorities while keeping them limited in number, aspirational, and easy to communicate. Its work was coordinated by an intergovernmental open working group (OWG).

According to Fukuda-Parr and McNeill (2019), these two processes were different in their histories, actors, engaged communities and political dynamics. The post-2015 agenda focused on creating a follow-up to the existing MDG framework with development conceptualised in a similar way and based on the standard process structured around regional voting blocs, the Western groups as well as the G77 and China. The Rio+20 on the other hand, took on the challenge of setting a more ambitious agenda at the start, which would address a broader set of development issues and seek structural change (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019).

Additionally, the OWG was mandated to use an innovative, constituency-based system of representation that was new to the limited membership bodies of the General Assembly. As a result, the OWG comprised 30 seats, some of which were shared by up to 4 countries and was consequently led by member countries (UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform n.d.(a)). Various stakeholders were invited to take part in the discussions and the participation of 'Major Groups'[1] was institutionalised. According to Caballero (2016), the new negotiation set-up enabled parties to break out of the usual processes led by the UN Secretariat and agencies, balance the disproportionate influence of the North (notably, Colombia initiated the idea of the SDGs, while Brazil hosted the summit) and allow for more input from civil society, academia and business (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019).

In January 2015, the General Assembly began the negotiation process on the post-2015 development agenda with input from the OWG. The process culminated in the subsequent adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with 17 SDGs at its core, at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015.

Figure 5. The Sustainable Development Goals

Source: United Nations (2015).

Despite the open and transparent structures, intense consultations and departure from the usual negotiating blocs, compromises had to be made to ensure an agreement between the UN member countries. Five years after agreement on the 2030 Agenda, the literature had identified some shortcomings in the chosen indicators and the persisting insufficiency of ambition on environmental goals in relation to the economic goals. Yet overall, there was widespread agreement that progress has been made since the MDGs

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[1] Since the first UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 – known as the Earth Summit, it has been recognised that achieving sustainable development would require the active participation of all sectors of society and all types of people. Agenda 21, adopted at the Earth Summit, drew upon this sentiment, and formalised nine sectors of society as the main channels through which broad participation would be facilitated in UN activities related to sustainable development. These are officially called 'Major Groups' and include the following sectors: women, children and youth, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organisations, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, the scientific and technological community, and farmers.

and that the SDGs allowed for a more ambitious and comprehensive development agenda. A remaining question, which continues to be widely discussed and is of utmost importance in the quest to ensure a global transformation towards sustainability, is the means of implementation of the agreed targets. The following subsection gives a brief overview of partnerships, which were defined in the 2030 Agenda as an essential tool for realising the SDGs.

1.1.3 Implementing the SDGs: partnerships

Learning from experience with the MDGs, the international community has recognised the limits of top-down technocratic interventions and the essential role of people as agents of change. In this respect, a door has been opened for a more organised way of engaging in governance, realised through voluntary multi-stakeholder initiatives, public-private partnerships, or cross-sector collaborations (Florini and Pauli 2018).

In particular, the 17 goals incorporate a goal dedicated to governance of the SDGs, which is a significant innovation compared with the MDGs, for which governance was less clearly embedded in the process. Target 17, which deals with 'Partnerships for the Goals', lays out two targets related to multi-stakeholder partnerships:

> 17.1 Enhance global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilise and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, in particular developing countries.
>
> 17.2 Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships.

Next to the Global Partnerships for Development, led by governments, an important complementary role is given to entities working in collaboration with, or even without, governments. They have a significant task in mobilising and pooling the various resources of a wide variety of actors and therefore in contributing to the funding of the SDGs, next to tax revenues, public borrowing or public development funds (Florini and Pauli 2018).

Cross-sector collaborations are not new to the SDGs and were already in place in the MDG agenda. However, studies have shown that many of the registered partnerships were not as effective as expected. A study by Pattberg and Widerberg (2016) found that over a third of partnerships have shown low levels or no measurable outputs and almost half of the partnerships where some measurable output was recorded did not respond to the stated goals and ambitions. According to the authors, global agreements (mostly in the climate domain) proved elusive for a long time; furthermore, inequitable trade agreements contributed to the mistrust of societies of engaging in work to achieve the SDGs. Most stakeholders and academics agree that the creation of numerous partnerships is inevitable for reaching the SDGs, but also that many of the current partnerships have been falling short of achieving their objectives. The question of how to design a system that would ensure more effective partnerships remains on the agenda of academics and various groups involved in monitoring SDG progress.

When discussing the approach towards partnerships, two different perspectives should be highlighted. The first one is represented by some parts of civil society organisations, which voice their scepticism towards partnership with private organisations, seeing them as inherently profit-seeking and market-driven, whose aims do not necessarily match the interests of the general public and the attainment of sustainable development. The second, represented by the business sector, sees opportunities related to better engagement in partnerships but argues against too much bureaucracy and regulation, which might hinder flexibility and innovation and therefore impact on the effectiveness of partnerships. As is often the case, the answer seems to lie in striking the right balance between the two positions. This is also supported by the general opinion of stakeholders, which favour well-drafted rules and framework conditions tailored to the needs of specific types of partnerships and sectors (Beisheim and Ellersiek 2017).

As mentioned, it is difficult to imagine the implementation of a wide range of transformative changes without the involvement of private actors. For a start, it will be simply impossible to perform such a change without the use of resources available to the private sector (Florini and Pauli 2018). Furthermore, smaller and less powerful groups, such as domestic civil society organisations in developing countries, may lack the capacity to fully engage in agenda setting or consultation activities and therefore fail to shape the landscape of non-state action (Ponte and Chenys 2013). According to the Business and Sustainable Development Commission (2017), the private sector itself seems to be aware of the positive impact of involvement, linked to both public pressure to contribute to social welfare through business models aimed at the public good (corporate social responsibility), and the promise of high profits.

Yet, studies have shown that the lack of sufficient regulation and oversight over multi-stakeholder partnerships can result in undesired results of partnerships – such as the dominance of private over public interest, the introduction of short-term solutions rather than transformative change, or misallocation of funds – all of which hinder progress towards the SDGs and lead to further erosion of trust in the commitment towards the goals (Florini and Pauli 2018). The effectiveness of multi-stakeholder partnerships, while dependent on many factors, is strongly linked to their ability to manage and share knowledge and expertise about processes and solutions (UNDESA 2015). Large private collaborations and their requirements for success will be addressed in more detail in Subsection 1.1.4.3.

Several studies call for giving a more central role to 'orchestrators', responsible for initiating and supporting individual partnerships. In fact, orchestration is already widely used in the governance of sustainable development as, thanks to its soft and indirect power approach, it results in less resistance from actors. The role of orchestrator can be taken by international institutions, government departments or professional orchestrators, who support the management of successful projects with their experience and knowledge (Horan 2019). Orchestrators can contribute in a variety of ways, from financing and standard setting to sharing knowledge and improving linkages between projects at both the domestic and global levels.

Still, to ensure successful partnerships for SDGs, correct implementation and the establishment of linkages is not sufficient, and should be accompanied by a contribution towards the transition to a more sustainable system. Orchestration schemes should thus be built to support not only successful implementation and cooperation but also to deliver on the transition element. In theory, governments might be especially well suited to this role due to their access to public resources, policy capabilities, legitimacy and longer-term horizon (Horan 2019). But in practice, the willingness of governments to safeguard the long-term benefits of partnerships, and to provide the desired counterbalance to the typically more short-term gain approach of private organisations, is often limited and varies significantly among countries.

An important stream in the literature tries to respond to gaps in the effectiveness of partnerships. While dependent on many factors, these are closely linked to the partnerships' ability to manage and share knowledge and expertise about processes and solutions in a transformative, inclusive and accountable manner (UNDESA 2015). To achieve this aim, a better metagovernance system aimed at providing a set of rules and overarching principles intended to guide, accompany and evaluate the work of partnerships is needed (Beisheim and Ellersiek 2017). Metagovernance can be carried out at the national and international levels by state, intergovernmental or non-state actors, with state actors standing out for having regulatory measures and sanctions available (Beisheim and Ellersiek 2017).

1.1.3.1 United Nations framework for partnerships

At the UN level, various attempts have been made over the years to introduce a framework for collaboration with non-state actors. In spite of providing some guiding principles, they have not resulted in a comprehensive metagovernance framework that would be widely applicable. Instead, a fragmented system exists that lacks a coherent implementation process.

Many initiatives taken at the UN level can be mentioned, such as the Bali Guiding Principles, adopted in 2003 by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development and the 'Guidelines on Cooperation between the United Nations and the Business Community'. Also, there is the Partnerships for SDGs online platform, introduced in 2015 by the Secretary-General and adopted by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs in 2016, and the Economic and Social Council Partnership Forum, which has been held since

2015. Apart from some valid attempts at introducing a soft law framework for partnerships and work on creating a platform which would enable easier monitoring and reporting, none of the bodies was able to create an effective and widely used scheme. Problems relate mostly to the lack of agreement among member countries on implementation or verification mechanisms, and a lack of resources on the side of UN agencies to provide for comprehensive screening (Beisheim and Ellersiek 2017). Due to the voluntary nature of the schemes and lack of oversight, implementation ultimately depends on the goodwill of the partnership leaders.

According to the UNSG Special Adviser on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the UN should chiefly support its member countries in building and accompanying partnerships. This is linked to the fact that partnerships should primarily respond to local needs and be coordinated with local development plans to ensure their integration with existing initiatives and priorities. Unfortunately, not all governments give the SDGs the priority they deserve and sometimes they are unwilling to support democratic and inclusive processes, and therefore even hinder attempts to reach higher levels of inclusiveness in creation and implementation. Other problems may arise out of competition between the state and the partnerships. As legitimate governments have a strong interest in advertising their actions, they might fear that partnerships which are too successful might damage their reputation. Nevertheless, ideally they would be well positioned to serve as actors providing the needed framework for monitoring partnerships.

In addition to the instruments mentioned above, the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) should also be considered. Established in 2012 at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, it is the main UN platform on sustainable development. The HLPF has a comprehensive and challenging mandate, encompassing tasks such as setting the sustainable development agenda; enhancing integration, coordination and coherence across the UN system; and following up all sustainable development goals and commitments (UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform n.d.(a)).

Although its mandate is rather impressive, the HLPF does not have authority to directly control actors such as states, international organisations or private organisations, nor does it have the required resources to fully act on its mandate. It seems to be well positioned, however, and likely purposely designed to provide voluntary guidance and support to other actors (Abbott et al. 2015). In other words, the role of the HLPF can be described as having ambitious governance goals but moderate governance capacity (Abbott et al. 2015).

In acting as a ‘global orchestrator for SDGs’, the HLPF requires significant financial resources and the ability to provide incentives, which arguably have not been fully granted to the forum, thus limiting the effective exercise even of its soft power mandate. When looking at the practical capabilities of the forum, it seems clear that the member countries aimed at keeping control of their progress on the SDGs, as well as their sovereignty and resources, and have deployed the forum as an advisory body. Aside from its limitations, the forum could offer a unified and independent voice for sustainable development, which previously was lacking within the UN system (Abbott et al. 2015). It nonetheless remains greatly dependent on the intermediaries' willingness to cooperate and has arguably led to insufficient results over the past years (Hege 2018).

1.1.4 Who are the main actors in the governance of the SDGs?

The preamble of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) mentions that 'all countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan'. Indeed, the ambitious and overarching agenda for the SDGs will likely be doomed to failure without the involvement of all stakeholders. Two main types of actors (understood as stakeholders) can be identified. According to Monkelbaan (2019), the first one operates typically on a specific geographical or jurisdictional scale (local and national governments, international organisations), while the second operates in a non-traditional, 'multilevel mode' (e.g. networks and corporations). Both types of actors will be examined in the following subsections.

1.1.4.1 National governments – the cases of the US and China

National governments cannot be treated as a uniform category, as not only their capabilities but also priorities and challenges vary largely from country to country. Even so, typically all national governments are expected to provide public goods and play a significant role, acting as regulators, monitors or coordinators of collective action. For this reason, systemic transformations such as the energy transition cannot avoid relying on the action of national governments. In spite of a high level of public disappointment in national governments, studies seem to suggest that the national level remains the key policymaking lever for delivering public goods (Karlsson and Jollands 2013). Yet, in their decision-making capacity, governments are often influenced by the vested interests of private companies as well as their own interests embedded in existing arrangements. To give an example, most fossil fuel reserves are held by state-owned enterprises, which strongly affects some governments' willingness to reform the sector as such reforms would imply a loss of government revenues (Monkelbaan 2019).

While a detailed examination of different national approaches to SDGs does not lie within the scope of this subsection, the approaches represented by the United States and China will be looked at more closely. The following subsections will examine in greater detail the European Union's approach to the SDGs.

1.1.4.1.1 The United States

Although it is known as the country with the highest GDP in the world, the US is far from being a top performer in sustainable development. According to the Sustainable

Development Report of the Bertelsmann Foundation, the US ranks 35th in the world (Sachs et al. 2019). Five years since adoption of the SDGs, the US is the only OECD and G20 country that has not volunteered to report on its progress towards achieving the SDGs. After President Donald Trump took office in January 2017, the US government consistently deprioritised multilateral development agencies and bodies, which was reaffirmed with the decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate change. Despite some clear signs of weakening commitment towards the goals, the US is officially still participating in international forums and discussions on the topic. In the '2030 Agenda Talking Points' memo, the official line of the US government was presented, clarifying that the US recognised the SDGs as a set of specific goals but would not individually endorse the specific goals (Igoe 2019).

While the federal government clearly distances itself from commitment towards the SDGs, some of the country's cities, states, universities, philanthropies, NGOs and corporations remain committed to supporting the agenda through more decentralised and local action. For example, the City of New York was the first to commit to submitting a voluntary review of its contributions towards the SDGs to the HLPF. This initiative started a movement of Voluntary Local Reviews, with over 20 local and regional governments participating in the reviews to date (UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform n.d.(b)). Since there is no universally accepted set of locally adapted targets based on the SDGs, nor official indicators or metrics, there is a great deal of flexibility in undertaking such an assessment. In this context, US universities also stepped up and developed a prototype handbook for city officials interested in performing the review (Deininger et al. 2019).

In turn, USAID, the US international development agency and (with its USD 27 billion budget) one of the largest official aid agencies in the world, retains its commitment to international development aid but does not directly refer in its strategy to the SDGs. Instead, it mentions the journey to self-reliance, which aims at working with host country governments and other partners to achieve locally sustained results (USAID n.d.). While the 'self-reliance journey' appears to be broadly aligned with the 2030 Agenda, USAID seems to have foregone the opportunity to further mainstream the SDGs in its strategy (USAID n.d.).

Since Joe Biden's election as US President, the US seems to have reacquired some of the credibility as an actor engaged in the SDG agenda. President Biden joined the Paris Agreement, declaring his engagement in the fight against climate change. The US is also willing to respond to the profound crisis caused by Covid-19 by 'building back better' and contributing to a more sustainable and resilient society. For example, President Biden is planning to build modern and sustainable infrastructure for a clean energy economy and stimulate sustainable investment.

1.1.4.1.2 China and the SDGs

While the US, traditionally a leading actor in global governance, distances itself from the SDGs, China appears to see an opportunity to establish its position as an internationally recognised actor committed to the global, cooperative effort. According to 'China's Progress Report on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', the country puts special emphasis on three key areas of the sustainable development agenda: eradicating extreme poverty, building an 'ecological civilisation', and contributing to global climate and sustainability governance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2019).

It should be acknowledged that China has been extremely successful in its domestic efforts to reduce poverty, and is currently increasing the amount of its bilateral investment abroad. As many as 700 million people in China have moved out of poverty with the country's economic boom, with significant progress also in relation to child mortality. Gaps have narrowed between different regions in terms of infrastructure, such as roads and internet connection. Some progress has also been made in relation to climate policies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2019).

Notwithstanding some efforts and enshrining the concept of an 'ecological civilisation' in the constitution, China remains by far the most polluting country in the world. In just five provinces, which host most of the heavy industries, more carbon dioxide is emitted than in any other country in the world. By focusing on poverty eradication or questions of connectivity and technological solutions, China also likely aims at shaping the development agenda away from a broader understanding of development that encompasses societal questions related to human rights violations or access to justice (Goal 16).

China has become one of the key actors in the international development landscape in recent years, notably through the prominent Belt and Road Initiative, an enormously ambitious agenda that could reach up to 70 % of the world's population (Gu et al. 2019). The Belt and Road Initiative has now been integrated into the 2030 Agenda to achieve the SDGs (Renwick, Gu and Gong 2018), after pressure by the United Nations. Furthermore, the companion Digital Silk Road initiative is in principle aligned with the 2030 Agenda.

At the same time, the SDGs also contain targets on social policy and good governance, which China is hardly equipped to represent. As a non-democratic country, China's commitment towards sustainable development appears more oriented towards the achievement of economic expansion, rather than a genuine commitment towards sustainability. For over a decade now, China has invested massively in developing countries globally, mostly through bilateral investment schemes. Additionally, the country has become ever more involved in multilateral development banks. As traditionally their shareholding in existing institutions was limited, China's strategy now includes an interest in creating new multilateral institutions (like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) that grant greater governance powers to China (Goodman et al. 2017). Through increasing its role in development institutions, China hopes to gain more influence in global development policy overall and expand its presence in developing countries. At the moment, China's assistance is linked largely to infrastructure-related loans and equity investment, with a significantly lower share of investment in grant-based assistance, commonly used in Western foreign assistance programmes.

China's approach to development aid is based on the idea that its trade, investment, and lending produce economic development opportunities for both China and its developing country partners. However, countries in Africa, South America or Asia have started questioning whether the alleged win-win set-up is indeed beneficial for them. Countries with significant resources like Brazil have expressed concerns that their relationship with China is simply repeating historical cycles of commodity dependency (Ferchen 2020). Additionally, cases such as the Hambantota deal, where Sri Lanka was forced to sell its port to China in order to pay off the debt accumulated in the process of building it, raises doubt as to the mutually beneficial relationship claimed by China (Abi-Habib 2020). In 2018, China established the China International Development Cooperation Agency, which acts as the main body responsible for the strategic planning and overall coordination of the country's foreign aid. For the moment there is no evidence suggesting that this agency will change the expansive and often self-serving approach to development, based on loans, and shift towards development assistance given to the beneficiaries directly (Ferchen 2020).

1.1.4.2 Subnational governments

The MDG process did not entail any official role for subnational governments in their achievement, although over the years it has become clear that their involvement is crucial. In the 2030 Agenda, the importance of all levels of government is highlighted in Goal 16 and special attention is paid to the importance of sustainable cities in Goal 11. Along with the 2030 Agenda, local and regional governments are also acknowledged in the Paris Agreement, the New Urban Agenda by UN-Habitat, the UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants, and the European Consensus on Development (OECD 2020a).

Research on governance for sustainable development generally emphasises that the subnational level, with its unique competences in the provision of basic services, territorial planning, infrastructure and more, plays a key part in implementing sustainable development policies (Saner et al. 2014). Regardless of the varying levels of decentralisation, in most cases local governments are responsible for managing services such as water, sanitation, infrastructure or land-use decisions. According to a study from 2015, up to 65 % of the SDG targets could be at risk should local urban stakeholders not be assigned a clear mandate and role in the transition towards sustainable development

(Cities Alliance 2015). Due to their close proximity to the public and local businesses, local governments are especially important for building successful partnerships as well as attempts to gather data for monitoring progress.

Several initiatives have emerged aimed at emphasising the role of cities and regions, including the Local and Regional Governments Forum, which met in 2018 as part of the HLPF, and the OECD Roundtable on Cities and Regions for the SDGs, which serves as a knowledge and experience sharing platform. Another initiative is the Seville Commitment, where governments of all levels, the UN, civil society and private businesses commit to recognising and supporting subnational governments in implementing the SDGs (OECD 2020a).

In spite of some significant progress in giving subnational governments a more prominent role, data show that at the national level, local and regional governments are often excluded from the policy debate, monitoring and implementation. According to a study performed by United Cities and Local Governments, only 34 % of countries that reported to the HLPF between 2016 and 2019 engaged local and regional governments in national coordination mechanisms. For all other countries, such engagement is either very weak (15 %) or non-existent (43 %) (UCLG 2019). To avoid a lack of policy coherence at the national and subnational levels, it seems desirable to strengthen the dialogue between the different governance levels and to create clearer national SDG strategies, with a defined role for local and regional government (OECD 2020a).

In addition, on the subnational side, some work also still remains to be done. Studies performed with European respondents show that the 2030 Agenda is often seen as an externally imposed burden, which is not linked to local policies (European Union 2014). A lack of financial and staff resources, as well as time, is mentioned as hindering efforts towards the SDGs, especially by small- and mid-sized municipalities (OECD 2020a).

While local governments can certainly still be significantly more involved in implementing the SDG agenda, some positive attempts should be highlighted:

- In Germany, the federal government provides technical and financial support to implement the SDGs through a multilevel government framework. The project 'Municipalities for Global Sustainability' involves all levels of government and connects them with the international framework established by the UN. So far, several cities and regions in Germany have managed to form a clear plan for addressing local sustainability challenges thanks to support by the project.

- In Argentina, the national body responsible for implementation of the 2030 Agenda provides provinces with guidance on effective planning for achievement of the goals. It also helps provinces prepare to undertake voluntary province reports, aimed at monitoring progress.

- For adopting a more holistic approach to the SDGs, the Flemish government in Belgium serves as an especially good example. The Flemish government bases its approach on a few fundamental pillars, such as promoting system innovation, taking a long-term perspective to development, involving stakeholders through partnerships, engaging in co-creation and learning from experiments. The aims of the long-term Flemish agenda are to move away from a top-down approach and to establish a network of stakeholders, through which multi-stakeholder partners can more easily connect and align priorities with local authorities (OECD 2020a).

The role of local and regional governments has become increasingly recognised as essential for achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, the subnational governments themselves have begun to seize the potential of the SDGs, especially in some parts of the world such as Germany, Belgium, or Japan. Continuing on this path and spreading the trend to other parts of the world might spur improvement in the use of the SDG framework in local agendas.

1.1.4.3 Large private-sector coalitions

National authorities, world powers, and subnational governments without doubt play a crucial role in implementation of the SDGs. But without the support of the private sector they are unlikely to meet the enormous challenges of the day. To evaluate the potential impact of large private coalitions, we will provide some examples of successful initiatives and examine the factors for success that can be found in the literature. Aside from the positive examples highlighted in this subsection, it should be mentioned that a partnership agenda, which relies heavily on private contributions, triggers wariness on the part of many developing countries and NGOs. Concerns are raised over the replacement of official development assistance by voluntary private partnerships, which might also further obscure governments' role in regulating the policy framework within which private companies operate. A legitimate concern is that increasing reliance on the private sector will make governments less likely to regulate to its disadvantage or to maintain a supervisory role.

Private-sector collaborations in different forms started emerging already in the 1990s. Since then, a plethora of different initiatives has been rolled out, some with significant impact, others failing to achieve their objectives. One of the most well-known and successful partnerships involving private-sector companies is Gavi, the vaccine alliance, which is a partnership of Unicef, WHO, World Bank, donors, recipient countries, civil society, the pharmaceutical industry and other private-sector companies. Gavi coordinates and aggregates the collective demand for vaccines in 73 countries, providing long-term and predictable demand for producers and, through its purchasing power, significantly cheaper and high-quality vaccines for recipients. In 2001, Gavi started out with 5 vaccine manufacturers in 5 countries, and by 2015 had already grown its network to 16 manufacturers in 11 countries (Taylor et al. 2017). Gavi's key strength is the ability to align the incentives of various involved partners through a collaborative decision-making model. Gavi works based on a 5-year strategy, with clear indicators for measuring its own performance (Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance n.d.).

Another initiative that should be looked at is the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), which aims at adopting more environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable production practices for cotton (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2017). BCI engages companies across the value chains, from farmers to fashion and textile brands, including widely known companies such as Levi Strauss, H&M and Adidas (BCI 2017). The potential market impact can be significant, as cotton is used in 40 % of all global textiles and over 300 million farmers rely on it for their livelihood (Fairtrade Foundation n.d.). Training programmes for farmers organised by BCI have led to a significant reduction in the use of pesticides and increased profits for local farmers, as chemicals can account for a significant part of farming costs (BCI n.d.). Through further training and support in building more efficient irrigation channels, significant reduction in water use can also be observed. Unlike the Fairtrade initiative, BCI does not offer direct premiums to farmers, which despite raising some criticism, allows potentially for a larger upscaling of the project, as the product cost for consumers does not increase (Confino 2011).

Researchers have tried to address the question of why some initiatives seem to be able to bring about the desired change while others fail to achieve their objective. One of the elements that plays a significant role is the market-driven approach to partnerships. It has long been understood that market forces on their own will lead to an unsustainable growth model; however, working against market power and competitive factors, which motivate companies, is likely to impede a scalable and economically sustainable solution. According to a study performed by BSR and the Rockefeller Foundation, the most cited motivations for corporate participation and collaboration include co-investing in new market opportunities, building resilient supply chains, risk-sharing, overcoming regulatory barriers, accessing information and knowledge, influencing policy and enhancing brand value and reputation (Enright et al. 2018). It is crucial for the achievement of long-standing projects that each partnering organisation has a defined purpose for participating in the partnership, in terms of both achieving progress towards sustainable development and benefits for the business.

As can be seen in the example of the Gavi, a clear, transparent, and functional structure of governance is another crucial factor for the success of a private partnership. Combined with building on the individual strengths of partners, it significantly increases chances for success. The actions of Gavi are overseen by a board composed of representatives of the different partner organisations, with publicly available minutes and a transparent structure. The organisation additionally builds on WHO's scientific expertise, Unicef's procurement system, the financial know-how of the World Bank and the market knowledge of the vaccine industry (Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance n.d.). Large partnerships such as Gavi or the BCI require dedicated staff and resources to ensure their functioning, while smaller partnerships, which lack the resources to establish their own secretariat, should be able to rely on the help of partnership platforms to support them with administrative issues, knowledge sharing or creating wider networks (Florini and Pauli 2018).

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, accountability is a crucial factor, which ensures that collaborations serve their purpose and indeed contribute to a more sustainable economy. As has been mentioned, private companies often choose to participate in partnerships primarily for business reasons, for short-term profit or securing supply chains. Without a properly set-up accountability scheme, which ensures transparency in actions and the use of resources, as well as a legitimate reporting mechanism, partnerships are likely to compromise on their purpose (Beisheim and Ellersiek 2017).

Figure 6. Design of successful private partnerships

Source: BSR Private-Sector Collaboration for Sustainable Development (n.d.).

To conclude, large-scale collaborations involving the private sector offer significant promise for mainstreaming the sustainable development approach in our economies. However, private partnerships need to overcome several key challenges, which include reaching the scale required for a successful transformation of economies and ensuring accountability of the numerous initiatives.

1.2 EU GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS FOR ACHIEVEMENT OF THE MDGS AND THE SDGS

1.2.1 The EU and sustainable development: before the SDGs

Sustainable development has been at the heart of the European project since the beginning, understood as it was defined in the Brundtland Report (1987): 'Sustainable development means that the needs of the present generation should be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' The EU Treaties recognise its three dimensions, namely economic efficiency, social inclusion and environmental responsibility, together with the need to ensure a life of dignity for all within the planet's limits.

Sustainable development has been one of the fundamental objectives of the European Union. References to sustainable development have been included in the Treaties (i.e. the Treaty of Amsterdam and the Treaty on European Union) as an overarching objective of EU policies. Provisions to mainstream it into EU policies and legislation, for instance via the EU Sustainable Development Strategy (EU SDS) and EU 2020, have been introduced. In addition, to ensure successful and widespread implementation, a high degree of engagement at different levels of society has been fostered.

Before adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, the EU participated in important world conferences related to sustainable development, briefly listed in the table below.

Table 1. EU participation in conferences related to sustainable development

1987 Brundtland Report
1992 Rio Earth Summit
1994 Programme of Action of ICPD
1995 World Summit for Social Development
1995 Beijing Platform for Action
2000 Millennium Declaration
2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development
2005 World Summit
2012 Rio +20

Source: Author's elaboration.

1.2.1.1 Europe and the MDGs

From 2000 to 2015 the EU and its Member States were committed to the MDGs and delivered encouraging results. Together, they have been the world's largest donor of official development assistance (ODA). The MDGs primarily aim at addressing the needs of the most disadvantaged in a 'one-way street' style of delivery. Indeed, the EU and the

Member States have adapted or shifted their development aid policies to focus on achieving the MDGs. They have massively contributed to development aid and introduced measures to increase the impact and quality of aid, notably through improved coordination and harmonisation.

Furthermore, the EU has placed development at the heart of its policies at the multilateral and regional levels, giving particular attention to the least developed countries and other vulnerable small economies. The EU has been active in improving living conditions in sub-Saharan Africa, especially by proposing initiatives in the following areas: (i) improving Africa's governance, (ii) interconnecting Africa's networks and trade, and (iii) striving towards equitable societies, access to services, decent work and environmental sustainability.

Table 2. EU contributions to SDGs

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
The EU is one of the biggest contributors to sustainable agriculture and food security for development. Worldwide, the EU supports more than 60 countries in their efforts to improve food and nutrition security and promote sustainable agriculture and food systems, alleviate hunger, support economic growth and ensure political stability.
Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education
The EU supports governments in over 40 countries to provide quality education and learning opportunities for all. Half of these countries are fragile and affected by conflict. The EU also works with the Global Partnership for Education, Unicef, UNESCO, multilateral and bilateral agencies, and civil society to deliver on education.
Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women
Since 2004, the EU contribution has helped 300 000 new female students to enrol in secondary education. In addition, over 18 000 female higher education students have taken part in EU mobility schemes such as Erasmus Mundus, which provides scholarships to students from developing countries to study in Europe.
Goal 4: Reduce child mortality
EU support and external aid have helped to protect children against many of the major causes of child mortality, but pneumonia, diarrhoea and malaria continue to be the main killers of under-fives and in 2013 caused about a third of all under-five deaths. Globally nearly half of under-five deaths are attributable to under-nutrition. The EU has worked closely with beneficiary countries and other development partners to address health system weaknesses and has supported the health sectors of 39 developing countries, with child health as the primary target. It also contributes through financial support to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Malaria, Tuberculosis, and to Gavi, the vaccine alliance. Thanks to EU support, at least 20 million more children were vaccinated against measles between 2004 and 2014. In 2004-2012 the EU helped build or renovate more than 8 500 health facilities worldwide.

Goal 5: Improve maternal health
The EU supports governments in more than 30 countries to develop and implement national health policies and strategies and to strengthen health systems to improve access and uptake of life-saving maternal health services. Among the aims are to reach universal access to quality and affordable reproductive and sexual health services and to information. Because of EU support, over 7.5 million births were attended by skilled health personnel between 2004 and 2012 and almost 17 million consultations on reproductive health took place.
Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
The EU provides substantial financial resources to fight diseases through country programmes, via the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and through research programmes such as the European & Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership. Owing to EU support, 22.6 million insecticide-treated bed nets were distributed between 2000 and 2014. In addition, 570 000 people with advanced HIV infections received anti-retroviral combination therapy over the same period.
Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
The EU supports partner countries to promote the sustainable management of natural resources, particularly land, forest, coastal zones and fisheries to protect ecosystems and to combat desertification. In 2007, the EU launched the Global Climate Change Alliance in order to strengthen international cooperation on climate change, committing EUR 316.5 million. The EU currently supports 51 programmes in 38 countries. Since 2004, EU assistance has provided access to clean water for more than 74 million people and sanitation to over 27 million people.
Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development
The EU continues to be the biggest donor in the world, collectively providing more official development assistance (ODA) than all other donors combined (EUR 58.2 billion in 2014). It is committed to achieving the UN target of mobilising a level of ODA that represents 0.7 % of the gross national income within the time frame of the 2030 Agenda.

Source: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_15_5712.

However, global progress on the MDGs has been rather uneven, with huge and persistent disparities between subregions and countries, as well as between geographical areas and population groups within nations, leaving significant gaps. As concluded by the final MDG report (2015a), despite many successes, millions of people have been left behind, especially the poorest and those disadvantaged because of their gender, age, disability, ethnicity or geographical location. The report identified the following unmet goals:

(i) gender inequalities persist;
(ii) big gaps exist between the poorest and richest households, and between rural and urban areas;
(iii) climate change and environmental degradation undermine progress achieved, and poor people suffer the most;
(iv) conflicts remain the biggest threat to human development;
(v) millions of poor people still live in poverty and hunger, without access to basic services.

Implementation of the MDGs across countries has been quite complex, especially in areas where social services were considerably developed and the number of people facing extreme deprivation was low, although not negligible – such as middle-income economies in Europe and Central Asia (United Nations 2015a). When governments recognised that the MDGs addressed issues central to the welfare of their population, they implemented the MDGs by adapting the global agenda addressed to the world's most disadvantaged to a national programme, addressed to the *country's* most disadvantaged. This adaptation of the MDGs to the respective development situations of countries was difficult and led to some data gaps, discrepancies, reporting delays and deficiencies in data collection.

1.2.1.2 The sustainable development strategy

In 2001, the European Council adopted the first EU SDS in Göteborg, which it then renewed in 2006 and in 2009. The overall stated aim of the EU SDS is as follows:

> [to] identify and develop actions to enable the EU to achieve a continuous long-term improvement of quality of life through the creation of sustainable communities able to manage and use resources efficiently, able to tap the ecological and social innovation potential of the economy and in the end able to ensure prosperity, environmental protection and social cohesion.

The European Commission Communication, 'A sustainable Europe for a better world: A European strategy for sustainable development' (2001) shed light on the need to work towards a sustainable European Union, where economic growth, social cohesion and environmental protection are identified as elements that must go hand in hand in a long-term strategic vision. The European Commission identified major problems posing severe or irreversible threats to the future well-being of European society: global warming, antibiotic resistance, the use of chemicals and food safety, poverty and social exclusion, the ageing of the population, loss of biodiversity, waste volumes and soil loss, transport congestion and EU regional imbalances. Urgent actions, strong political leadership, new approaches to policymaking, widespread participation and international responsibility are identified as key elements needed to address these unsustainable trends.

Despite some important achievements, these unsustainable trends persisted. In 2006, the European Commission published a renewed EU SDS. In this renewed strategy, the EU set out a single, coherent strategy to live up to the commitments for meeting the challenges of sustainable development in a more effective way. It recognised the need to gradually change unsustainable consumption and production patterns and move towards a more integrated approach to policymaking. It reaffirmed the need for global solidarity and recognised the importance of strengthening work with partners outside the EU, including those rapidly developing countries that will have a significant impact on global sustainable development. The following table illustrates the key challenges (main priorities) and objectives of the strategy (Council of the European Union 2006).

Table 3. Key challenges and overall objectives of the EU SDS

Key challenges	Overall objectives
Climate change and clean energy	To limit climate change and its costs and negative effects on society and the environment
Sustainable transport	To ensure that our transport systems meet society's economic, social and environmental needs while minimising their undesirable impacts on the economy, society and the environment
Sustainable consumption and production	To promote sustainable consumption and production patterns
Conservation and management of natural resources	To improve management and avoid overexploitation of natural resources, recognising the value of ecosystem services
Public health	To promote good public health on equal conditions and improve protection against health threats
Social inclusion, demography and migration	To create a socially inclusive society by taking into account solidarity between and within generations and to secure and increase people's quality of life as a precondition for lasting individual well-being
Global poverty and sustainable development challenges	To actively promote sustainable development worldwide and ensure that the European Union's internal and external policies are consistent with global sustainable development and its international commitments

Source: https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10917-2006-INIT/en/pdf.

To make the strategy applicable to the whole EU, some mechanisms for improving coordination with other levels of governments have been proposed, such as voluntary peer reviews of national sustainable development strategies. In order to ensure implementation across society, businesses, NGOs and the public have been invited to become actively involved in working for sustainable development. The recognised weakness of the EU SDS was the absence of time-bound and quantified targets.

1.2.1.3 The sustainable development indicators

'You cannot manage what you don't measure' are the words of Frans Timmermans, the First Vice-President of the European Commission, that make clear the importance of having good statistical indicators to monitor progress towards sustainable development.

The sustainable development indicators are part of such a monitoring system. Indeed, every two years Eurostat publishes a monitoring report which provides an objective, statistical picture of progress towards the goals and objectives of the EU SDS. The indicators have been continually improved and developed further in cooperation with the Member States.

The indicators used by Eurostat are divided into 10 themes: socioeconomic development, sustainable consumption and production, social inclusion, demographic changes, public health, climate change and energy, sustainable transport, natural resources, global partnership and good governance.

1.2.1.4 From the Lisbon strategy to Europe 2020: embracing sustainability through a comprehensive, multidimensional agenda

The Lisbon strategy was a 10-year strategy adopted in 2000 to make the European Union 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth, with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'. The main goal of the Lisbon strategy was to increase competitiveness and economic growth while enhancing job creation. It was then complemented by an environmental and sustainable development dimension a year later at the European Council in Göteborg with the EU SDS. This showed a commitment to reaching an overarching goal: to bring about economic, social and environmental renewal in the EU.

Unfortunately, the Lisbon strategy was found to be largely ineffective. As a follow-up, in 2010 the Commission under President José Manuel Barroso adopted a new strategy, Europe 2020: 'A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth'. It was presented as a European exit from the global economic and financial crises. Similar to its predecessor, the Lisbon strategy, it centred on the EU's competitiveness, while sustainable development was not considered a major issue.

The ambitious goal of the strategy was to overcome the structural weaknesses of the EU's economy and turn it into one that is smart, sustainable and inclusive. It sought to achieve this by supporting innovation and the development of knowledge, resource efficiency, competitiveness and environmental protection while increasing employment, social and territorial cohesion. The European Commission proposed seven flagship initiatives to catalyse the progress of the strategy under its priorities. The strategy was accompanied by several monitoring and implementation processes, including the European Semester, which, thanks to the Europe 2020 strategy, strengthened governance.

The Europe 2020 strategy could be regarded as a tool that could have helped the EU to complete its transition from austerity to prosperity, proposing a new vision oriented towards growth instead of austerity, by stimulating demand through investment and an expansionist policy. However, its mid-term review was not able to reinvigorate Europe 2020 as a growth-oriented strategy (Renda 2014).

Europe 2020 was adopted during a period of big transformation: the financial crisis had wiped out years of economic and social progress and exposed structural weaknesses in the EU's economy. Meanwhile, the world was moving on fast and long-term challenges – globalisation, pressure on resources and population ageing – intensified. The strategy proved not to be ambitious enough to achieve sustainable development: it neither included global policies nor addressed how social, economic and environmental policies could be interlinked, being merely a 'jobs and growth strategy'.

1.2.2 The EU in the SDG process

As discussed in Subsection 1.1.2, in September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, including at its core 17 SDGs. During negotiations on the 2030 Agenda, the EU took a leadership role in UN processes, being one of the largest groups of countries that regularly and consistently voted as a bloc (ECDPM 2016). The formal lead role within the European Commission was taken by DG ENV (environment) and DG DEVCO (development). To avoid regional blocs in the UN negotiation process, a new form of negotiation was proposed, in which there were only 70 seats and countries would cooperate in 'troikas' (Kamphof 2018). As a result, EU Member States were divided into troikas together with countries that are not part of the European Union. At the same time, to ensure EU unity and the ability to 'speak with one voice', EU Member States participated in joint working groups internally and prepared annual communications.

Since 2015, the EU has envisaged itself as fully committed to being a frontrunner in implementing the SDGs, but in practice the EU is not yet fully delivering on the level of action pledged, either internally or externally. According to the global 2019 SDG Index prepared by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, all 10 countries closest to achieving the SDGs are in the EU, yet, as the EU SDG Index & Dashboards show, no European country is on track towards achieving the goals.

The 2019 *Europe Sustainable Development Report* shows that the EU and its Member States face the greatest challenges on goals related to the climate, biodiversity, and the circular economy, as well as in strengthening convergence in living standards across countries and regions. In particular, countries need to accelerate progress with respect to climate change (SDG 13), sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12), protection and conservation of biodiversity (SDGs 14 and 15), and sustainable agriculture and food systems (SDG 2). Furthermore, according to the Sustainable Development Report (2019), many countries are backsliding on 'leave no one behind', so the EU's SDG strategy must place emphasis on strengthening social inclusion for everyone living in its territory. The same report also offers practical recommendations for how the EU and its Member States specifically can achieve the SDGs, with a focus on three broad areas:

- internal SDG priorities for the EU and Member States;
- European diplomacy and development cooperation for the SDGs;
- efforts to tackle international spillovers.

According to the first recommendation, the EU should concentrate on implementing the European Green Deal for energy decarbonisation, the circular economy, and sustainable land use and food systems. It should increase investment in sustainable infrastructure through the Sustainable Europe Investment Plan, and in education, job skills, and R&D through the EU Education Area and Horizon Europe 2030. In pursuing these objectives, the right level of ambition and policy coherence must be ensured. The report identifies three cornerstones: aligning the multiannual financial framework (MFF) 2021-2027 with the SDGs, strengthening SDG measurement and indicators, and putting the SDGs at the core of the European Semester.

The second recommendation builds on the fact that the SDGs represent EU values, so the EU should use them in its external action. Indeed, a critical part of the EU's role in achieving the SDGs is global leadership through diplomacy and international economic relations. Furthermore, since the EU is one of the world's biggest contributors to development cooperation, it now needs to align its associated actions with the SDGs to serve the needs of emerging economies and poor countries.

Finally, the third recommendation sheds light on the negative spillovers generated by EU actions that undermine other countries' ability to achieve the SDGs.

1.2.3 After 2015: EU internal governance and external participation in the 2030 Agenda

The conclusion of the negotiation phase and launch of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs was applauded worldwide, and governments committed to take action and ownership for achievement of the SDGs by 2030. Each government is supposed to develop its own strategy towards sustainable development, accounting for its domestic context. Before discussing the actions taken by the EU with respect to the SDGs, it should be recalled that implementation of the SDGs is a responsibility of UN member countries.

While the EU Member States are members of the UN, the EU is an observer with enhanced status: it can speak on behalf of the EU and its Member States at the UN and can present common positions, intervene or present proposals. This means that, on the one hand, EU Member States have a responsibility to set their national targets, guided by the global agenda, and incorporate the targets set by the 2030 Agenda into national policies; on the other hand, the EU has a responsibility deriving from the subsidiarity principle and its own obligations ('the EU is fully committed').

In this context, the role of the EU mainly consists of aggregating the collective efforts of the EU Member States by facilitating, strengthening, and creating synergies and coherence between these efforts, in order to provide added value. The task of the EU is close to that of the 'orchestrator' discussed in Subsection 1.1.3, which is defined as 'an indirect and soft mode of governance in which an actor (or a set of actors) as an orchestrator, works through another actor (or set of actors) as intermediaries, to govern a third actor (or set of actors), the target' (Abbott et al. 2012; Bernstein et al. 2014).

In addition, it is clear that not only governments should participate in implementation of the SDGs, but also that the close cooperation of all stakeholders is needed: civil society and private actors should engage with EU regulatory authorities in the domain of sustainability. This means that, in general, the role of the state in regulating the SDGs is closer to that of a facilitator or coordinator. Specifically, the state should engage with several actors that voluntarily participate in the regulatory process in order to address a target in the pursuit of public goals (Partiti 2017). Indeed, all stakeholders, public governance, businesses, civil society and individuals are supposed to play an active role in the sustainability transition. The SDGs are designed to be indivisible, and most SDGs cover several policy areas. Therefore, better cooperation across administrations needs to be accompanied by better coherence across different policy areas that are related. For this reason, a 'nexus approach' is envisaged in implementing the SDGs to address interlinkages and ensure that progress in one area is not made at the expense of another.

1.2.3.1 The EU within its borders: solidarity, cooperation and austerity

The first response of the EU to the SDGs came in November 2016 with adoption of the Communication 'Next steps for a sustainable European future – European action for sustainability'. In this document, the European Commission announced, first, a full integration of the SDGs into the European policy framework and the Commission's priorities and, second, a reflection on further developing the EU's longer-term vision after 2020. In addition, the Communication launched a multi-stakeholder platform on SDGs and established a mechanism to monitor the SDGs through the EU SDG indicators, under the leadership of Eurostat.

However, at the end of 2018, as reported by a study for the European Parliament, 'the Commission has not yet developed any specific and measurable SDG implementation strategy; there have been no systematic steps taken to mainstream the SDGs in all EU policies, as announced November 2016, and there is no mechanism that ensures sustainability in the work of all Commission services' (Niestroy et al. 2019). Stakeholders from different sectors agreed on the importance of having an 'EU strategy to 2030' for the SDGs, which despite the pressure, was not published. Later, in January 2019, the European Commission published a 'Reflection Paper: Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030', in which it reaffirms its commitment to deliver on the UN 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, by positioning itself at the forefront of sustainable action. The action taken to move towards a sustainable EU encompasses a transition to a circular economy, to a sustainable food system, to clean energy for buildings and mobility, and to the promotion of social rights and well-being for all.

In spite of the EU's ambitious statements following adoption of the 2030 Agenda in September 2015, a lot of criticism arose regarding the EU's performance in attaining the SDGs, pointing to discrepancies between words in support of sustainable development and the practical actions undertaken. Overall, the EU has been found insufficiently active in working towards the goals – within or outside the EU. Being one of the wealthiest regions in the world and one of the biggest consumption and trading blocs, the EU is well positioned to show leadership in sustainable development. Therefore, the initial approach of the EU represented a missed opportunity to show itself externally as a global leader and internally as able to generate added value for policymaking at the EU, Member State and local levels. In particular, the EU could have exploited its competitive advantages, such as strong welfare systems, considerable investment in research and innovation, and very high social, health and environmental standards (Eurostat 2020).

The EU's internal work on the SDGs and its external projection are two sides of the same coin. The EU could contribute with internal and external policies to the achievement of SDGs globally thanks to the spillover effects, positive or negative, that EU policies are able to generate. These policies are those which govern the production and consumption of goods and services in the EU and policies for external action and trade, such as EU free trade agreements with third countries. Indeed, trade-offs, synergies and unintended consequences should be investigated: it would be important to consider spillover effects when analysing implementation of the SDGs with the support of specific indicators able to capture them. For example, there could be negative environmental spillover effects associated with trade, but also positive effects related to poverty reduction and the number and quality of jobs created.

In 2017, a new European Consensus on Development (2017) was adopted as a strong governance mechanism to respond to the UN SDGs, reaffirming poverty eradication as the EU's primary development objective, but also integrating the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. The consensus is structured around the 5Ps (people, planet, prosperity, peace, partnership) that frame the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, it obliges all EU policy areas, internal and external, to be compatible with achievement of the SDGs. It is the first framework for development cooperation applied to both the Member States and EU institutions, which are committed to working in synergy.

Through the consensus, the EU and its Member States are committed to applying the principle of policy coherence for development (PCD), which requires that all EU policies contribute to, or at least do not hamper, the objectives of development cooperation and the SDGs. The PCD principle is considered a crucial element to achieve the SDGs. Policy coherence not only applies at the internal level, but also to the impact of internal policies on the external dimension, and vice versa. EU spillovers could also generate a boomerang effect in the EU economy. According to the SDG Index & Dashboards reports by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, the EU is not on track to negate spillover effects. Certain EU Member States have high SDG scores for implementation of the SDGs domestically, but they come with high costs for other countries and ultimately for the planet (Kloke-Lesch 2018).

In the years following adoption of the SDG framework, the EU has not reacted quickly in turning the SDGs into a roadmap for the EU across all domestic and international policies, even if the EU's most pressing socioeconomic priorities and challenges are covered under the SDGs (Kloke-Lesch 2018). The EU took some steps to incorporate the SDGs into the institutional landscape by establishing a working party on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and a High-Level Multi-Stakeholder Platform on SDGs. The working party regularly follows up, monitors and reviews the EU's internal and external implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development across policy sectors at the EU level. It further provides a forum for information exchange about implementation at the Member State level. The platform brings together stakeholders from civil society, NGOs, and the private and corporate sector in regular meetings to support and advise the European Commission on attaining the SDGs at the EU level.

Still, more actions were envisaged to implement the SDGs. Monitoring activities by Eurostat on the SDGs at the EU level proved insufficient to provide information about where the EU stands globally and how it can improve efforts towards achievement of the SDGs. For this reason, different stakeholders pushed for the integration of monitoring and assessment of progress on the SDGs into the European Semester. It was only in May 2020 that the European Commission proposed country-specific recommendations to provide economic guidance and a coordinated approach to all Member States facing the socioeconomic impacts of Covid-19. The recommendations cover the four dimensions of competitive sustainability (stability, fairness, environmental sustainability and competitiveness) and also place a specific emphasis on health. Subsequently, for the first time, the country reports included a chapter on environmental sustainability, the integration of SDGs in the various other sections, and a dedicated annex reporting on Member States' overall SDG performance.

In addition to the European Semester, other steps could help to move forward on implementation of the SDGs. These could include mainstreaming the SDGs in all policies, in particular through the Better Regulation tool (European Commission 2021a), or adjusting the 2021-2027 MFF to mainstream sustainable development in the EU budget and make investment in sustainable development a priority.

There are substantial barriers and challenges to fulfilling the SDGs as well as structural impediments, like silo-thinking, short-termism and power relations. Yet the EU still needs to grasp the opportunity to exert global leadership and influence in attaining the SDGs by shaping an EU strategy based on the 2030 Agenda and making the SDGs one of the EU's priorities, while safeguarding its domestic agenda, its values and its global interests. The SDGs therefore represent a chance to make progress on many European issues (such as the MFF or the common agricultural policy) and more generally in the specification of EU policies (Demailly and Hege 2018).

1.2.3.2 The EU's commitment to the SDGs since Covid-19

Covid-19 brought a deep economic and social crisis worldwide. The primary cost of the pandemic, namely the loss of human lives, is distressing, but the secondary effects on the global economy, on livelihoods and on sustainable development prospects are also very worrying. UN institutions affirmed that the SDGs are even more relevant today, with the pandemic giving a clear example of the disruptive common challenges that the world faces. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and sometimes reversed the progress made on certain goals. The urgent need for global action to meet people's basic needs, to save the planet and to build a fairer and more secure world is in line with the objectives of the SDGs; therefore, responses to the pandemic should be aligned with the actions needed to deliver the SDGs. Acknowledging that less than 10 years are left to achieve the SDGs, the UN is trying to speed up the implementation process and launched the 'Decade of Action on the SDGs' in January 2020.

The SDG Progress Report 2020 of the UN Economic and Social Committee contains a first assessment of the impacts and implications of Covid-19 for all 17 goals. The effects of the pandemic and the measures taken to mitigate its impact have overwhelmed health systems globally, caused businesses and factories to shut down, kept students out of schools and disrupted global value chains and the supply of products. Furthermore, it is expected that tens of millions of people will be pushed back into extreme poverty and hunger. Indeed, the poorest and most vulnerable people and countries have been affected disproportionately by the pandemic. The crisis is thus jeopardising progress towards the SDGs, but it is also clear that global action towards the SDGs is even more urgent and necessary than before. Covid-19 has generated negative effects on the vast majority of SDGs.

Table 4. Negative effects of Covid-19 on the SDGs

Goal 1.	Covid-19 is pushing tens of millions of people back into extreme poverty, putting years of progress at risk.
Goal 2.	Due to the pandemic, some 370 million school children are missing the free school meals they rely on. Measures to strengthen food production and distribution systems must be taken immediately to mitigate and minimise the impacts of the pandemic.
Goal 3.	Covid-19 is devastating health systems globally and threatens already achieved health outcomes.

Goal 4.	School closures to stop the spread of Covid-19 are having an adverse impact on learning outcomes and the social and behavioural development of children and youth. The digital divide will widen existing education equality gaps.
Goal 5.	The current pandemic is hitting women and girls hard. (Globally, women make up three quarters of medical doctors and nursing personnel, spend three times as many hours on unpaid care work at home as men, and school closures require women to care more for children and facilitate their learning at home. Domestic violence against women and children is also rising during the global lockdown.)
Goal 6.	Billions of people around the world still lack access to safely managed water and sanitation services and to basic handwashing facilities at home – which is critical to prevent Covid-19 from spreading.
Goal 7.	Covid-19 spotlights the need for reliable and affordable electricity to health centres. In some developing countries, a lack of reliable electricity has deeply affected the capacity to deliver essential health services.
Goal 8.	The pandemic has abruptly and profoundly disrupted the global economy, pushing the world into a recession. Small to medium-sized enterprises, workers in informal employment, the self-employed, daily wage earners, and workers in sectors at highest risk of disruption are hit the hardest.
Goal 9.	The pandemic is hitting manufacturing industries hard and causing disruptions in global value chains and the supply of products.
Goal 10.	The Covid-19 crisis is hitting the poorest and most vulnerable people hardest and threatens to have a particularly damaging impact on the poorest countries. It is laying bare the profound inequalities that exist within and among countries and is exacerbating these inequalities.
Goal 11.	Covid-19 will hit the more than 1 billion slum dwellers worldwide hardest.
Goal 16.	The pandemic is potentially leading to an increase in social unrest and violence.
Goal 17.	The pandemic is adding more hardship to implementation of the SDGs. As Covid-19 continues to spread, global financial markets have experienced great losses and intense volatility, and world trade is expected to plunge between 13 % and 32 % in 2020.

The pandemic has generated some positive temporary impacts that should be used to stimulate the transition towards sustainability in the global environmental agenda.

Goal 12.	The pandemic offers countries an opportunity to form a recovery plan that will push our consumption and production patterns towards a sustainable future.
Goal 13.	Covid-19 brought temporary improvements in air quality and a drop in greenhouse gas emissions. Governments and businesses should accelerate the transitions needed to combat climate change.

Source: Authors.

Indeed, the EU is committed to implementing an economic response to Covid-19 that can boost recovery and at the same time ensure sustainability. The EU already has many tools that can be used to ensure a sustainable recovery from the crisis. As an example, the sustainable finance toolbox, which includes a taxonomy to help identify investments that avoid climate risks, could help governments invest in an economic recovery that considers climate impacts (Climate Kic 2020). The figure below shows the different SDGs that have been affected by Covid-19.

Figure 7. Negative effects of Covid-19

Source: UN SDSN (2020), Outcomes from European Sustainable Development Report Webinar, May, https://www.unsdsn.org/outcomes-from-european-sustainable-development-report

The European Green Deal and the European Semester are notable tools to implement and meet the SDGs, notwithstanding the pandemic. Both are key to the short- and long-term recovery plans of the EU. In addition, with a view to 'building back better', the Recovery and Resilience Facility was presented in February 2021 as the EU's response to the Covid-19 crisis, aligning the recovery and resilience plan with achievement of sustainable development.

1.2.4 EU governance and sustainable development: a long and winding road

The European Commission, in its Communication 'Next steps for a sustainable European future – European action for sustainability' indicated that 'ultimately, sustainable development is an issue of governance'. However, governance has been a big problem for the sustainable development strategies introduced by the EU over time. In 2004, the Lisbon strategy was described as a failure in its mid-term review (the Kok Report) because of its overloaded agenda, poor coordination, conflicting priorities and a lack of political action. The Europe 2020 strategy tried to fix some problems, but it turned out to be ineffective due to a lack of incentives for Member States to bring their policies into line with the strategy, again showing poor EU governance. A greater sense of ownership of Europe 2020 arose among regional and local administrations, once its territorial dimension and its internal multilevel governance were applied (Renda 2014).

Indeed, governance mechanisms are crucial for achieving sustainable development, a relation earlier addressed in 1987 in the Brundtland Report. Since the nature and the objectives of sustainable development pose significant interdependent and integrated challenges for government bodies, comprehensive approaches and wide participation are needed. Given the relevance of governance in effectively achieving sustainability, the European sustainable development strategies have explicitly tackled governance processes.

First, the EU SDS addresses good governance in various sections, namely those on policy guiding principles, better policymaking, financing and economic instruments. Second, the Europe 2020 strategy includes a chapter on 'stronger governance' for delivering results: apart from designing a governance mechanism for streamlining policy objectives, it describes a multilevel governance system and identifies responsible institutions that need to be involved in policy delivery. These include the main EU institutions (Council, Commission and Parliament), national, regional and local governments, stakeholders and civil society (Eurostat 2015).

Furthermore, in the external action context, the new European Consensus on Development (2017) fully aligns European development actions with the 2030 Agenda integrating the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Here, good governance is presented as a requirement to achieve sustainable development. The same emphasis on good governance was previously presented in the older Communication on an 'Agenda for change' (2011).

The SDGs are a form of governance implemented through goals, as defined in Biermann and Kanie (2017), and in this context, it is not about a single action or policy but a continuous cycle of policy. In addition, there is not a single implementing authority, but several actors at different levels. Thus, the EU is well positioned to orchestrate, which is a soft mode of indirect governance discussed in previous sections.

Governance for sustainable development involves some important steering requirements and the challenges are linked to uncertain and ambivalent objectives, the long-term outlook, multiple levels and sectors, and wide participation. Given the nature of the SDGs, it is now becoming clear which type of governance could lead to greater potential for sustainable progress and accelerate SDG implementation. The governance should be (i) multi-sector, involving the economic, social and environmental dimensions, requiring policy coherence and a nexus approach; (ii) multilevel, involving the local, subnational, national and supranational levels, requiring cooperation at every level that in turn leads to the ability to solve problems outside of silos; and (iii) multi-actor, involving policymakers, stakeholders, businesses and civil society, requiring wide stakeholder participation to create ownership.

In addition, given the nature of sustainable development, a long-term governance perspective – rather than a short-term one linked to election cycles – is essential (Niestroy et al. 2019). Indeed, in the Reflection Paper (2019) it is acknowledged that all the interlinkages between the different sustainability challenges and opportunities should be considered and coherence between different policy areas, sectors and levels of decision-making should be supported, by having all stakeholders on board.

The EU has proposed some governance mechanisms in its sustainable development strategies. In the context of the EU SDS, to improve vertical integration and stakeholder participation, the European Commission introduced the requirement to produce a progress report every two years about implementation of the strategy at the EU and Member State level. This report will then be the basis for discussion at the European Council for guidance on the next steps in implementation (Pisano et al. 2011).

The theme of monitoring good governance is rather interesting. The 2015 Monitoring report of the EU SDS notes that there was no indicator considered to be sufficiently robust and policy-relevant to provide a proper overview. Good governance indicators would facilitate an assessment of the type of governance. Also, the European Semester is a tool through which the EU exercises its governance. Indeed, 'it enables the EU member countries to coordinate their economic policies throughout the year and address the economic challenges facing the EU'. It was created to monitor implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy but then it became rather narrow and focused on macroeconomic aspects. Numerous attempts have been made to widen its scope, and nowadays it also monitors implementation of the SDGs. Furthermore, as of 2017 the Commission provides regular reporting of the EU's progress towards implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The first response to the 2030 Agenda by the European Commission was included in the Communication 'Next steps for a sustainable European future', where the Juncker Commission affirmed that the SDGs were already being pursued through many of the EU's policies and integrated into all the Commission's 10 priorities[2]. The Commission presented a full overview of how European policies and actions contributed to the SDGs, within the EU and through the EU's external action, to show that EU policies were already addressing the 17 goals. The aim was to make clear the existence of the most relevant synergies between the SDGs and the top 10 priorities of the Juncker Commission, to ensure strong political ownership and avoid work towards the SDGs taking place in a political vacuum.

Table 5. Commission priorities and their relation to the SDGs

EU policies	**Related SDG**
Priority 1. A new boost for jobs, growth and investment Investment plan for Europe – European Fund for Strategic Investments Circular economy Reduce global marine pollution Promote safe reuse of treated wastewater EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste	SDGs 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15
Priority 3. A resilient Energy Union with a forward-looking climate change policy Energy Union Paris Agreement	SDGs 7, 13
Priority 4. A deeper and fairer single market with a strengthened industrial base Capital Markets Union Sustainable finance	SDGs 8, 9, 13, 14,15
Priority 5. A deeper and fairer economic and monetary union European pillar of social rights Corporate social responsibility & responsible business conduct	SDGs 1, 3, 8, 10

[2] The ten priorities are as follows: (1) a new boost for jobs, growth and investment; (2) a connected digital single market; (3) a resilient energy union with a forward-looking climate change policy; (4) a deeper and fairer internal market with a strengthened industrial base; (5) a deeper and fairer economic and monetary union; (6) a balanced and progressive trade policy to harness globalisation; (7) an area of justice and fundamental rights based on mutual trust; (8) towards a new policy on migration; (9) a stronger global actor; (10) a union of democratic change.

Priority 7. An area of justice and fundamental rights based on mutual trust European Semester Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019	SDGs 5, 16
Priority 8. Towards a new policy on migration European Agenda on Migration New Partnership Framework with third countries	SDGs 1, 10

Source: Authors.

Finally, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented sustainability as a fundamental pillar in her agenda and in the political guidelines. As can be seen in the figure below, the six European Commission priorities reflect all the SDGs.

Figure 8. European Commission priorities

Source: Commission Staff Working Document, Delivering on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals – A comprehensive approach, 18.11.2020.

The European Commission recently introduced a number of instruments centred on sustainable development. Among them are a strategy for green financing, the Sustainable Europe Investment Plan, the biodiversity strategy, the new farm to fork strategy on sustainable food, the new circular economy action plan, new legislation on the use of plastics and the integration of the SDGs into the European Semester. The European Commission's strategy made the European Green Deal an integral part of implementing the UN 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. In this way, sustainability and the well-being of the public seem to be at the heart of EU policymaking. In addition, the 2020 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy, published in December 2019, stated the importance of refocusing the European Semester to make it an instrument for achieving the SDGs.

2. EU ACTORNESS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is an essential precondition for the survival and flourishing of human life on earth. At the same time, it has become one of the important objectives of the European Community since it was included in the Treaty of Maastricht (1992) as an overarching objective of EU internal and external policies. A few years later, the Treaty of Amsterdam stipulated that sustainable development should be integrated into all EU policies. But to what extent is the EU capable of contributing to this goal? While the preceding chapter outlined global and EU governance of sustainable development, this chapter dives deeper into the *EU's capacity to contribute actively and deliberately to sustainable development – the EU's actorness*.

This analysis follows the standardised deep dive structure and definition of actorness. On sustainable development it compares the actorness of the EU across two phases: a phase after adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 (the 'MDG phase')[3] and a phase after 2015 when the Sustainable Development Goals were agreed upon (the 'SDG phase')[4]. We therefore adopt a broad understanding of sustainable development in terms of environmental, social and economic sustainability, instead of focusing solely on the SDGs or individual goals. Yet, given the breadth of the concept of sustainable development, analyses of individual dimensions of actorness consider selected aspects of sustainable development.

In sum, our analysis finds that the EU's **legal authority** to legislate and act in the domains of sustainable development is moderate. The EU Treaties contain general principles

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[3] This can include relevant events during the run-up to the MDGs in the 1990s.

[4] The analysis for this phase focuses on the years following adoption of the SDGs in 2015, but can also include the preparatory phase for the SDGs in the early 2010s if relevant for the respective dimension of actorness.

supporting the values of sustainable development and the legal competence to legislate strongly depends on the policy area. The EU's legal authority increased with the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, leading to a moderate/high level of authority.

The EU's **autonomy** was initially relatively low, but increased over the years. Around the year 2000, ambitious political strategies and policies were introduced at the EU level, but a lack of concrete EU measures brought the autonomy of the EU institutions into question, as the Member States conduct an important part of, for example, their development policies, at the national, bilateral levels[5]. The von der Leyen Commission (2019) adopted a more comprehensive strategy to implement the SDGs and introduced several budgetary and policy instruments, therefore demonstrating more autonomous action. Notably, the budgetary resources dedicated to sustainable development have increased in the multiannual financial framework (MFF) 2021-2027 and the NextGenerationEU instrument, but remain moderate.

The EU has demonstrated a moderate level of **cohesion** over the years. During the follow-up to the MDGs, the EU managed to speak with a single voice and presented itself as a normative leader, but competing budgetary priorities limited the coherence of common programmes and the level of development aid varied widely. In practice, most Member States are not near the agreed thresholds for development aid. With adoption of the SDGs, finding common narratives became more challenging because the SDGs expanded the development agenda to several politically sensitive policy fields. There is an increased effort to introduce harmonised policies, which might result in a higher level of cohesion in the medium term.

The EU has become increasingly **recognised** over the years. Compared with key nation states like the US or China, the EU clearly enjoys less formal recognition in international bodies, negotiations and regional organisations, for example in terms of membership or voting rights. Still, the EU is the only non-state party to several treaties under the auspices of the UN, leading to a moderate level of recognition. Since the 2010s, the EU has gradually become a more important negotiation partner, for example, through the European External Action Service, an observer in some regional organisations or a participant in institutions like the European Investment Bank (EIB). Moreover, the EU is widely perceived as an actor in the international press when it comes to sustainable development.

The EU has increased both its normative and instrumental **attractiveness** over the past decades. While clear cases of policy emulation are hard to identify in the MDG phase, the attractiveness of the EU has increased owing to changes in its neighbourhood policy and the several partnerships it has established over the years, to the sheer amount of its

[5] See also the deep dive on development aid and the EU-Africa partnership.

development aid and to its normative appeal. In recent years particularly, the EU has been able to establish some best practices related to sustainable development, such as the EU Taxonomy Regulation, which sets standards for sustainable finance. Yet it has also made a firm commitment to promote the protection of fundamental rights and adopted ambitious CO_2 emission reduction targets. In addition, the increase in investment motivated by environmental, social and governance factors – beyond pure financial gain – indicates an increase in the instrumental attractiveness of the EU's regulatory system when it comes to sustainability.

The EU is perceived to be moderately **credible** both internally and externally when it comes to sustainable development. In the 2000s, the EU was perceived positively by the EU public in some policy areas related to sustainable development and has gained some external credibility as one of the largest donors of development aid. With the introduction of the SDGs, Eurostat also started measuring internal progress towards the SDGs, indicating at least a degree of credible monitoring. Critics note, however, that more concrete measures are lacking and the negative effects of the European lifestyle and trade practices reduce the credibility of the EU in the domain of sustainable development. This moderate perception of the EU is also reflected in our media analysis, which ranks the EU in 9^{th} place compared with the G7 and BRICS in terms of the number of positively oriented sentences in international media.

The **opportunity and necessity to act** dimension has been heavily affected by external and internal events over the past decades. On the one hand, opportunities have reduced due to the emerging power of new actors like the BRICS countries and internal events like Brexit. On the other hand, the opportunity and necessity for leadership has increased with the unilateral turn of US politics and the urgency of the climate crisis, leading to a moderate level of opportunity. The necessity to act has become ever stronger over the years, not least due to growing awareness of the urgency of addressing the climate emergency, and also since Covid-19 highlighted issues of inequality, poverty and access to healthcare.

The table below aggregates our analysis of EU actorness across the seven dimensions. The colours are based on expert judgements, summarising the level of actorness per dimension and time period. We find that, overall, the EU exhibited a moderate level of actorness during the MDG phase, which increased to moderate/high during the SDG phase.

Table 6. EU actorness and sustainable development

Phase	MDG phase	SDG phase
Period	2000-2015	2015-2020
Authority		
Autonomy		
Cohesion		
Recognition		
Attractiveness		
Opportunity/necessity to act		
Credibility		

Legend	
Low	
Low/ moderate	
Moderate	
Moderate/ high	
High	

2.1 AUTHORITY

Table 7. Authority by sub-dimension and phase

Sub-dimension	MDG phase: 2000-2015	SDG phase: 2015-present
Primary law	*Sub-level: Moderate/high* • Sustainable development has become one of the important objectives of the European Community since it was included in the Treaty of Maastricht (1992) as an overarching objective of EU internal and external policies. A few years later, the Treaty of Amsterdam stipulated that sustainable development should be integrated into all EU policies. • In the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) sustainable development continues to be framed as a general objective of the EU, however the way in which it should be promoted internally and externally has deepened. Yet, a formal definition of sustainable development is still lacking. • The concrete competence of the EU to adopt legally binding acts in policy areas linked to sustainable development strongly depends on the policy area and increased with adoption of the Lisbon Treaty.	*Sub-level: Moderate/high* • The competence of the EU to adopt legally binding acts in policy areas linked to the SDGs remained as established in the Lisbon Treaty (2007). The degree of competence continues to strongly depend on the policy area.

Secondary law	*Sub-level: Low/moderate* • An analysis of secondary legislation from 2000 to 2015 provides a rough indication that legislation on sustainable development was still scarce at the beginning of the year 2000 but there was a steep growth from 2004 to 2015 (during the Barroso Commission).	*Sub-level: Moderate/high* • An analysis of secondary legislation from 2015 onwards provides a rough indication that EU authority continued to increase.

Source: Authors.

This section analyses the legal authority of the EU institutions vis-à-vis the Member States in sustainable development by looking at the **EU Treaties and secondary legislation**, namely regulations, directives and decisions. EU authority is defined as the formal legal competences of the EU, providing it with the right to act on sustainable development matters. The attribution of the level of actorness of the EU's authority in sustainable development is purely descriptive – answering the question of *what the formal competences derived from the Treaties are in the area of sustainable development* – without the intention of judging the EU's actions or the extent to which the EU exercises its competences. In addition, the analysis shows the evolution of the EU's authority over time.

2.1.1 Primary law and sustainable development

While sustainable development was first a general concept as part of academic papers, policy papers and soft law, it gradually evolved into a **legal rule** in the Treaties of the European Union (Declaris 2000). The table below provides an overview of the evolution of sustainable development in the EU Treaties. Analysing the EU Treaties is crucial to determining the level of authority, as the Treaties form the legal basis on which Member States act.

Table 8. The evolution of sustainable development in EU primary law

	Treaty of Maastricht (1992)	Treaty of Amsterdam (1997)	Treaty of Lisbon (2007)
Recital/ preamble		Determined **to promote economic and social progress for their peoples, taking into account the principle of *sustainable development*** (Treaty of Amsterdam, Part I, Article 1(2)).	Determined **to promote economic and social progress for their peoples, taking into account the principle of *sustainable development*** (TEU, Preamble).

EU objective	The Union shall set itself the following objectives: **to promote economic and social progress which is balanced and *sustainable*** (Treaty of Maastricht, Title I: Article B).	The Union shall set itself the following objectives: to promote economic and social progress and a high level of employment and **to achieve balanced and *sustainable development*** (Treaty of Amsterdam, Part I, Article 1(5)).	
Internal action	The Community shall have as its task, ... **to promote throughout the Community a harmonious and balanced development of economic activities, *sustainable* and non-inflationary *growth* respecting the environment** (Treaty of Maastricht, Title II: Article G(B)(2)).	The Community shall have as its task, ... **to promote throughout the Community a harmonious, balanced and *sustainable development* of economic activities** (Treaty of Amsterdam, Part I, Article 2(2)).	The Union shall establish an internal market. It shall work for the **sustainable development of Europe** (TEU, Article 3(3)).
External action	Community policy in the sphere of development cooperation, ... shall foster: the ***sustainable* economic and social development of the developing countries**, and more particularly the most disadvantaged among them (Treaty of Maastricht, Title XVII: Article 130(u)(1)).		In its relations with the wider world, the Union ... shall contribute to ... **the sustainable development of the Earth** (TEU, Article 3(5)). The Union shall establish and pursue common policies and actions, and shall work for a high degree of cooperation in all fields of international relations, to: – foster the **sustainable economic, social and environmental development** of developing countries, with the primary aim of eradicating poverty (TEU, Article 21 (d)); – help develop international measures ... to **ensure sustainable development** (TEU, Article 21 (f)).

Integration clause		Environmental protection requirements must be **integrated** into the definition and implementation of the Community policies and activities referred to in Article 3, in particular with **a view to promoting *sustainable development*** (Treaty of Amsterdam, Part I, Article 2 (4)).	Environmental protection requirements must be **integrated** into the definition and implementation of the EU's policies and activities, in particular with **a view to promoting *sustainable development*** (TFEU, Article 11).

Source: Authors.

The Treaty of Maastricht (1992) refers to the concept of sustainability, even if the term ‘sustainable development’ does not explicitly appear in the treaty articles (see the table above). The promotion of ‘economic and social progress that is balanced and sustainable’ is stated as one of the objectives of the EU. ‘Sustainable growth’ is one of the tasks that the Community should accomplish internally, while externally development cooperation policies should foster the ‘sustainable economic and social development of the developing countries’.

The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) clarifies the legal regime of sustainable development. As shown in Table 8 above, the term ‘sustainable development’ appears explicitly in the treaty articles: in the recital, as one of the objectives of the EU and as an internal task of the Community. Importantly, this treaty introduces the ‘integration clause’, which sets environmental protection as a requirement to be integrated into EU policies and actions, with a view to promoting sustainable development.

With the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) and the subsequent consolidated version (2012) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), EU primary law continues to refer to the concept of sustainable development as one of the EU’s objectives that should be promoted both internally and externally and integrated into the policymaking process. More specifically in the TEU, sustainable development is mentioned as an internal and external goal that EU actions should promote for the first time, the notion of ‘sustainable development of Europe’ and ‘sustainable development of Earth’ have been introduced. Furthermore, sustainable development is considered an outcome that should be achieved in the EU’s external action. In addition, Article 4(3) TEU introduces the involvement of the Member States in a spirit of sincere cooperation with the EU in achievement of the objectives set in the Treaties, which implicitly also include sustainable development.

Apart from clearly being a general objective of the European Union set by the Treaties, Article 11 TFEU (already introduced in the Treaty of Amsterdam) sets environmental protection as a requirement to be integrated into all EU policies and actions, with a view to promoting sustainable development. Not only should the environmental dimension of sustainable development be integrated into EU policies, but also Article 9 TFEU accounts for the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. In a more general note, Article 7 TFEU specifies that the EU should take into account all its objectives (then including sustainable development) in defining and implementing its policies and activities. These integration clauses are an essential tool for sustainable development, since they impose a legal obligation that sustainability principles are integrated into European public policies. Similarly, Article 37 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights states that the EU should promote sustainable development and take it into account in the policymaking processes.

The analysis above shows that before the introduction of the MDGs in the year 2000, the European Community had already formally recognised sustainable development: (i) as an internal and external objective with provisions that encourage the implementation of common policies and activities aimed at promoting sustainable development; and (ii) as an element to be integrated into EU policies. When the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force in 2007, it expanded references about sustainable development as an internal and external objective, while the provision stipulating that sustainable development is included in the EU's policies has remained the same.

Although sustainable development is clearly mentioned as a general objective of the European Union, the lack of a definition of sustainable development in the Treaties introduces difficulties in operationalising the concept. Indeed, apart from being a general objective in the Treaties, for its implementation and operationalisation concrete acts are needed. In this regard, given the dynamic nature of sustainable development, there is a need for more dynamic tools to concretely foster sustainable development, such as strategies, action plans or secondary law.

In conclusion, having provisions in the Treaties that set sustainable development as a general objective of the EU's internal and external action and foster the penetration of sustainable development into all public policies are evidence of a moderate/high level of authority. As stated above, the provisions which foster the penetration of sustainable development into all public policies and the harmonisation of the policies with a view to protecting natural, cultural and social resources (integration clause) is clear evidence of the increasing authority of the EU: there is an obligation for integrating sustainable development in all EU policies.

As will be analysed in the following subsection, despite the general objective and the integration clause stating that sustainable development should be integrated into EU policies, the Treaties also classify the legal competences of the EU (exclusive, shared or supporting) to act across the different areas that contribute to sustainable development.

2.1.2 Competences and secondary law

Beyond the broad principles laid down in the Treaties, a key factor determining the EU's legal authority is its competence to adopt binding legal acts. The EU has a varying degree of legal competence ranging from exclusive, to shared or supporting – depending on the policy area (EurLex 2016).

The EU has **exclusive competences** for example in common commercial policies (Article 3 TFEU); indeed, the EU is taking steps to include sustainable development in trade policies and using trade tools to support sustainable development. In particular, sustainable development is part of commercial policies because it is a principle and an objective of the EU's external action (Article 207 TFEU). The EU tries to use trade policy to promote universal values regarding environmental, social and labour protection, and fundamental rights. Since 1999, the Commission has been carrying out sustainability impact assessments in all negotiated trade agreements, assessing their effects on economic, social, environmental and human rights. Moreover, since 2006, the EU has aimed to include trade and sustainable development (TSD) chapters in trade agreements.[6]

The EU has **shared competence** in most of the areas covered by the SDGs, such as social policy, agriculture and fisheries, the environment and consumer protection (Article 4 TFEU). Hence, the EU and the EU Member States are able to legislate and adopt legally binding acts. EU countries exercise their own competence where the EU does not exercise, or has decided not to exercise, its competence.

Finally, the EU has **supporting competences** in some of the areas covered by the SDGs, such as protection and improvement of human health, industry and education (Article 6 TFEU). In these areas, the EU can only intervene to support, coordinate or complement the action of the EU Member States.

How has the EU exercised its legal authority in practice? The figure below shows the trend in the accumulation of the EU's secondary legislation in the period from 1996 to 2019. It clearly shows an increase over time in the amount of secondary legislation related to sustainable development. The figure is based on an analysis of the CEPS EurLex dataset of EU secondary law (Borrett and Laurer 2020). The figure shows the weighted number of legal acts (regulations, directives, decisions and international agreements) that are annotated with the keywords 'sustainable development'[7] by the EU's official EuroVoc category scheme. Note that this only provides a rough indicator of the number of EU legal

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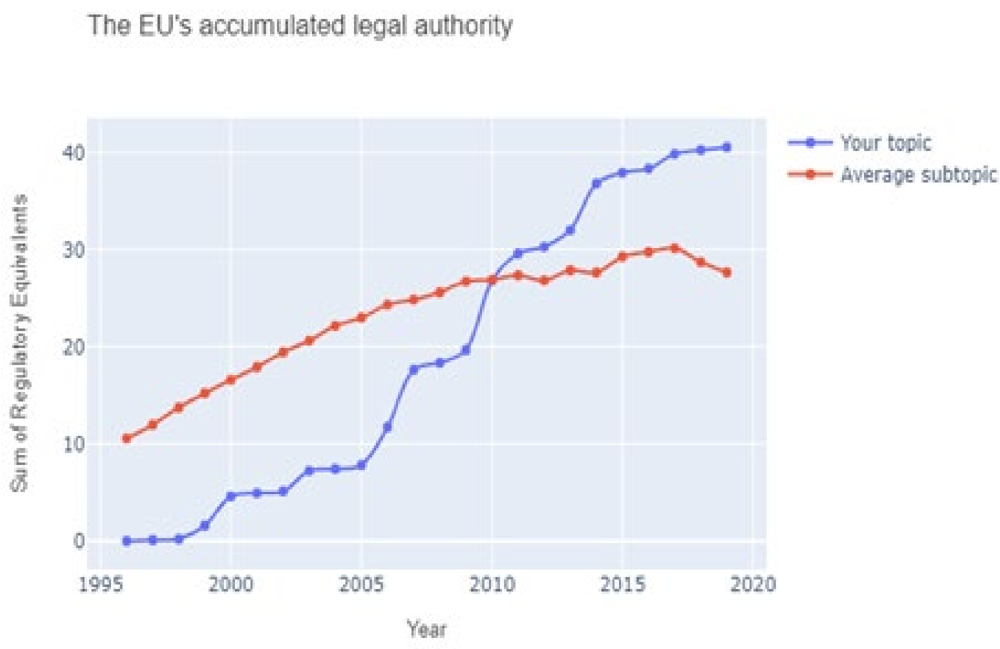
[6] In addition, in all the areas in which the EU does not have exclusive competences, the action of the EU should be subject to the principle of subsidiarity laid down in Article 5 TFEU, meaning that the EU can take action if it is more effective than the action taken at the national, regional or local level.

[7] In addition, the keyword 'bio-economy' was used, as it is used as a synonym for 'sustainable development' in the EU's EuroVoc category scheme.

acts related to the SDGs. Details on this analysis are available on the AGGREGATOR website (2021).

Figure 9. The EU's accumulated legal authority in the period 1996-2019

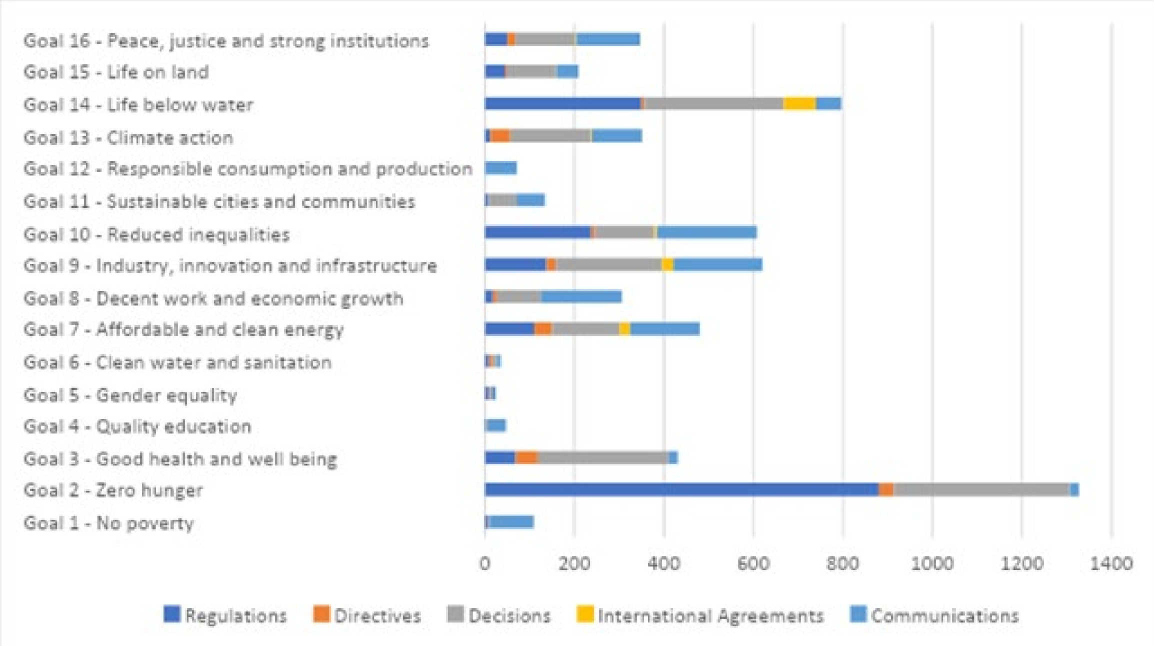


Source: Authors based on CEPS EurLex.eu.

A deeper look into the EU's secondary legislation beyond a simple count shows that legal acts mainly refer to implementation of the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences and hence relate to EU commercial policies or to the promotion of sustainable development and good governance in developing countries under the legal basis laid down in Article 208 TFEU. There is also a large share of legislation that has sustainable development as its goal and refers to fisheries management, forestry and land use.

The analysis of the *acquis communautaire* shows that the EU has been active in the areas related to sustainable development in which it has **shared competences**. The figure below shows the accumulation of secondary legislation (regulations, directives and decisions), international agreements and communications related to the SDGs that have been published by the EU in the period 2000-2019. The areas in which the EU has been more active and those in which it has been more silent clearly emerge from the figure below. Poverty eradication, inclusive education, gender equality, water management, economic growth and employment, sustainable cities and human settlements, responsible consumption and production are the areas in which the EU has been more silent. Furthermore, the figure shows that the EU acted mostly with regulation and decisions, rather than directives.

Figure 10. The EU's activity in SDG-related areas



Note: the analysis of the EU's *acquis communautaire* in the SDG areas was conducted using the CEPS EurLex web application (AGGREGATOR 2021). The figure shows the number of documents which have been annotated by the EU with selected keywords from the EUROVOC category scheme. The keywords were selected for each SDG based on the UN's Sustainable Development Indicators (UNSTATS 2020).

Source: Authors.

2.1.3 Final considerations on the level of authority

The analysis above shows that the EU has the legal mandate to act to foster sustainable development, which derives from the EU Treaties; however, the Treaties attribute shared competences to the EU and the Member States in most of the areas linked to sustainable development. The amount of secondary legislation on sustainable development has notably increased over time. Yet, the dynamic nature of sustainable development also requires other flexible tools, such as strategies or action plans setting specific targets. The considerations above, and the presence of binding rules in the EU Treaties pushing for the integration of sustainable development into EU policies, as well as the provisions setting sustainable development as an objective of the EU's internal and external policies, confer a moderate/high level of authority on the EU in sustainable development.

2.2 AUTONOMY

Table 9. Autonomy by sub-dimension and phase

Sub-dimension	MDG phase: 2000-2015	SDG phase: 2015-present
Capacity for agenda setting	*Sub-level: Moderate* • Several ambitious political strategies for development are adopted at the EU level, but Member States aim to retain their national autonomy and visibility, reducing the EU's autonomy. • EU action towards implementation of the MDGs is primarily framed in terms of external action.	*Sub-level: Moderate/high* • EU capacity for a comprehensive EU strategy for implementation of the SDGs is initially lacking during the Juncker Commission. • The von der Leyen Commission adopts a comprehensive strategy and tasks each Commissioner to deliver the SDGs in their respective policy areas. SDGs have been mainstreamed in the European Semester and external action.
EU budget and staff	*Sub-level: Low* • The MDGs are not mainstreamed or visible in the EU budget. • Only the development aid budget is dedicated to the MDGs. • Approximately half of official development aid is channelled through bilateral relations and therefore not linked to the EU.	*Sub-level: Moderate* • The SDGs were insufficiently mainstreamed in the 2014-2020 MFF. • The 2021-2027 MFF implements a number of reforms in budgetary instruments (e.g. Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument), increasing the EU's budgetary autonomy. • The number of staff dedicated to sustainability is higher than in other policy areas.
Available policy instruments	*Sub-level: Low/moderate* • A number of new policy instruments and reporting mechanisms (e.g. biannual reports on policy coherence for development) are proposed at the EU level, demonstrating some degree of EU autonomy.	*Sub-level: Moderate/high* • The von der Leyen Commission shows an increased degree of autonomy by adopting a 'whole of government' approach and by utilising horizontal policy instruments (e.g. European Semester, policy coherence for sustainable development, Better Regulation agenda, the proposed creation of a bank for sustainable development) attempting to mainstream the SDGs.

Source: Authors.

The level of autonomy has been defined as the extent to which the EU has the **necessary resources, means and capabilities to act**. Furthermore, this dimension also refers to the **EU's agenda setting and framing powers in relation to both Member States and the international agenda.** Autonomy and authority are interdependent, because without a legal basis or right to act, the EU cannot use the means available to it to exert power or vice versa. The following analysis will take account of the **institutional arrangements, budgetary allocations and available staff capacities of the EU**, as well as **the policy instruments** deployed by EU institutions in sustainable development policy areas.

2.2.1 The MDG phase

2.2.1.1 Agenda setting and policy instruments

The Treaty of Maastricht already recognised the EU's competence on development-related issues, following the principles of coordination, complementarity and coherence. The topic was addressed as a foreign affairs issue, therefore related to external action. Subsequently, several secondary legislative instruments were adopted in an attempt to create consensus among Member States on EU priorities and implementation procedures to achieve these goals. The most prominent instrument in this regard was the European Consensus on Development (2005), which made poverty reduction, democratic values, and support for national strategies and procedures the top priorities.

Institutional arrangements were then put into place to boost policy coherence and measure impacts at the EU level, namely through the 2001 White Paper on governance and the impact assessment procedure set up by the European Commission in 2002 (EEAC 2006). In this vein, during the Millennium +5 Summit in 2005, the EU launched a financial package for foreign aid and an ambitious agenda on policy coherence for development, calling for a global commitment in both areas. The EU's efforts to orientate priorities at the EU level towards the accomplishment of development goals was reflected in other policy instruments, like the 12-point EU action plan launched in 2010 (European Commission 2010), which was accompanied by a Staff Working Document on MDGs (European Commission 2005). Later, the discussion evolved towards establishing a post-2015 agenda, where the EU presented itself as a key international actor in the discussion, waving the flag of the world's largest donor.

Despite the priorities and coordination procedures of the European Consensus on Development, Member States have demonstrated their determination to **retain national visibility and the autonomy to intervene** in specific topics and geographical areas of their interest, usually due to historical bonds with developing countries. Consequently, although the EU has a legal competence to act on the international stage and agrees with Member States on the ways to do so, in multilateral meetings for evaluating implementation of the MDGs, there were several cases of EU Member States presenting initiatives in alignment with other nations, without prior consultation of their peers (Grosbon 2013). The EU's capability to act as an articulated entity was hence undermined.

This moderate capacity of the EU to act in an autonomous way at the international level is consistent with the management structures of financial instruments and budgetary allocations. The most important example in this sense is the European Development Fund (EDF), the largest geographical funding instrument in this policy area. It is built upon Member State contributions and resource allocation is decided by unanimity among donors. As a result, the European Parliament has no official scrutiny over it and, according to EU guidelines, capacities strongly depend on Member States' willingness to pay (D'Alfonso 2014).

2.2.1.2 Financial and human resources

Regarding budgetary allocations, the largest EU Member State donors have valued national bilateral contributions equally, if not over Union actions, as shown by a comparison between bilateral and multilateral official development assistance (ODA). According to data from the OECD quoted in a report from the Overseas Development Institute, in 2013, the top 10 EU Member State contributors[8] provided 52.6 % of their resources through bilateral networks, in contrast to the 35 % that was delivered via core multilateral channels[9], including the EU[10]. This preference is nuanced when including all EU Member States comprised in the report, since smaller donors[11] seem to favour multilateral channels, inverting the percentage balance: they supplied only 29.5 % through bilateral mechanisms. This way, the overall average percentage of the 19 countries considered in the report shows that 41.68 % of resources were delivered in a bilateral way, being relatively equivalent to the 50.52 % routed through multilateral organisations (Gulrajani 2016: 9).

When looking more closely at specific examples, the bilateral nature of ODA from major EU Member States seems to be confirmed[12]:

- *France*. In 2017, only 21 % of France's ODA contributions were delivered through EU funds. The Ministry for European and Foreign Affairs explicitly states that bilateral mechanisms have a special status in France's development policy,

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[8] The top 10 as a percentage of their GNI were Sweden, Luxembourg, Denmark, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, France, Finland and Ireland. See https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/content/overview_en

[9] This includes membership fees and voluntary contributions. The remaining 12.4 % was delivered through multi-bi aid channels, which are donor contributions to multilateral organisations that are earmarked for specific development purposes (Reinsberg 2017: 8).

[10] There are other frequently used multilateral channels, such as the World Bank International Development Association, the Regional Development Banks, the UN programmes, funds and specialised agencies and the Global Fund for Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Gulrajani 2016: 7).

[11] These are Austria, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Slovenia, Poland, Greece, Czechia and Slovakia. Among this group, the only country delivering aid mainly through bilateral channels was Portugal, with 64 % of its ODA resources.

[12] A more comprehensive analysis would consider all EU countries and the evolution of their contributions over time, in order to identify possible trends. As that is not the main aim of this deep dive, this partial analysis is sufficient for the comparative purpose presented here.

representing 59 % of the budget for the same year. The remaining 20 % was delivered through other multilateral organisations (France Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères 2019).

- *Belgium*. In 2016, Belgium contributed 4.5 % of its overall ODA budget to the EDF and 19.7 % to other Commission ODA financing instruments. All considered, only 24.2 % of its total ODA budget was channelled through EU funds. In 2017, the figure reached 28.9 %[13] (Belgium Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019).

- *Spain*. In 2016, Spain channelled only 26.8 % of its overall ODA budget through EU ODA financing instruments[14]. But the distribution between the bilateral and multilateral resources allocated has not been consistent. Between 2007 and 2010, bilateral ODA represented 68 % of contributions, in contrast to the 33.6 % it represented between 2011 and 2015 (Cooperación española).

This comparison is presented as a set of selected country cases, because online data sources are insufficient to track EU ODA from the beginning of the century. There are two main reasons that explain this: the first is that the OECD reported only on Development Assistant Committee members; the second is that Member State ODA contributions are not disaggregated by delivery channel in European Commission official reports with the comparative perspective we present here (European Commission 2020a), nor it is in the EU Aid Explorer[15]. Therefore, aggregated information on the EU is not available for the MDG analysis period (2000-2015) and specific contributions from Member States to EU development funds must be traced in an individual manner.

Skipping to other budgetary indicators, **by 2005 the EU had collectively committed to providing 0.7 % of gross national income (GNI) as ODA.** By 2008, 0.4 % of EU GNI was achieved, with ODA from the EU and Member States showing steady growth from 2004 to 2008 (Eurostat). The 2008 crisis brought great financial constraints, and the EU external budget was no exception to cuts. However, there was a relatively fast recovery from 2010 onwards thanks to the MDG initiative, which injected EUR 1 billion into ODA for measures helping to achieve the MDGs that were most off-track. Thus, the EU budget for external assistance had reached and surpassed pre-crisis levels by 2012, although the 0.7 % target remained elusive (EuropeAid 2013: 28).

Budgetary allocations for development aid have been maintained ever since, but they have not necessarily or exclusively been to promote the fulfilment of MDGs or later, the SDGs. Instead, funds were used to deal with the migration crisis that erupted in 2015 by

[13] Calculations elaborated by the authors based on official information.

[14] Calculations elaborated by the authors based on official information.

[15] Although it presented aid delivery channels, it does not compare the resources allocated by Member State through the EU and national development organisations.

tackling the root causes of migration through a development approach (Dennison, Fine, and Gowan 2019). In this sense, the development strategy has been partially subjugated to another policy concern, proving again to be highly vulnerable to external threats.

Leaving aside the international outlook and considering an intra-EU perspective on the budget, **spending related to the MDGs was fragmented and did not have a clearly defined space within the 2000-2006 or the 2007-2013 multiannual financial framework**. Development priorities within the EU were mainly related to agriculture and rural development. For the MFF 2007-2013, only two investment headings were directly related to specific MDGs, namely preservation and management of natural resources (MDG 7, environmental sustainability) and the EU as a global player (MDG 8, global partnership for development) (European Commission 2013). Indeed, the first one was highly debated in the development community, since it included packages incompatible with international development goals on agriculture and fisheries markets.

As for **financial reporting**, the Commission was obliged to present an annual report to the Council and Parliament about EU policies on development and external aid, but MDGs were not treated as a separate topic. In a complementary manner and following on from European policy efforts to address coherence problems, since 2008 a biannual report on policy coherence for development has been drawn up. Furthermore, the Commission monitored and reported on implementation of the 12-point action plan through the Financing for Development reporting process. In spite of the EU's reporting efforts, data gathering was a highly disjointed process both within Member States and between Member States and the European Commission. In addition – excluding guidelines established for OECD reports – the available public records on ODA were not standardised among national development agencies (King et al. 2012).

Regarding **staff**, another important resource determining the EU's capacity to act, there are no available means to trace employees whose work was directly or indirectly related to the MDGs. Nonetheless, there was a great effort to reform the institutional framework in accordance with the efficiency and results-oriented managerial vision that was proclaimed in the EU in the early 2000s. As a result, the Directorate-General Development and Cooperation – EuropeAid was formed on 1 January 2011 following the merger of AIDCO and DG DEV. It was later reformed on 1 January 2015 and was eventually renamed DG INTPA in February 2021 (Van Seters and Klavert 2011).

All things considered, the MDGs were almost exclusively a priority of the external action agenda and were not considered important as a single market priority. Although the problem was addressed, it can be concluded that the capacity for effective policy tools and internal coordination was insufficient. Furthermore, the EU's external action capacities for development have been vulnerable to external threats, such as the financial and migration crises. Resources among major donor states are mainly delivered through bilateral channels, which satisfies their desire to retain significant individual room for manoeuvre in the field. Therefore, coordination has been difficult. Still, the EU's role in boosting policy alignment and the allocation of development resources among Member States has proven crucial to keeping up contribution standards and coping with international commitments in post-crisis contexts. Likewise, aside from deeper considerations of effectiveness, the EU has progressively presented itself as a supranational agenda setter and as a reference body for good practice, managing to propose initiatives for policy mainstreaming at the supranational and national levels.

2.2.2 The SDG phase

2.2.2.1 Agenda setting and policy instruments

While widespread consensus between the European institutions exists regarding the significant role that the EU plays in achieving the SDGs, in practice the tools and resources available to the EU do not fully live up to the commitments. The TEU refers explicitly to sustainable development as one of the objectives of the EU and all three dimensions of sustainable development fall within the scope of competences of the EU, even if the social dimension does so to a lesser extent. **Even with the political commitment and the available legal bases for acting, the EU does not seem to fully exercise its capacity to mainstream the SDGs into its policymaking process or to adapt its budget and funding lines to the goals.**

While certainly the topic of sustainable development remains on the agenda of the European Commission and has been reaffirmed in numerous communications and political declarations (European Commission 2016a), sufficient effort has not been put into the creation of policy tools and procedures that would ensure the mainstreaming of the SDGs. This can be attributed to the lack of a comprehensive sustainability strategy for the EU: for at least two years following adoption of the SDGs, top EU institutions appeared to lack the internal capacity to set clear priorities and the EU's agenda for attainment of the SDGs through cross-sectional policy integration. This is particularly evident in the agenda of the Juncker Commission (2015) and the Leader's Agenda of European Council President Donald Tusk (2017). Neither of them make reference to the SDGs nor do they indicate that the mainstreaming of sustainable development would form part of their priorities or work programmes.

Nevertheless, in 2016, the Commission adopted a communication package containing the EU's upcoming sustainable development strategy. The first Communication on the 'Next steps for a sustainable European future' was adopted, which explained how the Commission's 10 political priorities contribute to implementation of the UN SDG agenda and how the EU aims to meet the SDGs in the future. A second Communication on a 'New European consensus on development' introduced a shared vision and framework for development cooperation for the EU and its Member States, which is brought together under the 2030 Agenda. Lastly, the Communication on a 'Renewed partnership with

African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries' outlines how EU-ACP relations following expiry of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement in 2020 can be brought in line with the SDGs.

In 2017, in a joint statement of the Council, Commission and European Parliament on 'The new European consensus on development: our world, our dignity, our future', the EU agreed to joint EU and Member State action. The Commission's 'Reflection Paper: Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030', published in late 2018 was also well received by the international community. The paper spelled out three ambitious, strategy-like scenarios for implementation of the SDGs. Yet, the document did not lay out specific institutional arrangements or policy tools, and due to the limited time left in the Commission's term, it was clear such strategies would only be implemented by the next Commission (Kloke-Lesch 2018). In the absence of an EU-wide comprehensive strategy, even though responsibility for the implementation is shared and monitored in parallel by national and EU authorities, initially Member States primarily relied on national SDG strategies.

In this respect, the von der Leyen Commission promised a new approach: the six priorities of the European Commission for 2019-2024 refer to some of the goals set in the SDGs and are enshrined in initiatives such as the European Green Deal (European Commission 2019a). The first year of the new Commission seemed to reinforce its commitment to the internal and external implementation of the SDGs (European Commission 2020c). The initiatives taken by the Commission have been placed in the broader framework of relevant policy instruments, such as the European Semester of economic governance (under which the Annual Growth Survey has been renamed the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey), the Better Regulation agenda and policy coherence for sustainable development. These instruments represent the key strands of the Commission's 'whole of government' approach underpinning their SDG agenda.

Taking a closer look at the Better Regulation agenda, since 2002 the Commission has followed a framework for integrated impact assessment requiring the assessment of all significant environmental, fundamental rights, economic and social impacts, allowing trade-offs to be identified (Commission of the European Communities 2002). But the Better Regulation toolbox has been criticised for insufficiently mainstreaming the SDGs in the process. While it specifically refers to the three dimensions of sustainable development, it does not provide a methodological framework that enables policy impacts to be located on the SDG spectrum, nor does it prioritise certain impacts over others to help address trade-offs (Renda 2017).

Since the new Commission took office, the 2020 work programme (European Commission 2020b) has signalled an intention to improve its current approach. In April 2021, the Commission finally unveiled the awaited Better Regulation Communication, expected to mainstream the SDGs in order to ensure that all legislative proposals contribute to the 2030 Agenda.

According to the Communication, relevant SDGs will need to be identified for each legislative proposal and the Commission must demonstrate how the initiative will support their attainment. SDGs will need to be incorporated in impact assessments and evaluations as well. While this is a positive development, the Communication is far from ambitious and lacks a holistic perspective that takes into account the impact of legislative initiatives on the overall SDG agenda. To meaningfully mainstream the SDGs in the Better Regulation agenda – as opposed to turning it into a checkbox exercise – all proposals should assess the initiatives' impact on all dimensions of sustainable development. This should include the economic, social and environmental dimensions and should move away from a cost-benefit analysis towards an increasingly sustainability and resilience-oriented analysis.

Other instruments introduced by the von der Leyen Commission include a major flagship initiative putting forward the EU's new growth strategy, whose implementation will contribute directly to achieving at least 12 of the 17 SDGs: the European Green Deal. It sets out the Commission's ambition to build a modern, resource-efficient, clean, circular and competitive economy that tackles climate and environmental challenges, as well as to secure a fair and inclusive transition for all – thus addressing many challenges in the 2030 Agenda. It has been expressly designed and presented as part of the Commission's strategy to implement the SDGs. The European Green Deal is additionally supported by the European Pillar of Social Rights to ensure that transitions to climate-neutrality, digitalisation and demographic change are socially fair and just (European Commission 2020c). Through the significant number of new instruments, the von der Leyen Commission seems to show a commitment to a higher level of SDG mainstreaming in the EU's policy cycle. The policy instruments, if utilised, will imply a considerable increase in the EU's autonomy and agenda-setting capacity for delivering the SDGs.

Furthermore, in 2020, the President of the European Commission tasked each Commissioner with ensuring the delivery of the UN SDGs within their respective policy areas. This decision means that responsibility for overall implementation of the SDGs at the EU level is attributed to the College as a whole in the spirit of collegiality. At the same time, it should be noted that implementation of the European Green Deal as well as of the Just Transition are the primary responsibility of Executive Vice-President Frans Timmermans.

Lastly, it is important to highlight that in response to Covid-19, the Commission has placed a stronger emphasis on the notions of sustainability and resilience. In this context, the NextGenerationEU Fund constitutes an overarching recovery plan laying the foundation for 'building back better'. The temporary instrument, designed to boost the EU's economic recovery via a EUR 750 billion stimulus package, will aim at rebuilding a greener, more digital and more resilient Europe following the pandemic.

Overall**, the strategic framing of implementation of the SDGs has improved since 2018**. It appears that the **'leadership void'** of the first years following adoption of the SDGs has ended. Multiple ambitious and foundational strategic documents and policy guidelines of global significance have been adopted, indicating that the EU's joint target-setting capacity has increased.

2.2.2.2 Financial and human resources

The 2014-2020 MFF did not focus sufficiently on achievement of the SDGs. Spending on SDGs was fragmented and did not have a clearly defined space within the previous MFF. Too large a percentage of the budget was still allocated to spending that did not contribute to a sustainable and green economy and was inconsistent with the SDGs. Several funding programmes focused on specific SDGs (e.g. the European Fund for Sustainable Development, H2020 programme, European Social Fund, Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, Programme for Environment and Climate Action). However, most of them did not use the SDG framework for measuring progress or setting the goals of the programmes.

The Commission proposal for the **2021-2027 MFF** pledged an ambitious increase in the EU's external action budget and put forward several new funding instruments, which clearly relate to the goals set in the 2030 Agenda. When the increase in the external action budget was announced in 2018, several references were made to the SDGs. Despite the failure to implement the ambitious budget increase (due to the need to regroup funds under the NextGenerationEU recovery plan), structural reform of the budget instruments could still promise increasingly effective financial autonomy in sustainable development (European Commission 2018a). The Commission proposed the reorganisation, simplification and streamlining of the different funding instruments by creating a Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). The new instrument will rest on three pillars:

- a geographical one (programmes dedicated, for example, to the European neighbourhood and sub-Saharan Africa);
- a thematic pillar (global programmes on themes such as human rights and democracy, stability and peace, sustainable energy and sustainable inclusive growth); and
- rapid response (to crisis and post-crisis situations, contributing to stability and conflict prevention) (European Parliament 2020).

The instrument is designed to incorporate a large degree of flexibility as it will not be divided up in advance but instead will be allocated based on emerging needs and necessities.

In March 2021, the European Parliament and the Council together reached a political agreement on the NDICI-Global Europe under the 2021-2027 MFF, supporting the EU's external action budget overall with EUR 79.5 billion. The NDICI budget can be broken down to EUR 60.38 billion for geographical programmes (at least EUR 19.32 billion for the neighbourhood, at least EUR 29.18 billion for sub-Saharan Africa, EUR 8.48 billion for Asia and the Pacific, and for the Americas and Caribbean EUR 3.39 billion). It allocates EUR 6.36 billion to thematic programmes (human rights and democracy, civil society organisations, stability and peace, conflict prevention and global challenges), and EUR 3.18 billion for rapid response actions. These budget groups are complemented by additional unallocated funds of EUR 9.53 billion, which can be used to address unforeseen developments and emergencies, and to support new priorities (European Commission 2021b).

Furthermore, through NDICI-Global Europe, the EU will increase support for sustainable investment under the European Fund for Sustainable Development-plus (EFSD+), to leverage private capital complementing the EU's external cooperation spending and give a unified budgetary guarantee – the External Action Guarantee – that will additionally contribute to programmes in the Western Balkans. As governance of the EFSD+ will be entrusted to the Commission, it is seen as an 'important step in the right direction towards a more effective EU financial architecture' for governance of the SDGs and could considerably increase the EU executive's autonomy in this field (Bilal 2019: 1).

Overall, the aim of consolidating the budget instruments is to increase the coherence, transparency, flexibility and effectiveness of EU external action, which together might contribute to policy coherence. The reform made budgeting for the EDF possible, increasing the EU's oversight of the aid allocation and arguably boosting autonomy. At the same time, while the NDICI may improve the EU's visibility on the global stage in the field of foreign aid, there is no evidence of clear mainstreaming of the SDGs in the budget. The NDICI Regulation nonetheless reaffirms the EU's commitment to provide 0.7 % of GNI as official development assistance within the timeframe of the 2030 Agenda. As such, the reform promises that at least 92 % of the new funding instrument should be reportable as official development assistance.

Despite the efforts to consolidate and simplify the funding instruments, there is still significant fragmentation across the funding channels. This can partly be attributed to the fact that competences in the area of sustainable development are also spread out across institutions. Within the European Commission, at least DG DEVCO (renamed DG INTPA), DG NEAR, DG ECHO, DG TRADE, DG CONNECT and DG JUST are responsible for implementation of the sustainable development agenda. The lack of coordination among the different DGs as well as lack of synergy with the activities of the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and national promotional and development banks reduce policy coherence and overall capacity for strategic action.

Accordingly, given the dispersed allocation of competences and wide range of policy fields covered by the SDGs, it may not be clear how many **staff members** are dedicated to implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Taken together, the departments mentioned above account for a big share of the EU's human resources (e.g. DG DEVCO accounts for around 10 % of the Commission's staff). Regarding the number of employees working specifically on sustainability, around 467 out of 29 640 European Commission staff members work in units or occupy positions directly mentioning sustainability[16]. This count is the highest among the deep dives, which is probably partly due to the breadth of the policy area. In the European Parliament, only the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats has a dedicated department for Sustainable Development Policy; eight staff members have a title corresponding directly to sustainable development. It can therefore be argued that the level of staff in the EU institutions related to sustainable development is moderate, given the extent of the policy area.

2.3 COHESION

Table 10. Cohesion by sub-dimension and phase

Sub-dimension	MDG phase: 2000-2015	SDG phase: 2015-present
Joint narratives and policy goals	*Sub-level: Moderate/high* • The EU manages to speak with a single voice on the international stage and presents itself as a normative leader in the area of the MDGs. • There are competing priorities regarding budget allocations.	*Sub-level: Moderate* • Finding common narratives becomes more challenging because the SDGs expanded the development agenda to a number of politically sensitive policy fields. • Member States become more polarised in a number of SDG-related policy fields with competing policy goals and objectives.
Reaching common targets	*Sub-level: Low* • Reaching the target of dedicating 0.7 % GNI to	*Sub-level: Low/moderate* • Substantial divergence among Member States remains according to the SDG Index.

[16] The figure was calculated based on a dataset on 29 644 European Commission employees in July 2020 collected by the consortium. The figures represent the number of employees with the keyword 'sustainable' in either the title of their unit or their job title. Note that this is only a rough indicator of the number of employees working in the Commission on sustainable development. The keyword search can both miss certain employees (false negatives) or count too many employees (false positives). It also does not account for the importance of the role of employees. For details, see Laurer (2020).

	development aid remains out of reach for most Member States. • The historical differences between Member States with strong development policy priorities and those without remain.	
Policy coherence	*Sub-level: Moderate* • The Development Assistant Committee reports by the OECD testify to low levels of coherence between the EU's internal and external policies.	*Sub-level: Low* • Continued efforts to improve policy coherence do not yield substantial results.

Source: Authors.

Cohesion is an internal dimension of actorness corresponding to a political collective's ability to speak with a single voice. The concept of internal cohesiveness in this section denotes the existence of joint narratives along with common targets and policy goals among Member States and EU institutions. Furthermore, putting in place governance and enforcement mechanisms that ensure achievement of the targets increases cohesion. Achieving common targets can also be seen as evidence of a high level of EU actorness in this dimension.

Internal cohesion is closely linked with a number of external dimensions of actorness such as *attractiveness* and *credibility*. The ability to speak with a single voice is viewed by the literature as a precondition for a political entity's capacity to be a normative actor in a given policy field. According to Manners, the 'expansion of the EU's normative basis on the world stage' is dependent upon whether the EU can 'legitimate itself as being more than the sum of its parts' by speaking with a single voice and demonstrating ability to operationalise the concept of sustainable development within and between EU institutions and Member States (Manners 2002: 244; Lightfoot and Burchell 2005: 79). At the same time, coordinating the bloc's position in the area of sustainable development comes at a price: it has been argued by EU officials that 'coordinated positions are always compromises, they are not as sharp and pro-active as they should be, and the compromises really smooth out all the edges of our positions' (Rasch 2008).

The main differences between the MDG and SDG phases when measuring the EU's cohesion lie in the scope, the political sensitivity and the importance (as perceived by political actors) of the policy areas affected by the goals set in the respective phases. In this regard, it can be argued that the MDGs were to a very large extent one-dimensional compared with the SDGs. While the MDG agenda centred around (topical) development aid provided by rich countries to poor countries – which is traditionally considered a 'soft' policy field – the SDGs consist of a holistic framework covering many 'hard' and politically contested policy areas, such as trade, migration, agriculture and the rule of law.

Therefore, at face value it can be said that due to the expansion of policy fields under the SDG agenda, achieving a high level for the cohesion dimension became more challenging compared with the MDG phase.

2.3.1 The MDG phase

Following adoption of the MDGs, EU cooperation in the area of development policy was seen as gaining momentum (Hadfield, Manners and Whitman 2017). This is evidenced in a number of strategy documents adopted in this period, such as the European Consensus on Development (2005), which is a landmark agreement between the Commission, the Council and Parliament spelling out the common vision of Member States and EU institutions for achievement of the MDGs[17]. The consensus was a welcome sign of growing common ambition in this field, however, it also raised concern as to whether such ambitious goals may come at the expense of losing strategic focus on development policies. According to the OECD, '[t]here is a risk that the ambitious, multiple objectives of the consensus, [which] included expanded political ones, could diffuse a focus on development and undermine long-term strategic priorities' (OECD 2007a). Indeed, it soon became apparent that the common targets would not be reached because Member States and the institutions had competing political priorities. For example, during the debates leading up to the MFF 2007-2013, many Member States proposed 'to cut the aid component and blur distinctions between anti-poverty resources and allocations for security and foreign policy expenditure', which created risks of trading human development goals for security goals (Woods 2005).

Since development is a shared competence of Member States and the EU, it was possible for EU and national policies to develop side-by-side. Member States preferred to keep primary control over their national development policies and therefore, the EU's efforts for boosting cohesiveness took the form of soft law measures. Although these initiatives improved the appearance of internal cohesiveness on the global stage, they often did not translate into substantive convergence of national development policies (Hadfield, Manners and Whitman 2017). According to Development Commissioner Poul Nielson (1999-2004), 'some [Member States] have accepted these initiatives because they are considered not important, as development is typically a "soft" policy field' (Olsen 2013).

As a result, national policies did not go through a 'Europeanisation' and compliance with the agreed commitments, such as reaching a 0.7 % GNI target for development aid, did not materialise in most Member States. More specifically, it is possible to differentiate between three groups of Member States in this period: first, the Nordic group, including

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[17] Other examples include procedural policy initiatives, such as the EU Code of Conduct and Division of Labour (2007); EU Strategy for Africa (2005); and the Joint Africa EU Strategy (2007) the Agenda for Change (2011); the Communication on EU budget support (2012); and the EU 'A Decent Life for All' position on the post-2015 framework for SDGs (2013).

Sweden, Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the UK, have historically met the 0.7 % target. Second, Member States such as Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and members of the 2004-2007 enlargement rounds have considerably lagged behind the target. And lastly, the remaining Member States, although they reached significant aid budgets, have not met the target of 0.7 % (Hadfield, Manners and Whitman 2017).

The Development Assistance Committee Peer Review by the OECD in 2007 highlighted that developed countries' increased interest in poverty reduction and development policy (as a result of the MDG momentum) was a positive development. But at the same time it warned that the European countries' overlapping memberships in the EU, the OECD and the G8 create challenges for overall policy coordination in the field (OECD 2007b). The Peer Review from 2007 as well as a Eurobarometer study from 2005 both emphasised that development policy 'is a legitimate and appropriate' EU-level policy competence and one where the role of the EU can and does have a value-added impact distinct and separate from the Member States' (Hadfield, Manners and Whitman 2017: 37; European Commission 2011a). Thus, the classical subsidiarity question revealed that common, as opposed to individual, Member State action is preferred in this area.

Yet, the fragmentation among Member States is also apparent in the amount of aid that is not channelled through EU institutions but instead through bilateral cooperation with developing countries in this period (OECD 2011; 2014). In the context of untying aid, the Commission was also not successful in reaching a compromise between Nordic (e.g. UK, Sweden, the Netherlands) and southern donors (Spain, Portugal and France) for untying Member States' bilateral policies (Carbone 2007).

In addition to boosting development aid via drawing global actors' attention to the growing inequalities between the Global North and South, the MDGs, and in particular MDG 8 (develop a global partnership for development), exposed the need to create synergy between foreign aid on the one hand and other 'non-aid policies' on the other. In preparation for the Millennium +5 Summit, the EU demonstrated global leadership by agreeing on an ambitious policy coherence for development (PCD) agenda (Carbone 2008). The international community, including the Development Assistance Committee, welcomed the EU's united stance and acknowledged that the bloc 'has actively contributed to the growing international consensus on policy coherence' (OECD 2007b).

Nonetheless, the peer reviews by the Development Assistance Committee highlighted on multiple occasions that despite the ambitious joint policy goals, the EU is lagging behind in operationalising policy coherence for development and remarkable differences between Member States remain in this respect (ibid.). Halfway towards the expiration of the MDGs, in 2008, at least 11 Member States either did not have a national PCD tool (Cyprus, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta and Slovenia) or did not operationalise existing PCD documents into formal institutional and administrative mechanisms (Belgium, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Poland and Slovakia) (Mackie et al. 2007).

Altogether, it can be said that while this phase witnessed a noticeable increase in foreign development budgets, it cannot be said that true internal cohesion among Member States and EU institutions accompanied these developments. Although similar policy goals and collective positions between Member States and EU institutions formally existed in this period, the priorities, preferences and values of different actors, as expressed in substantive policies, were still rather mixed.

2.3.2 The SDG phase

With adoption of the SDGs, a universal political agenda encompassing virtually all policy fields was created. The discourse over PCD was also extended to cover the whole range of sustainable development policies. As a result, the policy coherence for sustainable development became a 'multi-directional' instrument. It is noted that the 'relatively focused task of seeking better outcomes for the poor in developing countries has been transformed into a much more complex endeavour in which better outcomes are sought across many policy sectors, for all countries and for future generations as much as for the poor now' (Mackie, Ronceray and Spierings 2017). The ambitious and expansive agenda increased the complexity of ensuring internal cohesion among Member States and EU institutions.

In fact, while some considered the EU a global leader of the SDG agenda in 2015, internally it was more divided than ever and at a crossroads, with its Member States and political parties questioning its most fundamental values. Political agendas and public opinion in EU Member States became increasingly linked to populist political discourse, which in turn posed a threat to actors' capacity, willingness and interest in cooperating on a number of politicised SDG policy areas – such as migration, security and the rule of law. An anonymous expert interview revealed that G77 countries saw the EU critically in negotiations on the SDGs and environmental agreements. 'The EU' was seen as an incohesive group, with divergent interests in the Member States and thus the words and actions announced by the Commission remained unclear and unreliable according to the expert.

Hence, the EU's internal cohesion still shows a remarkable difference between the overarching EU agenda and national policies, and also a remarkable divergence among Member States. The controversies around the Global Compact for Migration, whose origins can be traced back to the SDG agenda, illustrate well the EU's inability to speak with a single voice on politically sensitive SDG topics. Member States of the EU did not vote consistently at the UN General Assembly, as three Member States (Czechia, Hungary and Poland) voted against the resolutions and five others (Austria, Bulgaria, Italy, Latvia and Romania) abstained. This event was seen as a challenge to the EU's united stance in external action and ignorance of the principle of sincere cooperation, as enshrined in Article 4(3) TEU (Vosyliūtė 2019).

The lack of policy coherence for sustainable development in the EU (Ashford and Renda 2016; SDSN/IEEP 2019) reverberates in significant differences in the performance of Member States in the SDG Index. According to the global 2019 SDG Index prepared by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, all 10 countries closest to achieving the SDGs are in the EU; however, no EU Member State is on track to achieving the goals, and some of the remaining Member States are significantly falling behind in the ranking.

This situation has triggered an important change in governance of the European Semester, recently announced by the European Commission: the European Semester will now be partly reoriented towards the SDGs. More specifically, the Annual Growth Survey was renamed the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey, and the country-specific recommendations now focus on two aspects: (i) the immediate fiscal, economic, employment and social responses to the crisis, with specific emphasis on health-related aspects; and (ii) the medium-term reform and investment priorities to put the economies back on track to sustainable and inclusive growth, while integrating the green transition and the digital transformation, all of this under the new umbrella framework of 'competitive sustainability'. But it is too early to conclude that the level of cohesion across Member States in terms of commitment to SDGs has been significantly boosted by such change.

In terms of cohesion, the EU's level of actorness in the SDG phase is moderate to low. Indeed, persisting support for fuel subsidies, deterioration in the rule of law, a wide dispersion in indicators related to human capital and increasing inequality in some Member States and many more indicators imply the existence of mixed values and mixed signals. The Annual Sustainable Growth strategy 2020 (December 2019) confirmed this:

> The contribution of the different levels of governance within the EU towards achieving the SDGs is complex due to the division of competences between Member States and EU institutions. While the transformational challenges are commonly shared, the starting point differs: some Member States are more exposed to economic, social and environmental risks or have more progress to make towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals. Differentiated, yet closely coordinated, policies in Member States are therefore necessary.

As things stand, the rankings for the SDGs and the spillovers caused by Member States portray a gloomy situation in terms of cohesion, and progress appears to be too slow (SDG Watch Europe 2020). Yet the new Sustainable Growth Strategy 2021 confirms that 'the Recovery and Resilience Facility must guide and build a more sustainable, resilient and fairer Europe for the next generation in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals' (European Commission 2021c).

2.4 RECOGNITION

Table 11. Recognition by sub-dimension and phase

Sub-dimension	MDG phase: 2000-2015	SDG phase: 2015-present
1. Formal recognition	*Sub-level: Moderate* • EU participation grows, bringing it status and action capability in organisations and negotiations. • The EU is not a formal member of most international organisations but has managed to establish a special status for itself in most of them and is therefore recognised as a main cooperation partner. • The EU is not an observer or partner of regional organisations but is cooperating with them by means of affiliated institutions, such as the European Investment Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. • The EU is the only non-state party to several treaties under UN auspices related to sustainable development and has been active in international sustainable development negotiations. It is recognised as a relevant actor in many specialised UN agencies.	*Sub-level: Moderate/high* • The EU is an active participant, and is often a sought-after cooperation partner with a unique and growing status in most organisations/ negotiations. • The EU has updated and renewed its agreements with some international organisations, as a way to strengthen cooperation efforts on the SDGs. • The EU has been granted observer status in some regional organisations and is increasingly active through its affiliated institutions in others. • The EU is granted enhanced observer status at the UN, which globally increases its action capability. It is highly active in the main international forums on sustainable development.
2. Recognition and media perception	*Sub-level* No digital media data available for this period.	*Sub-level: Moderate/high* • This sub-dimension measures recognition in terms of perception in international media articles. The EU is the third most mentioned actor compared with the G7 and BRICS countries in a dataset of 4 541 international media articles on sustainable development. Among the entities mentioned in the dataset, the EU represents a weighted 1.0 % of all entities, with only China and the US being mentioned more often (representing 1.9 % and 1.6 % of all mentioned entities, respectively). This leads to a 'moderate/high' level of recognition in terms of media perception.

Source: Authors.

Recognition can be defined as 'the view of other actors in the international system on the EU and their perception of the EU as a legitimate negotiation partner' (D3.2). Based on this definition, we have split the analysis of the EU's recognition into two parts:

(i) *Qualitative analysis of **formal recognition** of the EU*. We analyse the extent to which the EU is recognised as a legitimate partner (i.e. granted a formal status) in international and regional organisations and in international negotiations related to sustainable development.

(ii) *Standardised media analysis of **recognition of the EU as a media perception** in articles on sustainable development*. The degree of this form of recognition is approximated by counting how often the EU is mentioned in international media articles on sustainable development compared with the G7 and BRICS countries.

2.4.1 Formal recognition

The formal recognition dimension of actorness is defined as the **formal treatment of 'the EU as a legitimate negotiation partner'**. Formal recognition of the EU as an actor in the SDGs can thus partly be measured by its **participation and representation in global organisations** directly tackling the topic of sustainable development. In an international organisation, the legal status attributed to the EU and the rights and obligations deriving from it indicate whether non-EU countries in that institution accept the EU as a participant in decision-making about, and implementation of, cooperation agreements in addition to (or in place of) EU Member States (Jupille and Caporaso, 1998). Therefore, this indicates recognition of the EU as a relevant actor.

This point especially applies to sustainable development as it is not an exclusive EU competence but is shared with the Member States. As Marsh and Mackenstein (2005) note, 'the sui generis nature of the EU means that international organisations and forums vary in their willingness to recognise it [the EU] as an actor in its own right as opposed to its constituent Member States'. This leads, in turn, to substantial variations in the rights of the European Commission in different international organisations.

It must be noted that the European Commission not being granted a formal status or membership can also come from the fear of non-EU countries of an increase in EU power, from their unfamiliarity with the division of competences between EU Member States and the European Commission, or from the fact that membership is only open to nation states. On the other hand, it can also come from the political resistance of Member States themselves to handing over important representational tasks to Brussels (which here overlaps with the *authority* dimension).

Three different kinds of participation in international efforts for sustainable development can be distinguished for the purpose of this analysis:

- **international organisations** in which nation states and sometimes other actors like the EU actively take part in the decisions and actions;
- **international negotiations** and subsequent agreements in which actors can take part in the work over the years and in the negotiation rounds;
- **regional organisations** in which non-regional actors can undertake the role of observer or partner.

To assess EU participation in these cases, it is necessary to also look at the participation and representation of other main global actors, such as the US and China, along with France and Germany as individual Member States. For a comparison between the MDG and SDG eras, we look more precisely at the evolution of this participation over time. Note that states are not the ideal point of comparison for a supranational organisation like the EU, due to the *sui generis* nature of the EU. Yet amid the lack of direct 'supranational peers', states nonetheless provide a useful reference point to assess the formal level of recognition of the EU.

2.4.1.1 International organisations

The international organisations considered here to assess the EU's formal recognition in sustainable development policymaking are the following: the OECD, World Bank, Global Environmental Facility and the UN (and its different agencies and programmes), the International Development Law Organisation, International Labour Organization (ILO) and IMF.

These international organisations were chosen as having the most decision-making power over global issues and being most related to sustainable development. Looking at EU representation and participation in these international organisations enables us to assess the legal recognition of the EU by the international community as an actor to tackle the issue of sustainable development. We assume that the EU is recognised as an actor in the area if it has acquired action capability (e.g. legal status, voting rights) in the relevant institutions, while it is assumed to be less recognised if it merely has informal status and plays an inferior role compared with other actors.

The European Union is not an official member of any of the international organisations mentioned above, but it has been attributed a special status in all of them. In the OECD for instance, the EU is not a member but has had a unique status since 1960 in accordance with Supplementary Protocol No. 1 to the OECD Convention, which states: 'The European Commission shall take part in the work of the Organisation'.

Like all the member countries, the EU maintains a Permanent Delegation to the OECD, composed of an ambassador and diplomats. The ambassador helps formulate the programme of work and the other members of the delegation sit on the OECD's various specialised committees, which monitor the work of the Secretariat in accordance with the programme of work. Notably, the EU does not contribute to the budget of the OECD, and its representative is not entitled to vote when legal acts are being adopted by the Council, the decision-making body of the OECD. The ambassador may, however, be elected as a member of the bureau of subsidiary bodies, and participates fully in the preparation of texts, including legal acts, with an unrestricted right to make proposals and suggest changes. This participation of the EU in the OECD started at the very creation of the organisation in 1961. Since then, the formal status of the EU in the OECD has remained the same.

In comparison, the United States benefits from full membership: being part of the Council, the US ambassador, in consultation with peers, agrees the programme of work which is described in the annual report and establishes the amount of the annual budget. Apart from the budget, the standard membership of the US does not allow for much more action capability than the special status of the EU.

China, on the other hand, is not a member of the OECD. Even so, the parties have developed a working relationship: in October 1995, the OECD Council agreed on a programme of dialogue and cooperation with China. Since then, the OECD has contributed to policy reform in China by sharing its member countries' experiences in a range of areas. In response, China puts its own policy experience on the table for scrutiny and discussion by OECD member countries. The OECD Council at the ministerial level adopted a resolution on 16 May 2007 to strengthen cooperation with China through a programme of enhanced engagement. While enhanced engagement is distinct from accession to the OECD, it has the potential in the future to lead to membership. For now, this enhanced engagement is still less powerful than the special status granted to the EU, as it grants China fewer rights to directly participate in the OECD's work.

With other organisations, the EU has signed partnership or framework agreements that enable it to take part in the organisation's work and provide for strengthened cooperation in the parties' actions towards sustainable development. The EU started to get involved in such agreements after 2000, leading to an intensification of cooperation and consultation, at both the strategic and operational levels. In 2001, the first framework agreement with the World Bank was signed; in 2004, the Strategic Partnership Agreement with the UNDP was signed; around 2003-2004, both a new administrative agreement and a strategic partnership for development cooperation were signed with the ILO. The EU continues to review and update them over the years. The agreement with the World Bank was updated in 2016 and renewed in 2020[18]. Also in 2020, the EU and

[18] The European Commission and the World Bank Group first signed a framework agreement in 2001, which was updated and expanded in 2016, and renewed in 2020. After the Covid-19 crisis erupted, Axel van

the IMF signed a new Financial Framework Partnership Agreement (renewing the one of 2017) in order to 'boost their cooperation to tackle key challenges including climate change, and help countries achieve the Sustainable Development Goals' (European Commission 2020d).

Looking at other actors, the United States was a leading force in the establishment of the World Bank and the IMF in 1944 and remains their largest shareholder today. As the only World Bank shareholder that retains veto power over changes in the bank's structure, the US plays a unique role in influencing and shaping development priorities. By contrast, the EU does not have any leadership or other role in the decision-making process regarding the choice or implementation of development policies and programmes by the World Bank.

China joined the World Bank in 1980 and is now working actively within the institution. In terms of voting power, it is ranked third with 4.69 % of voting rights (behind the US with 15.67 % and Japan with 7.61 % of voting rights). France and Germany, which respectively joined the World Bank in 1945 and 1952, are also among the top eight countries in voting power, both with around 4 %. It can therefore be concluded that recognition of the EU within this institution is not as high as that of other global actors, as not being an official member means it is not granted voting or other actual decision rights. The same conclusion can be drawn from the EU's involvement in IMF activities. Bearing in mind the supranational status of the EU and the restrictions that entails in access to formal status, the EU can be considered to be highly involved in international organisations as a recognised partner.

The EU became a member of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in 1991 and since then, both parties have collaborated through countless programmes all over the world. Today, the EU is an active participant and formal member of several FAO-related activities and agreements, including fisheries commissions, the Codex Alimentarius Commission harmonising food standards and the International Plant Protection Convention. In terms of its rights, the EU can only act in spheres of its competence. As membership rights are 'to be exercised on an alternative basis' with the EU Member States (Article 2, FAO constitution), the EU and its Member States have to declare on every single agenda item before every meeting how the competence is divided between them and whether the EU or its Member States are going to vote (Heliskoski,2000). Despite its membership status, the EU may not automatically participate in committees and its representatives cannot be elected to official positions.

Trotsenburg, the World Bank Managing Director for Operations stated that '[o]ur partnership with the European Commission is now more important than ever as we work together to end extreme poverty, increase shared prosperity, and improve the lives of millions of people around the world'.

Hence, overall formal membership does not provide the EU with significant additional recognition in some areas covered by the FAO because non-EU members have carefully delimited the leeway of EU activity. Meanwhile, the United States, China and France have been members of FAO since 1945 – and Germany since 1950. Being full members on their own, they benefit from broader participation and more opportunities to be represented in administration and executive positions.

The EU is still perceived as a main cooperation partner regarding sustainable development policymaking: even though it is not officially a member of the main global organisations, special status and agreements are put in place in order for the EU to have a seat at the table, and to contribute and cooperate in some way with the organisation. The EU has acquired a high degree of action capability in sustainable development issues governed by international institutions, even without formal membership, implying at least some recognition of the EU as a relevant actor. However, the recognition of its actorness does not go as far as to grant it the same power and action capability as given by member status.

As for the evolution over time, the EU's participation in most of these organisations goes back to before the MDGs were implemented in 2000. Renewed agreements and enhanced participation of the EU have punctuated the following years, often as a way to strengthen cooperation in efforts to reach the SDGs.

2.4.1.2 Participation in international negotiations and ratification of subsequent agreements

The international negotiations and subsequent agreements and treaties dealing with sustainable development mainly occur under the auspices of the UN. Participation and ratification of agreements at the regional and subregional levels, like the protection of a natural area or other issues geographically restricted (which are often handled at the regional level), makes assessment of the EU's recognition difficult in comparison with other global actors. In this context, the multilateral agreements and treaties relating to sustainable development that we take into account in assessing the EU's recognition in this field are therefore those that have been launched multilaterally at the UN level since its creation in 1945 which involve non-EU actors. The comparison with other countries here is different from the comparison of the EU's presence in international organisations: for a start, when the EU is a party to major international negotiations, this shows that it is recognised as an important actor to negotiate with, as opposed to negotiating with Member States individually. The participation of China, the US, France and Germany in these agreements is further analysed to draw additional comparisons.

The EU has had permanent observer status at the UN since 1974, being represented by the state holding the rotating Council presidency. In 2001, the EU became the first non-state entity to host a UN summit: the UN conference on the least developed countries, which took place in Brussels. In 2011, the EU benefited from enhanced participation, which it had been requesting for a few years. This means that it was granted, among other rights, the right to speak in debates and to submit proposals and amendments. This was accompanied by an additional special feature allowing the European Council President to address the General Assembly on behalf of all the EU Member States.

Moreover, it benefits from observer status in most of the UN specialised agencies (e.g. in the World Health Organisation) and is a full voting member of three UN bodies (European Council n.d.). As a further example, the EU is a full participant in the UN on the Commission on Sustainable Development (which in 2013 became the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development), as well as the Forum on Forests and the FAO. Also, it is now jointly represented by the President of the European Council, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the European Commission and the EU delegations.

The EU is a party to some 50 international UN agreements as the only non-state participant. This participation started quite some time ago with the European Economic Community being party to many international conventions on, *inter alia*, the protection of animals, of the environment, of children and the rights of persons with disabilities. In the field of sustainable development, the EU has signed over 33 agreements since the 1970s, with 20 signed before the year 2000 and 13 afterwards. In comparison, France is a party to 27 of the same 33 agreements, Germany and the US of 21 (taking into account the Paris Agreement for the US) and China of 16. Among those 33 agreements to which the EU is a party, it has a mixed competence (divided with some Member States) in 25, and an exclusive one in only 8.

Regarding the most important initiatives in international negotiations on sustainable development, the EU was part of the Commission on Sustainable Development, a body under the UN Economic and Social Council tasked with overseeing the outcomes of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development/Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, in which it generally had a positive and progressive image. The EU actively participated in the preparation of the work and in projects for providing analytical inputs to the subsequent conferences, Rio+10 and Rio+20. This Commission became the High-Level Political Forum in 2013, in which the EU remained an important actor.

These major global conferences on sustainability have embedded the concept of sustainable development into policy debates and to a large extent, through them the EU has developed as a global environmental actor and has tried to shape global debates about sustainable development. The EU was indeed identified as a leading protagonist in the development of and support for the Kyoto Protocol on climate change and in acknowledging a broader environmental commitment to preventing grave damage to the environment and ensuring sustainable development. On environmental discussions, the EU has been one of the main actors in international negotiations, as later seen in the 2015

Paris Agreement. What is more, the EU is an actor in other institutional forums, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate, in which China, the US, France and Germany are also members.

Another important development for the EU's recognition in international negotiations was the foundation of the European External Action Service in 2010. While its role pertains more to security policy than to classical (sustainable) development policy, it did play an internationally recognised role in advancing the negotiations with Iran for a nuclear deal (Jessen 2017), thereby contributing to securing international peace (SDG 16). Still, the extent to which the External Action Service can establish the EU as a recognised actor next to the Member States remains to be seen, given that foreign and security policy remains mostly in the sovereign hands of Member States.

In summary, when it comes to international negotiations on issues related to sustainable development, the EU's formal recognition has grown over the years. While it formally does not have the same legal status or power as, e.g. the US or China, its formal recognition is growing as a relevant actor and discussion partner in some fields (e.g. environmental agreements). The EU has managed to create a personalised status for itself – not without struggle – within the UN. However, this special status does not grant to the EU any voting rights in the UN nor the right to sit on the Security Council, meaning the EU cannot benefit from a veto power, which reduces its negotiating power at the level of these international organisations. This participation of the EU in major international agreements and conventions started decades ago and proliferated more with the MDGs than the SDGs (since 2015, only the Paris Agreement).

2.4.1.3 Regional organisations

The regional organisations considered to assess the EU's formal recognition in sustainable development are the following: the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Caribbean Development Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the Arctic Council and the Central American Integration System.

Looking at the EU's participation in these regional organisations enables analysis of the EU's recognition by other countries (mostly developing and emerging ones): one can see the EU's presence as an observer in these organisations as an indicator of formal recognition. Mirroring the view of the above discussion, we assume that the EU is recognised as a relevant actor in a regional institution if it has acquired a status of partner or observer, contrasting with no role at all.

In the organisations mentioned above, the EU has observer status in 2 out of 9: the Association of Caribbean States, since 2009, and the Central American Integration System since 2013. Additionally, the EU signed a Cooperative Framework Arrangement with the

African Development Bank in 2014, as a way to coordinate efforts on the SDGs. Simultaneously, the EU is also partly present in these organisations by means of other European institutions like the European Investment Bank or the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The EIB, which is the only bank owned by and representing the interests of the 27 EU Member States to implement EU policy, is a partner of the Asian Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. These collaborations imply some cooperation in the implementation of sustainable development policies through project financing and point at a strong network of influence of the EU institutions. With the Asian Development Bank for instance, the EIB signed a Memorandum of Understanding in order to cooperate on parallel financing for projects in the Asia and Pacific region, demonstrating the recognition of EU institutions in the work towards international sustainable development.

As an additional point of comparison, we analyse the representation of the US, China, France and Germany. Note that the *sui generis* character of the EU makes it complicated to find an appropriate comparison point to derive a 'level' of recognition. We acknowledge that nation states are not the ideal entities to compare with a supranational union; yet, this pragmatic decision gives us a reference for assessing the EU's recognition as an actor, while taking into account the limitations of such a comparison for the analysis.

France and Germany benefit from an observer or non-regional member status in 8 of these regional organisations, while the US and China are each represented in the same way in 5 of them. Compared with global actors, the EU – represented by the European Commission – is not recognised as a main dialogue partner among non-European organisations related to sustainable development. This is once again not surprising, as the EU is only a supranational organisation and not a state. It is therefore rarely an observer or a partner but is represented by some of its institutions (EIB, EBRD and ESM). Moreover, some improvements have been made in the SDG period in granting it a more formal status and this might be expected to continue.

2.4.1.4 Summary of findings

The EU's status in international and regional organisations and its participation in international negotiations and agreements have been analysed to assess the formal recognition of the EU in sustainable development policymaking. The evolution over time of the EU's participation in this international policy arena has also been analysed, to distinguish between the two periods of the MDGs (around 2000) and the SDGs (around 2015). Note that the EU's formal recognition has been compared with the formal status of key nation states like the US as a reference point for a very high degree of actorness. It is of course not surprising that the EU's formal recognition is lower than that of key nation states as it is a supranational institution. The comparison, however, is useful as there is a lack of other comparative reference points due to the *sui generis* nature of the EU.

- **International organisations.** The EU does not have full membership in the international organisations analysed while other global actors (the US, China, France and Germany) all have major roles in terms of membership, voting rights and veto power. While this shows the leading role of nation states in international relations, the EU is recognised as a main cooperation partner by being granted a special status – e.g. observer status or associated membership – in all of the organisations. That is especially the case for agreements signed between the EU and these organisations that grant it a seat at the table and enable the EU to contribute on an operational level. Even without formal full membership, there is some recognition of the EU as a relevant actor to involve in international sustainable development policymaking.

  As for the evolution over time, the EU's participation in most of these organisations goes back to before the MDGs were implemented in 2000. Renewed agreements and the enhanced participation of the EU have punctuated the years afterwards, often as a way of strengthening cooperation to reach the SDGs.

- **International negotiations.** In the international forums focused on sustainable development, the EU does not have the same formal status (and therefore power) as nation states. Nonetheless, it has been a permanent observer at the UN General Assembly since 1974, and was granted additional rights in 2011, such as to speak in debates and submit proposals, i.e. take part in the work of different UN agencies. In international environmental negotiations (e.g. at the UNFCCC) or in the FAO, the EU has for instance been recognised as one of the main actors since the 1990s.

- **Regional organisations.** The EU is rarely an observer or a partner. Compared with key nation states, it is less represented in these organisations. Some progress regarding the EU's representation in these organisations has been made in the SDG period. Moreover, the EU is still cooperating with these regional organisations by means of affiliated institutions, such as the EIB and EBRD.

2.4.2 Approximating recognition via media analyses

Besides formal recognition, more generally recognition can be understood as 'the act of acknowledging or respecting another being, such as when we "recognise" someone's status' (McQueen n.d.). Based on this broader understanding, we analyse recognition in terms of the EU's perception in international media, in order to supplement the preceding analysis of formal recognition.

To operationalise recognition as a media perception, we make a simplified assumption: the more an actor is mentioned in international media, the more it is recognised as such.

This assumption is a simplification, but we argue that it provides a proxy of recognition. Take the example of climate negotiations: journalists will cover those actors who they recognise to be relevant during a round of negotiations and will not cover many other actors who they do not deem to be relevant enough for their readers[19]. This coverage not only reflects the perceptions of journalists, but also shapes public and elite perceptions. For the reader of a news article, certain actors 'existed' during the negotiation because they were covered, while many other actors were not mentioned and are therefore less likely to be perceived and recognised as relevant actors.

We operationalise this idea by counting how often an actor is mentioned in international news media articles. While a simple count neglects the semantic and grammatical context in which the actor is mentioned, the sum of mentions of an actor also indicates the extent to which that actor is recognised in general terms – be it positively or negatively. If the US or China are intensely criticised for an action, the mere criticism implicitly recognises that their actions are important, while other actors have such a low level of recognition that they are not even worth mentioning. Similarly, if the EU is mentioned for its inaction in environmental negotiations, then this criticism is made based on the implicit assumption that the EU has the potential to be more active.

2.4.2.1.1 Empirical results

The table below ranks all G7+BRICS countries and the EU by how often they are mentioned in a sample of 4 541 articles from 12 countries on sustainable development compared with other actors. Based on this analysis, the EU represents a weighted 1.0 % of all entities mentioned in the sample. The articles in the sample mention many different countries, locations, organisations and people (around 50 000), and a weighted 1.0 % of them are words like 'EU', 'European Union', 'European Commission' or 'Europe'[20]. Compared with the G7 and BRICS countries, the EU is the third most mentioned actor[21]. Many journalists in different countries seem to consider the EU worth mentioning in their articles on sustainable development, which indicates a relatively high level of recognition

[19] Prominence and significance are two of several news factors that determine whether an event is reported in the media (Staab 1990).

[20] Note that the word 'Europe' was included in the keywords linked to the EU. This probably led to false positives, where the media did not talk specifically about the EU, but Europe more generally. At the same time, there are many instances where the media talk about 'Europe's new privacy law' or 'Europe is united in the Brexit negotiations', where the word 'Europe' does refer to the EU. This ambiguity could unfortunately not be solved and probably leads to an overestimation of the EU's mentions. To counteract this bias in favour of higher counts of the EU, only non-European media were included for calculating the statistics for the EU. This means that mentions of the EU in French, German, Italian and UK media are not included in the statistics. The numbers therefore represent the non-European perception of the EU.

[21] Note that the 'share_weighted' value is higher for the EU than for India, although India has a higher 'count_total'. This is due to the fact that the total count for India includes the non-Indian media from all 11 BRICS+G7 countries, while the total count for the EU includes the non-European media from the 7 non-European BRICS+G7 countries. This counteracts a bias for higher mentions of the EU in European media.

of the EU in international media. For this sub-dimension of recognition, this leads to a 'moderate/high' level of recognition. A comparative analysis between the MDG and SDG phase is unfortunately not possible, as digital news articles were only available in sufficient numbers from around the adoption date of the SDGs onwards (2010-2020).

Table 12. Counting key actors in articles related to sustainable development

Rank	Actors	Share of mentions (weighted)	Total count of mentions	Share of mentions scaled
1	China*	1.9 %	2 117	5
2	USA*	1.6 %	1 912	4.5
3	**EU***	**1.0 %**	**707**	**3.5**
4	India*	0.7 %	718	2.8
5	UK*	0.6 %	559	2.7
6	France*	0.6 %	694	2.7
7	Russia*	0.5 %	481	2.5
8	Germany*	0.4 %	445	2.4
9	Brazil*	0.4 %	365	2.3
10	Japan*	0.3 %	335	2.2
11	Italy*	0.3 %	329	2.1
12	South Africa*	0.2 %	239	2.1
13	Canada*	0.2 %	245	2

Source: Authors.

2.5 ATTRACTIVENESS

Table 13. Attractiveness by sub-dimension and phase

Sub-dimension	MDG phase: 2000-2015	SDG phase: 2015-present
1. EU normative attractiveness	*Sub-level: Low* • Evidence of a clear policy emulation is lacking.	*Sub-level: Moderate/high* • Neighbouring and accession countries take the EU's policies as a reference. Partnerships with third countries can also lead to some policy emulation and exchanges of best practice. • A specific case of policy emulation by third countries is the EU Taxonomy Regulation.
2. EU instrumental/ economic attractiveness	*Sub-level: Low/moderate* • Environmental, social and governance (ESG) requirements are not established yet and the level of ESG investment in the EU is low.	*Sub-level: Moderate/high* • The EU's regulatory environment becomes more attractive for ESG investment and the level of ESG investment rises.

Source: Authors.

Attractiveness is one of the external dimensions that defines the EU's actorness. It refers to 'the willingness to cooperate with the EU. It describes how much other actors perceive cooperation with the EU as something worth striving for. It is defined by both, the economic attractiveness of the EU, but also the values and norms or the EU's soft powers'[22]. Based on this definition, attractiveness can be divided into two sub-dimensions: a normative and an instrumental dimension. **Normative attractiveness** is the extent to which other actors view EU policies related to the SDGs as best practices worthy of emulation. **Instrumental attractiveness** is related to the ability of the EU to attract other actors to engage cooperation that generates benefits from an economic, political or geopolitical perspective. To determine the EU's level of attractiveness, it is compared with other actors.

2.5.1 The EU's normative attractiveness

A method to assess the EU's normative attractiveness in the SDGs is to analyse how other global actors react to EU policies or guidelines related to the SDGs. The EU is considered attractive if governments of third countries are willing to emulate the EU's actions because they are considered good practice.

2.5.1.1 Sustainable investment and the EU taxonomy – a case study

In the past decade the market for sustainable investment has grown rapidly. This rapid growth created both opportunities and challenges, along with a need for international standards to address fragmentation. Policymakers have responded to this need by introducing policy measures to clarify terminologies, introduce standards, overcome resource and information disadvantages, avoid 'greenwashing' and increase certainty. To what extent have EU policies in this domain been emulated?

Recently, the **EU has been a 'first mover'** in the field of sustainable finance, particularly in providing a clear definition and classification of sustainable investment with the aim of avoiding greenwashing. In March 2018, the European Commission published the *EU Action Plan on Financing Sustainable Growth*. As a follow-up, the European Commission established a technical expert group (TEG) on sustainable finance – a group that is currently working on recommendations and guidance for the tools required to implement the action plan. The TEG is also working on the establishment of an EU green bond standard that will help to finance assets for the low-carbon transition envisaged by the European Commission.

Following the guidance and recommendation of the TEG, in June 2020 the European Commission adopted the EU Taxonomy Regulation ((EU) 2020/288), which sets up a classification system for environmentally sustainable activities. In other words, it helps

[22] Definition in TRIGGER project deliverable 3.1.

translate EU policy commitments included in the Paris Agreement and in the SDGs, for use in the capital markets[23]. Under the same action plan, in November 2019 the EU adopted a Regulation on sustainability-related disclosures in the financial services sector (Regulation (EU) 2019/2088), which lays down sustainability disclosure obligations for manufacturers of financial products and financial advisers towards end-investors.

Other jurisdictions outside the EU have addressed sustainable finance taxonomies and definitions. In China in 2015, the People's Bank of China issued '**the Chinese Taxonomy**' (also known as the Green Bond Endorsed Project Catalogue). In 2016, China's authorities issued guidelines for establishing green financial systems, which point out that a mandatory system for disclosing environmental information by listed companies should be established. The China Securities Regulatory Commission then issued policies regulating the standards, content and format for the information disclosure of listed companies. An amended Environmental Protection Law implemented in 2015 clarified the responsibility in environmental information disclosure of key polluting companies (UNPRI 2019:15). In addition, in November 2017, the ASEAN Capital Market Forum issued the ASEAN Green Bond Standards. In November 2018, the Asset Management Association of China published the 'Green Investment Guidelines'.

In 2020, UNDP published a 'Technical Report on SDG Finance Taxonomy' tailored to China, which is the first project classification system with impact assessment and reporting criteria that allows investors and project developers to clearly identify SDG-enabling projects (UNDP 2020). The taxonomy is explicitly influenced by the EU taxonomy: it uses the EU's criteria for excluding projects harmful to the SDGs, according to the principle of 'do no significant harm'.

Regulators have not created uniform criteria for defining sustainable economic activities in the US. Since the EU has taken the lead by issuing an action plan on financing sustainable growth and developing the EU taxonomy, investors in the US are considering the EU taxonomy as a reference to measure whether an investment contributes to environmental objectives, such as climate change mitigation or adaptation (Farmer and Thompson 2020). Indeed, although the EU taxonomy is not binding for non-EU financial market participants, as long as the US remains silent on these matters, investors may choose voluntarily to align with the EU taxonomy, thus showing a concrete potential for the EU taxonomy to influence international reporting frameworks over time.

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[23] An OECD report published in October 2020, *Developing Sustainable Finance Definitions and Taxonomies*, analyses the difference between some taxonomies or definitions published in the EU, China, Japan, France and the Netherlands. It states that EU taxonomy is unique in the level of detail of its compliance requirements. It sets six environmental objectives that are all interlinked with the do-no-significant-harm criterion.

In Asia, in 2012, the **Hong Kong** Stock Exchange (HKEX) and Clearing Limited released its *ESG Reporting Guide*, encouraging listed companies to disclose their environmental, social and governance (ESG) performance on an annual basis. In 2019, the Hong Kong Monetary Authority introduced several measures to develop the city as a regional hub for sustainable banking and green finance. The HKEX is also contributing to this trend by introducing ESG-focused listing requirements, enhancing corporate governance and transparency, and updating its reporting guidelines. Other countries in the Asia Pacific region, such as **Singapore, Japan, Indonesia and Taiwan,** are also following a similar path in promoting ESG at the heart of their investment strategies. For these countries, the *EU taxonomy* may provide common, comparable criteria to screen sustainable activities (KPMG 2020a).

In conclusion, the EU Taxonomy Regulation has emerged as a **relevant document for the classification of sustainable activities and other countries are emulating the EU's approach**. For other areas related to sustainable development, we did not identify empirical evidence that a piece of EU legislation or a policy has been clearly emulated by other countries worldwide.

2.5.1.2 Policies adopted by the EU's neighbouring countries and strategic partnerships

Another means for encouraging policy emulation is the EU's neighbourhood policy. By looking at the 2019 Voluntary National Reviews published by several countries on implementation of the SDGs (UNDESA 2019), it emerges that the EU is sometimes considered a reference point for the EU's neighbouring countries and for the EU's accession countries. In its Voluntary National Review, Bosnia and Herzegovina introduced a growth strategy – the Regional Competitiveness and Growth Strategy 2020 – that is explicitly inspired by the Europe 2020 strategy. Iceland considers the EU a reference for the elaboration of its statistical indicators (*Nordic statistical indicators*) to better reflect its progress towards reaching the SDGs compared with the indicators proposed by the UN. Serbia makes clear that the accession process to the EU is deeply linked to its transition towards sustainable development. Furthermore, several countries have highlighted in their Voluntary National Reviews their compliance with EU regulation on fisheries in relation to SDG 14.

Beyond the EU's neighbourhood policy, the EU has established strategic partnerships with several global actors to collaborate on sustainable development, showing a mutual interest in working with other countries towards achievement of the SDGs. In particular, partnerships and initiatives are a tool for international cooperation that enables the emulation of successful policies. An example demonstrating the use of a partnership as a tool through which mutual interests are pursued and which is based on the emulation of successful policies is the **partnership for digital transformation** between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean. It was established in a Joint Communication on the 'European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: Joining forces for a common future'.

This partnership is focused on SDG 9 (innovation and infrastructure). Digitalisation is seen as a powerful way for the LAC region to overcome its structural challenges and as a generator of new sectors, quality jobs, the development of capacities and innovation. According to European Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen, the EU's digital single market is an example of how digital integration can focus on including the public and supporting businesses (European Commission 2020e). This mirrors the *Latin America Economic Outlook* (2020), which makes clear that 'LAC stands to learn from other regions' experiences, particularly the EU's Digital Single Market, aimed at including citizens and their rights in the digital age, and at strengthening businesses' (OECD 2020b). This shows that in building a digital market, the LAC region could take advantage of the EU's internal experience and in particular the EU's digital strategy.

Another example is the programme for sustainable energy connectivity in Central Asia, as part of the partnership between the EU and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). The programme aims at boosting the use of **sustainable energy** in Central Asia, primarily leading towards the achievement of SDG 7 (access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy) and SDG 13 (fighting climate change) and secondarily fostering gender equality (SDG 5). The overall objective of the programme is to promote a more sustainable energy mix in the Central Asia region in line with EU best practices, as stated in the action document on *EU Support to Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia* (2020).

The above considerations show that the EU is considered an attractive actor by other countries in the area of sustainable development, especially in relation to specific SDGs, as third countries are willing to engage with the EU. By contrast, during the MDG phase the EU sporadically participated in partnerships with third countries or international organisations with the aim of delivering on the eight MDGs, but it mostly contributed to achievement of the goals by providing financial resources (European Commission 2015a).

2.5.1.3 Results of a perception study on the EU's attractiveness

A perception study requested by the European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments and conducted between January and November 2015 presents interesting findings on the attractiveness of the EU in some fields related to sustainable development (European Commission 2015b). The study refers to 10 countries: Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the US. The study analyses EU actorness by asking how 'influential', 'important' or 'attractive' the EU is in various fields: global economic affairs, the maintenance of global peace and stability, the fight against global climate change and protection of the environment, development cooperation, promotion and defence of human rights worldwide, the advance of technological progress worldwide, and in its culture and lifestyle.

Most respondents viewed the EU as 'somewhat' to 'very' influential and attractive in these domains related to the SDGs. In the same study it nonetheless emerged that the EU was rarely seen as a norm setter, apart from a few areas, such as renewable energy, technology, gender equality and gay rights. Still, a social media analysis carried out in the context of three important events, namely Europe Day, a G7 meeting and an EU summit, found that the EU has normative features in the following fields: human rights, good governance and sustainable development.

2.5.2 The EU's instrumental attractiveness

An indicator of the EU's instrumental/economic attractiveness in the sustainable development field is the EU's ability to attract and encourage sustainable investment by influencing the regulatory framework. The amount of sustainable investment can serve as a rough proxy for the EU's attractiveness from a sustainable investment perspective – signifying whether the EU's economic and regulatory environment encourages sustainable investment or not. Sustainable investment is that chosen by an investor which takes due account of ESG considerations in investment decisions[24, 25].

As shown in the figure below, ESG considerations are closely related to the SDGs: all 17 SDGs refer to at least one ESG consideration. SDG objectives and ESG considerations are both directed towards the creation of value in the long term in a comprehensive way, broadly involving different sectors and actors in society. As a report by the World Economic Forum (2019) states, ESG performance is seen as a barometer of a company's commitment and progress towards the SDGs, and the SDGs complement and support investor decisions that take ESG considerations into account. Indeed, private investment decisions oriented towards sustainable assets contribute significantly to successful achievement of the SDGs (Eurosif 2018a: 53).

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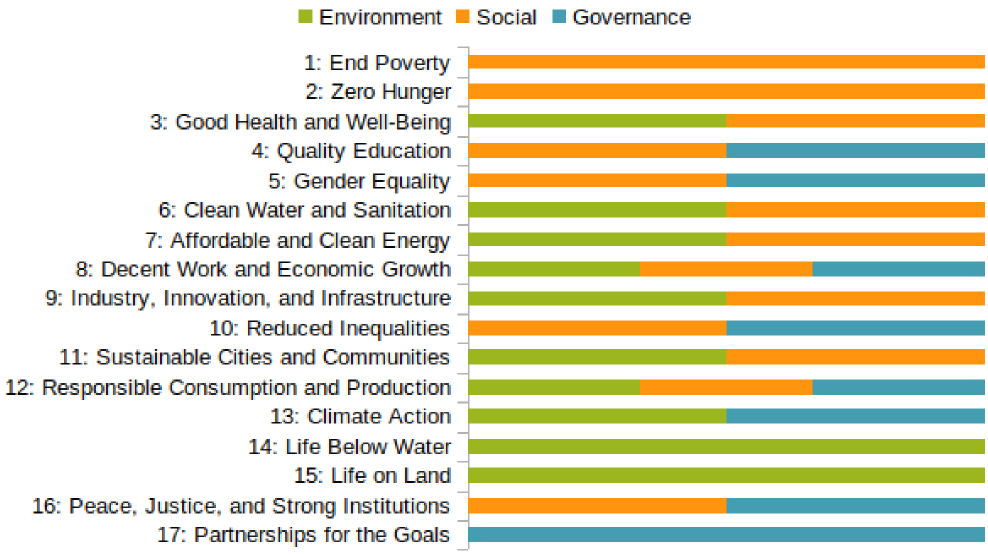
[24] Environmental considerations refer to climate change mitigation and adaptation, preservation of biodiversity, pollution prevention and the circular economy. Social considerations refer to inequality, inclusiveness, labour relations, investment in human capital and communities, and human rights issues. Governance considerations refer to management structures, employee relations and executive remuneration. https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/banking-and-finance/sustainable-finance/overview-sustainable-finance_en

[25] ESG integration is the most used sustainable investment strategy globally after the negative/exclusionary strategy. Global sustainable investment reached USD 30.7 trillion in the five major markets (the EU, United States, Japan, Canada, Australia and New Zealand).

Figure 11. General mapping of ESG considerations along the 17 SDGs



Source: Chakravarty (n.d.).

In 2006, the UN launched the Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI), a voluntary set of investment principles to which investors can commit. The PRI initiative encourages the incorporation of ESG matters into investment practices, to create a global financial system that is able to reward long-term, responsible investment which benefits the environment and society. However, two main events in 2015 – the 2030 Agenda with the SDGs and COP21 with the Paris Agreement – stimulated sustainable investment. Since the launch of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, investment decisions have been influenced by the increased visibility and urgency around the SDGs. PRI has shifted its focus from encouraging the incorporation of ESG matters to encouraging the selection of investment towards outcomes best aligned with the SDGs (PRI 2020). The attention on sustainable investment has gained even more importance since the pandemic. According to the 2020 EY Europe Attractiveness Survey, the pandemic has heightened consumer awareness of sustainability, putting increased pressure on the EU to continue to be an attractive environment for sustainable investment (Dhont and De Rose 2020).

2.5.2.1 Sustainable investment in the EU

Several reports state that the **EU is a frontrunner in sustainable investing**. A report by GSI Alliance published in 2018 provides important figures about sustainable investment in the EU:

(i) In 2018, the EU was the global leader in sustainable investing, with the highest amount of sustainable assets (USD 14.1 trillion) and with 46 % of global sustainable investment assets being located in the EU.

(ii) The growth rate between 2016 and 2018 was modest (11 %) and even decreased by 1 % compared with 2014-2016.

(iii) The percentage of sustainable investment assets relative to the total managed assets was 48.8 % but declined between 2014 and 2018 (GSI Alliance 2018).

Eurosif (2018a) shows that sustainability-themed investment, namely long-term investment associated with the SDGs, such as water scarcity, energy efficiency, carbon reduction, agriculture and access to education, **has grown substantially.** Between 2009 and 2017, it had a compound annual growth rate of 25 % over the 8 years (Eurosif 2018b).

Another element that indicates the broad presence of sustainable investment in the EU is the number of signatories to the UN PRI initiative, which publicly demonstrates the commitment of an organisation towards integrating ESG considerations into investment decisions. PRI signatories are **more densely located in the EU** than elsewhere: there are 1 728 signatories from the EU[26], 678 from the US and 51 from China (according to the PRI Signatory Directory). The commitments are voluntary (without legal obligation) but are increasingly seen as soft law, as the signatories are expected to comply with the commitment of integrating ESG considerations into investment decisions (PwC n.d.).

2.5.2.2 Sustainable investment outside the EU

Outside the EU, other governments are attributing increased importance to sustainability in investment. This shows a shift towards sustainability thanks to alignment on ESG considerations, a field where the EU is leading the way.

- **United States.** Although the US is the world's largest market for investors, it lags behind the EU when it comes to sustainable investing. In 2018, the US registered USD 12 trillion invested in sustainable assets, which represents 25.7 % of the total managed assets. The presence of sustainable investment assets is increasing in the US: 39 % of the total sustainable investments worldwide are located in the US. The US is planning a voluntary alignment with the EU taxonomy since it would likely attract capital from EU investors (Farmer and Thompson 2020).

- **China.** Although China does not present clear data about the amount of sustainable investment assets in the country, it seems that positive momentum has recently gathered for sustainable investing. The first UN PRI signatory from China only appeared in 2011; as of November 2019, the number had increased to 32. A report by the China Social Investment Forum indicates that China started later than EU Member States and the US in incorporating ESG considerations into

[26] Belgium & Luxemburg, CEE & CIS, France, Germany & Austria, the Netherlands, Nordics, southern Europe, UK & Ireland.

investment decisions (only 2 % of equities were ESG-oriented in 2019); however, the report projects an acceleration in the development of China's sustainable investment (CSIF 2019). As China's equity markets have gradually opened up internationally, ESG considerations have been propelled to the forefront, for internal reasons and for becoming more active in and aligned with the global arena (Lai and Templeton 2020).

- India. India has emerged as an important destination for SDG-related investment, even if ESG considerations are still not well integrated into investor decisions (Tandon 2020). India adopted a number of fiscal and policy measures to address climate change, increasing sustainable investment. Companies are signing up to the UN PRI and investors increasingly account for ESG considerations in their investment decisions. One of the main problems for India is the lack of definitions; on this aspect, the EU is considered an example to follow for the preparation of a taxonomy (Prakash and Purkayastha 2020).

In conclusion, the EU attracts the highest amount of sustainable investment, defined as investment that takes due account of ESG considerations, compared with countries outside the EU. In this subsection, the presence of sustainable assets in the EU is a proxy of its instrumental attractiveness in the area of sustainable development. This indicates that the EU has created a favourable economic and regulatory environment for sustainable investment. Furthermore, as the subsection on normative attractiveness has shown, clear legislation on sustainable finance is the basis for attracting investors motivated by ESG considerations. Other countries are looking closely at developments in EU legislation and many are following the EU as an example.

2.5.2.3 Final considerations on the level of attractiveness

The analysis above has shown that the EU is attractive in some specific areas. Recently, third countries have started to use the EU Taxonomy Regulation as a reference for the classification of financial instruments as sustainable. At the same time, EU neighbouring and accession countries look at EU policies and initiatives as a reference for their own. Studies have shown that the EU is attractive in some fields, such as sustainable development, human rights, climate mitigation and good governance. In addition, the EU has established partnerships with third countries that have an objective to achieve the SDGs, and the EU's best practices are often reproduced in those countries.

Finally, the EU is successful in attracting sustainable investment from private investors, showing that the EU's regulatory and economic environment is favourable for ESG investment. The amount of ESG investment in the EU can be considered a rough proxy for the EU's attractiveness from an ESG investment perspective and indicates that the EU is capable of stimulating it.

For the period around 2015, we attribute a moderate/high level of attractiveness to the EU when it comes to sustainable development. For the earlier period around the MDGs in 2000, there is no clear evidence on the EU's level of attractiveness. We did not observe the EU's normative or economic attractiveness probably because the conceptualisation of sustainable development was still at an early stage in the EU.

2.6 OPPORTUNITY/NECESSITY TO ACT

Table 14. Opportunity/necessity to act by sub-dimension and phase

Sub-dimension	MDG phase: 2000-2015	SDG phase: 2015-present
1. Trade and economic cooperation	*Sub-level: Moderate* • The EU used the momentum created by the MDGs to pursue a trade liberalisation agenda. • The first free trade agreements (FTAs) including a 'trade and sustainable development chapter' are adopted in 2009.	*Sub-level: Moderate* • Stuck in the middle of a trade war between the US and China, the EU turns to bilateral trade relations and assumes a defensive position. • The EU continues to include and expand TSD chapters in FTAs but does not move towards a binding framework.
2. Development cooperation	*Sub-level: Moderate* • The EU becomes the largest development aid donor globally. • There is minimal and ad hoc reaction to the growing Chinese presence in international development.	*Sub-level: Moderate* • The EU's opportunities for global leadership reduce as a result of China's growing assertiveness and Brexit. • The EU reacts to the funding and leadership gap created by Brexit in EU development policy and pushes EDF reform.
3. Peace, justice and strong institutions	*Sub-level: Moderate* • Actions are relatively uncoordinated in response to emerging crises.	*Sub-level: Low* • The EU continues to show varying levels of capacity to swiftly react to emerging crises. • The EU is an important advocate of human and political rights and shows pragmatism in forming alliances in its geographical neighbourhood (e.g. in Syria much more than in Myanmar or Venezuela).

Source: Authors.

Opportunity and necessity to act form an external dimension of actorness measuring the presence and position of the EU in the global policy arena. More specifically, this dimension refers to the actor constellation in the international arena, windows of opportunity that may emerge from changes in the policy preferences of other actors and the development of global trends. Accordingly, the purpose of this section is to identify key (transformative) processes which contributed to the reconfiguration of global power dynamics, as well as key global events. These events can require swift and coordinated reactions or open windows of opportunity for EU action in the area of sustainable development. Based on the identified trends and events, this section will examine whether the EU seized an opportunity to act, reacted to emerging necessities, and/or showed willingness to step out of the status quo to bring about transformative progress towards attainment of the MDGs and the SDGs in the respective phases[27].

Based on these observations, this section aims to answer two research questions: (i) what transformative processes and events in the global policy arena for SDGs created a necessity or opportunity for EU action? (ii) How can we describe the EU's responsiveness to changing opportunity structures and engagement in new actor constellations using the example of three case studies?

2.6.1 The changing global policy arena for sustainable development

Since the MDGs were adopted in 2000, the global power dynamics as well as policy preferences of principal global actors have transformed considerably. Declining normative uniformity, the rise of nationalism and populism in national politics, rule of law backsliding and increasing protectionism in trade all threaten the potential for global cooperation for the attainment of previously the MDGs and today the SDGs (Bodenstein, Faust and Furness 2017).

In particular, during President Donald Trump's term (2016-2020), the United States showed declining commitment to sustainable development and withdrew its support for multilateral cooperation (both in global governance institutions and in national foreign policy). The country entered into a dangerous trade war with China, exhibited denial of man-made climate change and attempted to reassert the country's normative dominance in a number of crucial human rights issues (e.g. in the area of female reproductive health) (Igoe 2019). Following the transition to the Biden administration, the international community is expecting an opportunity to reinstate multilateral cooperation with the US in climate and sustainable development issues. Nevertheless, it is still too early to judge whether the new President will try to reassert the country's leading role in the global policy arena for sustainable development.

At the same time, China has been showing a growing appetite to assume global leadership in social and environmental issues and become the main actor in international

[27] Whether the EU acts in reaction to an event or whether it takes the initiative to become the first-mover in a given field is largely dependent on other internal dimensions of actorness. For example, it is not possible for the EU to take an opportunity to act if it does not possess the relevant competences, authority, and resources in a given policy area. Furthermore, when internal cohesion is lacking on a given topic, the EU will often not be able to produce collective action.

development under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (Liu et al. 2020). China's evolving role in this area has resulted in the shrinking of the EU's scope of action and posed a challenge to its position as a normative leader in this domain by offering an alternative view of the social and political underpinnings of sustainability (Kloke-Lesch 2018).

While having suffered from numerous internal crises over the last two decades, on the global level, the **EU** is often seen as the last remaining global actor that is committed to rules-based multilateralism (Tocci 2018). As a result of the changing dynamics of global governance, which are increasingly characterised by unilateralism and power politics, the EU has faced numerous external developments that entailed a necessity to react, and also opened up opportunities for ambitious EU action. That said, the case studies below reveal that due to internal and external shocks, the EU has not always demonstrated an ability to seize these opportunities or react to external events.

2.6.2 Case studies on key policy areas

To evaluate the EU's capacity to react to emerging opportunities in the sustainability policy arena, it is necessary to narrow the focus of the analysis. The following subsections will therefore concentrate on three broad policy fields that are deemed central to sustainable development. More specifically, the selected policy areas are those where the EU is seen as 'having a capacity to innovate in multilateral systems' and where 'immediate windows of opportunity arose for the EU to fill the gap in a more and more fragmented multilateral system' (Gowan and Dworkin 2019). These are (i) trade and economic cooperation, (ii) international development cooperation, and (iii) peace, justice and strong institutions.

2.6.2.1 Trade and economic cooperation

International trade policy is seen as a pivotal area for cooperation in the context of sustainable development under the economic, social and environmental pillars[28]. For this reason, the positive and negative effects of trade on sustainable development have been important issues in the negotiations leading up to the adoption of both the MDGs and the SDGs (Stocchetti 2016). While international trade agreements can sometimes lead to worsening working conditions and have negative impacts on the environment by, for example, causing deforestation and biodiversity loss, they can also contribute to the protection of regulatory standards as well as social and environmental values.

[28] In particular, according to the WTO, trade contributes to delivering the following SDGs: SDG 1 (no poverty); SDG 2 (zero hunger); SDG 3 (good health and well-being); SDG 5 (gender equality); SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth); SDG 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure); SDG 10 (reduced inequalities); SDG 14 (life below water); SDG 17 (partnership for the goals). Available at https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/coher_e/sdgs_e/sdgs_e.htm.

Furthermore, trade agreements provide entry to markets and contribute to creating jobs, raising incomes, and thereby reducing poverty and promoting (sometimes sustainable) growth in trade partner countries.

Hence, by reason of being the world's largest trading bloc through trade partnerships, the EU holds the potential for exerting its 'soft power, in particular to open up its partners' markets … and defending core principles, while promoting economic development outcomes based on its partners priorities rather than its own' (Bilal and Hoekman 2019). It is thus possible to conceptualise every chance to conclude a trade agreement or otherwise foster an open, rules-based, multilateral trade system as an opportunity to mainstream sustainable development into international economic cooperation.

2.6.2.1.1 The EU's role in the multilateral trade system

During the **Doha Development Round** of multilateral trade negotiations in 2001, the EU had a strong and distinctive negotiating position. Following the Uruguay Round, which led to the establishment of the WTO in 1995, the EU has been 'the most persistent and vigorous advocate of a broad trade agenda, going beyond the "built-in agenda" on agriculture and services, to include non-agricultural products, competition policy, investment, government procurement and trade facilitation, as well as trade and the environment and trade and core labour standards' (Young 2007: 789).

The start of the Doha Round coincided with an important shift in the international discourse on trade, which increasingly started to emphasise the development dimension of trade. The MDGs drew the international community's attention to global poverty and highlighted the need for pro-development trade policies. This trend translated into strengthening pro-liberalisation sentiment among governments, which created an opportunity for the EU to pursue a liberal trade agenda and to introduce the 'Everything but Arms' initiative, the objective of which is to unilaterally remove trade barriers on (almost) all products except for arms and munitions (Young 2007).

In addition to pursuing traditional trade liberalism, the EU aimed to safeguard European social rules, including core labour and environmental standards, from the challenges of trade liberalisation. To this end, the EU attempted to seize the momentum created by adoption of the MDGs and 'use trade policy as a means of inducing others to make their policies more like those of the EU and its Member States' (ibid., 797). The EU's efforts on this front illustrate that it was one of the first global actors that realised the WTO's potential for promoting human rights, reinforcing social and democratic principles, and its contribution to sustainable development and environmental protection. However, developing countries' governments showed extreme hostility towards the EU on these issues because they saw these efforts as allowing for 'green protectionism' and 'health protectionism'. As a result, the EU recognised that there was only a meaningful opportunity to advance the traditional trade liberalisation goals and eventually abandoned its social trade policy agenda (Young 2007; Lamy and Gnesotto 2004).

The current WTO crisis – emanating from the unilateral recourse of the US to protectionist trade measures against China and further efforts to block the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism – represents a grave threat to a multilateral rules-based trade system. The crisis risks a return of 'unilateralism and power-based bilateral trade relations' that dominated at the start of the century (Bilal and Hoekman 2019). The return of protectionism in general, and the tension between the US and China in particular, threaten to undo substantial sustainable development efforts and investment (Jones 2020).

Against this background and in face of the WTO's inability to resolve the tension, the opportunity structure of the EU has changed considerably. The European Commissioner for Trade at the time, Phil Hogan, communicated that EU trade policy would necessarily become more defensive to 'strengthen further Europe's ability to protect itself from unfair trade practices' and he would make sure 'that the EU disposes of the right tools to assertively defend its rights' (European Parliament 2019). The words of the Commissioner point towards the realisation that there was no opportunity for the EU to shape the external policy environment in line with EU preferences, and hence the priority shifted to becoming more defensive. As such, the EU's continued efforts to use bilateral trade agreements to shape the governance environment can be seen as a response to the crisis of multilateralism and the decline of the WTO's authority.

2.6.2.1.2 Trade and sustainable development chapters in EU free trade agreements

Having discussed some questions related specifically to multilateral trade, this subsection considers how the EU has sought to use bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) as opportunities to affect the governance environment. No single FTA might have the systemic impact of a well-functioning WTO, but given the trading scale of the EU, the cumulative impact of all its FTAs could amount to a significant driver of SDG-related behaviour around the world.

The sustainability dimension of international trade policy is given expression in trade and sustainable development chapters of international trade agreements. The EU has been at the forefront of incorporating a sustainable development agenda in international trade agreements, the first of which was introduced in 2009 in the EU-Korea FTA, showing that the EU was already pursuing sustainable development in international trade policy in the MDG era. To date, at least 12 'new generation' FTAs include rules on trade and sustainable development[29]. These sections refer to 'the right of each party to establish

[29] Canada, Central America, Colombia/Peru/Ecuador, Georgia, Japan, Mercosur, Mexico, Moldova, Singapore, South Korea, Ukraine and Vietnam. See https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/policymaking/sustainable-development/

its own levels of environmental and labour protection; a commitment to respect the fundamental rights at work; and facilitating trade in environmental goods and services (renewable energy, energy efficient and eco-labelled goods)' (Kettunen 2020).

The EU has progressively expanded the sustainable development chapters in subsequent FTAs. Still, to date there is no sanction mechanism backing these chapters. As such, their usefulness remains unclear. What is more, civil society organisations often attack the EU for making empty promises in sustainability chapters despite the apparent negative impacts of trade agreements on human rights, economic sectors and the environment, such as in the case of the recent EU-Mercosur FTA (Voituriez 2019). Therefore, the main criticism of the EU for not having seized opportunities in the negotiation of these FTAs is grounded in the argument that when

> faced with these pitfalls, not only has the EU not sought to reshape international trade law into a stronger multilateral framework for correcting the major structural imbalances caused by previous multilateral agreements (particularly in terms of agriculture and environmental and social emergencies), but it has negotiated even more bilateral agreements with the same flaws. (Dupré 2020)

Nevertheless, the international community has been optimistic that 'FTAs may eventually serve as an institutional push to introduce formal rules and regulations on sustainable development at the national level in partner countries, which would support responsible businesses in the long run' (Kettunen 2020). The adoption of the European Green Deal gives room for such optimism. Considering the EU's commitment to decarbonise the European economy by 2050, it is also the interest of the EU to make these sustainable development chapters binding. As a result of the Green Deal, European businesses will need to make substantial investment in sustainability to ensure timely transition. Therefore, in order to avoid creating a competitive disadvantage for European companies, trading partners must be equally committed to the SDGs. There have already been a number of initiatives on this front, such as the idea that the EU would impose a carbon border adjustment mechanism (or carbon border tax). The levied tax would be proportionate to the amount of carbon emissions attributable to the goods being imported into the EU market. According to the proposal, if an agreement is reached with a third country regarding the compatibility of their own carbon-pricing mechanisms, producers from those countries would be exempt from the tax.

In conclusion, the EU has had multiple opportunities to react to global developments and trends in international trade policy to advance sustainable development targets. Considering the size and relevance of the EU as a trading partner, the EU must act to avoid the collapse of the rules-based multilateral trade system. This subsection finds that even though the EU has been assertive in facilitating international economic cooperation (as opposed to resorting to protectionism) and fostered the mainstreaming of sustainable development into trade agreements, it has failed to seize these opportunities to create binding commitments to the SDGs. This justifies the attribution of a moderate level of actorness: although the EU has acknowledged crises and windows of opportunities to act in the area of trade policy, it has been reluctant to step out of the status quo of trade liberalisation and assume an assertive role in sustainable trade cooperation.

2.6.2.2 International development cooperation

International development cooperation has been a core feature of the global sustainable development agenda since the start[30]. The EU is known to be the world's largest donor of development aid (European Commission 2020f). Over the last two decades, however, a number of global political events and emerging trends have given rise to challenges and opportunities for the EU's development policy and status among other global actors in this field. First, the growing presence of China (and other southern countries) in Africa since the early 2000s has altered the actor constellation in this policy area and posed normative as well as geopolitical challenges to the EU's long-standing position in dictating the foundations of development cooperation. Second, Brexit created a 'funding gap' and a 'policy leadership gap' in the EU's development cooperation policy. The combination of major changes in China's external role and the internal impact of Brexit means that the EU's opportunity to shape the governance landscape in the area of development cooperation has shrunk. There has been a necessity for the EU to respond to these developments and adapt to having less influence in the short to medium term.

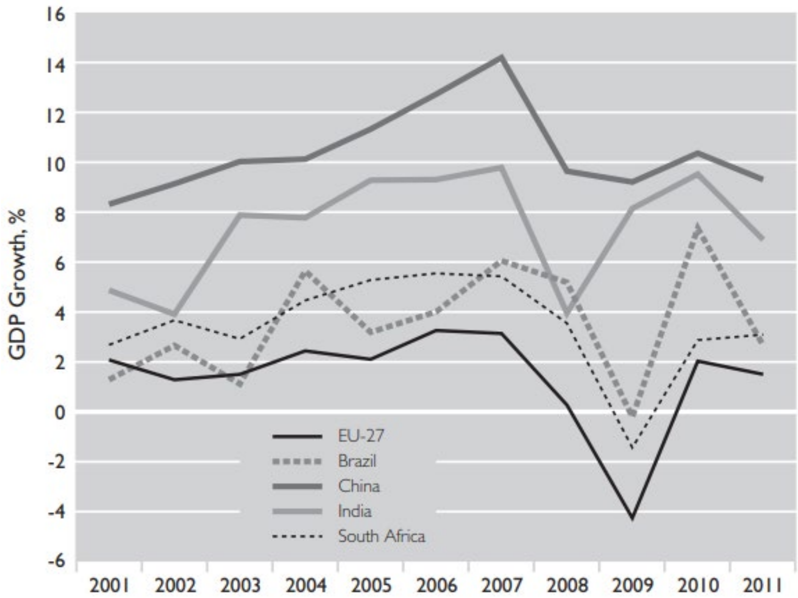
2.6.2.2.1 South-South cooperation

Emerging (global) powers and the rise of South-South cooperation has increasingly altered the opportunity structure of the EU in the area of development cooperation since the early 2000s. Whereas in the 'old' global order, development cooperation has been traditionally conceived as being dominated by North-South development aid ties, the unprecedented growth of some southern powers such as China, India and Brazil has called into question the EU's role and continued influence. The changing power structures in the global arena in the field of development cooperation is reflected in how 'differing worldviews, normative values and approaches progressively clash in the field of development cooperation, changes to power structures and political leverage alter partnerships, and developing countries increasingly discover alternatives to the cooperation schemes of Europe' (Fejerskov 2013). These changes are seen as both an opportunity and a test of the EU's development policy as 'they force traditional institutions and donors to re-evaluate their motives, priorities, strategies and models of development cooperation, and put pressure on the EU to assess comparative advantages and key strengths in its development cooperation' (ibid.).

[30] The EU's actorness in the area of development policy is also discussed in detail in the TRIGGER deep dive on EU-Africa relations.

There are two main underlying reasons for the changing model of development cooperation. First, because of the global financial crisis of 2008, the EU budget for international aid suffered (OECD 2012). More importantly, developing countries made it through these crises without massive help from the EU. As a result, the dynamics of development cooperation shifted from interdependence to partnership (Humphrey 2010).

Figure 12. GDP growth rates, 2001-2011



Source: Fejerskov 2013.

Emerging southern powers quickly capitalised on the 'partnership' approach and gained political influence in recipient countries. In South-South cooperation, 'economic relations almost entirely take the form of loans rather than charity, perhaps to avoid the lack of fulfilment of commitments characterising traditional aid, but also stressing the reciprocal nature of cooperation' (Fejerskov 2013). While the approach appears more flexible and progressive, concerns have arisen about their impact on sustainable development. In particular, it is worrying that the loans offered by China are not sustainable and political commitments to democracy, human rights and the rule of law have no impact on China's target selection (Igoe 2019). As such, China's engagement seems to be motivated by the chance to exert political influence and secure access to land and raw materials rather than contributing to sustainable development.

These trends have altered the EU's opportunities for demonstrating actorness in the field of development policy. The growing influence of China's instrumental approach has challenged the EU's value-based approach and constrained its prospects for promoting global development through effective multilateralism (Grimm and Hackenesch 2017). Consequently, the EU's response to China's growing assertiveness has been 'minimal' and 'ad hoc' (Grimm and Hackenesch 2017).

2.6.2.2.2 Brexit and EU development cooperation

Brexit has important implications for both the funding and orientation of EU development cooperation. The European Development Fund saw a big part of its contributions from UK funding, constituting approximately 15 % (D'Alfonso 2013). By reason of being the EU's third largest donor, the UK has been an important actor in the EU's development policy. However, the funding gap is not the only issue that entailed a necessity for the EU to react to the withdrawal of the UK from the EU. Brexit also opened up a 'policy leadership gap' due to the fact that the UK has been an influential actor shaping the direction and orientation of EU development policy (Price 2019).

The EDF reform proposed by the Commission in 2018 can be seen as a seized opportunity to fill the policy leadership gap created by Brexit. The initial reform proposal consisted of setting up a new funding instrument in the EU's MFF, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, incorporating the EDF under the EU budget (European Commission 2018b). The UK had traditionally been against the Commission's efforts to incorporate the EDF into the EU's general budget (as it was afraid of losing national influence). Hence, the Commission grasped the opportunity stemming from Brexit to 'establish itself as a "front runner" in the SDGs and has sought to reposition itself by advocating for strong coordination mechanisms to monitor EU and Member States' activities and the development of a "whole of government" approach' (Price 2019). Therefore, although the final version of the 2021-2027 MFF and in particular the budget for development cooperation is underwhelming in the light of initial proposals, the institutional reform is considered an important step towards re-establishing the influence of EU supranational institutions on development cooperation policy (Parandii 2020).

2.6.2.3 Peace, justice and strong institutions

Peace, justice and strong institutions are essential perquisites for sustainable development. Violence, conflict, human rights abuses and weak institutions were seen as the biggest threats hampering attainment of the MDGs (European Commission 2018a). Therefore, conflict prevention, post-conflict peacekeeping and the promotion of durable peace and stability became priorities of the 2030 Agenda (see SDG 16). The EU is an important actor in the area of security and conflict management. Nevertheless, there are numerous examples from the past illustrating how a lack of internal cohesion can result in the inability to seize opportunities to provide a unified response to emerging crises.

At the start of the century, the EU's presence in Middle East conflicts is illustrative of its capacity for collective action in this field. There are numerous examples of the EU reacting to opportunities to promote peace and stability by making use of its own tools, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Barcelona Process. In other cases, the EU failed to take a united stance and engage constructively in conflict situations, such as in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

In more recent years, the EU's capacity for acting in this field has been relatively inconsistent. The EU responded to conflicts and rising terrorism in the Arab world and in the Sahel by backing the UN in local efforts and peace operations, as well as by cooperating with international aid agencies (Gowan and Dworkin 2019). At the same time, the EU and its Member States have also occasionally proved unable to act, for example in showing unity and support for the UN Global Compact on Migration in 2018, which was necessary for tackling the emerging crises in the Global South (Gotev 2018).

The EU's inability to react to emerging necessities upon its own initiative is best illustrated by the sluggish and fragmented response it provided to the Mediterranean refugee crisis. The crisis peaked in 2015, when an unprecedented number of refugees and migrants, fleeing from conflicts in Africa and the Middle East, especially from Syria, travelled through the Mediterranean route to enter the EU. The internal division among Member States on migration issues, as well as the security-driven approach that primarily focused on urgent and immediate border-control interests, prevented the EU from addressing the root causes of migration from these regions and tackling the crisis on a structural level (Torelli 2018). As noted at the outset of this subsection, this is a clear example where the EU's ability to react to external opportunities and necessities is hugely constrained by other internal dimensions of actorness. Indeed, if all other internal dimensions had been aligned, the EU could have acted upon the necessity generated by the refugee crisis, but the combination of weak cohesion and low authority (with Member States having ultimate authority over their borders) meant that in practical terms the opportunity for the EU to act was low.

In the field of human rights, developments in recent years have also given rise to opportunities for the EU to take a strong stance in the international discourse on human rights. China has been trying to exert influence on the framing of the discourse, moving towards a sovereignty-oriented approach to human rights. Many believe that this created a necessity for the EU to step into a normative leadership position (Gowan and Dworkin 2019). The withdrawal of the US from the Human Rights Council also opened an opportunity for EU Member States to forge constructive alliances and take action. The new alliance with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation enabled EU countries to pass multiple resolutions in the context of pressing conflicts and human rights abuses, such as the Rohingya conflict and the extra-judicial killings of Filipino alleged criminals (Gowan and Dworkin 2019).

EU-Rwanda relations, for example, illustrate the EU's strong commitment to a universalist (as opposed to sovereignty-based) approach to human rights issues. Diplomatic relations between Rwanda and EU officials became increasingly hostile following the repeated criticism of the European Parliament on the state of civil and political rights in Rwanda. In 2013, when the Rwandan Supreme Court dismissed the appeal of the (according to European standards) unfairly imprisoned Victoire Ingabire, leader of the opposition

Unified Democratic forces, the European Parliament accused Rwandan courts of 'not observing the principle of presumption of innocence of the accused and disregard for international justice standards'. The European Parliament also drew attention to the systematic abuses against political opponents, journalists and people in military detention centres (Koigi 2016).

In 2016, following a visit to Ingabire in prison, a number of European Parliament members brought forward another resolution voicing their concerns about 'Rwanda's thinning political pluralism, dictatorship and the continued intimidation of the government's dissenting voices' (ibid.). The resolution acknowledged the country's significant progress towards the MDGs by managing to reduce poverty and child mortality. It called on the government to 'extend these economic and social achievements to the field of human rights in order to fully move towards a modern and inclusive democracy which will then be able to provide the region with stability and to be [an] example of good governance and national reconciliation' (European Parliament 2016). The resolution also called upon the European Commission to review EU support to Rwanda and ensure that continued aid is conditional upon the country's strengthened commitment to the protection of human and political rights. A study concluded that the EU ultimately chose not to sanction Rwanda because the expected negative impact of those sanctions on economic and social progress in the country outweighed the expected effect of the sanctions for human rights breaches (Saltnes 2017). As such, the EU decided to prioritise 'development norms over human rights and democracy concerns' (ibid., 18).

More recently, **EU foreign policy** is said to have failed Venezuela by missing a crucial opportunity to show support for the opposition leader Juan Guaido as interim president of the country. The European Parliament voted to recognise and accept Guaido as 'the only legitimate interim president of the country until new free, transparent and credible presidential elections can be called in order to restore democracy' and urged the EU Foreign Ministers Council to do the same (ibid.). Yet, due to some members' reluctance to show symbolic support, no joint declaration recognising the opposition was adopted. This is regrettable also because some believe that as 'Russia and the US continue to trade barbs over their spheres of influence, the EU could take up the role of negotiator and facilitator, especially for the Venezuelan people suffering due to the complete breakdown of essential services' (Wesel 2019).

In conclusion, the EU's presence in this field is characterised by varying levels of pragmatism and willingness to form alliances. The EU as a peacebuilding actor demonstrates willingness to learn from old mistakes and improve (Juncos and Blockmans 2018). However, the selected examples also illustrate that internal weaknesses of the EU bloc often result in a failure to take action collectively.

2.7 Credibility

Table 15. Credibility by sub-dimension and phase

Sub-dimension	MDG phase: 2000-2015	SDG phase: 2015-present
1. Qualitative analysis of credibility	*Sub-level: Moderate* • The EU is perceived by the EU public as acting positively in the fight against poverty, protection of the environment and peace in the world, according to a Eurobarometer survey. • The EU has gained some external credibility as the largest donor of development aid. • The lack of concrete measures to back up promises and low level of policy coherence diminish the EU's credibility.	*Sub-level: Moderate* • Relatively good results for the EU in the achievement of SDGs help the EU maintain its external and internal credibility. • NGOs and officials argue that the commitments on sustainable development are not backed by sufficiently concrete policy measures. • Prospects of increased policy coherence might imply higher credibility in the near future, with the von der Leyen Commission and e.g. European Green Deal, but only if backed by concrete policy measures.
2. Experimental analysis: measuring perceived trustworthiness in international media	*Sub-level* No data are available for this time period.	*Sub-level: Moderate* • To supplement the qualitative analysis of credibility, a media analysis of the EU's perceived trustworthiness was conducted. According to this analysis, 4 % of all sentences mentioning the EU broadly express trust or positive sentiment towards the EU in international media articles on sustainable development. • Compared with other global actors, the EU is ranked 9th in terms of the number of positive sentences. This leads to a 'moderate' level of perceived trustworthiness in international media.

Source: Authors.

The actorness dimension of credibility concerns the extent to which the EU respects its commitments and follows up on its promised endeavours – both internally and externally. This section assesses the credibility of the EU as an actor in sustainable development policymaking in two steps. First, a qualitative analysis compares the EU's commitment with its concrete action and analyses public opinion polls as a proxy for credibility. Second, a media analysis investigates the EU's perceived trustworthiness in a sample of 4 541 international media articles from leading media in the G7 and BRICS countries as an additional proxy for the EU's credibility.

2.7.1 Qualitative analysis of the EU's credibility

2.7.1.1 External credibility

The EU's external credibility depends on the extent to which it follows up on its promised endeavours and works to fulfil its commitments. The EU has been recognised as having played an active role in the negotiations on the SDGs and as generally supportive of an ambitious framework for sustainable development (Rijnhout and Zondevan 2018; Kettunen et al. 2018).

Hence, there are high expectations for the EU Member States to deliver through their domestic implementation: the credibility of the EU in sustainable development will be hindered in the absence of a clear, comprehensive and ambitious strategy for implementation within the EU (Renda 2017). The Council of the European Union highlighted the importance of work towards the SDGs for shaping the EU's internal and external credibility in its conclusions 'Towards an ever more sustainable Union by 2030' (Council of the European Union 2019) published in April 2019. It called for efforts on the 2030 Agenda to be accelerated 'both globally and internally, as an overarching priority of the EU, for the benefit of its public and for upholding its credibility within Europe and globally'. Moreover, there were also high expectations for the EU to deliver on its external action commitments (mainly through development aid) to help other actors fulfil the MDG agenda. The following subsections assess whether the EU has followed up on these high expectations and worked towards its commitments in the periods of both the MDGs and SDGs.

2.7.1.1.1 Credibility and the MDGs

Since the launch of the MDGs in 2000, the EU has been involved in several development partnerships and initiatives but moved relatively slowly to put in place key measures. Notable examples are the European Consensus on Development, which relied on the MDGs and adopted a political commitment on policy coherence for development (European Union 2021), and a 12-point action plan in 2010 for focusing development policy on a renewed effort to reach the MDGs by 2015 (European Commission 2010). In the same year, at the High-Level Meeting of the UN General Assembly in New York, President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso announced that the EU would establish an MDG initiative of EUR 1 billion to foster progress towards the MDGs. In 2011, the European Commission published its Agenda for Change, laying down a programme designed to enhance development impacts further and improve results against the MDGs, by concentrating on countries most in need and on priority sectors (European Commission 2011b)[31].

Beyond these general initiatives, did the EU stick to its commitments in practice? The EU and its Member States collectively provided more aid than all other donors combined: in 2012, they provided more than half of global aid (Muñoz Gálvez 2018). They also led the way in efforts to spend 0.7 % of gross national income on aid (part of MDG 8), although most EU Member States fell short on these pledges. A report commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Development and written by independent researchers concludes that the EU was an international driver for achievement of the MDGs, notably by implementing programmes and engaging in the international debate on aid effectiveness (Morazán et al. 2013). Overall, the report concludes that the EU has been perceived as credible in its external actions directed at attaining the MDGs, by implementing programmes, providing financial aid when most needed and leading efforts towards a global partnership on development aid.

Several authors argue that the EU's credibility is limited due to internal difficulties in reconciling domestic interests, particularly in trade, agriculture and fisheries policy, with the interests of developing countries (Morazán et al. 2013). The EU has especially sought to establish a new generation of free trade agreements with groups of developing countries: for instance, it participated in negotiations on the Economic Partnership Agreement initiated in 2002 between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific states. In these negotiations, the EU's repeated assurances that it would be a 'partner for development' were seen as mere rhetoric, mainly because of a lack of credible commitment to additional funding (Sheahan et al. 2010).

Moreover, the EU has also been increasingly perceived as lacking credibility in international trade talks, notably during the Doha Round of negotiations at the WTO: the EU's insistence on linking agricultural liberalisation in developing countries to negotiations on investment, competition and trade facilitation issues is widely regarded as one of the reasons for the collapse of the talks at the 2003 Cancún conference. Restrictions in access to its market for developing countries were additionally seen as incoherent with its development objectives (Halderman and Nelson 2004), and have been proven to be harmful to developing economies: the EU's trade-distorting policies and measures have been reported to have displaced more than USD 20 billion of net agricultural exports per year from developing countries (IFPRI 2003). The EU's common agricultural policy in particular has been perceived as undermining the livelihoods of millions of farmers in developing countries by dumping cheap products in their markets

[31] Some action for individual MDGs was taken. For example, for the first MDG goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger the EU created a Food Facility. It provided EUR 1 billion over 3 years (2009-2011) to improve agricultural productivity and food supply in 49 countries most affected by the soaring food prices in 2007-2008.

and denying them export opportunities to the EU market, which is seen as an incredible double standard by developing countries.

2.7.1.1.2 Credibility and the Sustainable Development Goals

As regards the EU's external credibility and the SDGs, one key policy area is trade – which has been an exclusive competence of the EU since the Lisbon Treaty (2009). Since its 2009 FTA with South Korea, the EU has started to integrate trade and sustainable development chapters into its trade agreements (European Commission 2017). In 2020, the Commission appointed its first chief trade enforcement officer, whose tasks are to 'help EU exporters gain more value from partner markets and [to] also strengthen the enforcement of sustainable development commitments, notably in relation to the climate agenda and labour rights' (European Commission 2020b). It remains to be seen, however, if this is sufficient to address the criticism by MEPs and civil society groups that TSD chapters are not sufficiently enforced (Lowe 2019). Furthermore, several empirical studies show that these sustainable development provisions are designed heterogeneously, particularly with regard to their degree of bindingness, enforceability and transparency (Poletti and Sicurelli 2018; Harrison et al. 2019, as cited in Poletti, Sicurelli, and Yildirim 2020).

In 2017, the Commission published a non-paper to gather feedback and open the debate on its TSD approach, which led to a second non-paper published in 2018 in which the Commission outlined its plan to improve the enforcement of the TSD clauses. In her political guidelines, the then-candidate Ursula von der Leyen clearly stated that she 'will ensure that every new agreement concluded will have a dedicated sustainable-development chapter and the highest standards of climate, environmental and labour protection, with a zero-tolerance policy on child labour' (von der Leyen 2019). More time is needed to assess the implementation of these policies and therefore conclude whether EU policy coherence has improved and what that means for its credibility. The European Green Deal, for instance, emphasises the importance of tackling negative spillovers to meet the EU's sustainable development objectives, but no concrete action has been taken yet to ensure this consistency (SDSN and IEEP 2020).

The Mercosur-EU free trade agreement is a recent example of the complexity of assessing the EU's credibility when it comes to sustainable development. Mercosur states and the European Commission reached an agreement in June 2019, which includes mostly free trade provisions, but also a sustainable development chapter (European Commission 2019a). The final ratification of the agreement, however, is currently being blocked by the European Parliament and Member States like France. Some say that this lack of commitment undermines the EU's credibility. Others say that this blockage strengthens the EU's credibility, as Mercosur states like Brazil do not sufficiently comply with their climate commitments under the Paris Agreement, thus undermining the soft sustainable development chapter in the trade agreement (Brzozowski 2021).

2.7.1.2 Internal credibility

Besides the EU's external commitments, the credibility of the EU also depends on its implementation of development goals internally. This is specifically the case for the SDGs. One of the innovations of the SDGs in relation to the MDGs is that they apply to all countries, in both the Global North and the South, and therefore also require advanced economies to act domestically (Hege and Barchiche 2019).

The EU cannot be credible if it advocates for developing countries to implement policies that it is not prepared to implement itself. Hence, Eurostat has started to publish a yearly report on the progress of the EU in achieving the SDGs. Based on the EU SDG indicators, the 2020 report argues that progress had occurred towards almost all SDGs over the previous 5 years (Eurostat 2020). In particular, the report says that significant progress had been made towards the achievement of goals on 'peace, justice and strong institutions', and good progress towards 'no poverty', 'good health and well-being', 'zero hunger' and 'decent work and economic growth'. However, the report underlines that the indicators show no progress (if not regression) on 'climate action' and 'gender equality' – two issues that the EU repeatedly underlines.

Reacting to this report, SDG Watch Europe, an EU-level cross-sectoral alliance of NGOs, argues that the situation is not as straightforward as suggested by the report (SDG Watch Europe 2020). They contend that the report is based on partial and subjective indicators, that the slow progress is not enough to achieve the goals and that the negative spillovers on other countries are not taken into account.

Another report prepared by teams of independent experts at the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and the Institute for European Environmental Policy highlights that compared with the rest of the world, the EU is doing better in terms of poverty eradication and is also well placed in terms of social protection, health and well-being (Sachs et al. 2021). This report, based on the 2020 Global SDG Index by Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, also argues that there are significant gaps in performance across EU countries, that EU countries also generate large negative spillover effects and that before Covid-19, even though there had been progress by the EU since 2010, no EU country was on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

These mixed results resonate with the criticism to which the European Commission has been subject regarding its ambition to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth, most notably on the fact that the goals and premises of its agendas were never mainstreamed into the policy process of the European Commission or other EU institutions (Renda 2017).

When the Juncker Commission assumed office in 2014, sustainable development was not among the top 10 priorities formulated by the President. It was added the next year, with strong pressure from the European Parliament to do so. In 2016, the Commission presented a programme on the 2030 Agenda, consisting of an overarching Communication about the EU's next steps, a proposal for a new European Consensus on Development and the first Eurostat report on achievement of the SDGs in the EU. In 2017, the Commission issued a White Paper on the future of Europe, laying down five different scenarios, none of which included sustainable development or the 2030 Agenda as part of the vision and narrative for a future EU. It has to be noted that the European Parliament, the Council, the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee and civil society all worked hard in pushing the Commission to integrate sustainable development into the core of its work (Niestroy et al. 2019).

Even so, a study commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Development notes that by the end of 2018, the Commission had not yet developed any specific and measurable SDG implementation strategy, and that there had been no systematic steps taken to mainstream the SDGs in all EU policies, as announced in November 2016 (Niestroy et al. 2019). The report also highlights that the intention to mainstream the SDGs in all EU policies has not been fulfilled, not even in the revision of the Better Regulation Guidelines in 2017.

In 2019, the Commission released its long-awaited 'Reflection Paper: Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030' (European Commission 2019b), which provides a diagnosis, summarises the state of proposals on implementation of the SDGs at the EU level and proposes ideas for the future. Different reports commenting on this paper argue that it is still very vague and without concrete plans, targets or a timeline (Hege, 2019; SDG Watch Europe, 2019). Five years after adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the EU is still in the 'reflection' phase and lacks a concrete plan for implementation of the SDGs. As SDG Watch Europe puts it: since 2015, 'a lot is said, less is done' with regard to progress towards the SDGs in the EU (SDG Watch Europe 2019).

The new Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen started its mandate with a commitment that each Commissioner would ensure the delivery of the SDGs in their policy area, and that the Commission as a whole will be responsible for their overall implementation (European Commission 2020a). It was also finally agreed that the progress by Member States towards SDGs would be integrated into the European Semester. The next few years will enable us to determine whether these commitments will contribute to enhanced or reduced credibility of the EU, i.e. if the Commission actively backs them up with strong policy measures.

2.7.1.2.1 Public perception and internal credibility

Public opinion measured by Eurobarometer surveys provides another indicator of the EU's internal credibility. Although in most years it has not asked questions specifically related to sustainable development, a series of surveys conducted between 2003 to 2006 contained questions on the EU's role in the fight against poverty, protection of the environment and peace in the world. We acknowledge here that public perception is not equivalent to credibility. By answering these survey questions, however, the public expressed a positive or negative perception of the EU as an actor, which can serve as a proxy for the perceived credibility of the EU. We therefore assume that more positive public opinion also indicated a higher degree of perceived credibility.

When asked if, in their opinion, the EU tended to play a 'positive' role, a 'negative' role or 'neither' regarding the **fight against poverty** in the world, around 45.6 % of respondents answered positively, and 17 % negatively. The positive trend increased over time (from 36 % in October 2003 to 49 % in September 2006) while the negative answers did not vary significantly over the years (see the table below). When the same question was asked about the role of the US, the answers were more negative: overall, only 19 % thought it tended to play a positive role regarding the fight against poverty in the world, while 52.2 % thought it played a negative one (see the table below).

Table 16. In your opinion, does the EU tend to play a positive role, a negative role or neither positive nor negative role regarding the fight against poverty in the world?

	Positive	Negative	Neither	Do not know
10/2003	36 %	19 %	33 %	13 %
10/2004	45 %	17 %	29 %	9 %
05/2005	49 %	16 %	27 %	8 %
10/2005	49 %	16 %	28 %	8 %
09/2006	49 %	17 %	27 %	7 %

Source: Eurobarometer 2003-2006.

Table 17. In your opinion, does the US tend to play a positive role, a negative role or neither positive nor negative role regarding the fight against poverty in the world?

	Positive	Negative	Neither	Do not know
10/2003	17 %	52 %	22 %	9 %
10/2004	18 %	54 %	21 %	7 %
05/2005	20 %	52 %	21 %	7 %
10/2005	20 %	51 %	22 %	7 %
09/2006	20 %	52 %	21 %	7 %

Source: Eurobarometer 2003-2006.

When asked if in their opinion, the EU tended to play a positive role, a negative role or neither regarding **protection of the environment**, 46 % of respondents answered positive in October 2003, and 60 % did 3 years later. Over the survey years, around 13.4% of respondents thought the EU played a negative role in protection of the environment. When asked the same question about the role of the US, the answers were again quite the opposite and stable over the years: around 59.4 % of the respondents thought that the US tended to play a negative role regarding protection of the environment, while only 16.6 % thought that it tended to play a positive one ('Eurobarometer 2003-2006' n.d.).

Finally, when asked if in their opinion, the EU tended to play a positive role, a negative role or neither regarding **peace in the world**, around 61.6 % thought that it played a positive role and 10.4 % a negative one, with no significant variation over the years. When asked the same question about the role of the US, the answers were again more negative: around 55 % thought that the US tended to play a negative role, while 24 % replied that it tended to play a positive one ('Eurobarometer 2003-2006' n.d.).

This **comparison** of the perception of the EU's role in fighting poverty, promoting peace and protecting the environment with that of the US shows that the EU seemed to benefit from a more positive public perception on these important topics related to sustainable development. The EU public tended to think that the EU exerted a positive role in these areas and – by extension – were more likely to see it as more credible in its efforts to achieve these goals. Additionally, the answers to these surveys can be compared with another Eurobarometer question surveyed over the same years (October 2003-October 2005), where the respondents were asked whether or not the EU inspired in them personally a feeling of trust (among other answers, with multiple ones possible). Only 20 % answered positively. This indicates that the above conclusion is not influenced by the overall trust of Europeans in the EU but is a reflection of the credibility of its sustainable development policies.

A comparison over time, however, is not feasible considering the availability of the data: the Eurobarometer surveys provided indications of the EU's credibility during 2003-2006, but did not contain information about the internal credibility of the EU with regard to sustainable development or specifically the SDGs over the following years.

2.7.1.3 Summary of the qualitative analysis

The EU's reputation as a credible actor has both an internal and an external dimension. The **external dimension of credibility** has been assessed by analysing the reliability of the EU's commitments regarding the MDGs and SDGs. Based on the EU's financial commitments and policy initiatives, we conclude that the EU had a moderate level of credibility during the phase of the MDGs. The Commission has been criticised for not making enough efforts to pass concrete policies to implement the MDGs or SDGs. Since 2017 and with the new Commission in 2019, more ambitious commitments have been made. To what extent the EU will fulfil these commitments in the coming years remains to be seen.

The **internal dimension of credibility** has been assessed by analysing internal initiatives, like Eurostat's approach to measuring progress towards the SDGs. Moreover, we have examined surveys in which the EU public were asked to provide their opinion on the role of the EU in global topics connected with sustainable development. Compared with the US, the EU was perceived positively in several policy areas related to sustainable development between 2003 and 2006. No comparable survey was found, however, to assess the same dimension for the SDGs in the following years.

2.7.2 The trustworthiness of the EU in international media

To what extent is the EU perceived as 'trustworthy' in international media compared with other global actors? This subsection tries to answer this question by summarising the experimental findings of a media analysis on perceived trust towards the EU in international news articles on sustainable development. Trust and credibility are two closely related concepts in the actorness literature; the concept of trust was chosen for this study as it is better suited to media analysis. More details on this analysis are provided in the methodological annex.

The method used for this analysis, Natural Language Inference (NLI), is designed to identify and count sentences in news articles that broadly express the notion of trust towards an actor. The statistics are based on counting sentences like '[n]o one has any reason to fear Europe, but everyone should be able to depend on Europe', which directly imply trustworthiness or more generally positive sentences like '[t]he EU is America's main trading partner'.

More precisely, this analysis was conducted in several steps:

(i) extracting all sentences mentioning the EU in 4 541 international news articles on sustainable development;
(ii) using a deep learning NLI model to extract all sentences that broadly express the notion that 'the EU is (not) trustworthy';
(iii) counting the number of sentences and weighing them to avoid overrepresenting specific national media;
(iv) repeating the same analysis for all G7 and BRICS countries to create a point of comparison;
(v) comparing the weighted count of sentences across actors to inform a judgement on the 'perceived trustworthiness' of the EU in international media.

It is important to note that this method is experimental, and it is not as precise at identifying trust in media articles as a qualitative analysis would be. At the same time, it provides a scalable approach to analysing thousands of media articles with decent accuracy (see also the methodological annex).

The results are presented in the table below. In the eyes of international media, Canada is the most trustworthy actor among the G7+BRICS countries and the EU. On balance, 38 % of sentences mentioning Canada also broadly consider Canada to be trustworthy. The EU is only ranked 9th out of 13 actors. On balance, 4 % of all sentences mentioning the EU also express trust towards the EU. The least trustworthy country in articles on sustainable development is the US: 9 % of all sentences mentioning the US express distrust towards the US in international media discourse. Based on this analysis, the EU is clearly not perceived to be the most trusted actor, but nor is it among the distrusted actors. For this sub-dimension of credibility/trust, that finding leads to an estimated 'moderate' level of trust.

Table 18. Trust statistics on BRICS+G7+EU in international media discourse on sustainable development

Hypotheses	Share_sent_balance	Share_sent_trustworthy.	Share_sent_not trustworthy.	N_sent_balance	N_sent_trustworthy	N_sent_not trustworthy	Share_sent_balance scaled
Canada is (not) trustworthy.	38 %	50 %	11 %	78	96	18	5.0
Germany is (not) trustworthy.	23 %	30 %	7 %	81	113	32	3.7
Italy is (not) trustworthy.	15 %	25 %	9 %	5	42	37	3.0
South Africa is (not) trustworthy.	15 %	25 %	10 %	38	62	24	3.0
France is (not) trustworthy.	15 %	23 %	9 %	68	126	58	3.0
The UK is (not) trustworthy.	14 %	23 %	9 %	78	130	52	3.0
Brazil is (not) trustworthy.	7 %	19 %	11 %	11	73	62	2.4
Japan is (not) trustworthy.	6 %	21 %	15 %	39	74	35	2.3
The European Union is (not) trustworthy.	4 %	16 %	12 %	37	119	82	2.1
Russia is (not) trustworthy.	4 %	24 %	20 %	2	85	83	2.1
China is (not) trustworthy.	1 %	16 %	14 %	7	294	287	1.9
India is (not) trustworthy.	-5 %	9 %	14 %	-8	6	14	1.3
America is (not) trustworthy.	-9 %	4 %	13 %	-194	100	294	1.0

Source: Authors.

3. EU EFFECTIVENESS IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE OF THE SDGS

Sustainable development has been understood as involving the 'physical survival of a population', which is often connected to environmental protection, food production and poverty. Since the turn of the 21st century, the concept of sustainable development has gradually evolved, arguably thanks to initiatives by the European Union. It is now a broader concept that goes beyond physical survival to include fulfilling a certain level of psychological needs and dignity. The change has been gradual and not all countries have attempted adequately to mainstream the idea of sustainable development, as emerging countries might not find it a priority. Despite that, the EU has persistently mainstreamed the idea of sustainable development through different instruments, such as including conditions related to the UN SDGs in international trade agreements. Generally speaking, the Commission's involvement has been significant in shaping the current global agenda on sustainable development.

This chapter assesses the effectiveness of the EU's 'external' efforts in leading or managing global governance of sustainable development, but not the effectiveness of its 'internal' efforts in this domain – which has its own indicators for evaluation and is beyond the scope of this research. We therefore focus mainly on the actions taken by European institutions and representatives at the UN discussions on the 2030 Agenda to extend the EU's influence or leadership to other international players in the field of sustainable development. These could be high-level negotiations with other nations, bilateral agreements or the setting of standards.

This chapter also identifies goals at the meso level that are specific to sustainable development. We discuss some instruments by which the EU has attempted to achieve those goals. Finally, we select two instruments – namely EU trade policy and the EU taxonomy of sustainable economic activities – to discuss micro goals associated with these two instruments at length.

3.1 MESO GOALS: PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ON TWO FRONTS

With EU values as a guiding principle, on sustainable development the Commission has attempted to extend its influence beyond its Member States. The Commission not only takes it as the Polaris for the EU internally and incorporates various sustainable development initiatives into different policy domains, but also believes in it for joint efforts by governments, which may require additional push. The EU has been strengthening its external actions on the global governance of sustainable development on two fronts.

At the *extensive margin*, defined as the scope of sustainable development, the EU has led a reshaping effort, expanding the scope towards social and political dimensions. A worldwide milestone was outlining the 2030 Agenda, with its 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). The EU was not directly involved since it is only an observer at the UN and has no voting rights. But the Commission and the Council had stated the unified EU's positions prior to international discussions by the UN Open Working Group (OWG) on the SDGs in several documents, which effectively bound Member States' positions and actions. The two main sources of information are Council Conclusions (2013) published in June 2013 and a Communication ('A decent life for all: From vision to collective action') published in June 2014 (European Commission 2014).

At the *intensive margin*, defined as the intensity of efforts given the scope, the Commission has been pushing for more concrete actions by international partners, proposing a tangible evaluation mechanism and a fair responsibility-sharing principle. Apart from fixing the principles in the 2030 Agenda, the Commission has played a major role in integrating sustainable development through several instruments, including by associating SDGs with trade agreements and establishing a taxonomy for sustainable economic activities.

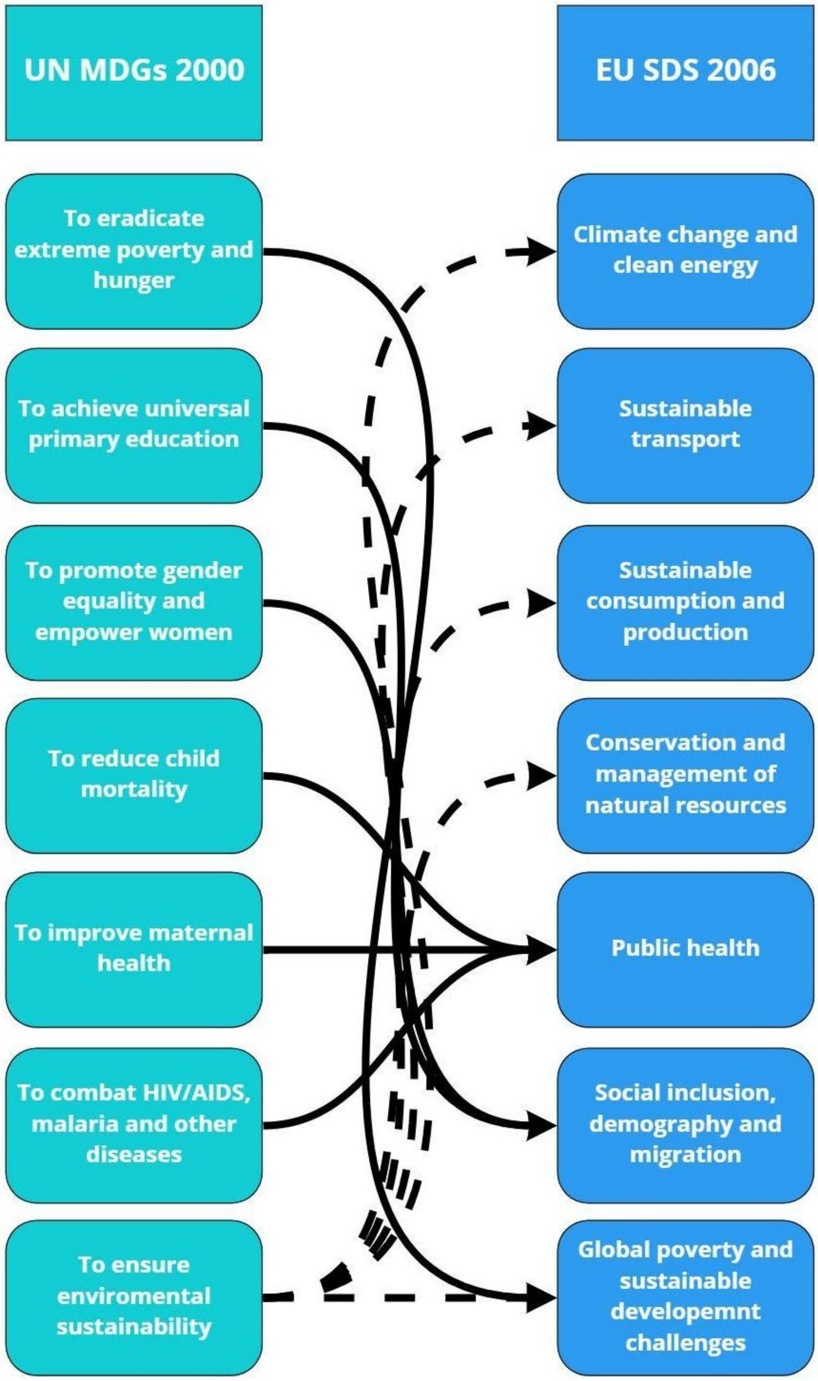
3.1.1 The extensive margin: expanding the scope of sustainable development

The Commission had been advocating a broader definition of sustainable development almost a decade before the UN SDGs were proposed in 2015. The evolution of the scope has been a gradual process. The UN Millennium Declaration in 2000 led to the launch of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – eight international development goals to be achieved by 2015, targeted at solving the poverty and health problems of developing countries. Together with these goals, the MDGs also detailed specific measurable targets. In all, the MDGs were believed to be a failure, except in some parts of Europe. There was little genuine engagement, though the rhetoric was grand (Hulme and Scott 2010). Nevertheless, the MDGs laid the foundation for subsequent developments.

Parallel to the MDGs, the European Council adopted the first EU sustainable development strategy (SDS) in 2001. A review of the EU SDS by the European Commission in 2004 and the European Council in 2005 approved a declaration that identified seven key challenges to the world's sustainable development, with elements already seen in the MDGs. Figure 13 lists the UN MDGs of 2000 and the EU SDS of 2006 to illustrate changes in the scope of sustainable development during the first half of the 2000s.

The UN MDGs were formed against a backdrop of hunger and health problems in Africa, based on the Global North-South relations, and built around foreign aid as the main instrument. The EU SDS, while not dropping the global vision of narrowing the North-South development gap, attempted to address problems of the developed North, including climate change, sustainable consumption and production, and social inclusion. The fight against global poverty became one of the goals although it did not occupy a central position. Instead, environmental protection and climate change moved towards centre stage. For many less-developed countries, some EU SDS targets were luxuries. For example, on education, the UN MDGs targeted universal primary education while the EU SDS went further and promoted widespread secondary education and the employment of young people. Issues arising from an ageing population were addressed by the EU SDS, which were mainly challenges facing developed countries.

Figure 13. Comparison of the UN MDGs of 2000 and the EU SDS of 2006



Note: The MDG 'to ensure environmental sustainability' was split into five different goals of the EU SDS 2006 and thus the evolution is depicted by dashed lines. While all EU SDS priorities have their roots in the UN MDGs, environmental protection became more central.

Source: Authors' interpretation.

The EU SDS has occasionally been reviewed and modified since 2006. The 2011 update closely followed the EU SDS of 2006 but two additional goals were added, namely, ‘global partnership’ and ‘good governance’, paving the way for the strategy to be elevated to the global stage.

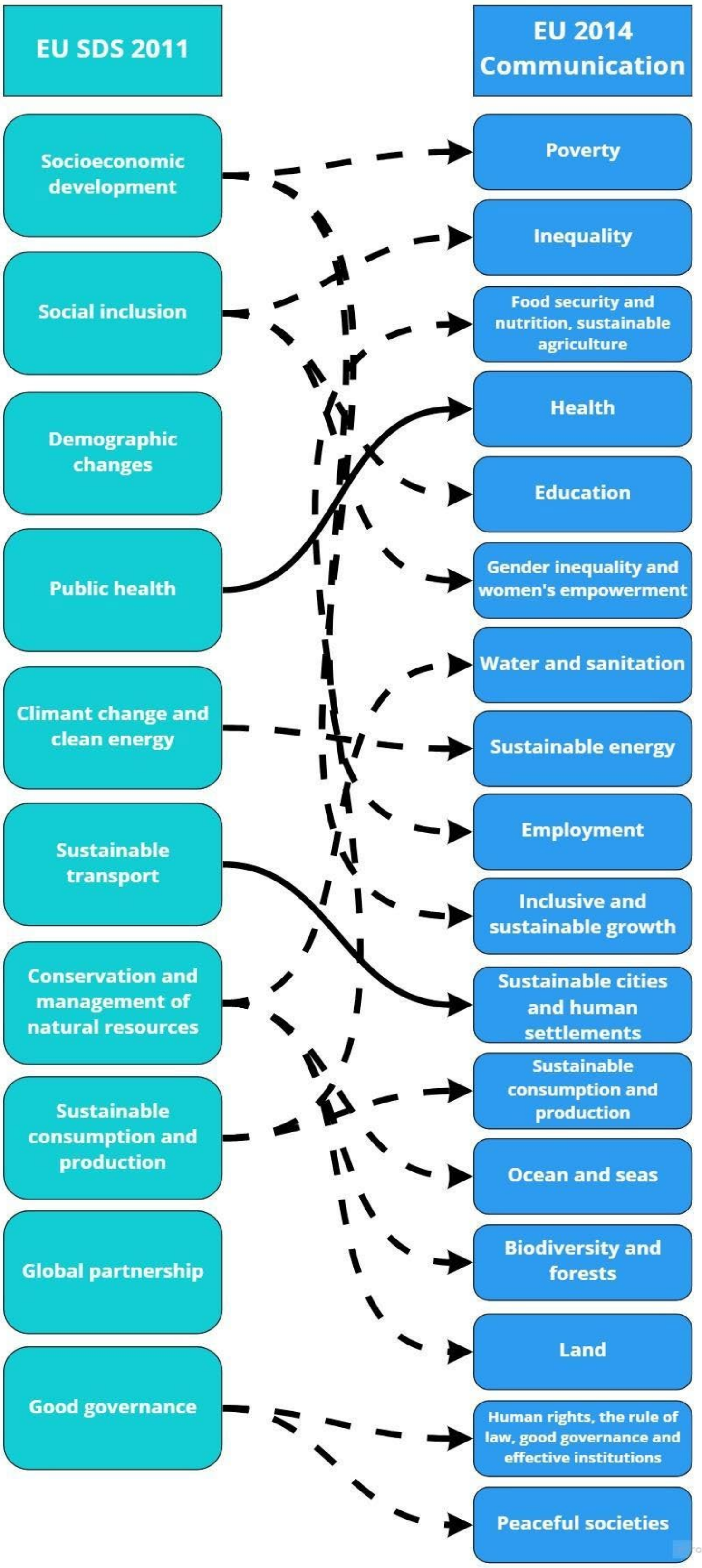
The European Commission Communication in 2014 outlined the Commission’s vision of sustainable development ahead of the 2015 summit, which agreed on the SDGs (European Commission 2014). Pages 5 to 11 of this Communication listed 17 potential targets. The Commission advocated for a transformed development agenda that would address new challenges. First, the new universal framework should cover areas not sufficiently tackled by the MDGs. Second, the next agenda should consider climate change as a cross-cutting issue. Finally, the new framework should ensure a rights-based approach that emphasises human rights and addresses justice and peace.

A comparison between the EU SDS of 2011 and the proposed goals listed in the 2014 Communication, depicted in Figure 14, shows that the latter are rooted in the former. For example, ‘social inclusion’ was split into ‘inequality’, ‘education’ and ‘gender inequality and women’s empowerment’ with more granular definitions. On top of these déjà vu targets, the Communication proposed two relatively distinctive targets, namely, ‘human rights, the rule of law, good governance and effective institutions’ and ‘peaceful societies’. The Commission indeed noted that these are ‘enabling conditions for progress’ and that ‘poor governance, including a lack of democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights, is currently hampering efforts towards poverty eradication and sustainable development’ (European Commission 2016b).

The EU, represented by some Member States in the OWGs, was particularly vocal during the early OWG meetings to push for two separate goals, one on peaceful societies and the other on governance and the rule of law (Arajärvi 2018)[32].

[32] Also see the Statements of the Netherlands on behalf of the UK, Australia and Netherlands (https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/6370uk3.pdf) and Sweden (https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/6535sweden2.pdf).

Figure 14. Comparison of the EU SDS of 2011 and the EU 2014 Communication



Source: Authors' interpretation.

3.1.2 The intensive margin

3.1.2.1 Establish a framework respecting national circumstances

The UN MDG framework was mainly aid-driven, channelling support from the Global North to the Global South (Radelet 2004). The background against which the SDGs were designed was substantially different. The growth of economic power in some less-developed countries, changes in geopolitics and also changing global challenges all pushed the EU and other major international players to reconsider the future strategy. The Commission recognised this:

> Given that the scope of the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities is limited to global environmental degradation, this concept is not useful to address the wider challenges of the post-2015 framework … Thus, while goal and target setting should be for all, the implementation of the universal framework should take into account differing national relevance and circumstances and respect national policies and priorities. (European Commission 2014: 3)

The idea was to encourage some emerging countries to take more responsibility in the pursuit of sustainable development.

One of the main narratives before the 2030 Agenda was to move the global governance of sustainable development towards 'universal goals'. Yet, the principle of 'universality' in this context had multiple layers. First, 'universal applicability' of the goals implied that the scope of goals should be expanded. Whereas the MDGs largely focused on achieving development in developing countries, the 'SDG agenda addresses common concerns, and so generates demands for all' (Long 2015: 206). Second, 'the universality of content' relates to the ambition of the goals, in particular that '[e]ach goal should aim at global zero', and hence zero in every country or at 'access for all' (ibid). On these two aspects, there was wide consensus among actors during the discussion.

A third aspect of universality, however, was one of the most controversial issues in the context of the post-2015 agenda, namely the tension between competing notions of fair distribution of responsibility for realising the goals. This quality of universality is referred to as 'universal but differentiated responsibilities', which originates from the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) and relates to financial burden-sharing in the SDG architecture.

The concept of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC) was developed in the 1990s in the global governance framework for climate change. It denotes the 'lasting political consensus that the widest possible cooperation by all countries is needed to combat climate change and the adverse effects thereof' (Pauw et al. 2014: 1). At the same time, the concept incorporates differentiating logic based on the concept of equity in general international law, on historical responsibility for emissions and on recognition of the 'special needs of developing countries, especially in the context of international environmental law' (ibid., p. 4).

The CBDR concept was first spelled out in Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration (UNCED 1992):

> States shall cooperate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem. In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, states have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command.

However, the EU was against applying the principle to sustainable development without modification:

> We are of the opinion that CBDR as set out in Rio Principle 7 in 1992 cannot apply as an overarching principle to a holistic agenda. It does not integrate the idea of dynamic differentiation as stated in Rio 2012: depending on realities, capacities and levels of development of countries. Moreover, it is worth recalling that Rio principle 7 has a clear limitation to environmental degradation.[33]

This sentiment was also shared by the United States.

3.1.2.2 Construct an evidence-based evaluation mechanism

The European Commission, as stated in the 2014 Communication, advocated a well-structured system for evaluating progress in the framework of the SDGs. With clear indicators and aims, countries can evaluate their progress easily and compare it with others systematically.

As early as 2006, some years before the UN summit on the 2030 Agenda, when the EU launched the EU SDS, each of the seven key challenges highlighted was accompanied by 'operational objectives and targets'. For example, for the challenge of 'climate change and clean energy', it stated that '[b]y 2010, 5.75 % of transport fuel should consist of biofuels, as an indicative target (Directive 2003/30/EC)', and consideration be given to 'raising their proportion to 8 % by 2015' (Council of the European Union 2013: 8). The report also listed actions for achieving those objectives and targets.

The EU was eager to transfer such an indicator-based evaluation scheme to promote sustainable development at the global level. Page 4 of the 2013 Council Conclusions, states that the post-2015 framework should '[c]onsist of a single set of clear goals, which

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[33] See the statement issued by the European Commission: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/13031eu.pdf

are ambitious, evidence-based, achievable, action-oriented, limited in number and easy to communicate, with measurable targets and indicators which are both qualitative and quantitative and which should be reviewed and monitored to ensure transparency and accountability'.

3.1.2.3 Mainstreaming sustainable development

The design and announcement of the 2030 Agenda were not the finish line. Subsequent efforts by the EU were necessary to mainstream sustainable development in concrete legal and financial initiatives, in the EU and internationally. The need for mainstreaming was well acknowledged (Renda 2017) but the motivation and thus the degree of mainstreaming at the local and regional levels have been low. The European Commission is better positioned to mainstream sustainable development as it is less political than national governments and thus less prone to short-termism (Niestroy et al. 2020). The mainstreaming was carried out in several policy areas and revealed in different policy tools and agendas. One example is the EU taxonomy of sustainable economic activities, which sets a guideline for companies and NGOs to report their efforts or achievements in sustainable development (see Subsection 3.3.2). Moreover, the EU is not only focused on mainstreaming sustainable development within the EU but is also trying to promote it through international relations. A major example here is EU trade policy. Conditions related to sustainable development have been written into the EU's international trade agreements, though their enforceability is yet to be tested (see Subsection 3.3.1).

3.2 INSTRUMENTS: HOW HAS THE EU SOUGHT TO ATTAIN THESE GOALS?

To achieve the meso goals, the EU institutions, and sometimes Member States, have worked together and influenced the global governance of sustainable development through various instruments. These range from reliance on market forces (i.e. acting alone while expecting others to follow) to cooperation with like-minded nations and organisations participating in international goal and standard setting. Discussion of the 2030 Agenda at the UN level was certainly a major opportunity for EU attempts to exert its influence. On top of this multilateral cooperation, the Commission has moved to bilateral settings and also acted as a role model in setting standards and regulations.

3.2.1 Advocate at the UN level

The EU was a major player in shaping the UN-level discussions on the 2030 Agenda. As a result of these discussions, the 2030 Agenda includes an evidence-based evaluation scheme with targets clearly stated and indicators specified. One major advance of the UN SDGs from the UN MDGs is the establishment of a systematic scheme for evaluating countries' progress in sustainable development. The 17 SDGs are currently accompanied by 231 unique indicators. Each target of the 17 SDGs is measured or evaluated by at least one indicator. For example, Target 1.1 '[b]y 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than $1.25 a day' is associated with the indicator '[p]roportion of the population living below the international poverty line by sex, age, employment status and geographical location (urban/rural)'. All indicators are available to the public and regularly updated. *The Sustainable Development Goals Report,* published by the UN every year, relies extensively on the quantitative inputs of those indicators.

The fact that the EU has its own SDG indicators, adopted in May 2017, does not belittle the UN SDG indicators. The whole framework has been advocated by the EU, but countries may face different constraints in producing useful and compatible data, and thus the EU decided to adopt its own indicators for further improving the evaluation scheme. Sixty-five of the current EU SDG indicators are aligned with the UN SDG indicators (Eurostat 2020).

Nevertheless, the EU failed to establish a responsibility-sharing principle that recognises the continuing development of less-developed countries. An ideological conflict stemmed from the intention of developed countries to limit their responsibilities (Thérien and Pouliot 2020). While the Global North demanded that emerging actors share the burden, the Global South emphasised sovereignty and independent choices.

Meanwhile, expansion of the scope of sustainable development faced resistance from some countries, especially on the inclusion of 'rule of law' in the UN SDGs. Most notably, developing countries, led by the G77, were opposed to these *governance*-related goals from the outset. Note that the term 'democracy' was dropped from the statements released by the Member States participating in the UN OWG. This softer position still encountered resistance from many developing countries. Numerous developing countries have been reluctant or unable to catch up to the level of democracy and rule of law of developed countries. They opposed the idea by arguing that there is no one-size-fits-all model of the rule of law.

Russia was the most vocal opponent of including the rule of law in the new development agenda (Arajärvi 2018). The rejection was also linked to their disagreement with the rule of law indices compiled by some NGOs. As SDGs should be universal, meaning that they should be based on common approaches, be supported by everyone and be equally applicable worldwide, the Russian delegation argued that putting political governance in the picture would violate this principle. Eventually, participating Member States were willing to word the title of the Focus Area without explicit reference to the rule of law. Still, Russia voiced strong opposition to the inclusion of SDG 16. The Russian delegation argued that it would bring a fourth dimension into sustainable development (adding *political governance* to the social, economic and environmental dimensions), and that the goal was opening a door for interference in the internal affairs of states.

Nations finally compromised after replacing 'the rule of law' with 'access to justice.' Although it was a regressive step, it was necessary to use a narrower concept to get through the negotiation. Considering the strong opposition by Russia and other less democratic countries, the negotiation was a hard-fought battle and the inclusion of it as SDG 16 should be considered an achievement. Yet, the grand idea of including a rights-based sustainable development goal that captures advancement of democracy and the rule of law was not attained.

Moreover, the declaration of the UN SDGs was criticised by commentators who described it as utopian with unattainable goals (Easterly 2015). For example, 'ending poverty in all its forms and dimensions' is arguably impossible attain before 2030. It is argued that the 2030 Agenda was a step backward from its predecessor, which listed some precise and measurable targets, such as cutting the proportion in hunger by half. Another criticism is its breadth: the whole Agenda lacks focus as all goals are claimed to be a top priority.

Commentators might have voiced their discontent too early. The UN SDG agenda has been transforming society at different levels. Companies and institutions have been following the UN SDGs in reshaping their workplace culture and practices (Pizzi, Rosati and Venturelli 2020). This report does not aim at measuring the progress of sustainable development itself, yet there is no doubt that the UN SDGs are much more than dreamy idealism. The EU has been integrating the UN SDGs into various policy domains. While Covid-19 has posed a great threat and highlights the importance of the humanity-nature relationship, the EU's recovery plan has been heavily linked to and evaluated based on the 17 SDGs. The Commission has not forgotten the SDGs during this difficult period but is committed to connecting the post-Covid-19 recovery to the SDGs[34].

3.2.2 Action as a global leader

As a response to the 2030 Agenda under the global framework and a consolidating move among the Member States, the European Commission published a Communication in 2016 to signal its commitment once again to sustainable development (European Commission 2016b). In various places the document stresses that the European Union had been instrumental in shaping the 2030 Agenda and is willing to take the lead to advance sustainable development on a global scale:

> The EU was instrumental in shaping the global 2030 Agenda, which is fully consistent with Europe's vision and has now become the world's blueprint for global sustainable development. (ibid. p. 3)

[34] https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/news/jrc-study-eu-post-covid-recovery-strongly-connected-all-sustainable-development-goals

> The 2030 Agenda provides an opportunity for the EU to strongly anchor its strategic orientation in the global effort to build a sustainable future, which the EU has co-shaped together with its partners. (ibid. p. 4)

> In the proposal for a new European Consensus on Development, the Commission proposes a new way of working with partner countries and together with Member States – from joint programming to joint actions – to ensure greater coherence, complementarity and effectiveness. (ibid. p. 13)

The Communication also echoes the EU's efforts in promoting a rights-based approach to development and 'differentiated partnerships in accordance with our partners' development paths and needs' (p. 13). The Communication is a signal to other countries that the Commission takes the 2030 Agenda seriously and wants to present itself as a model for others. Sustainable development is a global public good, and as such subject to free-rider problems. A leader in action will provide incentives for others to follow. This Communication not only speaks to the Member States but also tells other nations that the EU will be leading the pursuit of SDGs. The case studies in Section 3.3 will go deeper into two areas (trade policy and sustainability reporting) to investigate to what extent these words have been followed by actions.

3.2.3 The EU trade strategy

The European Commission has formulated a new trade policy strategy that embeds its commitment to achieving the SDGs. The strategy prioritises sustainability in trade policy and adopts a more ambitious and assertive approach in ensuring joint efforts to advance the UN SDGs by Member States and trade partners. The following quotes from the Communication on 'Trade policy review: An open, sustainable and assertive trade policy' (European Commission 2021d) describe the EU's intention to influence other trade partners for the common objective of achieving certain SDGs:

> The EU works with partners to ensure adherence to universal values, notably the promotion and protection of human rights. This includes core labour standards, and social protection in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, gender equality, and the fight against climate change and biodiversity loss. (p. 6)

> The EU will not win the fight against climate change by acting alone. In order to succeed, it is important to promote the understanding among our partners that the green transformation is not only a necessity in the medium term, but already constitutes smart economic policy today. (p. 6)

> All EU policies need to contribute but progress will depend on global partners, on large emitters and polluters, being ready to increase their level of ambition. Trade policy will have an important supporting role. (p. 12)

> The EU intends to do everything it can to support partners in their efforts to recover from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and to achieve sustainable development.

> The EU's dense network of trade agreements with these countries offer the prospect of closer economic integration and the development of integrated production and services networks. This would be part of a broader strategy to promote sustainable investment and improve the resilience of our economies through diversified value chains and foster the development of trade in sustainable products, including in order to support the climate and energy transformation. (p. 17)

The intention is indeed clear from the Communication that the EU will be attempting to leverage its economic power and trade benefits to embed elements of sustainable development into trade agreements with trade partners. The EU can use the attractiveness of a large single market with 445 million consumers to reach trade agreements while implementing SDG-related conditions. Subsection 3.3.1 further investigates how effective the EU is in leveraging its trade policy to promote the SDGs.

3.2.4 EU regulations and the Brussels effect

EU laws and regulations apply to any firms doing business in the EU. Together with the globalisation of economic activities, the EU has de facto been externalising its laws and regulations beyond its borders – the 'Brussels effect' (Bradford 2020). One example of the Brussels effect is the EU Taxonomy Regulation. This regulation provides a uniform language that classifies investment into sustainable economic activities. The Taxonomy Regulation (EU) 2020/852 entered into force in June 2020 and requires firms to disclose certain information regarding their economic activities[35]. Early evidence suggests that the EU taxonomy of sustainable economic activities has become the role model for other countries attempting to harmonise their taxonomies with the EU's.

Meanwhile, the Better Regulation toolbox has been considered an important instrument for mainstreaming SDGs (Renda 2017, Renda 2021, European Commission 2020j), although a study evaluated the Commission as failing to fulfil its intention to mainstream the SDGs in all policies through Better Regulation tools (Niestroy et al. 2020). The power of the Brussels effect associated with the Better Regulation toolbox is yet to be seen.

3.3 CASE STUDIES

3.3.1 Case 1: EU trade policy and sustainability provisions in CETA and other trade agreements

This short case study focuses on a specific characteristic of trade agreements, namely their commitments to promote sustainable development. The analysis is used as a means of assessing the effectiveness of the EU in promoting sustainable development through its trade policy, identified as an instrument to achieve the meso goal of mainstreaming

[35] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32020R0852

sustainable development. Among the EU's several trade agreements, the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) is specifically analysed. CETA is an unprecedented trade agreement between the EU and Canada. Their negotiations started in May 2009, with the agreement being signed in October 2016 and entering into force provisionally in September 2017. CETA is qualified as a mixed agreement, as it presents elements of both EU and Member State competences and requires the ratification of all Member States before it fully enters into force. Most of the agreement currently applies; however, national parliaments in EU countries still need to approve the agreement before it can take full effect. By 2021, 14 EU Member States had ratified the agreement.

3.3.1.1 The sustainability goals in EU trade agreements

Articles 3(5), 21(d) and 21(f) TEU provide that the EU should foster sustainable development through its external action. Article 7 TFEU establishes that all EU policies, including trade policy, need to contribute to sustainable development, identified as an EU objective.

In the Communication 'Trade policy review: An open, sustainable and assertive trade policy' (European Commission 2021d), the Commission portrays the EU as an international actor that uses trade agreements as a tool to promote sustainable development, particularly in the context of its relationship with developing countries. On a similar note, the 2020-2024 Strategic Plan of DG Trade states that trade policy should support the push for sustainable development and internationally set standards on labour, the environment, climate protection and responsible sourcing[36].

In the context of this analysis, the 'use of trade policy as a major instrument of soft power' is considered an EU response to the meso goal of 'mainstreaming sustainable development in the EU and worldwide'. Along these lines, Bilal, Hoekman and Njinkeu (2020) affirmed that the EU adapted its trade and external policies not only to better pursue its economic interests, but also to achieve its political, geostrategic, developmental, and environmental objectives. Dröge and Schenuit (2018) looked at how the EU's trade policy could support the climate and sustainability policies in a strategic way. They found that in regional trade agreements, the EU could set standards on efficiency or environmental impacts to help create markets for environmentally friendly goods in the long term.

While trade and sustainability can and should be compatible, EU trade policies cannot be the sole tool used to promote sustainable development. All the same, trade policy is recognised as fundamental to fostering sustainable development in the EU and

[36] The 2020-2024 Strategic Plan of DG Trade specifically set the goal of 'ensuring trade policy is sustainable by effectively contributing to a wider set of EU policy goals, such as the European Green Deal, adherence to international commitments on labour and the environment, gender and sustainable supply chains'.

worldwide and to achieving the goal of mainstreaming sustainable development. Several studies have specifically analysed how trade can contribute to the economic, social, and environmental dimension of sustainable development, such as WTO (2018) and Beverelli et al. (2020).

The EU takes different steps to integrate sustainability objectives into trade practices and then mainstream sustainable development:

- At the multilateral level, the EU is involved in the WTO Committee on Trade and Environment, which has only recently become active, but the work of this Committee is supposed to intensify thanks to a new initiative launched in November 2020 to foster and coordinate structured discussions on trade and environmental sustainability.

- At the bilateral and regional levels, the EU is involved in negotiating and implementing sustainability provisions in the trade and sustainable development (TSD) chapters of trade agreements and ensures that sustainable practices are duly integrated into trade policies through impact assessments.

- At the unilateral level, the EU established the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) to allow developing countries to pay lower duties on their exports to the EU. In particular, the GSP+ instrument supports sustainable development and good governance in developing countries by giving trade preferences to vulnerable countries which ratify and implement international conventions[37].

While the EU is using trade policy as one of the main instruments to manage its external relations and as part of the EU's external action, it is also a vehicle for promoting European and universal principles and values, such as sustainable development. The EU recognises the role of trade policy in this sense, and takes several steps to promote sustainable development through trade at the multilateral level (WTO), regional and bilateral levels (free trade agreements (FTAs)), and finally at the unilateral level (GSP+).

Looking at the EU's engagement identified above, it is possible to affirm that at least in principle the Commission, and in particular DG Trade, takes actions to employ trade policy as a major instrument of soft power to mainstream sustainable development in the EU and worldwide. However, for a deeper analysis, it is interesting to take a step further in this direction and consider the EU's effectiveness in mainstreaming sustainable development by analysing some micro goals.

[37] GSP+ refers to the special incentive arrangement for sustainable development and good governance. See https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/development/generalised-scheme-of-preferences/

3.3.1.2 Two main goals at the micro level

Based on the general strategic documents outlined above, we discern two micro goals related to trade agreements and sustainability for our assessment of the EU's effectiveness in mainstreaming sustainable development.

(i) **Include TSD chapters in CETA and other trade agreements.** The following subsection will discuss whether the EU has included TSD chapters in CETA and other trade agreements and the influence exercised by the EU in negotiating the content of these chapters. Establishing these goals is an explicit aim of the EU's trade strategy.

(ii) **Introduce strong and enforceable TSD chapters.** A further subsection will compare the strength of TSD chapters with other chapters, such as investment, in terms of the institutional and governance mechanisms introduced to ensure the implementation and enforceability of the provisions. It is relevant to note that strong TSD chapters are controversial in the EU, as they can make trade negotiations more difficult and can conflict with economic goals. We include this second micro goal because it is implied in the EU's ambition to promote sustainable trade; assessment of this second goal shows the degree to which words are followed in practice.

TSD chapters are the most immediate way to account for sustainability in trade policy. The two subsections below analyse the extent to which the micro goals identified above have been attained.

3.3.1.2.1 Inclusion of TSD chapters in CETA and other trade agreements

CETA contains specific TSD provisions in chapters 22, 23 and 24, respectively in relation to sustainable development, labour and the environment (see Box 1).

Box 1. Description of TSD chapters in CETA

Chapter 22 of CETA addresses trade and sustainable development. This chapter can be considered an introduction to the subsequent chapters on labour and the environment. In chapter 22, the parties 'underline the benefit of considering trade-related labour and environmental issues as part of a global approach to trade and sustainable development'. The EU and Canada recognise that economic growth, social development and environmental protection are interlinked, and acknowledge the importance of cooperation and promotion of trade policies that contribute to sustainable development in the EU and in Canada.

In this chapter, the Joint Committee on Trade and Sustainable Development (CTSD) is established. It is an intergovernmental body made up of high-level officials who meet on an ad hoc basis to monitor the implementation of chapters 22, 23 and 24 and review the impact of the agreement on sustainable development. Both parties commit to promote forums with interest groups: the CTSD presents updates on implementation of the agreement to a Civil Society Forum, composed of representatives of civil society organisations established in the EU and in Canada, to promote dialogue on the sustainable development aspects of CETA. Furthermore, Canadian and EU domestic advisory groups join the Committee to provide feedback and suggestions for the TSD chapters.

Chapter 23 of CETA concerns the relationship between trade and labour issues. In this chapter, the EU and Canada recognise the value of international cooperation and agreements on labour affairs and commit to respect multilateral labour standards set by, in particular, the 1998 International Labour Organisation (ILO) Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. In addition, the parties commit to making sustained efforts to ratify and implement the ILO's fundamental conventions, without references to specific conventions.

Chapter 24 of CETA addresses trade and the environment. In this chapter, the EU and Canada recognise the environment as a 'fundamental pillar of sustainable development' and acknowledge the value of international environmental governance and agreements. In particular, the parties commit to effectively implement multilateral environmental agreements. However, as noted by Nadarajah (2015), the chapter refers to conservation and sustainable management only in relation to forestry and fisheries products and in a largely permissive way, omitting other sectors that could extensively damage the environment such as mining, transportation, or energy.

Chapters 23 and 24 include a provision protecting the parties' right to regulate, which is limited when it comes to lowering standards. This shows that both parties have similar interests in maintaining a high level of labour and environmental regulation, and in preventing trade from undermining their standards.

Since the EU and Canada are like-minded and have developed economies, with similarities in important social, economic and political aspects, the presence of TSD chapters in CETA was a straightforward issue to negotiate. Both the EU and Canada have traditionally negotiated provisions tackling trade-related labour and environmental issues in their FTAs. Yet, some differences between them can be noticed. While Canada generally deals with these areas through side agreements attached to the FTAs, such as in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its companion agreement the

North American Agreement on Environmental Cooperation[38], the EU incorporates labour and environmental considerations into its agreements, as part of a broader sustainable development framework.

CETA follows the EU approach: the TSD chapters (22, 23 and 24) are an integral part of the agreement. In general, Harrison et al. (2019) reported that TSD chapters and labour provisions were proposed by EU negotiators during the negotiations with third parties' officials. Negotiators from the European Commission were pressed to include TSD chapters by the European Parliament, supported by NGOs and the European trade union movement.

As stated above, for the EU, as well as for Canada, tackling sustainable development in trade agreements is not a novel idea. EU FTAs referred to the principle of sustainable development already in the 1990s. Subsequently, as EU law has evolved during the last decades, it has strengthened provisions related to sustainable development: from voluntary dialogue and cooperation-only provisions to fully fledged commitments. In 2008, the EU-Cariforum Economic Partnership Agreement introduced an obligation not to lower environmental, labour and other social standards in order to attract FDI and established a monitoring mechanism.

Finally in 2011, for the first time in history, the EU-South Korea FTA contained a separate TSD chapter addressing labour and environmental matters. This FTA also introduced an ad hoc two-stage process to deal with disputes under the TSD chapter: first, launching a government consultation and then, setting up a panel of experts to help settle the dispute.

The EU has a vast network of bilateral trade agreements, through which it can help promote sustainable development. To date, there are 12 international trade agreements concluded by the EU that include rules on trade and sustainable development. The EU's counterparts in these trade agreements are Canada, Central America, Colombia-Perú-Ecuador, Georgia, Japan, Mercosur, Mexico, Moldova, Singapore, South Korea, Ukraine, and Vietnam, as summarised in Table 19.[39]

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[38] The two agreements have been replaced by the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), also called NAFTA 2.0, which entered into force on 1 July 2020 under the Trump administration. The USMCA has been defined as 'the most detailed environmental chapter in any trade agreement in history' but avoids some important issues such as climate change (Laurens, Dove, Morin, & Jinnah, 2019). The agreement put the environmental provisions at the core of the agreement and subjects these provisions to a sanction-based dispute settlement mechanism.

[39] The list is obtained from the following url: https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/policymaking/sustainable-development/

Table 19. EU trade agreements that include sustainable development

Country	Year	TSD	Institutional mechanism
Canada	2016	Chapters 22, 23, 24	Committee on Trade and Sustainable Development
Central America	2013	Title VIII	Board on Trade and Sustainable Development
Colombia-Perú-Ecuador	2013	Title IX	Subcommittee on Trade and Sustainable Development
Georgia	2016	Chapter 13	Trade and Sustainable Development Subcommittee
Japan	2019	Chapter 16	Committee on Trade and Sustainable Development
Mercosur	2019*	Chapter XX	Subcommittee on Trade and Sustainable Development
Mexico	2018*	Chapter XX	Subcommittee on Trade and Sustainable Development
Moldova	2016	Chapter 13	Trade and Sustainable Development Subcommittee
Singapore	2019	Chapter 12	Board on Trade and Sustainable Development
South Korea	2011	Chapter 13	Committee on Trade and Sustainable Development
Ukraine	2016	Chapter 13	Trade and Sustainable Development Subcommittee
Vietnam	2020	Chapter 13	Committee on Trade and Sustainable Development

Note: *The negotiation process is not completely finalised.

Source: Authors.

EU bilateral or regional trade agreements deal with sustainable development in similar terms: they recognise the importance of labour and environmental issues to contribute to sustainable development and the standards set internationally. They include *inter alia* commitments to ratify and effectively implement multilateral environmental agreements and multilateral ILO labour standards and agreements. They also establish the right to regulate sustainable development; the pursuit of high-level standards of protection; specific provisions encouraging trade practices and schemes that support and promote sustainable development; and provisions on the sustainable management and use of natural resources (biodiversity, fisheries, forestry, etc.). The agreements stress the importance of civil society in monitoring the effective implementation of TSD provisions and establish a specific institutional mechanism with similar functions. In addition, the agreements specify that if there is disagreement on TSD matters, a specific type of dispute resolution mechanism will be set up, which will be characterised by government consultations and a panel of experts.

Despite the apparent similarity of TSD provisions, several empirical works show that these provisions vary significantly regarding their degree of bindingness, enforceability and transparency as the EU approaches different trading partners. Poletti et al. (2020) discussed how these differences appeared linked to the level of integration in the global value chains of the EU and the counterparties in the agreement. Indeed, it is true that the inclusion of TSD chapters may hinder the negotiation process and the conclusion of a trade agreement with less like-minded trading partners.

CETA differs from other trade agreements with TSD chapters because, instead of a single chapter, the provisions are grouped into three different chapters: trade and sustainable development (an introductory chapter) and the more substantive chapters covering trade and labour and then trade and the environment.

In conclusion, the EU has made sustained efforts to increasingly account for sustainability in its trade policy. While in the 1990s, the principle of sustainability was only mentioned, in 2008 an obligation regarding sustainability was introduced in an FTA and, finally, by 2011 the TSD chapters had become a recurrent element of a new generation of trade agreements. However, the level of ambition of these chapters is not high enough for such a primary topic: as will be analysed in the following subsection, the fact that the rules on sustainability are not sufficiently concrete or targeted lowers the level of effectiveness of the EU in negotiating binding and enforceable sustainability provisions. Merely having TSD chapters in trade agreements might not induce effective subsequent actions. Another step forward for the EU would be to participate in the negotiation of stand-alone agreements on sustainable development – such as the negotiations on the Agreement on Climate Change, Trade and Sustainability between Costa Rica and Fiji, Iceland, New Zealand and Norway, to show higher commitment towards the inclusion of sustainable development in trade policy.

3.3.1.2.2 Strength of the enforceability of TSD provisions

The meso goal of mainstreaming sustainability requires that trade agreements have strong TSD chapters. In principle, the obligations included in the TSD chapters are binding and enforceable. That said, the obligatory value of the provisions in the TSD chapters is weakened by their vague and non-prescriptive legal wording (Gruni 2020). In addition, the enforcement system in the TSD chapters is different from the one used to enforce other legal clauses in the agreement: the dispute resolution mechanism is based on a specific two-stage approach characterised by consultations and a panel of independent experts. The specific dispute settlement mechanism in place for the TSD chapters makes the provisions under these chapters under-enforceable compared with other chapters in the agreement, secured by investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS), state-to-state dispute settlement or the investment court system. Importantly, should there be a breach of the agreement by the parties on issues covered in the TSD chapters, no economic or trade sanctions are applicable.

To assess the difference in the legal prescriptiveness and enforcement of the TSD chapters compared with other provisions in the same trade agreement, in this subsection we compare the provisions on investment with those on TSD in terms of the dispute resolution mechanism and the institutional and governance mechanism.

It should be noted that the current provisional application of CETA does not extend to indirect foreign investment, financial services related to foreign direct investment or the investment dispute resolution mechanism. These provisions will enter into force when the agreement is ratified by Canada, the EU and all the EU Member States.

Investments between the EU and Canada are regulated in chapter 8 of CETA. Section F describes the mechanism in place for the resolution of investment disputes between investors and states. CETA moves away from the traditional ISDS and introduces the investment court system. The mechanism provides investors with recourse to compensation when there is evidence that a party has acted in breach of its obligations and, as a result, an investor has suffered financial loss. In Table 20 this mechanism is compared with the dispute resolution mechanism applicable to the TSD chapters.

Table 20. Comparison of dispute resolution mechanisms

Investment chapter (chapter 8 of CETA)	TSD chapters (chapters 22, 23, 24 of CETA)
Consultations between parties and eventually recourse to mediation	Consultations between parties
Submission of a claim to the Tribunal, composed of five nationals of Canada, five nationals of EU Member States and five nationals of third countries*	If requested, the Committee on Trade and Sustainable Development shall endeavour to resolve the matter
The Appellate Tribunal* may uphold, amend or reverse the Tribunal's award	If requested, domestic advisory groups or civil society organisations may provide advice under a consultative mechanism
The Committee on Services and Investment can make recommendations to the CETA Joint Committee	Panel of experts
Sanctions in the case of infringement	No sanctions in the case of infringement

Note: * The members of the Tribunal and the Appellate Tribunal are appointed by the CETA Joint Committee.

Source: Authors.

In CETA's investment chapter, the ISDS and the arbitrators' mechanism are replaced by an independent investment court system, consisting of a permanent tribunal (composed by five nationals of Canada, five nationals of the EU Member States and five nationals of third countries) and an Appeal Tribunal competent to review the decisions of the tribunal. This system should conduct dispute settlement proceedings in a transparent and impartial manner. In addition, under the investment chapter, the Committee on Services and Investment is established as a forum to consult on issues under chapter 8.

Yet, in the TSD chapters, after unsuccessful consultations among the parties, the disputes can be submitted to a panel of experts (composed of three members), which will elaborate an interim and a final report for the resolution of the dispute. Importantly, at the end of the investigation, if infringement of the provisions under the sustainability chapters in the FTA is confirmed, the parties are not subject to sanctions. By contrast, under the investment chapter the final award may consist of monetary damages and any applicable interest and/or restitution of property (Farmer and Gupta 2021).

The fact that sustainability chapters are not considered a priority compared with the commercial and investment provisions while negotiating trade agreements is quite clear when comparing CETA's provisions on dispute settlement under the TSD chapters and those under the investment chapter. While the investment chapter in CETA establishes a Tribunal, an Appellate Tribunal and a Committee on Services and Investments for dispute settlement, disputes under TSD chapters should be settled by a consultation procedure and a panel of experts. Another difference lies in the impossibility to impose sanctions if a breach of TSD provisions occurs.

At this point, it is worth acknowledging the conflicting interests at stake in the EU on the introduction of TSD chapters in trade agreements, in spite of the need for strong TSD chapters to promote sustainability through trade agreements. The European Parliament has pushed for higher enforceability and asked for the introduction of sanctions in case of infringement. But the European Commission, in particular DG Trade, believes that the introduction of sanctions for the infringement of provisions in TSD chapters is not desirable, because the ability to conclude trade agreements with countries that are not like-minded might be hindered significantly (Bronckers and Gruni 2018).

Still, both the EU and Canada show interest in increasing the effective enforceability of TSD provisions. In line with the European Green Deal, the European Commission took some steps towards more effective enforcement of TSD chapters. In 2018, the European Commission published a non-paper on a 15-point TSD action plan (subject to a review by 2023) to make the implementation of TSD chapters more effective and to improve their enforcement. Along the same lines, the EU recently introduced the position of a chief trade enforcement officer to monitor and enforce the environmental and labour protection obligations of EU trade agreements with third countries. It also established a Single-Entry Point for stakeholders willing to lodge a complaint on market access issues or non-compliance with TSD or GSP commitments. In addition, the EU committed to undertake a review of its TSD implementation and enforcement in 2021.

Interestingly, Canada has already concluded trade agreements with binding environmental and labour chapters subject to the overall FTA dispute settlement mechanism, i.e. with the US and Mexico and in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership[40].

3.3.1.3 Conclusion

The effectiveness of the EU as an actor in attaining the goal of mainstreaming sustainable development through its external policies and through trade agreements with third countries has been partially achieved. But when looking at the two micro goals identified, it is notable that while the EU has actively and successfully worked to include TSD chapters in trade agreements with third countries to address sustainability aspects, their provisions are less strong and enforceable than other provisions, such as those referring to investment. The introduction of TSD chapters is an important step but the EU's approach is often criticised for 'lacking teeth'.

The EU is aware of this: in 2017, the European Commission published its 15-point action plan to propose actions for more assertive enforcement of TSD chapters; France and the Netherlands, in a joint proposal, called on the EU to raise or lower tariffs according to a partner's performance in meeting sustainability obligations; and in 2020, the EU established the new position of a chief trade enforcement officer to reinforce sustainability commitments under the trade agreements. In addition, in the latest trade policy Communication of the European Commission (2021), sustainability has become a central pillar, and actions for a comprehensive review of TSD chapters to ensure effective enforcement and implementation are envisaged.

The EU is taking further steps for stronger TSD chapters, yet the conflicts of interest persist between having robust TSD chapters and easily negotiating and concluding trade agreements with third countries – which are not necessarily like-minded with regard to sustainable development issues. This is a central factor to consider when assessing the EU's effectiveness in mainstreaming sustainable development through trade policy.

[40] Government of Canada (2020), Joint Report, Meeting of the Committee on Trade and Sustainable Development (10-11 December 2020, by videoconference) https://www.international.gc.ca/trade-commerce/trade-agreements-accords-commerciaux/agr-acc/ceta-aecg/2021-04-27-trade-and-sustainable-development.aspx?lang=eng

3.3.2 Case 2: Standards for sustainability reporting and sustainable activities

3.3.2.1 The EU's meso goals: setting sustainability standards in the EU and beyond

In the past decade, the EU has introduced several laws aiming to increase transparency and set standards for the sustainable activities of businesses: two directives on non-financial reporting and the EU Taxonomy Regulation for sustainable activities.

The **Non-Financial Reporting Directive** (NFRD, Directive 2014/95/EU) was the first EU-wide regulatory attempt to lay down rules for the disclosure environmental, social, human rights and anti-corruption information by large companies and financial institutions operating in the EU. The directive is designed to channel capital flows towards sustainable projects and to manage risks related to environmental and social issues. A major problem of the directive, however, is that it allows a high degree of flexibility in the choice of requirements and indicators.

Given this shortcoming, a proposal for a **Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive** (CSRD) was adopted by the Commission in April 2021 to further improve the scope of the reporting directive and promote practices on sustainability reporting. The new directive aims to enhance the transparency and credibility of disclosure and help investors gain access to adequate information for investment decisions and enable other types of stakeholders to monitor and analyse (un)sustainable activities of large businesses (European Commission 2021e).

In addition, the EU is one of the first organisations to produce a classification system of sustainable economic activities: the **EU Taxonomy Regulation for Sustainable Activities**. The main objective of the taxonomy is to establish a common language and definitions of what 'sustainable activities' actually are – and which activities cannot be called 'sustainable'. By creating these common definitions and criteria, the EU hopes to prevent greenwashing and facilitate informed sustainable investment. Activities under the taxonomy are required to contribute substantially to one of six environmental objectives: climate change mitigation; climate change adaptation; sustainable use and protection of water and marine resources; transition to a circular economy, waste prevention and recycling; pollution prevention and control; and protection of healthy ecosystems. The regulation was published on 18 June 2020, entered into force on 12 July 2020 and certain provisions will become applicable in January 2022 or 2023 (European Commission 2020k).

The Taxonomy Regulation is designed to help the EU achieve its 2030 climate and energy targets as well as the objectives of the European Green Deal. Together with the NFRD and the CSRD, the EU aims to establish a consistent framework for transparent sustainability reporting by businesses. With a higher level of transparency, investors are able to improve their investment decisions that channel capital into sustainable activities. With a common language and a set of criteria to identify sustainable economic activities, investors, companies and other stakeholders could mobilise capital to finance a transition towards a carbon-neutral region.

To analyse the EU's external effectiveness, it is important to make clear the EU's international goals linked to these legal initiatives. These initiatives are part of the European Green Deal, which states: 'As the world's largest single market, the EU can set standards that apply across global value chains. The Commission will continue to work on new standards for sustainable growth and use its economic weight to shape international standards that are in line with EU environmental and climate ambitions' (European Commission 2019c). This goal, for example, is repeated in the Commission's proposal for the CSRD, which 'aims to build on and contribute to international sustainability reporting initiatives. EU sustainability reporting standards should be developed in constructive two-way cooperation with leading international initiatives' (European Commission 2021f). The Commission has the explicit ambition of 'setting international standards for sustainable finance' and other sustainable economic activities (European Commission 2021g).

Bearing in mind these ambitions and goals, the key question of this case study is whether the EU has been successful in achieving its goal of externalising its standards for sustainable business practices. Are these reporting directives and the Taxonomy Regulation successful cases of the EU's external effectiveness and the Brussels effect?

3.3.2.2 Indicators for goal attainment

The attainment of the EU's goal to set international standards can be approximated with the following indicators:

- the number of international agreements that refer to the EU's directive and Taxonomy Regulation. This is an important channel when international standards are set through international documents involving state actors. These can emerge from multilateral efforts such as discussions at high-level summits (the UN, G7, G20, OECD, etc.).
- the presence of non-EU laws, regulations or other official documents and announcements in other countries that mention EU standards and follow them. This is a direct measure that can be observed when a non-EU country adopts EU standards and practices. It can be the result of a trade or investment agreement, an effort by the EU to engage in development cooperation in a host country, or a policy transfer where other actors consider EU standards to be best practices.
- the number of private actors referring and adhering to the NFRD or the Taxonomy Regulation. The primary actors that refer to and abide by the Taxonomy Regulation are companies and financial institutions. The EU's influence can be observed through announcements or changes in the strategy of non-EU firms. To gauge international effectiveness, such private actors need to adopt these EU

standards outside the EU (as they are already legally obliged to apply them within the EU). Efforts to adopt standards from these legal acts outside the EU would be a valid indicator of adoption of EU practices by global or non-EU firms. Other possible indicators are civil society and academic actors advocating these EU standards internationally.

3.3.2.3 Assessing the EU's effectiveness

Based on these indicators for goal attainment, how effective has the EU been in attaining its goals? A comparison of the sustainability reporting directives and the Taxonomy Regulation shows that 'being there early' is a key determinant for effectiveness – a factor closely linked to the opportunity dimension of actorness.

3.3.2.3.1 Limited global impact of the sustainability reporting directives

Overall, the level of EU effectiveness in attaining its goal of setting international standards beyond the EU through the sustainability reporting directives seems low, as there have been numerous non-governmental attempts with much more influence all over the world. In fact, Directive 2014/95/EU mentioned the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) as a framework for firms to rely on (European Union 2014). It was later emphasised in the communication document by the European Commission that the guidelines 'owe a lot to the leadership and knowledge of the organisations behind these frameworks'; those organisations include both the CDP and the GRI (European Commission 2017). The list of references or requirements by the GRI for reporting continues further with more than 160 policies in 60 countries (GRI n.d.).

Given the long history[41] of various non-state initiatives on sustainability reporting with the ambition of worldwide convergence and harmonisation of sustainability reporting standards, the EU's directives appear to be a follow-up that accompanies the existing frameworks. This was confirmed in the proposal for the CSRD, when it expressed that the

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[41] The private sector has played an important role in shaping standards for sustainability reporting. The GRI was founded in 1997 with the purpose of determining whether corporations were engaged in environmentally responsible conduct (Sethi, Rovenpor and Demir 2017). A milestone in sustainability reporting occurred in 2000 when the first GRI guideline was published. Soon after, the GRI started to address more than just environmental concerns, with further assessments of environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices. The GRI guidelines then became a framework for sustainability reporting, which has been developed throughout several generations of standards (globalreporting.org n.d.). GRI is widely recognised as the leading standard for voluntary reporting of ESG performance, with widespread participation – about 96 % of the world's largest 250 companies and more than 4 000 firms in 52 countries (KPMG 2020b). Organisations that follow the GRI standards report on different metrics for economic, environmental and social aspects. Companies are recommended, but not required, to use external assurance to enhance the credibility of their reports.

The GRI has become a household name in setting international sustainability reporting guidelines (Laine, Tregidga and Unerman 2021: 93). According to a survey in 2020 by KPMG, the GRI remains the dominant global standard for sustainability reporting. Two other widely used standards are those of the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board and the International Standards Organisation (KPMG 2020b).

proposal would 'build on and contribute to international sustainability reporting initiatives' that include the GRI and the CDP (European Commission 2021e). In the context of the directive, the EU seems to be in more of a supporting role when it tries to strengthen its standards, instead of leading by effectively setting international standards.

It can therefore be argued that the level of international effectiveness or the general success outside the EU of the EU's reporting directives is limited compared with the long-standing non-governmental standards and guidelines. The EU is still leading in the number of sustainability reports produced (KPMG 2020b), but evidence for international standard setting is sparse. There is only limited evidence that the reporting directives are a positive case of the Brussels effect.

3.3.2.3.2 Greater effectiveness of the EU taxonomy

Compared with the reporting directives, the EU Taxonomy Regulation has the potential to be more effective at internationalising EU standards, as the lack of pre-existing international standards provides a potential window of opportunity for EU standard setting (ter Laag 2021). Until now, only a few economies have launched this type of taxonomy, most of which are emerging economies (Mongolia, Malaysia, etc.). Among big economies, China, Canada and Japan have already introduced their own green taxonomies, but the Chinese and the Canadian systems are acknowledged as being highly localised (Robinson-Tillett 2019). Later in March this year, Yi Gang, the governor of the People's Bank of China, revealed a plan to converge green investment taxonomies across the Chinese and the European market (Li and Yu 2021). This confirms the capacity of the EU taxonomy to be applied globally.

Several observers believe that the EU Taxonomy Regulation has already impacted standards for green taxonomies, which are currently being developed in other countries. The Malaysian central bank is reported to be working with the World Bank on developing a taxonomy system aligned with the EU's, which was published in April 2021 as the Malaysian Climate Change and Principle-based Taxonomy (Milburn 2020; Uhrynuk and Burdulia 2021). This initiative was closely followed by other ASEAN economies, from the national level to the ASEAN level. Singapore has issued a consultation paper on a proposed green taxonomy that will, to a large extent, be aligned with the EU's Regulation (EU 2020/852) on establishment of a framework to facilitate sustainable investment. The provisions in the consultation paper 'proposed largely mirror those found under the EU Taxonomy Regulation' (Kwok, Robins and Lin 2021). In a report by the ASEAN in April 2021, the EU was referred to as one of the sources of the commonly applied 'rules' in the taxonomy (ASEAN Working Committee on Capital Market Development 2020).

A further development to which the EU taxonomy most likely contributed is the establishment of a working group on taxonomies as part of the International Platform on Sustainable Finance, which aims to create a 'common ground taxonomy'. It is reasonable to expect that this taxonomy will take EU standards into account given the early-mover advantage of the EU (ISPF 2020).

Another interesting case is Japan. Although Japan widely acknowledged that it referred to the EU's system in developing its own green taxonomy, the country is a well-known critic of the EU taxonomy (Milburn 2020). Japanese researchers argued that there is no one-size-fits-all standard and that Japan should adopt its own green taxonomy. The country's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry published a 'Concept Paper on Climate Transition Finance Principles' in March 2021, stating: 'international principles should adopt an inclusive and flexible approach that can be applied to various circumstances of countries and regions without excluding specific sectors/industries or technologies from its scope, and further details should be considered by each country or region based on its respective circumstances' (METI 2020).

Along with state actors, the EU Taxonomy Regulation has influenced private actors – mainly firms and financial institutions. So far, however, it has chiefly done so among entities operating within the EU according to various reports and newspaper articles evaluating its impact on the business climate (Humphreys and Olming 2021; Moloney and Verhey 2021; EY 2020; Boyd 2021). But if the effects on other national regulatory authorities continue, the impacts of the EU taxonomy will cascade through a top-down approach to reach external non-state actors.

Although the EU Taxonomy Regulation has not been applied yet, its effects have been recognised all over the world. As Rafael del Villar Alrich, a researcher of the Banco de Mexico, said, '[t]he European Union is at the front line of [harmonising definitions of sustainability]. In my sense, the liquidity for green investments is also heavily coming from Europe. Going forward the EU Taxonomy will be a fundamental reference point for emerging markets as well' (OMFIF 2020). With its Taxonomy Regulation, the EU is well on the way to attaining its goal of setting international sustainability standards for businesses.

3.3.2.4 Conclusion

We have shown that an important EU goal is to set international standards for sustainability reporting. The level of attainment of this goal differs greatly between the EU sustainability reporting directives and the Taxonomy Regulation. The directives were based on a long history of reporting practices developed through worldwide non-governmental initiatives that have been applied by many companies, cities and regions – especially the GRI. Therefore, their external effectiveness was limited, as private companies had set the standards before the EU.

By contrast, the Taxonomy Regulation has been appraised highly by other states and non-state actors since it emerged as a proposal. The EU is one of the first actors to attempt to systemise the classification of sustainable economic activities and thus enjoys first-mover advantage in an area that still contains conflicting definitions and categorisations. While the actual impact of the Taxonomy Regulation in practice remains to be seen and further research is necessary once new evidence is available, early findings indicate that the EU taxonomy can be considered a success, and shows a higher level of EU effectiveness.

3.4 FINAL REMARKS ON EU EFFECTIVENESS

The European Union has been an important player in advocating and expanding the scope of sustainable development. Ideas proposed by EU delegates were included in the 2030 Agenda agreed at the UN level. Yet, the 2030 Agenda was not the finish line but rather a starting point. The EU has attempted to mainstream sustainable development within and beyond the EU through internal and external action. This chapter on EU effectiveness has provided two case studies for closer investigation.

First, trade and sustainable development chapters have been inserted into the free trade agreement between the EU and Canada and other trade agreements, indicating that the EU has been effective in achieving its goal of including sustainability standards in international agreements. The enforceability of those provisions, however, is believed to be weak and is yet to be tested. Second, the EU has stepped up in setting sustainable reporting standards and establishing a common taxonomy for sustainable economic activities, aimed at improving transparency and facilitating investment in sustainable development.

The EU has had mixed success in externalising its sustainability standards with these legal initiatives. The EU's reporting directives were passed after private initiatives had already become the de facto standard for international reporting, reducing the degree to which the EU's directives could influence international standards. Still, early evidence suggests that the Taxonomy Regulation will have a greater influence on international standards, given the EU's first-mover advantage. The full effect of the regulation remains to be seen in practice. While this chapter has been unable to give a final comprehensive verdict on the EU's effectiveness in promoting the SDGs, we conclude that without the efforts of the EU, the world would not have achieved the current progress in mainstreaming the SDGs.

It is difficult to disentangle the efforts of other nations from those of the EU, as they share quite similar goals and objectives. This chapter has studied the topic from an EU-centric perspective rather than a comparative perspective. It is hard to study multilateral or bilateral negotiations where multiple players push and pull at the same time. For instance, how could we split the credit if the EU and the United States have both lobbied for the same outcome? Not to credit the EU is wrong. Despite the setback of failing to convince other nations to include a full-blown political dimension into the scope of sustainable development, the EU has been persistent in mainstreaming SDGs and setting sustainable development standards. An evaluation at this stage is perhaps too early as it takes time to actually see the effects of some efforts. Covid-19 has interrupted progress and cast doubt on whether the initiatives by the Commission and actions by the Member States will be followed by similar actions of other nations. Nonetheless, based on the discussion so far, the Commission has undoubtedly been an active and fairly effective player in shaping the global governance of sustainable development.

According to Groen and Niemann (2012), although scholars have begun to connect issues of 'actorness' with those of 'effectiveness', the relationship between the two concepts is often under-specified. While it is safe to assume that actorness might enable effectiveness, it should be recalled that it does not entail it – or in other words, it is not a direct and inevitable consequence. The external dimensions of actorness, and more specifically 'opportunity/necessity to act' and 'attractiveness', can be considered important enablers of greater effectiveness, as defined throughout this report, i.e. goal attainment. Indeed, according to Groen and Niemann (2012) the concept of effectiveness is closely related to the external dimension: high levels of actorness in externally visible dimensions would help to create and influence favourable and like-minded external contexts, leading to an easier achievement of goals.

This concept of linking actorness with effectiveness may explain why, throughout the report, we have referred to case studies that describe both actorness dimensions and effectiveness. For a start, by referring to the external context, the actorness dimension of opportunity/necessity to act is deeply related to the concept of effectiveness defined as goal attainment. The ability of the EU to seize opportunities in the global arena and consequently act is almost a prerequisite to attaining a goal. It is thus not a coincidence that the trade and sustainable development chapters in EU FTAs have been considered a case study for the actorness dimension of opportunity/necessity to act and effectiveness. The Commission used trade agreements as an opportunity to mainstream sustainable development by introducing enforceable chapters on it.

In addition, the external actorness dimension of attractiveness is a determinant of the EU's effectiveness. As discussed in the respective sections, the EU's taxonomy of sustainable economic activities has been an attractive role model for other nations. The EU has taken the step of being the first mover and successfully setting a global standard for sustainable economic activities. If the actions by an entity are considered by other actors to be 'worthy of emulation' or an entity is generally regarded by other actors as a good partner, then it will be easier to attain the goal of setting international standards and to encourage sustainable development by influencing the regulatory framework.

4. CONCLUSION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES GOING FORWARD

Several factors will affect the EU's ability to pursue the SDGs over the coming years. Some of them are related to the overall evolution of global governance. Depending on the global momentum for advancing on ambitious reforms towards sustainable development, the EU may have the possibility to nest its agenda in more global agreements. That said, internal dynamics will also determine whether the EU will be able to retain sufficient authority, autonomy and cohesion to effectively project its agenda on to the global context. Below, we list some of the factors that appear essential for analysis of the EU's future actorness on sustainable development.

4.1 EXTERNAL FACTORS: SCENARIOS FOR THE EVOLUTION OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND MOMENTUM FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REFORMS

Among the factors that are (partly) external to the remit of EU action, the following medium-term drivers appear to be particularly important:

- *The mounting rivalry between the US and China*. At the time of writing, it is clear that the priority for US foreign policy is not sustainable development, but rather countering the rise of China as the largest superpower on the global stage. Recent steps such as the revival of the Quad (the US, Japan, Australia and India) and the AUKUS agreement have been met with fierce opposition by China, possibly leading to retaliatory measures. A possible escalation of tensions on the diplomatic and military fronts could result in the momentum for meaningful reform towards the SDGs becoming much weaker going forward.

  At the same time, there is a chance that US-China tensions could lead to a 'race to the top', with the US determined to take the role of champion in fighting climate change and protecting biodiversity, to challenge China on this rather difficult front. Similarly, the attempt to contrast China's Belt and Road Initiative (and even more specifically, the Digital Silk Road) have led the US to seek cooperation with the EU in an attempt to consolidate an alternative technology stack, which developing countries could find attractive compared with the Chinese one in terms of protection of fundamental rights, economic opportunity and the possibility to invest in human capital and economic development.

- *The Covid-19 pandemic*. While health is an important pillar of the SDGs, the need to focus on this specific domain may dilute the overall momentum for global reform towards all the SDGs. The narrative in global governance may end up focusing on a limited subset of goals (e.g. climate and health), leaving behind equally important issues and goals in terms of human capital, infrastructure, good governance and the rule of law. To some extent, a lack of attention on the SDGs is already visible in the debate on the future of multilateralism, which is now becoming more focused on resilience and more specifically on preparedness and response to future threats. The 'leave no one behind' goal, which was part of the SDG narrative and agenda, is now in question given the lack of vaccine solidarity in the context of the pandemic. It is difficult to guess whether this is likely to lead to a gradual loss of momentum for the overall SDG agenda as a cornerstone of the multilateral order.

- *A shift of emphasis from growth towards human development and factors beyond GDP.* Recent scandals at the World Bank (and IMF) on indicators for the ease of doing business ranking are likely to revive debate on how international institutions and donors measure progress and impacts when it comes to promoting reform at the global level, particularly in developing countries. This may lead to new fruitful discussions on the SDGs in the coming years, perhaps with some adjustments (e.g. the addition of resilience indicators).

- *Developments in US politics.* This is another highly uncertain factor to consider. The current low approval rate of the Biden administration suggests, according to many commentators, that there is a concrete possibility of the next presidential elections seeing a U-turn, with a return to Trump-style politics (if not Trump himself). In any event, pressure to deliver on the home front may reduce the Biden administration's political capital to commit to the SDG agenda, or parts thereof. This, in turn, would likely have a mixed impact on the EU's ability to project its actorness in the SDG domain: on the one hand, the absence of the US would leave the EU as the most accredited actor in the pursuit of global efforts for sustainable development; on the other hand, the same absence would greatly reduce the chances that global agreement is found to continue on the road to the 2030 Agenda.

4.2 INTERNAL FACTORS: THE FUTURE OF EU INTEGRATION AND RELEVANCE OF STRATEGY FOR EFFECTIVENESS

Looking at internal factors, much will depend on whether the EU's plans will evolve in the direction of enhanced attention on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. The following elements must be taken into account when gauging the possible development of EU actorness and effectiveness in this domain.

- *Evolution of the EU agenda post-pandemic*. The von der Leyen Commission has raised expectations with respect to the SDGs: (i) by adopting an EU-level strategy that could be defined as 'SDG minus' (centred on the European Green Deal and the Just Transition, but not on other aspects of the SDGs); (ii) later complementing it with a proposed Health Union and possible conditionalities related to the rule of law; and (iii) announcing the mainstreaming of the SDGs in the European Semester, a step that was subsequently taken under the supervision of Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni.

Since then, however, hopes have partly been frustrated by a gradual emphasis on resilience, the emergence of strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty as dominant narratives of the EU's industrial strategy, and the limited scope of the Just Transition initiative (focused mostly on short-term transitions in coal-intensive regions). Also, many commentators have argued that full 'mainstreaming' has unfortunately not occurred because of a relative lack of courage shown by the Commission in implementing important items on its agenda. For instance, the taxonomy for sustainable investment still partly lacks a social dimension; the 2021 Communication on Better Regulation deals with the SDGs, but fails to announce a full reorientation of better regulation towards them; and difficulties remain in embarking on a full reform of the common agricultural policy towards the SDGs. The overall impression is that the Commission currently is following too many 'North stars', including well-being, resilience, growth, sustainable competitiveness, competitive sustainability and others (depending on the official document one consults), rather than leading an effort towards preserving the SDGs at the core of its overall strategy.

- *NextGenerationEU and the national resilience and recovery plans*. In terms of multilevel governance, momentum for sustainable development appears to be limited due to the prevalence of protective measures in national plans compared with initiatives and investment oriented towards systemic transformation (Renda 2021; ESIR 2021; de Vet et al. 2021). The European Commission has tried to guide these efforts by specifying minimum percentages to be spent on green and digital transitions. It has also proposed seven flagship areas, which Member States are asked to prioritise when preparing and implementing their plans (scale up; power up; reskill and upskill; digital connectivity; public administration; a renovation wave; and clean, smart and fair urban mobility). Yet political tensions have emerged, with countries unwilling to protect fundamental rights and democracy (e.g. Hungary) and even questioning the predominance of EU law over national law (e.g. Poland). Coupled with the strains provoked by the pandemic and the surge in nationalism, populism and Euroscepticism in many countries, these tensions are likely to place EU institutions in a rather weak position when actually requesting that Member States align their efforts towards the 2030 Agenda.

4.3 Long-term scenarios and the EU's sustainability agenda

Looking at the longer term, the prospects for the EU's actorness and effectiveness in the area of sustainable development appears uncertain at best, and heavily dependent on the way in which the EU and other superpowers will manage to bring the pandemic and its related socioeconomic impacts under control. Should the EU be able to claim a successful vaccination campaign, a swift and balanced economic recovery, and an enduring commitment to systemic transformation and global public goods, its actorness would see a substantial increase over time, with consequent good prospects in terms of effectiveness. On the other hand, the ambitions of China and the United States as future leaders of the global order may leave the EU in an uncomfortable position between these two superpowers. That would weaken EU actorness, especially if Member States – as a result of disappointing management of the pandemic at the EU level – saw declining support for European integration.

Recently, a foresight exercise on the future of EU integration run by CEPS in cooperation with Fraunhofer ISI, led to the identification of four representative scenarios for EU integration going forward and up to 2040:

- In one scenario, the EU capitalises on a successful vaccination policy and is able to utilise popular pro-EU momentum to create a centralised funding apparatus to stimulate economic growth and development projects across the EU (the *Optimistic New Deal* scenario).
- In another, the EU is slow in completing the vaccination campaign, which erodes Member State confidence in the efficacy of EU governing institutions. That is coupled with widening societal disparities (based on wealth, social values, cultural diversity, digital literacy, generational differences and environmental expectations). Combined, these factors lead the EU to become less ambitious and mostly inward-looking, rather than open to engaging with the global order (the *Wretched Fortress* scenario).
- In a further scenario, the EU manages to successfully engage with the public by refreshing its narrative and communication, gaining sufficient momentum to lead the international community towards the pursuit of global public goods (the *United Force* scenario).
- Then there is a scenario in which the EU becomes reduced in size, with Member States leaving the EU, and the remaining members increasingly siding with China in introducing a technology-powered approach to democracy and public policy (the *Chinese Province* scenario).

These scenarios are also usefully consulted in combination with the TRIGGER scenarios for 2050, released earlier in 2021. These longer-term scenarios further exemplify the many drivers that may affect future EU actorness and effectiveness in the sustainable development domain.

A strong EU in a strong global governance setting (*Reunited Nations* scenario) would succeed in forging alliances towards sustainable development, and remain strong also with respect to other superpowers such as the US, China and India. By contrast, a weak EU in a strong global governance context (*Governing with Gaia* scenario) may be good news for sustainable development, but bleaker news for EU actorness. Fragmented global governance would frustrate most sustainable development attempts. That is especially because the EU, however strong (as in the *DUPLO®MACY* scenario), would likely remain responsible for a relatively small share of global emissions and unable to fully exert an influence on global supply chains, fundamental rights or the pursuit of global public goods. The same goes for the case in which global governance is weak, and the EU is also an increasingly weak player (*World Wide Gaps* scenario).

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